



Education, Integration and the Roma of Northwestern Bulgaria



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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Set

The present thesis has as its main focus the education problems of the Roma/Gypsy¹ minority in northwestern Bulgaria as an important factor for their successful integration within the Bulgarian society. The Roma are the largest and most segregated ethnic group in Europe due to their specific origin and history. The present-day status of the Bulgarian Roma is the result of different historical, social and economic factors, all of which have contributed to their segregated status in the Bulgarian society and tendencies show that unless the state, relevant NGOs and the Roma themselves take adequate measures in order to prevent it, their situation can only worsen. Their segregation manifests itself on many levels – from a low economic status and mass unemployment, to damaged health status with 10 to 15 years lowered life expectancy, as compared to the life expectancy rates of the majority in the country. This condition is determined by various factors which overlap with each other and education is often seen as a significant tool for positive changes. This is also the unanimous opinion of many experts who deal with the so-called *Roma problem*.

Experts argue that the gradual improvement of the Romas' educational opportunities is a means which targets the deep and initial causes for their poor condition. Their increased access to education is an important and even obligatory prerequisite for their active and equal inclusion in the social life of the country, although its implementation is a long-term process which requires a strong political continuity and effort. In other words, education for the young Roma is seen as a guarantee that the symptoms of the problem will not only be silenced (which is what the state policy achieves most of the time) but will create opportunities for a permanent and sustainable transformation of the status quo. This is the way which can help the Roma minority become an active partner in the state agencies and NGOs, which work for the integration of the gypsies in Bulgaria. Through education it is hoped that they can take an active role in decisions regarding their own course of development.

The level of education also correlates with the opportunity for successful realization on the labor market. It is further argued that school is also the place which facilitates the emergence of ethnic tolerance through introduction to the culture and traditions of the bearers of different ethnic origins. Marginalization of a large percentage of the gypsies, as well as the discrimination attitudes from the majority cannot be overcome if the majority of young Roma

¹ Note on terminology: I use both terms, Roma and Gypsy, interchangeably throughout the thesis. The term

remain illiterate and ignorant of the life outside their own community. Isolation and the gap between the Roma minority and the other ethnic groups in Bulgaria will only deepen unless education becomes a priority of paramount importance.

The main objectives of the thesis are to explore the dynamics between the attitudes of the Roma in northwestern Bulgaria regarding education and see how these expectations reflect their long-term and short-term decisions about the education of their children. I have used as a target group three representative settlements in northwestern Bulgaria – a big town with a big Roma ghetto (Montana); a smaller town with a big Roma ghetto (Byala Slatina); and a village with a large percentage of Roma people living in it (Borovan). The situation of the Roma people in Bulgaria varies considerably depending on their location and occupation. The economic situation in the country is different in the different regions and this has also affected the present-day condition of the gypsies. As an ethnic group, the Roma are also quite heterogeneous and are divided into many internal subgroups which is also reflected in their socio-economic situation. The target group of my research mainly comprises of Dassikane Roma (Christian, or Bulgarian Roma), and a small group of Horahane Roma (Muslim, or Turkish Roma). The northwestern region is also characterized by a serious economic underdevelopment and a high unemployment rate – a situation which has harshly affected the Roma communities, too. As a result, the Roma population in the region is still to a large extent uneducated and deeply segregated in ghettos, a situation which can lead to social tension in some of the settlements.

1.2. Methodology and fieldwork description

Before fieldwork, I have developed the following hypotheses:

1. Most parents believe that education will not give better chances for the realization of their children because racism among Bulgarians is the reason for the bad condition of the Roma. (In this way they shift responsibility on someone else and adopt the rather passive position of unprivileged).

2. Some parents believe that education is the way out of their situation. (The difficulty here is to understand whether this really is an attitude or just a declarative statement. A way to find out is to see how much a family is ready to invest in the education of the child.)

3. A large percentage of the Roma leaders and parents underestimate the role of the family and community for the education of the children and shift the responsibility entirely on the state. They do not have a realistic idea of what qualitative education is and do not understand the role of desegregation.

4. Presently, Bulgarian society is very racial and this hinders the full inclusion of Roma children in non-segregated schools.

5. Most of the Roma children do not receive the required pre-school preparation connected to the acquisition of the Bulgarian language and other necessary habits and skills, without which it is very difficult to adapt later in school.

6. The majority of the Roma are unemployed and their difficult economic condition is one of the reasons for the early drop-out of the children from school, as they cannot provide them with clothes, transportation, money, study materials, etc.

My fieldwork lasted for two months – from June to September 2006. My main respondents were a) Roma parents and children; b) Roma leaders and NGO representatives; and c) experts on Roma issues on local and national level. I tried to include different types of Roma families – both families where the parents had received (some) education and had a more stable income, and families where the parents were uneducated and had a very unstable economic situation. The correlation between the level of education and monthly income, although not a fixed criteria, is quite often a very strong one and people with some educational background usually have a more stable economic situation compared to those who have had little or no education.

I carried out what Markus (1995) calls a *multi-sited* fieldwork which started with trips to the capital, Sofia, where I had appointments and interviews with my co-supervisor, Dr. Ilona Tomova, and other expert interviews. On a local level, I have travelled extensively to the three settlements (Montana, Byala Slatina, and Borovan) and carried out numerous interviews with Roma people, local Roma leaders and NGO representatives. On a local level, I also met some experts dealing with Roma education and integration issues. Most of the interviews I carried out were structured. In addition, I have also had some biographic and group interviews. The paper work includes revision of assessments on Roma issues and statistic data.

My fieldwork was vastly facilitated by a so-called gift exchange. This was a rather unexpected development which happened thanks to my digital camera. I was warned by Dr. Ilona Tomova that people in the ghetto would ask me for money and her advice was to never exchange money for information as this would harshly hinder my fieldwork and may lead to disappointment in both sides. My ‘currency’, however, turned out to be the pictures. I wanted to take pictures of some of the people that I interviewed and of the ghettos that I visited. From the very beginning children asked me whether I would bring back developed pictures

and as I had already refused to give them money, I agreed to bring back pictures. This was an instant ice breaker and more people agreed to talk to me and let me closer to them.

1.3. Assimilation versus integration

The terms ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ are quite often used interchangeably in literature. It is difficult to make a clear cut between them because some aspects of both terms overlap. There are many examples in human history which show that forced assimilation has often been used to integrate certain minority groups into the majority of the population. The application of this violent practice has proved to be effective in the short term but the assimilation of a certain group of people into another is just a temporary solution to the problem, which, however, has almost always turned out to bear rather serious consequences for the social peace and stability in a given society. Take, for example, the war in Former Yugoslavia which has proved that violent and artificial assimilation cannot be the basis for peaceful interaction between groups of different religious and cultural origin and may result in a violent conflict.

I assume the difference between the two terms to be crucial for the purposes of my thesis. Therefore, I have chosen the working definitions, as used in the UNDP report on the Roma situation in Eastern Europe, *Avoiding the Dependency Trap*, 2002. As clearly indicated there, the term *integration* refers to “the opportunity to participate in socioeconomic life on an equal basis without losing one’s own identity (linguistic, cultural), while simultaneously contributing one’s individual distinctiveness to the cultural richness of the society” (UNDP Regional Report, 2002). Thus stated, this definition describes the term not as a static state, but as a changing process which develops every day, and which I consider to be more appropriate for the situation of the Roma minority in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the term *assimilation* is viewed as “social inclusion at the expense of losing distinct group identity. Assimilation of minorities (usually ethnic) generally requires the sacrifice of their ethno-cultural distinctiveness in order to receive entry opportunities. Assimilation is rarely successful, at least in the short and medium term. Minorities can easily lose elements of their distinctiveness without receiving commensurate entry opportunities” (UNDP Regional Report, 2002). I have chosen these two working definitions because they correspond to an approach which is closely connected to human development and human rights perspectives.

1.4. Relevance of the project to the Peace and Conflict Transformation Programme

Integration seems to be the only way out of the problematic situation in Bulgaria where the Roma are marginalized, discriminated against, and 69% of the majority have negative attitudes towards the members of that ethnic group (Decheva 2001). Integration of the Roma can be seen as crucial for keeping the ethnic and social peace in the country not only because there is tension between the Roma and the state, on one hand, and the Roma and the majority, on the other hand, but also because the new nationalistic political fractions are getting more and more popular among the electorate.

The integration problem is even deeper if we consider the demographic processes in Bulgaria. By hypothesis, if the same tendencies prevail, by the year 2050, the Roma will comprise 30% - 35% of the total population, compared to 4,7% - 8,5% at present.

The integration of the Roma can also be considered as a preventive peace work because presently all prerequisites for a Roma revolt are available; the same which provoked the Roma revolt in Slovakia in the beginning of 2004. Another disturbing fact shows that the crime rate among young Roma is over ten times higher per 100 000 people than that among the children belonging to other ethnic groups (UNDP National Report, Bulgaria, 2002).

So far, the state has taken actions regarding the Roma minority only under pressure by international human rights organizations and the European Union. In other words, the integration policy has not been based on dialogues between the state and the Roma themselves, which is one of the possible reasons for its failure. The Roma problems have never been prioritized in the Bulgarian society. So far, they have only been viewed as such within the scope of the minority itself. This situation can produce large-scale social conflicts in future which can impact the social peace in the country.

EU and UNDP reports are unanimous in their conclusions that Bulgaria has gained minor success as far as the integration of the Roma is concerned. The recommendations suggest a deeper study and understanding of the Roma ethnos in general, which would facilitate the implementation of working projects for their integration. At the same time, this integration should not put to danger the survival of the Roma traditions and cultural heritage.

2. The Roma in Bulgaria

2.1. Brief History of the Roma in Bulgaria

Origin

Hypotheses and leading theories about the origin of the Roma are intermingled with the legends told by the Roma themselves; by readings of the Bible (the Old Testament); debatable historic sources, and numerous attempts to follow their migration to Europe.

All legends, based on the Bible, situate the Roma in a group of sinners (sons of Cain), cursed by the God's wrath to wander homeless on earth, which corresponds to their nomadic lifestyle. For Christian Middle Age Europe, as summarized by Pamporov (2006), this is the only legitimate way which can give an account for their appearance in Europe. This religious etiology is at the core of the prejudices against and the stereotypes of the Roma which had resulted in isolationist negative attitudes, persecutions and segregation.

Another popular legend is the one tracing the origin of the Roma back to Egypt. On one hand, this legend is based on the self-ascription narratives of the Roma themselves, who claim that they have arrived from the "Small Egypt". On the other hand, it is based on a passage from the Holy Scripture which reads that Egypt will be turned into a desert and all Egyptians will be scattered around the world. Herodotus related their origin to the Pharaoh Senusert the Third, who crossed Nubia and Palestine and defeated the Thracians and the Skits in Europe, and some of his men settled in Kolhida on his way to Egypt.²

The widely accepted theory which relates the origin of the Roma not to Egypt or Asia Minor but to India dates back from 1763 when the theology student Ishtvan Valiy found out many identical words between the Roma dialect of the Hungarian Roma and the language of a group of students from southwestern India. In 1978 the Second World Congress of the International Roma Committee officially acknowledged India as the motherland of the Roma. This theory has also been proved by latest genetic research.

Stages of settlement in Bulgaria

Most researchers of the history of the migrations of the Roma into Europe in general, and into Bulgaria, in particular, believe that the first big migration wave of the Roma which had started from the Iranian Plateau occurred in the 8th century with their entrance into the Asian

² Modern researchers, however, are not unanimous about the geographic location of the "Small Egypt". Some researchers argue that Small Egypt is a derivative from 'Klein Egypten' – a phrase used to denote the Middle East, whereas another researchers (as Liegeois and Vaux de Foletier) argue that it was situated in Northern Pelopones or Epir (Pamporov 2006).

part of the Byzantine Empire. It is believed that the Iranian Plateau is the place where the Roma language and the Roma social norms were formed. Around the 10th century the Roma had already entered Egypt and other parts of North Africa. From there, through the Aegean Islands and Greece they entered Europe around 11th century. During the next three centuries different Roma groups had settled in most European countries. According to this chronology, the arrival of the Roma in Bulgaria is dated back to the 14th century, although the first sporadic immigration happened much earlier.

The hypotheses for the settlement of the Roma in Bulgaria are even more because this part of the Balkan Peninsula is closest to the Iranian Plateau and is one of the main roads between the Asian part of the Byzantine Empire and Europe.

Fraser (1992) dates the first settlement of Roma in Bulgaria to the middle and the end of the 14th century. Marushiakova and Popov (2000), however, support the hypothesis that a group of Roma had settled in Thracia (within the borders of Bulgaria) already at the beginning of the 9th century. There even exist a hypothesis that a small group of Roma, known today as “the grey pigeons” had entered Bulgaria as early as the end of the 7th century, that is, shortly after the birth of the Bulgarian State. The appearance of the Roma on Bulgarian territory that early is highly debatable. However, the hypothesis that they have only entered the country in late 14th and early 15th century, when Bulgaria fell under Ottoman Rule, is also arguable. As pointed out by Pamporov: “Actually, related to the hypotheses for the arrival of the Roma in Bulgaria, the Roma research in an international aspect suffer a special form of scientific frustration: How come there are no registered cases of Roma presence before Ottoman Rule?” (2006:26). The reasons for the lack of serious historic sources for the arrival of the Roma in Bulgaria before the 14th century could be different. It could be the bad administration system of Middle-aged Bulgaria in terms of documentation and archiving. Another plausible reason could lie in the bad relations between Bulgaria and the Byzantine and Latin Empires and as the Roma have entered the country from these two empires and have managed to settle on Bulgarian territory, they could have been seen as allies to the two empires, that is, as Byzantines or Crusaders, despite their marginal status in the structure of the two empires. A third reason could be the mass destruction by fire of palaces and monastery literary centers with the invasion of the Ottoman army which could have led to the loss of a great number of written sources for the history of Middle-aged Bulgaria (Pamporov 2006).

Despite the different hypotheses concerning the exact date of the first settlement of the Roma on the territory of Bulgaria, researchers are unanimous about the more important

migration waves of Roma people on Bulgarian lands. Even those who support the idea of the early settlement of the Roma in Bulgaria acknowledge the fact that these first migration groups were quite sparse and they had not influenced the development of the Roma ethnos on the territory of the country in general.

Altogether, there have been three big Roma migration waves. The first significant migration wave came before, with or after the Ottoman army and is dated between the 14th and 15th centuries. Marushiakova and Popov (2002) use different written sources to verify the first official data for the presence of a compact Roma population within the boundaries of the country. The Roma are officially mentioned for the first time in the Nikopol Sandzhak from 1430 which refers to 431 Coptic, that is 'Egyptian' or 'gypsy' households. Another source is a common register of the gypsies in Rumeli (a district within the boundaries of Bulgaria) from 1523 which shows the presence of 5701 households, or 28 500 Roma people in the district (Marushiakova and Popov 2002).

The second migration wave occurred around the 17th century when Roma slaves from the vassal principalities of Wallachia and Moldova sought refuge on the territories of the Ottoman Empire during the wars between Austria and the Ottoman Empire and the short-term Austrian occupation of parts of Northwestern Bulgaria. The third wave, also known as the 'big Kelderara invasion' occurred after the Crimean War and led to the mass invasion of Roma groups from Wallachia and Moldova in Bulgaria in the second part of the 19th century. The migration of Roma groups on the Balkans continued until the 20th century as a result of the frequent wars in the region and the often change of state boundaries as a result of these wars (Marushiakova and Popov 2001).

Around the time of the Russian-Turkish war and the re-establishment of the Bulgarian state in 1878, the majority of the Roma in Bulgaria still lived in the countryside as nomads with permanent settlements at wintertime. Their sedentarisation started around 1920s and 1930s, when the first *mahali* (neighborhoods) with Roma population started to appear (Marushiakova and Popov 2001).

The status of the Roma during the Communist and the Transition Periods

During the Communist Period in Bulgaria, the state policy towards the Roma was influenced by the ideology of the proletariat – only the class differences were significant in the social differentiation of the society. This made ethnic and individual differences not only insignificant, but they were also viewed as a hindrance for the social unity of the society. The state policy aimed at unifying all members of the society by the homogenization of the labor

class. The Roma minority turned out to be the perfect target group for this experiment of the communist engineering as they were poor, did not possess any land and were easy victims of forced resettlement. The measures against the Roma included obligatory employment in the industrial or the cooperative sectors; forced resettlement of the Roma in state-provided housing that usually manifested itself in breaking of larger Roma extended families and groups into smaller units (usually one-generation families) and their accommodation in majority-dominated environment; obligatory inclusion into the health system of the state (that is regular health examinations and immunizations) and obligatory education for the Roma children (Ringhold et. al 2002).

The results of this social experiment are not only negative at first sight. The income of the Roma increased. They received access to social services otherwise unavailable for them. Their general health status improved. The failure of the whole Communist Ideal, however, shows that this positive development is not sustainable in the long term and the final outcome of this policy towards the Roma has led to the permanent loss of traditional relations within their community which were not replaced by new relations, which has alienated numerous Roma families across the country. Their resettlement among the majority did not lead to equalization with the economic status of the majority – the Roma still remained at the bottom of the economic ladder. The only positive development as a result of these measures was the improved access of Roma children to education, although mainstream Bulgarian education was still ideologically loaded and unsuited to the different cultural needs of the Roma (Ringold et. al 2002).

The Transition Period after 1989, as unanimously stated by the social scientists dealing with the sharp changes which determine the change of one governmental form to another and the impact of this change on the population, has affected most negatively the Roma communities who have had the smallest resources for adaptation to the new environment. The Roma, who forcibly inhabited small settlements, started migrating to the big cities on a large scale. This marked the formation of the typical Roma ghettos in the outskirts of the towns, where more than 50% of them live presently. This imposed several problems on the Roma minority in Bulgaria. Usually being less educated, the Roma were the first to lose their jobs in the early years of the Transition. This accumulated in greater poverty and resulted in lack of or insufficient education in the next Roma generation. The less education and skill possession prevented the Roma from being a competitive factor on the labour market, thus increasing the discrimination gap between them and the majority of the country.

The increasing poverty of the Roma has also resulted in deterioration of their health status. The free health system from the Communist Period was reformed and most Gypsies were excluded from the new paid system, as well as from other social services. All this, together with their total exclusion from the social life of the country, portrays the present picture of this minority in the country.

The deep crisis applies to all parameters of the individual and group existence of the Roma. Its end result is a tendency towards the increasing disintegration and marginalization of this ethno-cultural group, and for it to remain at the bottom of the social scale in the far long-term. The group of degenerated and marginalized Gypsies is growing fast. They have lost their traditional culture before they have managed to change it for another. The social implications for the Roma are striking: Because of their impoverished status, parents can no longer take proper care for their children and oftentimes force them to steal, beg or prostitute in order to get some money for the family. The number of families abandoned by the father is increasing. At the same time, statistics show an increased tendency of birth growth, as children are viewed as a tool for the acquisition of social welfare money. The number of mentally-affected and chronically ill children, as well as children abandoned by their parents is increasing dramatically.

The sharp decline in school attendance by Roma children in recent years will have lasting negative consequences. The Bulgarian state will very soon be faced with the difficult problem of integrating tens of thousands of young people who are illiterate, unqualified, unaccustomed to the working environment and lacking any chance of social survival, or who tend towards deviant forms of behavior. Lowering of the already poor standard of education and qualifications in the Roma community leads it into a vicious circle of unemployment, misery, marginalization and crime. The last available mechanisms for the social integration of the Roma into society are being destroyed in this way.

The Transition Period, however, also brought some positive opportunities for the Roma minority. Ethnic minorities could at last self-identify themselves and thus receive certain rights from their different status, as well as to organize themselves politically. The practice in Bulgaria, however, has shown that the Roma minority, unlike the Turk minority, has not fully benefited from these opportunities and the representatives of the minority themselves see the years after 1989 as worse than the previous ones with tendencies for deterioration (Ringold et. al 2004).

2.2. Demographic characteristics

The Roma minority is the third largest ethnic group in Bulgaria, following the Bulgarian majority and the Turk minority. The latest census from 2001³ shows that the people who self-determine themselves as Roma on the territory of the country number 370 908, or 4,7% of the total population. According to the same census, the Bulgarians number 83,9%, and the Turks are 9,4% (National Statistic Institute).

Experts are divided into two regarding the exact number of the Roma population in the country, however. Some believe that the number of the Roma is twice as high as the census numbers show – that is, more than 700 000 people, or more than 8% of the total population (Liegeois 1995; Tomova 1995). Prognostic estimates even argue that the question of the second largest ethnic group is quite debatable. It is believed that a large percent of the Roma deliberately hide their ethnic identity because of the social stigma associated with it. This group of experts base their argument on an unofficial census of the Roma carried out by the Ministry of Interior in 1989, according to which 576 927 people fell into the Roma category (6,45%). Keeping in mind the rapid birth rate of the Roma, prognoses are that from 1989 to 2001 (when the last census was carried out), their numbers have increased and not decreased, as the last census show (Marushiakova and Popov 1993).

The opposing expert camp argue that only self-description counts as a legitimate ethnic belonging and people who do not identify themselves as Roma should not be counted as such (Pamporov 2006).

The exact number of the Roma in Bulgaria will remain questionable but there is a sound reason to take into account expert estimates and analyses in addition to statistic data. It is important to note that the number and the growth of the Roma in Bulgaria attracts a great national interest and is a subject of multiple speculations. It is a wide-spread opinion that most Roma have a so-called *parasitic* style of survival in the macro society. In the past, when the mobility of the Roma was much greater, a more suitable term to describe their lifestyle would be the so-called *parasitic nomadism*. This survival strategy is not necessarily a negative one. If we use the biological terms *organism* (*the macrosociety, the majority*) and *parasite* (*the Roma ethnic minority*), the historic retrospective shows that this form of existence is more likely to be *symbiotic* (counterfeeding), rather conflicting. The Roma had taken advantage of the privileges to be part of the modern state by executing specific functions in it. After 1989, however, this symbiotic existence has become of a conflicting and

³ The next national census will be carried out in 2011.

racist character. The reason for that is multidimensional: the mass impoverishment of the population; the high unemployment level; the formation of the Roma ghettos (*mahali*); the appearance of the free media, which spends a lot of time dealing with the so-called *Gypsy Problem*. In general, the social and economic crisis of the Transition period has mainly affected the Roma minority. In certain regions, the minority has turned into a burden for the state and into an unwanted parasite for the majority. The Bulgarians are famous for their ethnic tolerance of which the Bulgarian history bear numerous records – from the attitude towards Jews and Armenians in the Second World War, to the newest history of the Balkans when numerous ethnic war conflicts have taken place in the neighboring countries. It has turned, however, that the tolerance towards the Roma correlates to their number and growth. In other words, when an ethnic society is largely dependent on social aids for its survival and at the same time progressively multiplies its number and share of the national population growth, the majority (the Bulgarians in this case) gradually starts seeing in their face not only a burden, but also a threat. This threat translates into the assumption that in future, the Roma minority is no longer going to be a minority in the country. These attitudes are additionally sharpened by some nationalistic fractions and political parties in the country. Perhaps this potential threat plays a major role in the acts of racism and discrimination against the Roma minority in Bulgaria.

The question of the number of the Roma in Bulgaria is tightly related to the criteria according to which an individual is being recognized and treated as belonging to one ethnicity or another. This implicitly arises the problem of how is the Roma minority defined and by whom. There also remain the question of how do the individuals from mixed marriages and the groups with so-called peripheral ethnic identity (in this case Bulgarian, Turkish and Wlachian) identify themselves. In order to answer the question *Who are the Roma in Bulgaria?* we need to investigate the structure of the Roma identity, its borders, and the ways in which it is being formed.

2.3. Ethnic identity and classification of the Roma groups in Bulgaria

The term ‘ethnicity’ is a rather new academic term which describes the relationships between different groups whose members consider themselves to be different from one another. Ethnically distinctive groups within the boundaries of states with population from different ethnic belonging are referred to as ‘ethnic minority’. As pointed out by Eriksen, “an ethnic minority can be defined as a group which is numerically inferior to the rest of the population in a society, which is politically non-dominant and which is being reproduced as an ethnic

entity” (1993:121). The members of an ethnic group also share a common self-awareness of belonging; that is, they share similar understanding of their group’s past, history, culture, social norms, etc. (Mayall 2004). The term ‘ethnic group’ is also *relational* – an ethnic group is distinct only *in relation to* another group (Eriksen 1993).

Researchers dealing with ethnic identity issues employ the use of different markers in order to analyze the content of the concept. Brian Belton (2005) analyzes and criticizes the biased usage of one marker or another and mixing of the terms *ethnicity* and *race*. Thus, for example, one main marker, such as *ritual and rite*, which contains cultural elements such as traditional behavioral practices from the everyday life; specific rituals at holidays and ceremonies; value system; beliefs, etc. does not suffice to mark the boundaries of the Roma ethnic identity. As Belton remarks:

Ritual and rite mark out one social or community group, but these cultural markers may not be shared by another group that occupies the same ethnic category. This seems to be the case among the Gypsies. [Belton 2005:25]

Another major marker, such as *language* is also being questioned due to the specifics of the Roma ethnos. Regardless of the fact that the mother tongue is an important construct of one’s identity, it may not always be of equally great relevance. Thus, for example, there exist not only individuals, but whole Roma groups in Bulgaria that do not use the Roma language and are still being recognized by members of other ethnic groups as Roma and they themselves recognize themselves as such, sharing rituals and traditions with other groups who speak the Roma language.

Itinerancy is another marker commonly used to describe the Roma identity. The widespread stereotype *gypsies = travelers (nomads)*, no matter how natural, does not stand a serious scientific verification. Based on Liegeois, Belton (2005) remarks that after the Second World War, the opportunities for a nomadic lifestyle have dropped dramatically in Europe. The sedentary lifestyle of the gypsies is a product of the modern lifestyle which forces them to act accordingly to law, borders, employment opportunities, etc. Therefore, *itinerancy* has become a less important marker of the gypsy identity.

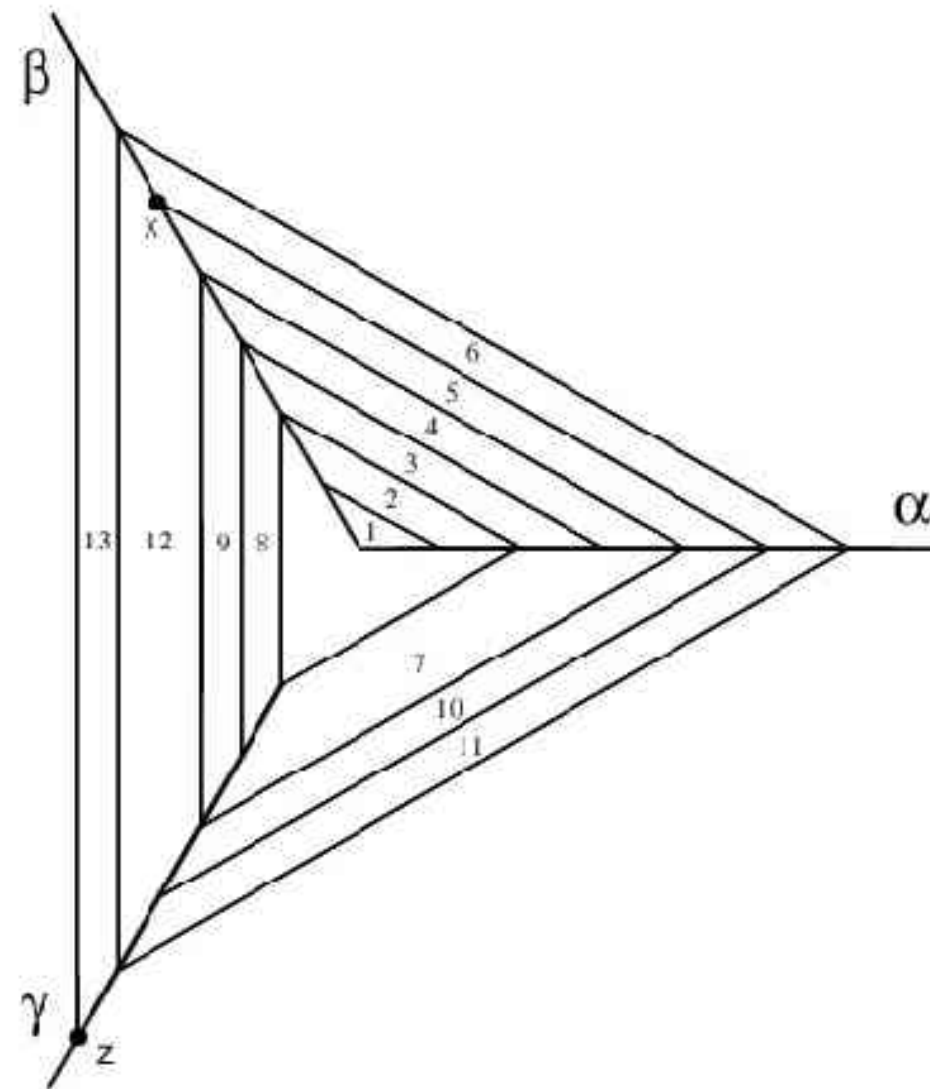
The last major marker analyzed by Belton (2005) is *self-identification and ascription*. Okely (1983) argues that this marker should be one of paramount importance. I have already mentioned the problem of the real number of the gypsies in Bulgaria which arises from this marker. The national census is not possible in any different way in a modern society, yet, I

agree with Belton that “self-ascription is the most problematic marker of the Gypsy identity” (2005:31). The implicit question here is: “Is it enough to declare or think that I am a gypsy in order to become one?” The complex debate which arises from this question is an integral part of the usage of the term *ethnic identity*. For the purposes of this thesis, I would only like to stress upon the problematic nature of this marker, without going into the core of this problem.

I do not discuss a marker such as *origin* which, despite being quite relevant for the definition of some other ethnic groups, is to a large extent inapplicable for the gypsies due to their specific history and migration patterns, as well as the linguistic proofs of the place of their origin.

The prioritizing of one or several markers leads to the usage of different models for description of the Roma ethnic identity. In addition, the Roma are a rather varied ethnic group which also hinders the application of one, universal, model. This is one of the underlying reasons why one of the most in-depth studies of the Roma ethnic identity is called *Gypsy Identities*, and not *Gypsy Identity*. Mayall (2004) makes a thorough historic analysis of almost all attempts for definition of the Roma ethnic identity. He shows the dynamics with which the theoretic concepts related to the structure of the gypsy identity develop and change in time, stressing on the different methods used by different authors. According to Mayall (2004), authors such as Okely, Liegeois, Fraser, Acton, Kenrick, Hancock and others, do not share similar perspectives when they discuss the ranging of the markers, the borders and the structure of the Roma identity. This problematic is very important when we have to not only say what the Bulgarian Roma are not, but when we have to provide a thorough model of the structure, the borders and the ways of formation of the specific Roma identity within the specific Bulgarian context.

For the purposes of my thesis, I would like to use the sociogram by Pamporov (2006) and his model of a so-called *kaleidoscopic ethnic identity*, as it is relevant to the specifics of the Roma ethnicity in Bulgaria and the present historic moment characterized by the dynamics of a constant transition and rediscovering of the individual identity. This theoretical framework is built upon and expands Liegeois’s model of the structure of the Roma identity and supports Okely’s argument that we do not have to define the Roma from the outside but should let the ethnic group speak for itself. Another reason why I use Pamporov’s model is based on his argument that the *kaleidoscopic ethnic identity* reflects the dynamics of the concept, determines its borders and allows for the examination of the crossover process across these borders. This model also provides a straightforward way to present the different groups and subgroups of the Bulgarian Roma.



Graphic 1: Sociogram of the Roma identity (Pamporov 2006:48)

Pamporov’s sociogram is a triordinate system, as depicted in Graphic 1. The axis α stands for the personal pronoun *ame* (*we*); the axis β stands for the *known otherness* or *tume* (*you*); and γ stands for *ol* (*they*) – this is the axis of the *outsiderness*. The center of the system is *me* (*I*) and the sectors enumerated from outside in show the distantness of the *protagonist* (the individual) from the group they symbolize and at the same time shows the geometrically growing volume of the group in question (Pamporov 2006).

In **Sector 1** lies the nuclear family. The nuclear family according to Pamporov is the “factor for the preservation of the cultural identity in any environment” (2006:49). In **Sector 2** are situated the direct relatives of all degrees, as well as the collateral relatives up to third degree. Pamporov’s model is based on the theory that the Roma kinship system is of a so-

called *Escimo type*, which is bilateral but the direct blood relationship is still of greatest significance. In other words, Sector 2 includes the nuclear family, the ancestors, the grandchildren and the nephews/nieces. To sum it up, Sectors 1 and 2 are located between the axes α and β because they represent the sphere of the *significant others* which can never become outsiders for the individual.

Sector 3 includes the collateral relatives above third degree and the in-law relatives. There are parallel sectors in the other two zones (between α and β and between β and γ). This is so because in some cases when relative relations are unwanted, the individual can distance oneself both from one's own and from the other family. On another hand, we witness certain tolerant attitude towards the non-gypsies which can even lead to an exogamous marriage. Sector 8 depicts this possible close otherness.

Sector 4 is of great significance because it is the sphere of the spoken by the individual dialect. Based on this sector, we differentiate the 5 main Roma groups in Bulgaria. The disperse looks like that: *daskane – horahane – kalderashya – kalaydzhes – ludari*. These are the names of the Roma groups used by the Bulgarian Roma themselves. Parallel to Sector 4 is Sector 9 which can be called *das (Bulgarian)* but it could also be *horahay (Turk)*, *balamo (Greek)*, *Zhut (Jew)*. As Pamporov concludes, “this is the linguistic net that surrounds the individual and starts from the understanding of ‘you’ in order to come to the chatter of ‘they’” (2006:50).

Sector 7 embodies the term *mezhdiri* and includes members of exogamous marriages of equal groups which leads to the formation of a new group. Its situating between axes α (we) and γ (they) shows the possible alienation from the new community, as well as the full integration into it. Its situating next to Sectors 3 and 8, on one hand, and Sectors 4 and 9, on another hand, shows the level of distance – from kinship to language group.

Sector 5 marks what most classifications call a *subgroup*. This sector is determined by the professional identity of the individual and/or the geographic regions that live in the collective memory of the community. From here on, towards direction *they*. **Sector 10** presents the mixed marriages with non-gypsies, as well as marriages with members of a lower group in terms of professional status.

Sector 6 depicts what most studies of the Roma identity call a *metagroup*. This is the threshold of the *imagined gypsy identity* (an abstract term which includes the multitude of groups and subgroups defining themselves as *ame (we)*). In Benedict Anderson's terms, this

is an equivalent of the notion of nation. This sector is called Gypsy / Roma. As shown in the graphic, it is dependent on **Sector 11** where other gypsy metagroups are located⁴.

Sector 12 is the sphere of the *imagined non-gypsy communities*. The most commonly used gypsy word for them is *gadzhe (non-gypsy)*. This Sector corresponds to Sector 10 in terms of marriage relations and to Sector 5 in terms of local neighborhood and professional inclination.

Sector 13 is located furthest from the center. Here reside individuals whose identity the Roma can never recognize as their own. These are the non-gypsies in power who are seen by the Roma as repressors and who are seen as producing negative stereotypes about them (stereotypes that are insulting and alienating for the gypsies). The word used by the Bulgarian Roma to denote them is *gomi* and most often translates as ‘policeman’, ‘judge’, ‘inspector’.

Apart from the above described sectors which structure the Roma kaleidoscopic identity, between the axes of *we*, *you* and *they* there also exist two more identity dimensions which are fixed according to a certain stable distance from the *Self*. These are the points **X** and **Z**. The Roma word for **X** is *drugutno* which translates as ‘stranger’. The Roma use this word to denote a person who is not known to them, who comes from afar but at the same time is visually recognized as a part of *we*. The point depicts the moment of encounter when his identity, profession, belonging, and place of origin are still unknown. Point **Z** represents the extreme case of alienation that the members of Sector 13 can reach. This is the moment when the actions of those in power are being understood as acts of violence and direct repression.

The adaptive character of the model of the kaleidoscopic identity allows for the analysis of the Roma identity through the prism of the nomad lifestyle. The Roma migrations and the different social contexts in which different groups find themselves create a process that fragments the collective memory into many pieces (linguistic, professional, territorial, etc.) and constructs multiple collective identities. From another perspective, the model also allows to follow the happening within a Roma community in a period of sedentarism which had started during the times of Ottoman Rule. In more recent times, the beginning of the Communist Period in Bulgaria coincides with the appearance of ethnic neighborhoods, which today have turned into ghettos. According to Pamporov, this process has led to the following dynamics in the ethnic identity of the Bulgarian gypsies:

⁴ Apart from the Roma, there are three more gypsy metagroups in Europe – *Kale*, *Manusha* and *Sinti*.

The ethnic ghettorisation speeds the shrinking of identity and limits the horizon of the otherness. The excessive shrinking closes the world of the significant others within the framework of the family and leads to the gradual loss of group identity. From one hand, this makes the Roma extremely sensitive and even aggressive towards the otherness and the outsidersness. At the same time it forces them to construct and redefine a new identity. In this way we can witness the birth, enforcement and expansion of a metagroup identity, similar to the national one. [Pamporov 2006:52]

2.4. The Gypsy Ghetto (Mahala)

Nowadays, the Bulgarian gypsies, and the gypsies all over Europe for that matter, lead a sedentary way of life. A very insignificant number of them have preserved the nomadic lifestyle and have a seasonal pattern of movement in search of income sources. These are single families, however, who still perform some traditional arts and crafts and who are inclined to settle permanently if they find appealing enough conditions.

The last census data in Bulgaria (from 2001) are quite old as of today but even they show the massive urbanization process in the country after 1989 that has affected not only the Roma but the whole population of the country. The movement from villages and small towns towards big city centers is valid for all ethnic groups. In the case of the Roma, however, this process marks the beginning of the transformation of the small gypsy neighborhoods into big ghettos. Nowadays, about 80% of the Bulgarian gypsies live in such so-called *mahali* (*Mahala* is the word used by the Bulgarian Roma to denote the neighborhood they live in. This is also the word most Bulgarians use to describe the gypsy ghetto, often using the phrase *gypsy mahala*. The word itself enters the Bulgarian vocabulary during the Ottoman Rule – *mahalle* but its origin is Arabic – *māhallā*, literally meaning *to settle, to occupy*). For comparison, before 1989, only about 4% of the Bulgarian gypsies lived in separate *mahali* (Tomova 2009).

The changes in the Bulgarian economic system after 1989 have lead to the drastic impoverishment of the Roma population which manifests itself in a permanent unemployment, reaching up to 90% in some regions. The Roma *mahali* are overcrowded and have turned into zones with highest concentration of poor people. In such an environment, negative social phenomena also thrive: deviant social behavior; growth of violence and crime; breaking up of the stable family forms; early dropping out of school and social welfare dependency. Poverty concentration leads to growth in the number of single mothers and decrease into the age of the first sexual intercourse. All this leads to reproduction of more

poverty and marks the vicious circle of poverty and dependency. This is the dependency trap that the Bulgarian gypsies are trying to escape.

These processes are mainly visible in the town, where the Bulgarian Roma have turned into a sort of *ethnic underclass*. Similar processes are also observed in small villages but not to the extent to call their habitats ‘a ghetto’. In villages, the Roma also live in separate *mahali* but they are not as densely populated and segregated as the town ghettos. According to Pamporov’s observations (2006), some villages are undergoing processes leading to the formation of ghettos and, for example, some villages already have separate Roma shop, Roma café, Roma cemetery.

The modern ghetto is characterized by some features which separate it from the classic notion of the word ‘ghetto’. It is a micro-society which to a certain extent looks self-efficient from an everyday point of view – the individual does not have to leave it in order to satisfy his/her biological and cultural needs. From another perspective, the isolation of the modern ghetto is not complete: individuals venture out of it in order to secure resources (money, food, clothes, etc.) and information from the outside world floods in (mainly through the electronic media).

Roma ghettos are viewed as a huge problem by the local authorities for many reasons. Most of the buildings are illegal, that is, juridically they do not exist. Many of the constructions are built with available materials such as tin, cardboard, stones, etc. Because of overcrowding, young families are forced to simply build an adjacent room next to the husband’s parents’ house. This practice has led to the extreme narrowing of streets and some parts of the ghetto resemble a labyrinth which I myself witnessed in Byala Slatina and Montana. Electricity stealing is a mass endeavor which is also a big problem for the authorities. The lack of sanitation leads to the spread of many hygiene-related diseases such as hepatitis and tuberculosis.

Poverty and misery can go as far as to force a family of 12 people from 4 generations to inhabit a small room and sleep on the floor. According to Tomova’s data (1995), 52% of the gypsies do not have at their disposal running cold water; 74% do not have a toilet; 86% do not have hot water in their homes; and 33% use a common toilet for several families. These numbers are perhaps higher nowadays.

Bulgarian ghettos are characterized by the sharp contrast between extreme poverty and extreme richness which can be observed meters apart one from another. Next to small house built with straw and clay, there can rise a huge 4-storey palace fenced by a tall fence

and belonging to a rich person from the ghetto. In a close proximity to dirty sanitation water running directly in the street, can live the richest person in the *mahala*.

Another problematic phenomenon is the formation of a ghetto within the ghetto, of which I have already mentioned before. This phenomenon has first been described by Tomova (1995). The ghetto within the ghetto is usually situated at the very end of the *mahala* and comprises of individuals cast aside by the rest of the Roma in the ghetto. The most common mechanism which triggers this phenomenon is the following: individuals who have been unemployed for a long period of time are forced to sell out their property and as there is nowhere else to go, they built some small construction to live in on a land that does not belong to them. At this stage, they still maintain some relationships with the rest of the community, despite their lowered status. The second stage is usually connected, on one hand, with the violation of certain important social norms, such as violence and thefts, and on the other hand, with the excessive use of alcohol which leads to deviant behavior and incapability of the person to take care of his/her family. At this stage, the individuals of this secondary ghetto are separated from the others not only physically but they are also rejected by the community and only maintain certain relationships with their closest relatives. The third stage which completes the image of the modern ghetto within the ghetto is related to the natural growth process that affects it. The number of the individuals inhabiting it is great enough and they receive another status of otherness, or outsidership. The ghetto within the ghetto can even get a new name, which is the case in Byala Slatina. There apply new rules in the ghetto within the ghetto which are different from those which apply in the *mahala*. One can call it a stricter pyramid-like hierarchical structure. On the top, there usually stands a leader who has the power to control the life in the secondary ghetto with the help of his dependents. This person is usually referred to as *tartor* (ring leader) has his status can be compared to that of a head of a criminal structure. The comparison comes not only from the criminal activities he is involved with but also from the violent mechanisms he uses in exercising his power. The criminal activity flourishing in this new ghetto is varied: thefts, forced prostitution, drugs and weapons trade, even trade with children and babies. The last are usually being sold for adoption to foreigners, or in the worst scenario – become organ donors. Generally, the ghetto within the ghetto is dangerous even for the inhabitants of the rest of the *mahala*.

Thus formed, the ghetto within the ghetto is an asylum for newly arrived Roma from other parts of the country. This are usually rejected (anomated) or too poor families looking for a new start in bigger towns. Once they find themselves on a new territory and competing with the overpopulation there, they have no other choice but to settle illegally in the ghetto

within the ghetto. There, however, they fall victims of the *tartor* and are forced to engage in criminal activity.

Specific for the ghetto within the ghetto is that it is families who live there that have most children. This is also a survival strategy because they receive welfare aids for each new child. On other hand, being outside the regulation plans, that is being juridically non-existent, the ghetto within the ghetto falls outside the national census. Unfortunately, these double discriminated people are *invisible* for the authorities. In other words, the Roma who are in most need of help are abandoned by the state because they are officially non-existent. Thus, they fall outside all official governmental programs for support of the Roma population. What they usually receive from the authorities are constant threats for eviction which are not followed by any actions. The ghetto within the ghetto seems such a serious problem for the local authorities that they fear destroying it thus failing and only generating new problems.

The negative tendency is the growth of these ghettos within the ghettos to continue. A specific example is the ghetto in Montana. During Tomova's fieldwork there in 1995, the ghetto within the ghetto numbered less than 50 people (Tomova 1995). Ten years later, during my fieldwork there, the number of its inhabitants was more than 300.

The social organization of the typical gypsy ghetto in Bulgaria varies depending on the specifics of a given subgroup that inhabits it. Still, we can summarize some of the main figures in the community who act as regulators for all that happens within the *mahala*. Pamporov (2006) provides the following typology of the informal leaders in the ghetto and this is also compatible to my observations during my fieldwork in Montana and Byala Slatina.

The so-called *barvale* (little tin gods) enjoy the highest status. This are Roma rich people who own a legal, semi-legal or, oftentimes, completely illegal business. Quite often, they provide employment for many of the ghetto inhabitants. Providing food for a large number of households, their high status and influence seems quite logical. At the same time, *barvale* can also be the *tartor* of the ghetto within the ghetto, which I have described beforehand. His power can lie not only in providing employment for others but also in fear of violence.

The second informal leader in the ghetto is the so-called *bakalin*. This is a person who owns a small grocery shop or a small alcohol bar. He is a tradesman who is not as rich as the *barvale* but who provides people with food and other necessities. He usually works with a small profit and offers good prices for the people depending on the secure large consumption. A very important part of his activity is that he *sells* goods at good will, that is, the *mahala*

members can get food and other products without having to pay for them at the moment. The *bakalin* writes down the customers' bills and they repay him without added interest whenever they can. It is exactly this delayed payment that gives the *bakalin* his power as the survival of whole households depend on him.

The third type of informal leader is the one who owns some spiritual charisma. This can be the spiritual leader in the community, the traditional healer or the witch. This can be also the musician who has received acclaim by the rest of the people. These people can earn the trust of the others and usually depend on their personal virtues.

The fourth type of informal leaders are the university graduates and the Roma with completed professional secondary education. Skillfulness and personal prosperity achieved by legal means is also highly valued among the people of the ghetto in a slightly different way. People with higher education have more opportunities to cross the borders of the ghetto. They can easily communicate with members of the majority and are well accepted by them. Integration in the macrosociety is not difficult for them. These Roma intellectuals have an important role as agents between the ghetto community and the world of *gadje*. They can provide help not only with search for jobs outside the *mahala* but also with problems with the tax system, the health system, welfare aids applications and all other activities that require a higher level of education and literacy.

The last type of informal leader is the traditional authority of the extended family. In each *mahala* there is at least one individual over 55 – 60 years of age who is the head of a vast family network within the *mahala*. Usually, this is a man who has three or more sons, who, in their turn, have each three or more children. Through marriage relations, all sections of the ghetto can be involved in the descending family network of this individual. In this way he has the opportunity to expand his power and to exercise his will, thus subjugating in a traditional way the members of his family.

Life in the ghetto is mainly regulated by the internal norms of the community and the guardians for their observations are the above-mentioned leaders. Of course, changes and regulations valid for the macrosociety also influence the life in the ghetto but they are always seen through the prism of the traditional lifestyle of a given gypsy community.

I cannot provide a full picture of what really the ghetto is, as it means I should go into detail into many specific traditional practices and customs, different for the different Roma groups. These include the rules that apply in cases of marriage, death, sickness, justice (some groups have a traditional court called *meshare*), childbirth, religion, etc. I believe it is important, however, to present a brief classification of the typical for the Bulgarian gypsies

economic strategies and methods for survival, as it will give a picture of how this rather segregated and discriminated ethnic group manages to survive despite its hardships. At the same time, this can also reveal some of the reasons that increase the negative attitude among the Bulgarian majority towards the gypsies.

2.5. Means of income and survival

Research into the traditional survival and economic strategies does not allow for the classification of the gypsies neither as a hunter-gatherer society, nor as a modern industrial society. As Pamporov (2006) points out, researchers usually come across the pre-modern means of survival related to the practicing of certain craft. The traditional Roma economic strategies include services affecting the pre-modern society but on a lower technical level. Such survival means is related to selling of a given service such as tinning, basket-making, wood-crafting, etc. to a certain circle of consumers at a given period of time. This creates the following paradox, however: the craftsmen's children learn the craft from their parents by observation and practice. When they grow up, however, they become direct competition for the old craftsman (the father). In this way an extended family will have too many members performing the same craft for a limited group of consumers. That is why many individuals separate from their family after adolescence and create their own nuclear family or even move out of their parents' immediate area. Despite this separation, they do not break the network of social interactions with their extended family. This is due not only to the fact that the family plays a fundamental role in the choice of a marriage partner but also because, unlike modern professional networks, the practicing of a traditional craft means staying in a rather closed and densely knitted professional network where everyone knows everyone practicing the same craft.

After the World War II, the Bulgarian Roma were gradually included in the planned economic of the socialism. The Roma's main occupation in towns became employment in the newly built large production plants. The gypsies living in the villages became part of the newly established state agricultural cooperations. Very few of them were allowed to practice their crafts in some villages and small towns and the ready-made products were sold as souvenirs. Other craftsmen were trained in accordance with their skills and were used to perform activities close to their crafts through the modern production means.

Despite the practicing of the new modern jobs during the Socialism, many of the gypsies found ways to preserve their traditional crafts passing it on to their children. In general, however, crafts lost their role as a source for income generation.

After the change of the political regime in 1989, the gypsies were the first to lose their jobs in the new era of labor economics. The reasons for that are numerous, complex and inter-related. Perhaps of greatest significance was the low education level of a large portion of the Roma population in the country, which in a competitive environment in times of crisis and a limited number of positions, led to the natural dropping behind of the gypsies. From another perspective, perhaps, the wide-spread stereotypes describing the gypsies as lazy, thievish, irresponsible and undisciplined might also have played a huge role in the process. In other words, the Roma are easily discriminated on the labor market even if they are professionally qualified.

Another problem hindering the subsistence of the gypsies through agriculture, for example is the lack any agricultural production means such as land, machines, seeds, fertilizers, etc. which require a considerable amount of preliminary investing. The Bulgarian Roma find themselves without any property that they can use to secure a bank credit.

Another important factor for the dropping behind on the labor market are the ethnic barriers between the gypsies and the majority. Not knowing the gypsy minority hinders a lot of Bulgarians in their relationships with the gypsies. Many Bulgarians would not like to have a gypsy as a colleague, as an employee, or as a neighbor, and the gypsy children are also not wanted as peers for their children in school. These attitudes further deepen the segregation of the Roma and are also acting as a self-segregation trigger mechanism for the Roma themselves.

The transition period after 1989 is a very difficult one for the whole generation. It sets a permanent economic crisis. It is especially difficult for the Roma and most of them find themselves on the verge of survival, as an UNDP report of the time shows (Ringhold et al. 2002). The change in the economic system in the country, in one hand, that has lead to poverty and mass unemployment among the Roma, and the change of the political regime and the newly acquired freedom of choice, in another hand, generate the formation of different types of economic strategies in the Roma communities. In most cases the primary aim of these strategies is simply survival, that is, the provision of income that secures first-aid goods (mainly food), without any long-term objectives for the gradual improvement of their overall economic situation.

There have been several attempts for the systematization and description of these strategies. Tomova (1995) provides a very general typology made up of four elements. The first strategy is called *whatever job*, the second is related to the use of deviant criminal activities of different character (like thefts and prostitution enforcement), the third is the use

of child labor (which is a common reason for school dropping out), and the last one which is used when the first three are not available or do not show any results, is the seeking of help from relatives, distant relatives, and even neighbors.

The most thorough and full systematization of the typical Roma economic strategies is made by Pamporov (2006). I will briefly describe his typology adding to it information that I have obtained during my fieldwork in the summer of 2006. The main strategies described by him are the following:

Working abroad (gurbet)

After 1989 and the opening of the Bulgarian borders, many Bulgarians got the opportunity to search for jobs in the forbidden up until that moment countries from Western Europe and other parts of the world. The members of the gypsy minority are no strangers to this process either. The destinations chosen by the Roma in the first years of the transition are several. A convenient place was the nearby Greece because of the little money required to get there, just some hundred kilometers away. Northern Greece becomes a mass destination for members of different groups of Bulgarian Roma. This part of Greece is not only close to the Bulgarian border but is also a region with a very heterogeneous population comprising of a large number of Slavic-speaking Christians, Turks, Rumanians and gypsies who play the role of mediators between the Bulgarian gypsies and the Greek employers. Another factor conditioning this choice is the fact that the Roma language contains a big number of Greek words, some of which with key significance when it comes to economic strategies, such as the numbers. Almost all Roma perform lowly qualified jobs and many of them work there illegally, that is, without contracts and work permits, pretending to be simply tourists.

Another important country is Germany, with special preferences of Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia. As Pamporov points out: "... the reason for these preferences is a rather curious one, than economically grounded but at the same time – tightly related to the social phenomenology – football" (2006:217). Because of the low education level of the gypsies, it is mainly the sports activities in these regions which form the geographic images instead. The popularity of the football game in Bulgaria and the developed assumption that regions with strong football teams are economically stronger (which is the case in Bulgaria) determine this irrational choice – the Bulgarian Roma head for the cities of the famous football teams Bayern (Munich), Borussia (Dortmund), Bayer (Leverkusen) and Schalke (Gelsenkirchen). Despite the irrationality of the football factor, the logical corollary turns out to be true – Bavaria and the Ruhr District turn out to be the strongest economic regions in Germany.

Gradually, with the fall of the Schengen Agreement, the number of countries that attract the Bulgarian gypsies drastically increases. Most common destinations in Europe become Spain, Holland, England, Austria and Italy, and outside Europe – Israel, Dubai, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Crafts revitalization

Practicing of traditional crafts in some Roma subgroups turns out to be of fundamental character for their survival. Crafting is seen not only as a profession but as a way of life that bring along a lot of positive emotions. Such is the case of the *tinsmiths*. Love for the craft and the pride of the specific skills it requires motivates the tinsmiths a lot and helps them find market for their production. These are mainly copper utensils and cutlery, as well as the popular on the Balkans cauldrons for alcohol brewing.

Another successful example is the one of the *basket-makers* who also manage to sell out the hand-made baskets they produce. Despite the fact that it has lost much of its appeal for the young generation, the craft is often being practiced by the elders just for the personal satisfaction a well crafted item gives.

Change of craft

When a subgroup comes to the conclusion that their craft is in a deep crisis, its members start to look for a way to change it for another craft that is more relevant to the new market conditions. There are two types of transformations. In the first type, the original craft is partially preserved. Most of the skills used in it are still being used and just the professional field is being changed. Oftentimes, the combination of the two professions is simultaneous and one of them is seasonal and is related to movement from one settlement to another. The second type is the change of the traditional craft with a completely new type of profession that is specific for another Roma subgroup.

Thus, for example, a family who subsist by tinsmithing can get involved in building construction, or more precisely, construction jobs that include metal processing (e.g. gutter-making).

Another typical example is the involvement in various types of illegal trade. Illegal in this case means tax-free trade. The variety here is big and goods that can be traded are numerous. For some regions, as reported by Pamporov (2006), this involves animals' trade. Families often visit animal markets and move from one settlement to another. Those who

practice this usually wait until the end of the market day when most of the other tradesmen lower the prices and buy their stock and resell it with a profit at another market. Others specialize in hides' trade by buying animal hides from small villages and selling them in towns.

Another type of trade is the so-called 'suitcase trade'. This practice is not only popular among the Roma but also among the Bulgarian Turks and some of the Bulgarians as well. The most popular articles are clothes which they usually buy from neighboring Turkey where textile and clothes production flourishes and prices are much lower than those in Bulgaria. Clothes-selling is usually done at improvised markets which are to be found in many settlements. Tendencies show, however, that this type of trade has been gradually decreasing.

Social welfare

Social welfare is the secure source for income in many Roma families in Bulgaria. In villages and small towns, this small income can be combined with the practicing of traditional crafts. When the two practices are combined, however, crafting should be done illegally in order for the individual to remain on the doll. The Roma receive many additional small incomes but keep them off the record in order not to lose the economic strategy in question which is extremely important especially in winter when it is often the only income source.

Unlike in villages and small towns, social welfare is usually the only income source in bigger towns where we find the typical gypsy ghettos. When social welfare is of such high significance, it is no wonder that it has received such an 'overvalue' and take such efforts to be secured and preserved. These efforts include a whole variety of ways to fake documents, required by the local authorities. What is more, during my fieldwork in Kosharnik (Montana) I came across the data that there are several people who have specialized in faking social welfare declaration. For a small amount of money they *help* their neighbors cheat the state.

Apart from providing false data to the authorities, some of the Roma have also developed other strategies for eluding the law in order to get money from the state. These include false retirement for health reasons, or the fictitious giving away of a car. In terms of social health welfare, some methods can be really inhumane. Tomova (1995) has observed that in some Roma communities genetically transmitted diseases, such as epilepsy, serves as a valuable economic strategy. Thus, for example, a young girl with epilepsy is a desired marriage partner first because she herself is provided for by the state for the rest of her life, and second because there is a 50% chance to transmit the disease to each of her children, thus providing another lifelong secure income in the family.

The social welfare strategy has negative consequences both for the state and the Roma community. On one hand, the mass social welfare for the gypsies is a burden for the state and the working part of the population, and on the other hand, the long absence of a large number of members of the Roma leads to loss of working habits and only deepens the negative stereotypes about the gypsies in general.

Gathering

The insignificant amount of social welfare in Bulgaria combined with the instable job opportunities available for the Roma has led to the rediscovery of gathering. As Pamporov (2006) observes, herbs gathering in Bulgaria is a traditional activity in Bulgaria. As an economic strategy, however, is exclusively being used by the Roma. The gypsies add a new meaning to this practice speaking of it as something which belongs to them. In reality, it can be said that today gathering in Bulgaria *is* a Roma activity. According to a 2004 research, gathering of mushrooms and herbs is an active economic strategy for about 3,9% of the Bulgarian gypsies (Dimova, Telkidzjiev et al. 2004).

Mushroom and herbs gathering by the Roma, however, often leads to ecological microdisasters in the territories it is being practiced. Because of the building of permanent camps during the gathering season, a large number of trees are being cut off and the wastes of the temporary settlements are left behind. Because of lack of knowledge of the ecosystem, and for convenience reasons, herbs are usually being uprooted, and the mushrooms are being plucked with their stumps. In these ways, the Roma are destroying their income source themselves, as these resources are becoming rarer and rarer by the year.

In urban areas, Roma gathering has a completely different face. Here it has the reverse ecological effect. The lack of garbage recycling in many towns and cities is being compensated by the gypsies who sort out and sell at the special check points materials as metal, paper, cardboard, glass bottles, etc. According to Pamporov (2006), also confirmed by my observations in Montana, some individuals assume garbage scavenging as a profession. In the big Sofia ghetto *Fakulteta* there is even a nick-name for this occupation – *kofermen* – a word comprised of the words for ‘bin’ and ‘superman’. The association with superman comes from the notion that the transportation of large amounts of garbage by hand or with the help of a small cart requires great physical efforts (Pamporov 2006). Garbage scavenging is a main economic strategy for about 6.1% of the Bulgarian Roma (Dimova, Telkidzjiev et al. 2004).

Urban gathering also leads to disasters not of ecological but of economic and social character. The reason for that is that metal gathering seldom confides to the garbage only as it is not much to be found there. The main source of metal comes from what the gypsies themselves call *metal picking* (Pamporov 2006). The targets of this *picking* are quite diverse – the tops of sanitation holes, railroad rails, road signs, water pipes, electric cables, bronze sculptures, bus stops, armature metal or anything made out of metal.

Money lending and londzja

Some of the rich gypsies, mainly from the subgroup of the *kaldarashi* have turned into ‘bankers’ in the ghettos there they live. They offer loans in return for high interests to their poor neighbors and make a substantial amount of money out of it. This is possible because of the extreme poverty of most of the families in the ghetto who oftentimes have no other choice but to loan money from the local loan-giver. The sanctions for non-returns are big. The interest is being initially doubled, or tripled and a new deadline is being given. The next sanction is property appropriation and the final measure is physical torture (Pamporov 2006).

Another type of money-lending spread in the Roma *mahali* is the so-called *londzja* which is a grouping of 20 – 30 people who have gathered in order to collect a certain amount of money they can lend to the other members of the community. The *londzja* has strict rules and its members are tied by a vow. It is being managed by four members chosen by the others and traditionally starts in January and lasts for one year.

Mendicancy and pickpocketing

Mendicancy and pickpocketing are social phenomena that have been part of the everyday life of many societies throughout time. Usually they are related to extreme poverty and marginalization of those who practice it; that is, we usually attribute those activities to outcast individuals despised by the rest of the society. In Bulgaria, for example, during the Ottoman Rule, mendicancy was used as a survival strategy mainly by orphans and handicapped individuals who were incapable of finding other income sources and wandered around monasteries and churches. As suggested by Pamporov (2006), however, mendicancy and pickpocketing, as well as fortune telling are considered traditional crafts by the Roma practiced predominantly by women and children. Practicing any of those is also not directly related to the material status of an individual and even members of rich families occupy in such activities.

During the Communist Period in Bulgaria mendicancy was punished with forced resettlement and imprisonment in specialized labor camps. That is why Roma women were doing it secretly mainly from people who they knew well and within their own settlement.

The harsh economic crisis in the first years of the Transition Period after 1989 hindered many people from the majority continuing giving away food, clothes and money to the Roma. This forced many Roma to look for subsistence in bigger cities where people were richer and more apt to charitable activities. Two specific subgroups – the bear breeders and the monkey breeders were less influenced by the Communist Regime and managed to regain their crafts quickly afterwards. Other traditional mendicancy-related crafts, such as puppets making and puppets performing have died out.

As indicated by Pamporov (2006), during the Communist Regime the loss of the specific artistic skills which made mendicancy look like performances has led to the fact that after 1989 mendicancy has taken shape and form typical for earlier historic times. Pamporov (2006) summarizes three types of *mange*⁵. The first type of *mange* relies on the worst forms of human disabilities: crippled hands and legs, infected wounds, scarred faces, etc. The second type includes young women with babies, young children and old people. These two types are characterized by the fact that they show a rude demonstration of the unequal social status of the Roma who rely on pity and the sense of guilt of the passers-by. The first type of mendicancy is usually performed at the entrances of churches and banks as these are the main target groups which it aims – charitable people or people who are afraid of God, and the rich. The second type is usually being performed at pedestrian zones and in the public transport and relies on the empathy of the passers-by and their ability to stand in someone else's shoes, especially as children and old people are to be found in each and every family.

The third type of mendicancy is different from the other two because it does not rely on sympathy and good will but on the forcing of a certain service. The Roma who usually practice this are children washing car windows, and musicians who would just appear at weddings. Children use middle-sized crossroads and wash the front car window without first asking the driver whether to do it or not. If the driver then refuses to pay, they would usually break the side mirror or the windscreen wiper. People usually pay because of fear of these.

Musicians use the exits of churches and municipality halls usually used by newly-weds. They perform two traditional wedding songs. On one hand they rely on the fact that many people like these songs and are willing to pay because of the euphoria accompanying

⁵ Plural of *mango* – a beggard

the wedding day. On another hand, as such a musician confesses himself, they rely even more on the fact that there are people who do not like such music and gypsy orchestras. The Roma get paid not to play their music but to get out of sight and not play it at all (Pamporov 2006).

A specific feature of the mendicancy is the fact that each beggar has his/her own territory which is being strictly observed by the other beggars. In most case they do not 'work' for themselves but for another person – a father, some other relative, a local leader (*tartor*). Usually the 'employer' stays close by, watches what is being given to the beggar and occasionally collects the money.

The types of mendicancy described so far (handicapped, old people, children washing car windows, etc.) are to be found not only among the Roma and not only in Bulgaria. There is, however, a specific type of mendicancy that is being used by the Roma exclusively – mendicancy with newborn babies. This type of mendicancy is part of the first type of mendicancy but I will explain it in a more detail because it shows how far some Roma can go in search for money for survival. In most cases, the baby is being held by a woman who is not directly related to it. They can be very far relatives or not related at all. In the second case, the baby is being *rented* from its parents for a small amount of money. The people who hold the baby work in shifts because they get tired of holding it for longer periods of time. Thus, an adult spends about 2 – 3 hours in the street, whereas the baby stays out all day long. In order to stay calm, the baby is being given alcohol or tranquilizers and in order to cry when needed, they simply pinch it.

Pickpocketing, on another hand, is a traditional female occupation among the *kalderashi* and some other Roma subgroups in Bulgaria. In the Roma language, this craft is being referred to as *chori* and young girls start being taught in it around the age of ten. A young Roma woman is more desired as a wife if she is skilled in pickpocketing. Those who fail to master the craft are often being physically and psychologically tortured to the extent that some girls get their fingers mutilated (Pamporov 2006).

Prostitution and women trafficking

Prostitution, similarly to mendicancy and pickpocketing is being controlled and limited by the state. Yet, the extreme segregation of some groups of Bulgarian Roma after 1989 has lead to the fact that prostitution has become a mass phenomenon in some Roma *mahali*. As pointed out by Pamporov (2006), it is also the only means of income in some families.

Prostitution is most widespread in the border regions and along high traffic roads but is also to be found in small villages where the most common clients of this service are old

people. Problem with prostitution among the Roma in Bulgaria arises from the fact that oftentimes it is of forced character. The traditionally low wedding age and the practicing of *coemptio* marriages allow for different organized groups to have an easy access to underage girls. Social segregation and desperation have made some parents force their own children to engage in prostitution. Pamporov (2006) gives as an example extreme cases in which parents systematically offer their preschool children to pedophiles.

Most vulnerable are girls under the age of 18 who already have a broken traditional marriage. If the in-laws are not happy with the termination of the marriage, they can kidnap the girl and force her into prostitution in order to get their money back. In some cases, the girl is being sold from one pimp to another and eventually ends up prostituting abroad. Women trafficking is another huge problem for the Roma communities in Bulgaria. Ethnic Bulgarians who fall victims of trafficking are usually of full legal age and are most commonly deceived by advertisements for well-paid jobs abroad. In general, they are capable to seek help from the local authorities and thus end their slavery in times of crisis. Unlike them, Roma girls and women are in most cases illiterate and usually dependent on family bonds. This means, that they have been bought as brides and are owned by their pimps as daughter-in-laws or wives according to their traditional norms. In other words, they are completely dependent on their pimps and remain with them until they stop earning good money when they are usually being sold to other foreigner pimps.

A specific part of people trafficking abroad is the traffic of pregnant women who sell they babies. Usually the mother gets less than half of the amount for the baby and most of the money goes to the traffic leader, or the organization that has carried out the deal.

Marriage as an economic strategy

For some Roma subgroups in Bulgaria the wedding (the wedding ceremony) is a major income source. The aim of this ceremony is to provide for the young family. At the wedding day, all relatives and friends of the two families are being invited, often numbering more than 300 people. The young couple does not receive any other gifts but money and gold. In this way it receives a substantial capital which allows it to buy a house, a car, or start a small business. Each amount of money given to the couple is being strictly recorded. All this recording which I witnessed at a wedding ceremony in Montana, is important because the given money are actually a sort of loan that is being returned on another wedding. Thus, for example, when a relative is being invited at a wedding, he gives a certain amount of money. When he organizes a wedding himself, the family that has received the money from him

before should return a bigger amount, as it is considered shameful to return the same amount of money afterwards. The same scheme for money collection also works for baptisms and inauguration of homes. Relatives and friends are being invited and are required to return it under the similar conditions described above.

From all strategies characteristic of the subsistence modes of the Roma groups in Bulgaria that I listed above, it becomes clear that the children in a Roma family have specific roles typical only for this ethnos in the country. Oftentimes, children are the main income source in a family and are often viewed as a capital. It all starts with the birth of a child, when the state provides the family with a single amount of money, which is being given to all citizens of the country upon birth. Following it is a small but secure monthly allowance given to each child in the family. So far, the situation is identical to that in Bulgarian families. A Roma baby, however, is often used as a bait while begging. Young children can be taught to ‘gather’ metal. Another typical example is the forced car window washing at busy crossroads. Pick pocketing requires a great deal of learning and experience and the expectations towards those who learn how to do it are big. And when a child is female, it is often considered a property that is to be sold one day. Traditionally, the age of girl selling into marriage is between 14 and 16, which according to the laws of the macrosociety in the country, the girls are still considered to be children that are still preparing for their adult lives in school.

The children in the Roma family are forced to work alongside adults and are usually expected to take care of their younger siblings. All this active participation of the children in the economy of the family has a direct correlation with the main topic here – the education as a main part of the integration process of the Roma minority in Bulgaria. Education in general is a long term investment that requires efforts from both parents and children. The main assets being invested in education are time and money and the expected pay-off is situated somewhere in the distant future. When a family with many children is so poor that it is constantly living on the verge of its physical survival, the lack of interest towards education seems quite logical. Poverty makes people abandon their long-term vision and subjugates all efforts in the survival of the present day, the next one, and the week. Given the circumstances, education as a promise for a better future for the children seems quite groundless and the parents prefer to focus on the satisfaction of the immediate needs of the present. Even a simple mathematic calculation shows that the whole family will be at a loss if children were spending their time in school, instead of working for the family budget in the meantime. School requires further and quite demanding for a Roma family expenses for

school materials, clothes, transportation. In other words, from an economic standpoint, having a child in school takes time and money, while the opposite brings profit.

The narrowing of the time horizon and the economic investment associated with the education process are not the only problem characteristic of the Bulgarian Roma. Equally important is the image of the successful Roma; of the person from the ghetto who has power, money and respect. The rich Roma, that are the main role models in the society, are more often than not uneducated. This is definitely the case in the Roma communities I visited in Northern Bulgaria. Many of the rich Roma in the ghettos I visited has illegal business or at least the beginning of their business career was related to illegal activities. Success in life is not understood as determined by the level of education which leads to low motivation in education. On the other hand, most of the Roma in Bulgaria, including those I met in the fieldwork, believe that they are being discriminated against by the majority in all spheres of life and give frequent examples of well educated Roma who have difficulties finding good jobs because of their origin.

2.6. Relations with the majority

As mentioned earlier, the Roma have been inhabiting Bulgarian lands for centuries. The relationships between the Roma and the rest of the ethnic groups in the country, especially the Bulgarians, are quite complex in nature and have been constantly changing throughout the centuries.

The present day condition of these relationships is to a large extent determined by the drastic changes in Bulgaria after 1989. The transition from a totalitarian regime and a centralized planned economic into a democratic organization of the social life, based on the principles of the political pluralism, market economy and recognition of human rights, has brought disappointment to all ethnic groups in the country. The great hopes of fast positive change at the beginning of the 90s have been replaced by the realities of the rather difficult and long transition period marked by numerous economic and political crises. The burden of the permanent crisis in the transition period was not evenly distributed among the population and the Roma have been the most disadvantaged of all groups. Despite the fact that they have always been on the lowest level of social stratification, the poverty levels attained in the transition period have been unparalleled. Mass unemployment and loss of trust in the state institutions have made the Roma seek unconventional means of subsistence which are often against law. About 50% of the prisoners in Bulgarian prisons are of Roma origin. This statistics, however, is hardly the main reason for the negative stereotype of the modern

Bulgarian Roma. The media have also played a decisive role for the creation of this negative image. Thus, for example, the news criminal chronicles usually point out the ethnic origin of the criminal offender and oftentimes the ethnic origin is a part of the title of the criminal news. With time, the media have created the image of the Bulgarian Roma as one who is viewed as a burden for the country, and respectively for the majority, is a synonym of a thief, a criminal, who neglects his/her children, is always complaining and does not respect the social norms of the country. Added to this is the political propaganda of some nationalistic parties that misuse statistical data on the birth rate among the Roma and threaten the majority with fear of 'tsiganization'. As a result, it is no wonder that 69% of the Bulgarians have negative attitude towards the Roma. For the average member of the majority, the Roma really look much more than they really are because as a result of their unemployment they are simply more 'visible' in the street. This perpetuates the fear that the numbers of the Roma are increasing with drastic speed (Decheva 2001).

Sociological research on the social distances and stereotypes for the ethnic minorities in the last fifteen years unambiguously show that the attitude of the Bulgarian towards the Roma is of a rather stable character. The last such research of the Open Society Institute from 2009 shows that the image of the Roma minority is composed of a largest number and only negative stereotypes, which are: *thievish, lazy, dirty, uneducated, insolent, deceitful, criminals, poor*. The leading stereotype is *thievish* – 46,3%, followed by *lazy* – 23,4%. The same research shows that the Roma are the most unwanted of all minorities living in the countries in terms of all social distances – special, employment oriented, educational (Pamporov 2009).

The other side of this relationship is also one comprised of negative components. The Roma are also prejudiced against the Bulgarians. The image of the majority and the image of the state are overlapping in the eyes of the Roma and the Roma tend to blame the state / the majority for all of their problems. The specific dimensions of this relationship are the discrimination in all spheres of life, the neglect from the state, the unmet promises from different political parties, etc.

In a summary, the relationship between the Roma and the Bulgarians are marked by a two-way mistrust.

3. Education and the Roma

3.1. The education system in Bulgaria

The present structure of the education system in Bulgaria is a product of a development that had already started before the Russian – Turkish War (1877 - 1878). Despite the unfavorable historic circumstances due to the Ottoman rule that had seized the country for five centuries, Bulgaria has a rich tradition in education. The first secular school was established in 1835 already and the first Bulgarian University was opened in 1888.

Right after the end of the Russian – Turkish War Bulgaria was under temporary Russian control and that was the time when the first attempts for the development of a common education system in the country began. Example of this is the signed in 1878 a provisional chart of the Bulgarian schools which stipulated that the primary education for children of both sexes was compulsory and free. The constitution of the country was signed in 1879 and the new independent government established the Ministry of Enlightenment that became the managing organ of the newly developing education system in the country.

Gradually the education system establishes itself as one of the main conditions for the progress of the state in general. This progress was especially notable at the beginning of the 20th century when the economics of the country marks a great gain. These were the times when the Bulgarian Academy of Science was established; the Law of the Public Enlightenment was amended and the education became compulsory up until grade 4; education became more profiled and profession-oriented.

The economic and cultural revival of the country collapse after the Balkan Wars (1912, 1913) and World War I (1914 - 1918). What follow are years of instability and crises that stop the development of the education system up until World War II (1939 - 1945) when education in general stops being a priority matter not only in Bulgaria.

In 1944, the power in the country is overtaken by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) which marks the beginning of a long totalitarian rule until 1989. This period is marked by the merge of the state with the party. The socialist (communist) model forces complete centralization of the government in all spheres, including in education. Right after the take-over there is a purge of all civil servants. Students applying to the University were required to present a document showing that they are politically credible. Curricula and teaching styles were based on the idea that children should be raised in the spirit of the party utopia ideals. Russian becomes a compulsory subject in school.

The mass changes at the beginning of the communist regime however are not negative alone. The education is free and involves most of the children in the country. This is also the period when the Roma start participating in education on a mass scale for the first time. Up until 1946, 81% of the Roma are illiterate⁶. The 50s and the 60s go under the slogan “liquidation of illiteracy” and increasing of the education level of the citizens of the country as a whole. This policy has been most successful among the Bulgarian Turks and least successful among the Bulgarian Roma. The Roma community did not want to conform to the new conditions seeing in the school a hostile institution aiming to destroy their traditions and take away their children. In other words, the Roma recognize the new education system as an attempt for assimilation. As I have previously mentioned, during this period there were taken different measures to settle the nomadic Roma groups. In 1958, the nomadic way of life and the mendicancy were forbidden by a law. This puts an end of their foraging lifestyle and makes it possible for their children to participate in education. Soon after that education becomes compulsory for all Bulgarian citizens up until the age of 16. These legal amendments do not solve the problems completely. Some groups continue to live nomadic lives and many children do not attend school despite the government’s efforts and threats of sanctions towards their parents.

The controlling Communist Regime had constructed an entirely different situation in terms of education in Bulgaria. The new conditions increase the education status of the Roma, and the established education system in general is one of the best efforts of this political order despite the high amount of propaganda included in the curriculum.

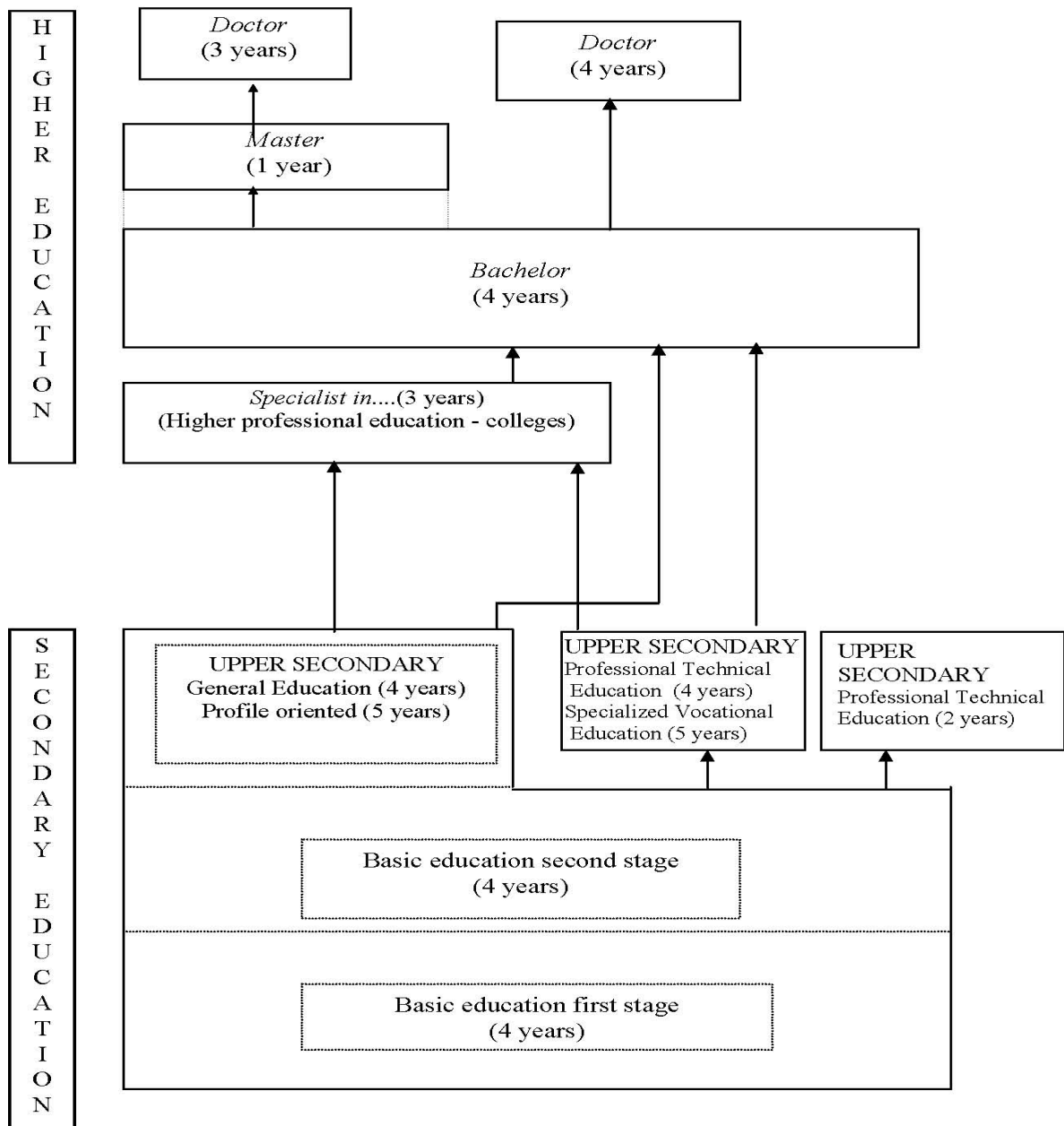
The Totalitarian Regime fell in 1989 and the state was again swept by structural reforms in all levels of the state apparatus and government. The government makes numerous changes in the laws concerning the education system. The name of the Ministry itself is being changed several times and since 1997 is being called Ministry of Education and Science.

The first decade of the democratic development in Bulgaria was marked with changes dictated by the early process of EU membership. The structures of the primary and the secondary education were changed and the higher education is being divided into three levels (bachelor, master, and doctorate). The present structure of the Bulgarian education encompasses not only the school levels but also the nurseries, kindergartens and the so-called *pre-school*. The nursery is attended by children between ages 1 and 3 and the kindergarten – between 3 and 5.

⁶ Data from census from 31.12.1946, published by DUI (State Management of Information), 1970.

Pre-school is compulsory and free and is a transition level between kindergarten and school. This level is either carried out in the kindergarten or in school. Children who do not speak Bulgarian good enough get a special course in the language. School education is compulsory until the age of 16 and starts from the age of 7. The education system has the following structure:

STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN BULGARIA



Source: Ministry of Education and

Science(http://www.mon.bg/english/high/system_educ.htm)

Basic education has two levels:

- 1) Lower Primary – 4 years (1 – 4 grade)
- 2) Upper Primary – 4 years (5 – 8 grade)

Secondary education has one level only and lasts for four years (9 – 12 grade).

3.2. Statistic data about the Roma in schools and common problems

The Roma are the least educated ethnic group in Bulgaria.

**DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURES BY ETHNICITY, GENDER AND EDUCATION (%)
ETHNIC GROUPS**

	ETHNIC GROUPS								
	Bulgarians			Turks			Roma		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Total (thousand)	6605438	3203040	3402398	747954	375803	372151	370907	186344	184563
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Higher	10.27	9.82	10.70	0.77	0.67	0.86	0.06	0.07	0.05
College	5.15	3.74	6.48	0.92	0.68	1.15	0.08	0.07	0.09
Secondary special	28.76	34.09	23.75	12.77	16.75	8.76	2.98	4.16	1.80
Secondary	11.11	8.05	13.98	3.95	3.23	4.67	0.96	1.03	0.89
Primary	38.96	38.45	39.45	67.55	66.43	68.67	68.65	69.71	67.58
Illiterate	0.64	0.45	0.82	5.66	3.67	7.66	12.06	9.58	14.56

Source: National Statistical Institute, Calculation based on 2001 Population Census

The main criteria and problematic spheres in terms of education might be generally divided into three groups: 1) number of enrolled students; 2) graduation / dropping-out of school; 3) types of schools and education quality.

Number of enrolled students

Official statistic data concerning the number of the enrolled students in Bulgaria are being gathered in two ways: according to the levels regulated by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED - 97)⁷, and according to age groups⁸. These are the data for the year 2000 – 2005:

⁷ Calculated as a percentage of the enrolled students in education levels and age groups from the total number of the population in the corresponding age group.

Enrollment ratio according to level of education (2000 - 2005)

Education Level (ISCED – 97)	Number of enrolled students (%) according to school years				
	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005
Preschool	66,8	73,6	74,2	74,6	73,6
Primary Education	96,3	98,5	99,8	100,3	99,7
Lower Secondary Education	82,4	83,1	83,9	84,2	84,2
Secondary Education	64,7	68,3	74,9	77,1	77,3

Source: National Statistic Institute (NSI), *Education in Republic of Bulgaria – 2005*, Sofia, 2005. P. 116.

Enrolment Ratio according to age groups (2000-2005)

Age group (years)	1) Number of enrolled students (%) according to age groups				
	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005
3-6	70,1	77,2	78,5	78,0	76,3
7-10	98,4	101,2	102,3	102,2	101,6
11-14	97,0	97,7	98,0	98,1	98,2
15-18	71,9	75,2	81,0	82,8	82,9

Source: NSI, *Education in Bulgaria, 2005*.

It becomes apparent from the tables that there are not clear tendencies in terms of preschool education where enrollment is oftentimes influenced by various socio-economic factors. There is, however, certain increase in the enrollment numbers. The positive change, especially in terms of education level, is more visible at the higher education levels and age groups.

There are no official data on the numbers of schools according to age groups are not being gathered. These are being calculated based on the school record and reflect the number of the enrolled students but these data are not very exact in terms of the really enrolled students in them because there are cases, especially among the Roma, in which the children are enrolled at the beginning of the school year but seldom attend classes afterwards. A

⁸ Calculated as a percentage of enrolled students according to their age group from the total number of the population in the corresponding age group regardless of the education level.

reliable source of data, also taking into account the ethnicity of the students is a government study assigned by the Ministry of Finance. The study covers the period from 1995 to 2001. The table below shows the great discrepancy between the Roma and the non-Roma.

Number of enrolled students according to education level (1995-2001)

Ethnic group	Number of enrolled students (%) according to education level and years								
	Preschool			Primary (grades 1 - 8)			Secondary		
	1995	1997	2001	1995	1997	2001	1995	1997	2001
Total	44	14	22	87	88	90	47	55	46
Bulgarian	44	15	26	90	93	94	55	66	56
Turks	53	10	19	88	93	90	10	30	34
Roma	25	5	16	55	58	71	3	5	6

Source: Ministry of Finance, *Overview of the public expences – Education: status, problems and opportunities, material for preliminary discussion, available at <http://www.minfin.government.bg/docs/EDUper cent20reportper cent2020041.pdf>*

The prevailing tendency is the number of the enrolled students to grow but there is also an obvious decrease in the attendance of the preschool level. Most importantly, the share of the Roma children attending schools at the end of the period is 28,3% lower than the average for the country in terms of preschool education level, 21,3% in terms of primary education level and 87% in terms of the secondary education level.

Graduation / Dropping-out of school

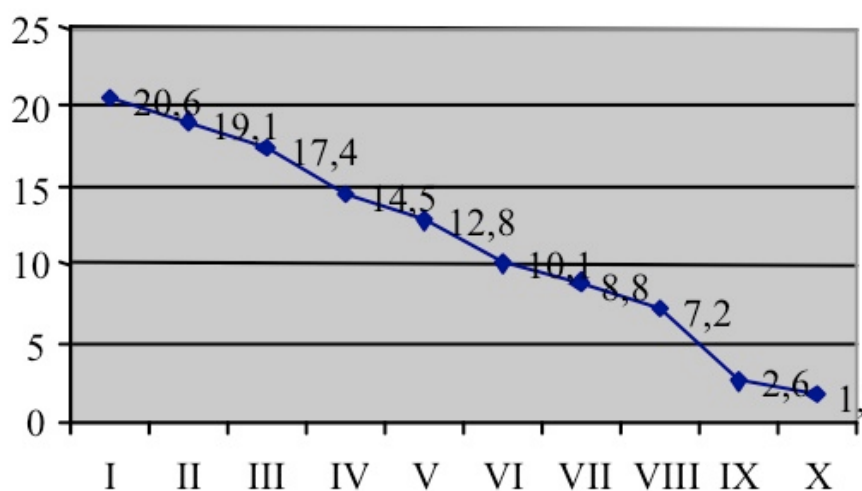
There is not a systematic account of the number of students who have dropped out of school and their ethnic belonging. Thus, for example, according to the Ministry of Education, the number of children who dropped out of school for the school year 2004 – 2005 are 19 193 out of 963 051 students enrolled in all schools in the national education system, which is about 0,12%⁹. These are the data presented by regional officers but the methodology used to gather them remains unclear. Usually, students are considered to have dropped out when they or their parents remove them from school. In many cases, however, this information does not match the real picture in terms of school dropping-out. Especially in the segregated Roma

⁹ National Program for development of school and preschool education, available at www.minedu.government.bg

schools, students are being enrolled and even pass from one grade to the next but very seldom attend classes or come to school at all (IMIR:5).

In 2002 – 2003 the Ministry of Education carried out a mass research on the ethnic composition of the students. According to the results, the total number of the Roma students is 10,5% from all students in primary and secondary education. This is easily explained with the age structure of the Bulgarian ethnic groups, according to which the Roma ethnic group is the ‘youngest’. It is interesting to note that this share is extremely unsteady in the different levels and grades: the Roma children comprise 20% in grade 1, and about 1% in grade 12 out of the total number of all students in the country.

Share of the Roma (%) in the total number of students according to grades



Source: Roma Education Fund¹⁰

This large disproportion is mainly the result of the process of dropping out of school of the Roma and only slightly the result of the positive natural growth of the Roma, combined with the negative growth of the other ethnic groups in Bulgaria. This makes dropping out of school the largest problem of the Roma minority in Bulgaria in terms of education.

Data from IMIR (the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations) from 2003 on the number of the dropped out students according to ethnic groups gathered based on the answers of the participants in the survey, also support the large asymmetry between the children from Bulgarian, Roma and Turk origin. According to this

¹⁰ Roma Education Fund. *Needs Assessment Study for the Roma Education Fund, Background Paper – Bulgaria*, December 2004, available at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTROMA/Resources/NAReportBulgariaAnnex1FINAL.pdf> (briefly referred to as: REF, *Needs Assessment Study – Bulgaria*)

study, the total number of the dropped out students for 2003 is as follows:

Share of dropped-out students according to ethnic groups for 2003

Ethnic group	Ethnic subgroup	Share of dropped-out students (%)	
		Total	Age-group 15-19
Bulgarian	--	2,0	3,9
Turk	--	8,3	21
Roma	--	--	42,8
Roma	Christian	12,8	--
Roma	Muslim	8,1	--

Source IMIR, Final Report on Minority Education, p. 6

These data correspond to the observation of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee for the former Specialized professional training schools¹¹. These are some of the largest segregated Roma schools in Bulgaria found mainly in big towns. There has been detected a systematic discrepancy between the official data on the number of students in these schools and the real number of those attending classes. In general, attendance is about 70%.

The dropping-out of Roma children from school is a phenomenon with multiple dimensions. The reasons for that are to be found in several directions, as it has been done by so far the largest research in the field, *The Dropping-out Romas*, by Open Society Institute from 2009. Important reasons are not only the economic problems of the Roma minority, which turn everyday survival into a main priority, but also the inconsistent and filled with negligence state policy. On the other hand, the organization of the state education in Bulgaria is artificially trying to solve the dropping-out problem at the expense of the quality of the education Roma children get. The important role of the parents and the specifics of each Roma group should also be taken into consideration because the cultural model happens not on a national level (and state policy often neglects how much different Roma groups differ from one another) but in the *mahala* where education is not a value by itself.

¹¹ The results are published in The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Five Years Later: Nongovernmental Projects for Desegregation of the Roma Education in Bulgaria*, Sofia 2005.

Types of schools

I have already mentioned the problem with the quality of education. This very important component of the education process is a function of the implementation of certain education program. And because there is a well regulated unified national education system, the variables are the teachers staff and the material basis that facilitate the education process. In other words, the quality of education depends on the school¹².

There are five types of schools that accommodate Roma children:

- 1) **“Bulgarian” schools:** The Roma children are less than 5 – 10% which makes 2 – 3 Roma children in a class-group. These types of schools are attended by very few Roma children who come from well integrated families (and often change their Roma identity with Bulgarian before they enter school). Here the quality of education is of highest quality and the dropping-out of the Roma children is not bigger than that for the other ethnic groups.
- 2) **Mixed schools:** The Roma children are about one fourth or about one third of the total amount of students. The quality of education is relatively high. The integration of the Roma children is facilitated by the fact that they are not as ‘lonely’ as in the first type of schools, and by the fact that they find a favorable social environment also because of the location of the school itself. The mixed schools are always outside the Roma ghetto/*mahala* and present a good opportunity for interactions with the macrosociety. At the same time, this situation is also beneficial for the other students because interactions among children are perhaps one of the best ways to overcome the negative stereotypes and the mutual mistrust between the different ethnic groups. The biggest problems of the Roma children in this type of schools include: lack of materials (pens, books, etc.), lack of parental involvement, non-attendance. Another huge problem is the one related to their self-esteem and identity. Non-attendance is also a problem but it is more often sporadic (although more common than among Bulgarian children). The problem with the acquisition of Bulgarian language is not big (Open Society Institute 2008).
- 3) **“Gypsy” schools:** These are the so-called *segregated schools*. They are located in Roma ghettos in towns. The quality of education is much lower than that in the mixed schools. The school integration is also hindered by the lack of contacts with Bulgarian

¹² Private schools are rare in Bulgaria and when I talk about the national program, I only mean state free schools.

classmates and from insufficient interactions with the macrosociety. Data from the Ministry of Education from 2005 show that 30 421 children of Roma origin who live in towns in 22 municipalities are being educated in kindergartens and schools with more than 50% of Roma children and students. Of these, 2 464 are attending kindergarten, and 27 957 – school. According to a report by the Open Society Institute from 2005, from 2 657 standard schools and 127 special-need schools in Bulgaria, the number of schools with more than 50% students with Roma origin is 554 (or almost 20% of all schools). At the same time schools with more than 30% students of Roma origin is 960 (35% of all schools in the country). One of the observations in the report is that a school that has more than 30% Roma students easily turns into a “Roma school” because the parents of non-Roma children transfer their children to other schools. The problems the Roma children face in these schools are: non-attendance, failure to meet the state education standards, problems with the acquisition and use of Bulgarian language, lack of materials, clothes and shoes, poor condition of the material basis, lack of parental involvement. Non-attendance is reported to be a huge problem threatening the overall conduction of the education process. Many of the teachers report that the students cannot meet the state education requirements and the education process is perfunctory and of low quality. The problem with Bulgarian language is especially acute among Turkish-speaking Roma but is also present, although to a lesser extent, among the Roma-speaking children, studying in segregated schools (Open Society Institute 2008).

- 4) **Village schools:** Roma children are usually the majority in these types of schools, solely because of demographic reasons. According to the 2001 census, about 30% of the population of the country lives in villages, while the number of the Roma who live in villages is up to 46%. Moreover, 44% of the Roma are up to 20 years of age (or about 30% of the Roma are in school-going age), whereas this number is twice lower for the rest of the country and even lower in the villages. The quality of education is higher than the quality in the segregated schools but lower than that in the mixed schools.
- 5) **Special schools:** Over 51% of the children in them are of Roma origin (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2002). These schools are designed for children with lowered educational abilities, children with cognitive deficiency, and other health and/or

intellectual dysfunctions. These are usually boarding schools, which means they offer additional services besides education. Children in these schools get free food, shelter and staff helping with their needs outside the education process. It is these additional services that are the most common reason why many Roma parents send their children without disabilities in these special schools despite the negatives associated with them – lower quality of education, inability to continue in secondary education and university, and the general deprivation and social isolation that affects the intellectual development of the children. In other words, special schools turn ‘healthy’ Roma children into children with deficiencies.

3.3 State policy for encouragement of the integration of the Roma minority.

Programs and projects.

The governments after the change of the political regime in Bulgaria in 1989 face numerous problems of the transition period, including several severe economic crises. In this way, the problem of the integration of the Roma minority (and specifically their education) is of little interest. During this period, the problems of the Roma minority are only taken care of by NGOs, financed by international donor organizations and projects such as The World Bank, Open Society Institute, programs of EU and UNESCO, program MARTA of the Dutch government and the Helsinki Committee. The first mass research on the Roma – *The Gypsies in the Transition Period*, 1995 – is also from this period. The main initiator and donor of the research in the Open Society Institute which finances projects of several Roma NGOs working for the improvement of the situation of the Roma in different municipalities.

Only towards the end of the 90s, the Bulgarian state commences a politics targeted at the integration of the Roma ethnic minority and their extremely low education level and tendencies for worsening. The first actions are a response of the pressure of the EU Commission, UN regional reports and international law organizations signaling discrimination and violation of the human rights. Under this pressure, the government establishes a separate unit dealing with ethnic issues at the Ministry Council in 1997. Nowadays it is called **National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues** (NCCEII) and is an agency for consulting, cooperation and coordination between state institutions and NGOs for formation and implementation of the state policy on ethnic and demographic issues.

As late as 1999 the Bulgarian government signs a memorandum with the European Commission and becomes a beneficiary of PHARE program (PHARE 1999). The European Commission grants 500 000 euro and NCCEII uses 300 000 for improvement of the living conditions in Roma neighborhoods, and 200 000 are directed for the improvement of the education level of the Roma minority. The education project includes several programs. One of them is Soros's *Step by Step* program which aim is to improve work with small children (from first grade) in a small group that would eventually lead to small but permanent changes in the education level and to serve as a base for a more successful continuation of the Roma children in higher education levels. The program included 50 young educated Roma whose job was to not only facilitate the work of the teachers in schools but also to assist children in the ghettos and in this way work with parents, too. The aim was quality education but achieved in a new way that includes motivation of the parents through positive example. The project's underline is that school alone cannot achieve the desired changes. The 50 help teachers undergo a two-month course at university and start working in several settlements. The programs results are fairly good and the I initiative is renewed in 2001 and 2003 and includes children from Homes for children lacking parental support, financed by the MARTA program of the Dutch government.

NCCEII coordinated the implementation of the first document that regulated the goals of the state policy towards the Roma integration into the Bulgarian society. This is the so-called *Frame program for equal integration of the Roma into the Bulgarian society* signed by the government in 1999. Its education section contains the following priorities:

- 1) *Desegregation of the Roma schools*. This priority suggests the development of long-term strategy for the gradual transfer of the students of these segregated ghetto schools. The final long-term goal is the closing down of these schools where the quality of education is extremely low and in many cases – fictitious.
- 2) *Eliminating the process of sending normally developing children in schools for children with educational dysfunctions*. This is aimed at the overcoming of the discriminatory mechanisms that advantage the cultural differences of the Roma children and their social inequality to be treated as mentally retarded or educationally disfunctioning.
- 3) *Counteraction to the acts of racism in the class room*. This priority emphasizes the need for programs in cultivation of ethnic tolerance. Such additional education should also include teachers, students and parents.

- 4) *Studying of Roma language and history in schools.* This priority presupposes the introduction of additional qualification in the universities teaching Roma language and culture.
- 5) *Training of individuals at university level.* This aims at supporting talented Roma children to pursue higher education. This is based on the idea that in order to implement a successful integration of the Roma minority in Bulgaria, there need to exist Roma intellectuals that would know equally well their own culture and the culture of the majority. These educated Roma would eventually act as mediators between the Roma communities and the state. The specific programs measures include introduction of courses for pre-university training and ranting of scholarships covering the costs of university studying.
- 6) *Programs for teaching and qualification of adult Roma.* The objective is to overcome the discrepancy between the increased requirements of the labor market and what most Roma can offer as skills and knowledge corresponding to the modern conditions.

This frame program is being updated and improved in the next several years but the priorities have remained the same. Unfortunately, as Nunev (2006) points out, this well-looking program remains but a good will. The state institutions, such as NCCEII, the Ministry of education and the Ministry of labor and social policy do not act accordingly in order to implement the program's measures. Only NCCEII manages to secure further PHARE funding (PHARE 2001 and PHARE 2003) which is used for several different projects: writing of school books on Roma history and culture; qualification seminars for teachers; purchase of study materials for students from very poor families; free transport and breakfast for the children in some schools.

Another project worth mentioning here is the one initiated and financed by the *Roma Participation Program (1997 - 2007)*¹³ of Open Society Institute. The project's goal is to transfer children from 'gypsy' schools from the Roma ghetto in other 'Bulgarian' schools where the quality of education is much higher which would help these children integrate and equally participate in the macrosociety. The first attempt is carried out in Vidin where the local Roma NGO "Drom" initiates the project in the year 2000. The beginning is very difficult for the implementing team because it is hostilely received by the local authorities

¹³ <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/focus/rpp>

and parents of students of Bulgarian ethnic belonging. The project gradually grows and in 2005 it is evaluated by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee as the most successful desegregation project in Bulgaria. The following year, in 2001, similar projects are being implemented in five more settlements¹⁴.

One of the main disadvantages of these desegregation projects is the fact that they are not a part of purposeful and organized state policy. The Bulgarian government does not grant its support of the projects until 2003, and the support manifests itself in the writing of *Directions for the integration of minority children and students*, by the Ministry of Education and Science. This is a study which role is to facilitate the teachers in schools. The state budget does not provide any funds for the projects despite the need for that. This reaction (the lack of adequate reaction) from the state's side is an example of the fact that there does not exist political will for the implementation of the priorities set in the Frame Program from 1999.

Yet, the NGOs run desegregation projects manage to elevate the debate on the crisis of the education of the Roma minority in a national level and the involve the state which gradually starts to support the thesis that education is a paramount condition for the successful integration of the Roma in Bulgaria. This position stems from the realization of the fact that the difficult situation of the Roma minority will worsen in the future years when a greater number of young Roma will not be able to find jobs on the labor market because they lack the needed skills and qualifications formed through the education process. This, on its side, would turn the Roma into a burden for the state and is a precondition for social conflicts.

The state policy towards the integration of the Roma minority changes after 2005. Bulgaria is one of the ten countries that take part in *The Decade of the Roma Inclusion, 2005 - 2015*¹⁵ which is the largest international initiative concerning the integration of the Roma minority in Europe. In February 2005, the prime ministers of Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, The Czech Republic, Macedonia, Croatia and Monte Negro meet in Sofia and sign a declaration¹⁶ engaging the states to support the Roma minorities in all aspects of their integration. The goal of the decade is to work for the elimination of discrimination and the large inequalities between the Roma and the other ethnic groups in the long term. The priority topics are **education, employment, health care and living conditions**. As a result, Bulgaria draws up a *National action plan for the Decade of the Roma inclusion* which now

¹⁴ These are the towns of Pleven, Sliven, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, and Montana (where I carried out my fieldwork)

¹⁵ <http://www.romadecade.org/>

¹⁶ http://www.romadecade.org/decade_declaration

includes a substantial financing of projects targeting the improvement of the education status of the Roma minority. As far as education is concerned, the Ministry of Education and Science creates a *National program for the fuller inclusion of students in the compulsory school age* that includes three modules: 1) Provision of **free school books** for the students from grades 1 to 4; 2) Optimization of the school network and **free transport** to schools – this module targets students from small and isolated settlements; 3) Provision of **free breakfast** for all students from grades 1 to 4.

As the Open Society Institute assessment (2009) states, the program has three major drawbacks:

- 1) It is not widely popular and many Roma communities do not know of it. The critics in this part concerns the lack of adequate communication channels between the local administration and the Roma communities in general. The low education status of the people in the *mahali* and their closed lives hinders the parents from learning about all new opportunities that the education system and the state offer. Therefore, there is a need for an active dialogue that would help minimize these gaps.
- 2) The program does not respect local differences and specific needs. The program would have been much more beneficial had it been more flexible. This means, the local authorities need to have more freedom. In this way, efforts and money can be directed exactly where needed. As numerously repeated, the Roma groups are very different from one another and the situation in the different settlements is also quite diverse. The Open Society Institute's assessment does not underestimate the importance of the unified national program but emphasizes on the fact that the Roma society in Bulgaria is not a homogenous entity and the aid it receives should be relevant to the specific circumstances that define the situation of the separate Roma groups.
- 3) The target group is students from grades 1 to 4, which is the largest school-attending group and is the least risk-prone group with dropping-out being least prominent. The efforts to improve the education level of the Roma children should not only focus until grade 4 because, even though the initial education phase is of crucial importance, good start does not automatically mean that there will be less dropping-out in higher grades.

The efforts of the state to improve the current situation have achieved some positive developments after 1997 but they are all based on the official statistics which in many cases is incomplete. There are several reasons for this:

- 1) The data in the official statistics are usually based on school records. Oftentimes school principals deliberately offer a much greater attendance rate than the real numbers because school budgets depend on the number of attending children. Fear of losing their jobs makes schools staff manipulate the data and lower their criteria.
- 2) False data is not only being provided by school staff. The Roma parents often enroll their children in school at the beginning of the school year in order to be eligible for social fare for a given child. The requirement is this: at the beginning of each month the parents have to present a paper signed by the class teacher as a proof of school attendance for the previous month. Without this paper, the state stops the money for the child. This procedure is quite corrupted because both sides (parents and teachers) benefit from presenting false data even if the child seldom or never attends school. The parents can use their children for other jobs and other activities without losing the money from the state, and the teachers keep their jobs and sometimes might even get some other profit from the parents. The local authorities are to a large extent aware of the problem but do not react against it.
- 3) Pressure from international organizations like UN, EU, UNESCO, etc., also influences the falsification of the official statistics because Bulgaria is trying to show the world as good results as possible in terms of Roma education in order to continue receiving money for projects financed by these organizations. In other words, Bulgaria risks losing its good face of a modern democratic EU member state if the official statistics show that the state fails to tackle the problem and the education status of the Roma does not improve. As Ringold et al note:

National administrative data in Bulgaria paint a rosy picture of access to education. Gross enrollment rates are nearly universal, and very few children are identified as being out of school. But a qualitative survey found that the reality is much more grim. In fact many children fall through the cracks, never attend school, and do not show up in the official administrative data. These children are frequently those from the poorest households. [2005:44]

To sum it up, the Bulgarian state admits the seriousness of the situation concerning the education of the Roma minority but does not manage to present the problems in their real dimensions. The real situation is much more severe and requires a different approach which makes the efforts of the state insufficient and sometimes inadequate.

4. Education problems and survival for the Roma communities from Montana, Byala Slatina, and Borovan

4.1. The setting

The objective of my fieldwork in the three settlements was to gather information for the problems of the Roma communities from all possible sources on a local level. The main focus was education. All studies and reports related to the problems of the Roma minority prioritize education as the most important factor for the improvement of the difficult and worsening situation of this large part of the population. Furthermore, the neglect of this situation may potentially lead to social pressure and conflicts. The official integration program and policy of the government also has education as one of its main action fields. Education can be seen as an obligatory condition that would close the great gap between the Roma and the majority. The other problematic spheres should not be neglected either. Unemployment, poverty, poor health status and living conditions, discrimination, should also be subject to change if full integration is the objective. Education, however, is of paramount importance, because without it even great financial support would only have a temporary effect and would repeat the negative model of dependency and segregation.

There is a consensus between international and local NGOs and the Bulgarian state that the Roma minority needs help especially in the field of education. An important question is what type of help different communities in different regions can acquire. One of the objectives of my fieldwork was to present the viewpoint of the Roma concerning education and whether there is a discrepancy between their opinion and the established understanding of the government that this is the most important problem of the Roma. The specifics of the Roma identity and traditions make the Roma suspicious and even hostile towards all forced policy towards them. The closed nature of the Roma communities and their attitudes towards the majority and the state institutions can make even the best state programs ineffective and inadequate. This exactly is the case in Bulgaria where education is free and compulsory up until the age of 16. The Roma cannot be educated if they themselves do not want to.

The current study tries to cover the phenomenon of dropping-out of school in three specific Roma communities in Northwestern Bulgaria in a complex way and presenting all viewpoints and especially those of the Roma themselves.

In Chapter 3 I presented the stand and the efforts of the state concerning the education of the Roma minority in Bulgaria. In this chapter I will analyze the results from the fieldwork

interviews and observation. I will first briefly describe the *mahali* I visited and the way life is organized in them. I will also present the opinions of experts, teachers and representatives of the local authorities on one side, and the viewpoint of the parents and the children, on the other side concerning the main problems of the Roma communities focusing on education.

The choice of these locations was largely influenced by the fact that they are quite representative for the region.

Montana is a big (for the region) town with a typical and big Roma neighborhood called *Kosharnik*. There also exists a secondary ghetto in the ghetto – the already described phenomenon *ghetto in the ghetto*. There is a segregated school in the ghetto where 100% of the students are Roma. There is a very active NGO in the town, *Sham*, which runs a project for the desegregation of the Roma education.

Byala Slatina is a small town with a Roma ghetto. There is also *a ghetto in the ghetto* where the situation is worse, especially in terms of education. Most of the children study in a segregated school and the rest of them attend a so-called *special school*.

Borovan is a village in which the Roma population is scattered in several different places and there is not a separated ghetto (*mahala*) in it. The children attend a mixed school but because of the small number of students, there are so-called *mixed classes* attended by children of different ages and education levels. This lowers the quality of education and creates preconditions for early dropping-out of school.

These settlement types are representative of all settlement types in Northwestern Bulgaria which is the most economically underdeveloped region in the country.

4.1.1. Infrastructure and living conditions

The Roma neighborhoods in Montana and Byala Slatina are very similar despite the fact that Montana is a much bigger town and its *mahala* is also bigger and with more inhabitants. The *mahali* are situated on the hills in the outskirts of the towns. This physical isolation of the ghettos from the rest of the town is very typical for Bulgaria in general. In these two towns the border from where the ghetto begins is easily recognizable. The streets look different from the rest of the town because apart from the houses, there are also many other buildings (most of them illegal) which make it look as if there is not clear boundary between neighboring houses. This additional building has narrowed the streets themselves and corresponds to the way of life in the ghetto where family and neighbor relations are of huge importance to the individual who defines himself/herself through the others, through the community.



The ghetto in Montana is quite far away from the town center and this is the reason why many of the ghetto inhabitants only leave the borders of the *mahala* if there is a sound reason for that, for example visiting a doctor, buying medicines (in both neighborhoods there are no medical services and pharmacies) or visiting the social aid office. This is usually done by a bus or a taxi if the individual does not own a car or a horse cart. In Byala Slatina, where distances are smaller, the people from the ghetto can walk to the town center for about 30 minutes.

In both ghettos there is one main street where the shops are located (3 shops in Montana, 2 in Byala Slatina) and numerous cafes that sell home brewed beverages. This is particularly interesting in Montana where the number of these cafes is quite considerable compared to the number of the ghetto inhabitants. Clients are usually the neighbors who pay “whenever they have got money”. The big expensive houses of the “big ones” or the rich Roma are also situated in the main street¹⁷. The rich Roma can afford to buy houses outside

¹⁷ There were four such houses in Montana, and three in Byala Slatina. The houses contrasted drastically to the poor environment.

the ghetto but do not usually do it, especially if they are uneducated, because as one man said: “Here I am among my own kin. The Bulgarians don’t like the dark skinned”. Another reason is the fact that the income source of these rich Roma is to a large extent illegal and can continue existing only within the ghetto. Being much richer than the rest in the *mahala* does not only have positive sides, such as high status and influence over the others. All rich Roma I spoke with complained that they have lost their friends and were feeling excluded from what was happening around them.

Another characteristics of the ghettos in Montana and Byala Slatina were the serious problems with **drainage**. Most of the houses do not have a drainage system and the dirty water from the neighboring houses was flowing directly in the houses of the “rich ones”. The toilets are predominantly outside and in some cases were missing at all. This problem contributes to the spread of infectious diseases as hepatitis and tuberculosis that were a very common occurrence in these two *mahali*. Running water is also a problem in many of the households and in the secondary ghettos is a rarity. People from the secondary ghettos fetch drinking and cooking water from more central parts of the ghetto. Water fetching is a predominant children’s activity.

Most of the streets are not paved and some do not exist in the town’s architectural plans. There are also several landfills in the ghettos that are another source of diseases. As I found out from conversations with the local authorities in Montana and Byala Slatina, there landfills were cleared several times only to reappear shortly after. As a result, the municipality authorities have stopped cleaning the ghettos. Other, smaller landfills can be found in many houses’ backyards.



In general, the hygienic conditions in the two overcrowded ghettos are extremely poor, especially in the so-called *ghettos in the ghettos* which are situated in the highest parts of the hills. They lack draining systems because most of the houses and buildings are illegal and dirty water flows down to the rest of the *mahala*.

In a stark contrast to the lack of a draining system, electricity is not a problem in the two ghettos. There is electricity everywhere. Even the smallest and shabbiest houses have cables coming in and out forming a net above the houses. Here the problem is with theft of electricity and refusal to pay the electricity bills. This is also one of the “popular” Roma problems in the Bulgarian media. It can be stated that this is one part of the image of the Roma in front of the majority – people who refuse to pay their bills.

On the inside, the houses look different depending on their location and how poor their inhabitants are. In many families who live in the legal part of the ghetto and who have stable income the conditions are quite good and despite the poverty the houses do not differ considerably from the houses of the poor Bulgarians. Among the poorest families, however, the rooms do not even have floors and the conditions are striking.



In most cases all family members in these poor households sleep in one room together which means that children do not have their own space where they can read and prepare for school. Oftentimes the family consists of three, and sometimes even four generations living together, or the so-called *extended families*.

A typical part of the home furnishing in all houses in the two ghettos, including those in Borovan, is a big stereo and a big TV set. These expensive possessions stand apart from the rest of the interior, especially in the poorest houses. Television, and especially music, are an important part of the Roma everyday life and families are ready to sacrifice large part of their budget in order to get hold of a better stereo and a TV set than their neighbors.

One of the least common item in the houses is **the book**. In houses, where the parents are educated there are books to be found but in most households the books are a rarity. I did not see a single book in the *ghettos in the ghettos*.

The Roma houses in the village of Borovan are situated in three separate parts of the village. There is not a separated ghetto or neighborhood and the houses themselves did not

differ considerably from the neighboring houses inhabited by Bulgarians although they looked a bit poorer and more modest.

4.1.2. Everyday life and social practices

The Roma in the three settlements are mainly *dasikane Roma*¹⁸. These are the so-called “Bulgarian gypsies” who are officially Orthodox Christian. Interviews and observations showed that most of them were mixing several different Christian practices with old traditional beliefs. In Byala Slatina, the local Adventist Church was recruiting people who were responding and attending the gatherings because of the offered free food. In general, religion did not play a big role in the everyday life of the communities I visited.

Almost all Roma in the visited regions were bilingual. Their mother tongue was Roma but almost all of them spoke Bulgarian, except for some old individuals.

In *Kosharnik* in Montana there are about 4 500 Roma with additional 300 – 400 people living in the secondary ghetto. The ghetto in Byala Slatina numbered about 2 000 people with about 200 people in the secondary ghetto. The number of the Roma in Borovan is almost 2000¹⁹.

What keeps the entity in the local Roma communities are the family and friend networks. In both *mahali* there are several richer families which have the biggest say in what was happening within the boundaries of the ghetto. In addition, the secondary ghettos had their own leaders – *tartors*, who had a nearly complete authority over the rest of the inhabitants. They were the ones who decided how the community would vote at elections, for example.

Traditionally, the family roles are well established: the man is the family head and makes the important decisions; the woman does the housework and takes care of the children. It is the man’s responsibility to provide for the family’s budget. The children also have established functions and start working at a very early age by helping their parents with their siblings.

As previously mentioned, there is a very strict boundary between representatives of the Roma communities and the rest (the majority). The Roma in the places where I carried out my fieldwork preferred to call themselves *gypsies* and were very suspicious of the *gadzhe* (the Bulgarians).

¹⁸ In Byala Slatina there were families who were claiming to be *Horahane Roma*, that is Turkish Roma, but they could not explain how they differed from the others and why they did not speak Turkish.

¹⁹ This is not the total number of the Roma in Montana and Byala Slatina but only the number in these specific ghettos.

4.1.3. Income, employment and survival strategies

In this part I have to separate the communities in the town ghettos from the community in Borovan. In the ghettos the unemployment is very high – about 70%, and in the secondary ghettos almost no one has a legal job. Very few families have preserved their traditional crafts. Those who were still doing crafts admitted that it was very difficult to sell their productions and the profit was too little and insufficient to assure the family survival.

The main income source are social unemployment welfare and children aid. Additional income comes from gathering of metal scrap, picking herbs and wild fruit and berries, paper gathering and some illegal activities such as thefts, prostitutions, drugs sell, etc. In the secondary ghetto in Byala Slatina the main income comes from theft of timber that is being sold to the Bulgarians in town. This activity is quite dangerous but is so profitable that even children are involved in it. Several days I had left the ghetto a man was killed by the forests security guard and yet the thefts continued. The profit from a day's work can equal a minimal monthly salary.

During my fieldwork I never asked questions about the illegal activities in the ghettos. My respondents alone wanted to talk about that in the context of conversation about the extreme poverty in the *mahali*. A repeating phrase was *noble theft*. One of the informal leaders in the *mahala* in Montana admitted:

What our people do is a noble theft. When your children are crying of hunger what else can you do if you don't have a job?

A parent from the secondary ghetto in Byala Slatina also said:

I will not only steal. I am ready to kill in order to feed my family!

The justification of theft and shifting responsibility on the state for not having provided them with jobs is a widespread attitude in both ghettos. There is a nostalgia for the times before 1989. Almost all old enough Roma (those older than 35) believed that their lives were much better during the Communist Regime because everyone was having a job then and the prices of items and services were much lower. The Roma minority in Bulgaria is most severely affected by the numerous economic crises of the Transition Period and it is understandable why people think in this way. It is still a mass understanding that it is the state

that has to provide people with jobs. This illusion hinders people from organizing themselves and initiating a strategy that would change their situation. Another negative tendency that was pointed out by the mayor of Byala Slatina and the vice mayor of Montana is the continued unemployment that has led to “loss of labor habits”. Many of the young Roma have never had a job. This creates problems for the local authorities when they try to decrease the unemployment level with different occupational programs. The mayor of Byala Slatina admitted:

I don't want to insult the Roma from the neighborhood but one cannot count on them. These people don't know what work schedule is. It is impossible for them to show up in time and stay at work for 8 hours. I am saying this out of my personal experience.

For the high unemployment level, the Roma blame not only the state but also the discrimination attitude of the Bulgarians. The discrimination is the explanatory frame for many of the problems of the Roma in the ghettos. Many times people complained that they do not get jobs only because of their darker skin color. The topic was reoccurring when discussing education, as well. I cannot assess to what extent the subjective feeling of discrimination reflects the reality (the studies on the social distances are not a very good source in this case) but based on my personal experience and on the fact that I grew in the region, I can tell that the Roma have right in most cases. The attitudes towards them are quite racist and discriminatory. Supporting this opinion is the case I came upon during my fieldwork when in Byala Slatina I saw a café with the following sign: “Forbidden for dogs and gypsies”. After a public scandal the sign was taken down but there remains the question how this can happen in a country that pretends to be an example of ethnic tolerance in the region.

The unemployment level in Borovan is even higher but the Roma families there could feed themselves with raised animals and crops. Theft and its justification is identical as in the two ghettos.

4.2. Dropping-out of school

Dropping-out of school stands out as one of the most serious problems of the Roma in Bulgaria. The number of the children who enroll in primary schools could also increase but on a whole, most parents enroll their children in grade one according to official statistics. The question is why seven years later half of these children stop attending school and only 1% of

them graduate from secondary school? The quality of education that the Roma children get will also be considered here as one of the reasons for dropping-out.

Many problems of the Roma minority and their integration in the macrosociety in Bulgaria are either being misrepresented and / or do not correspond to reality. Oftentimes, the state and NGOs selectively present the situation of the Roma and it is hard to analyze the data when they are not objective. Even the number of the Roma in the country differs according to different researchers. The practice of neglecting the big differences between the different Roma groups, subgroups and specific communities is also inadequate. The state institutions pretend that the real situation is the one provided by the official statistics, and the Roma pretend that their interests coincide with what the state thinks their interests are, namely, that it is very important for them to provide good education for their children.

One cannot help but ask how so many people survive without jobs, education, and income. The state is blind for the existence of a whole economic sector in which the majority of the Roma participate. Unfortunately, the illegal activities that comprise this sector are not only exclusive to adults and children also participate in it and are expected to provide for the family.

As of education, illusions and misinterpretation of the situation are the norm. The state institutions continuously repeat that education is an integral part of the Roma integration. The state sees education as the only tool that can transform the Roma from a financial burden into competitive individuals able to participate in the labor market. The official integration programs proclaim desegregation and efforts to stop dropping-out of school but oftentimes their goal is not to promote a long-term sustainable political act but to meet the requirements of the international legal organizations and EU. The validity of the official statistics is quite arguable. The number of the illiterate Roma is much bigger when we take into consideration two very important factors: first, does the diploma correspond to the real knowledge and skills of an individual; and second, is the so-called functional illiteracy taken into account?

My fieldwork data corresponds to what was also observed by Tomova (1995). I met children who had graduated from fifth or sixth grade and who were *completely illiterate* – they could not read or write. This has nothing to do with negligence in education or with the low quality of education in segregated schools but with the fact that school attained diplomas are to a large extent false. This has its reasons. Teachers in Bulgaria are constantly on the verge of losing their jobs. The negative population growth and the policy of school funding force teachers to lower their requirements towards the students and to give misleading

feedback because every single student counts in terms of school funding. This practice, however, lies to both parents, children and the state and leads to the distribution of data that reports education status different from reality.

Functional illiteracy is another component worth looking at when we talk about Roma education. This phenomenon is much more widespread than the one mentioned above. This is also confirmed by the findings of a study carried out by the Open Society Institute in 2005. Functional illiteracy stands for the inability to cope with the requirement of the situation in a given society regardless of the fact that an individual has acquired the main ‘literacy’ components of reading and writing. Many of the Romas who have graduated even from secondary school can read and write, and at the same time they cannot interpret or analyze the texts they can reproduce phonetically. This makes them unsuitable for most types of jobs in the modern society. What is more, their functional illiteracy sometimes hinders them from understanding job advertisements or specific job instructions. In this sense, the person who is functionally illiterate has the same chances of finding a job as the one who cannot read and write. Functional illiteracy shows how the quality of education can turn into a reason for school dropping-out because the Roma parents do not get their expectations fulfilled when the majority of their children cannot find a job even though they are educated. This demotivates parents to invest in education. The Roma children who attend segregated and special schools are often functionally illiterate and the number of Roma children attending other types of schools (or better schools) is very small.

4.3. Reasons for dropping-out in Montana, Byala Slatina and Borovan

The reasons for dropping-out of school are always interrelated and it is difficult to analyze them separately from one another. Based on my fieldwork, I have singled out the following factors determining the phenomenon in the three settlements I visited.

4.3.1. Poverty

This is an element from the vicious circle that rules the lives of the Roma minority in Bulgaria after 1989. The mass unemployment and poverty in the ghettos further deepen their social exclusion. Traditionally, Roma children work and are an income source whereas school-going works quite oppositely – it absorbs money and is an investment without clear outcome.

Most of the Roma parents pointed out the lack of money as one of the main reasons for their children’s absence from school. Many parents said that in order for their children not

to be embarrassed to go to school, they needed to have nice clothes, pocket money, all necessary school materials, and transportation money. Many households were forced to struggle with their survival on a daily basis and in this way the education of their children was not prioritized. In the situation of such extreme survival it is understandable why parents cannot understand the importance of education as a prerequisite for the development of their children. The poorest parents often enroll their children in school in order to be eligible for the social welfare. These children do not attend school on a regular basis and usually drop out after grades 4 or 5 when they can start working in order to help with the family's budget. A 10 year old girl from Byala Slatina admitted:

I've worked with my father since last year because we don't have money. There's no time to go to school. We are 6 children and we need lots of money.

A 15 year old boy from Montana explained that he was not attending school anymore because he had to work:

School doesn't give you money. We don't have money for food.

Poverty is a reason for dropping-out for many children from the secondary ghetto in Byala Slatina in a different way. Because of the extreme poverty found there, younger children were being enrolled in the local *special school* because children were receiving clothes, food and other additional cares there and were taken home by their parents only in the weekends. Later, these children cannot continue their education in a 'normal' school even if they want to because they have left behind and cannot sit the required exams. The fate of these children is usually getting an illegal job when they get 12 or 13 years old (and sometimes even younger) and to have their own families and children continuing living in the ghetto. Their dropping-out of the special school happens a bit earlier – when they are 10 or 11.

As I have already mentioned, extreme poverty lead to decrease of the time horizon which makes long term projects and initiatives hard to grasp and invest in. On the other hand, the financial help that the Roma children can get in order to be able to afford the basic necessities to go to school would further deepen the problem because this would take the responsibility away from the parents. This works contrary to the idea that in order for the Roma minority to integrate, it should be socially independent and not dependent on handouts

4.3.2. Education as value and priority

The analysis from the three settlements shows that education is not very much valued among the Roma in general. The family, the children and the kin are the headstones of everything that happens in these Roma communities. Despite the problem of the constant reconstruction of the Roma identity, the observations during my fieldwork show that for many Roma, even among the young ones, the old traditions related to the status in the community, marriage and their attitude towards the ‘non-Roma world’ still play a decisive role for their life choices and the values that determine them. Furthermore, Roma culture is oral and hence it does not need institutionalized education in order for the Roma to perpetuate its existence. The so important for the Roma continuity of tradition is effortlessly done when three or more generations live together under one roof, which is the case not only in the ghettos in Montana and Byala Slatina but also in the village of Borovan.

For a small number of families education is an important value and parents were ready to invest money, efforts and time in order to provide their children with quality education. In these families at least one of the parents has secondary education and both parents have jobs. The children from these families do not attend the segregated ghetto schools and oftentimes parents help them preparing for school. These types of families are well integrated in the macrosociety and the parents often criticize life in the ghetto. These integrated families try to hide their ethnic identity when outside the Roma neighborhood.

For most families, education is not a priority and the parents do not think that this is important for the future of their children although sometimes they were declaring the opposite. Whether education really is a value or this is just a declarative statement can be judged by the different data provided by parents and children in one and the same family, and by the things parents are ready to do in order to educate their children. Usually parents who declaratively talk about education as a prerequisite for a better future for their children do not put any efforts for this to happen. They are not willing to invest money from the family budget, they do not chose a school that provided quality education and they do not exercise any parental control in terms of school attendance. A mother of five from Montana said:

Children have to become educated and to do well but they say they don't want to go to school. What can I say when they only want to play?

In the same family the older children take care of the younger and one of them helps the father gather metal scrap on a daily basis. In addition the parents do not understand that educating their children is their own responsibility, not of the state. These are their expectations – the state should increase the social welfare money, to secure jobs for them and to educate their children. At the same time, the two eldest children in the family explained that they had stopped attending school after grade four because “we have to help mum and dad”. When asked: “Who succeeds in life?”, they answered: “Whoever knows how to cheat” and “Whoever has luck”.

Another example for a discrepancy between declaratively valued education and real aspirations are the following words of a mother of four from Byala Slatina:

It is best for children to study; to study a lot and then to get jobs.

When asked why her children had stopped attending school if education is so important, the same woman replied:

You have to get up early to go to school and I feel sorry to wake them up so early.

Children socialization happens in small closed circles and school institution and the education system in general are seen as imposed by outsiders and assimilationist. One of the reasons for this is probably what had happened during the Communist Regime when the Roma were forced to attend school. The poorest families in which the number of children is greatest value education least. In these families the parents are also least educated compared to the other Roma.

Many Roma parents believe that sending their children to school is done not in order to provide them with better future but as a service to the society for which the Roma parents must receive retribution. If we add the traditional mistrust between Bulgarians and Romas, it becomes apparent that there is no common ‘language’ that can facilitate the partnership between the two parties. An example of that is mother of four children of school age from Byala Slatina:

Both I and my husband are unemployed. The children are sick and there aren't enough money for anything. I am stupid and illiterate but I know that they need to increase

the children social aid if the Bulgarians (meaning the authorities) want me to send my children to school. This is not a life I'm living. It was much better before (before 1989).

I got additional data on the values and priority of education in Kosharnika through interviews with representatives of the NGO *Sham* which actively works with the Roma community in Montana. All, including those who had grown up in the *mahala* and were still living there were unanimous that education was not a priority for most parents. A representative of *Sham* admitted:

If you go to the neighborhood and ask about education they will all tell you that children should go to school. They will reply in that manner because they don't know you and would be afraid that they might lose the social aid they get. However, I'm telling you that things are what they seem. Most parents don't care whether their children go to school. I see this every day. I live in the mahala.

I witnessed the same phenomenon in Borovan, too. In most cases parents were talking highly of education but their actions did not correspond to their words. A mother said:

It is very good to be educated. I want my children to be educated but sometimes they don't want to go to school. They want to go tend the cows with their father and play around instead. What should I do? Beat them?

To sum it up, education was not of high value among the Roma communities in these settlements which increases the risk of early dropping-out of school. Yet, even uneducated parents saw education as somewhat important although usually they did not understand the role they had to play in order for their children to receive quality education. In other words, parents “did not mind” education and even thought it would be good if their children were educated but school attendance and persistency were a problem. In most cases parents were not motivating their children to go to school and were not ready to invest in education. Parents with very low education level could not assist their children with lessons and did not realize that education requires certain changes in the traditional treatment of children in Roma families.

4.3.3. Discrimination

As already mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 4, discrimination was one of the most important reasons for the difficult situation of the Roma in the three settlements. Within the context of education, this factor is equally important as poverty. The problem of discrimination came up in all interviews I carried out. Even youngest children were repeating that the Bulgarians did not love them and were constantly insulting them. My overall impression is that discrimination has become a part of the identity for the Roma in Montana, Byala Slatina, and Borovan. They perceived themselves not only as others, as different from the Bulgarians but also as being unwanted, and even hated by the majority. These were their attitudes: they always expected to be discriminated because of their ethnic belonging and did not trust the *gadzhe*. The Roma leaders in the two *mahali*, the people with most authority in their communities, were most concerned about the problem of discrimination. One of the richer Roma from Kosharnika, in whose home I was staying and who was one of the most respected people in the neighborhood repeated numerously that it was most important for the Roma children to live without “racial discrimination”. He admitted:

I don't hate the Bulgarians and I have many Bulgarian friends. They hate us, however. They think we are worth less and they insult us. The people (meaning, the Roma from the neighborhood) are sometimes afraid to go down to town. How do you think our children feel when they go to a Bulgarian school? Bulgarian children start calling them “dirty gypsies” from the start.

An informal leader from Byala Slatina was convinced that there has always existed discrimination against the Roma but things had gotten worse in the last years. He said:

It is much more difficult for us. When they see that you are darker and you are nowhere welcome. Even teachers treat our children differently just because they are gypsies. That is the reality. I don't know what can be done. We are not guilty for being born gypsies.

In Borovan where the Roma population is dispersed in different parts of the village, the attitudes were the same. A father of four shared:

Sometimes I don't know if it is a good thing to send my children to school. It doesn't make a difference if they study or not – there's still no job. The Bulgarians say that we only steal and don't take baths.

Discrimination in school was admitted by all parents from Montana and Byala Slatina whose children attended outside the ghettos in unsegregated “Bulgarian” schools. A mother from Montana, who was doing her best to educate her children admitted with tears in her eyes:

My child was first studying in the gypsy school here in Kosharnik but teachers were telling me he was too smart for this school. So I decided to enroll him in a school in town and even paid for private teachers. At the beginning all teachers and children accepted him well and he even got new friends. They didn't know he was a gypsy because he's got a whiter complexion. He hadn't told them because he was ashamed. After 6 months they found out and started beating and insulting him. This is it, mister, the cruel reality!

In Borovan many parents believed that the school director and some teachers discriminated their children and were treating their children differently just because they were Roma. Children also complained that some teachers were only beating Roma students and never Bulgarian ones.

Representatives of the local authorities in the three settlements declared that the Roma were exaggerating the discrimination problem. Their manner of speaking, however, was also racist just as the manner of speaking of the ethnic Bulgarians in their everyday conversations regarding the Roma.

4.3.4. Early marriage

Education does not fit in the traditional family model of these Roma communities because it requires long-term planning and delaying of marriage. Family and children – these are the attributes that give the individual a high status in the community. Marriage is the single most important event for the Roma from the three settlements where I conducted my fieldwork. The ritual is still determined by the Roma traditions and customs; it is ruled by rules that do not depend on the young couple although they also have some say in it.

In all three settlements the average marriage age among the girls is 14 years, and among the boys – 16 – 17 years. I had the chance to attend a wedding in Kosharnik in

Montana. The girl was 13, and the boy was 16 years old. Based on the information I got, marriages were happening so early because virginity was highly valued and it determined the bride's status in the community. A marriage can even be canceled, and serious conflicts among the families can follow, if the bride turned out not to be virgin.

All this is tightly related to dropping out of school especially among girls. Elder Roma explained to me that parents start thinking about a girl's marriage with her first menstruation. Parents were more liberal with boys although sometimes there was strong pressure on them and a girl was chosen if the boy had not been married after he had turned 18. A 42 year old woman from Montana explained:

They insult us, the Roma, for being such and such but we are more moral than the Bulgarians. When a girl gets her first period she should find a man. If she goes to school she can take a wrong path and get into trouble (losing her virginity). Her parents must protect her well. This is how it should be. Otherwise she will remain unmarried.

For the Roma it is unthinkable to be married and continue attending school. Young married girls could not understand my question whether both things – marriage and school – were somehow compatible. In addition, newly married couples were expected to get a child as soon as possible. This makes their marriage valid and marks their highest status in the community. For the boys / young men the first born child is a source for great pride, especially if it is a boy. The child makes them “real men” who have proven that they can “make children”.

The mass early marriages in all three settlements directly led to dropping-out of school. Girls got housewives and got children soon after marriage and boys had to get jobs in order to provide for their families. This problem was paid special attention to also by all teachers I talked to.

4.3.5. Segregation of the Roma communities

This multilayered factor for dropping-out of school resembles the vicious circle in which the Roma communities in Bulgaria find themselves. If education is the hope for the full integration of this ethnic minority, the more prominent segregation and marginalization produce illiteracy and low quality education which in turn increase the level of segregation and widen the gap between the Roma and non-Roma in Bulgaria.

Kosharnika in Montana is a typical town ghetto where children socialization is limited to the behavioral models they can observe on a daily basis. For them, contact with the outside world, with the macrosociety, is either sporadic or completely lacking. In the closed world of the ghetto role models are the rich Roma who have not gained their status through education. This decreases the motivation for success in school and stimulates early dropping-out. The same applies for the ghetto in Byala Slatina. The difference in Byala Slatina is that it is physically to venture out of the *mahala* but in general, the role models are the same. In Borovan, despite the lack of a typical gypsy ghetto, children socialization is of similar nature because the Roma mainly communicate with other Roma from the village. The contact with ethnic Bulgarians, who are mainly old people, is restricted to work. Roma children do not communicate with ethnic Bulgarians on a regular basis.

There is one primary school in *Kosharnika* in Montana (grades 1 to 8) which functions as a lower primary school (grades 1 to 4). The ghetto in Byala Slatina also has a primary school. Students in these schools are 100% children from the *mahali*, which makes these schools typical segregated Roma schools. The low quality education in these schools has already been mentioned. As a Roma leader in Montana noted:

We delude ourselves that our children go to school. Teachers cripple our children. This is the problem. They should at least teach them how to read.

My observations confirmed that many of the children really could not read despite the fact that many of them had graduated from school levels which guaranteed that they could not only read and write but should be able to write essays. The Roma NGO Shap that runs a project for the desegregation of the Roma education, financed by the Open Society Institute, insists that the school in Montana should be closed and all students should be transferred to schools outside the ghetto. Many parents, however, wanted the school to continue existing. Local authorities confirmed that the segregated school cannot be closed as long as there are students who want to attend it.

Sham's project works to create new opportunities for children from the ghetto to attend 'Bulgarian' schools where they can get quality education and where they can get the chance to communicate with Bulgarian children, thus facilitating their integration. I carried out interviews with four representatives of the organization, including its chairman, in order to receive more information about the development of the project. The main accent was the difficulties that hindered the project. All representatives were unanimous that the main

problem was the parental lack of interest and not the lack of money, as the majority of the parents did not see the need for quality education for their children. The chairman of the organization admitted:

In order the lives of the Roma to improve, the ghettos should be abolished. The people from the ghetto do not know of other assistance but money and infrastructure. The Roma are people who do not know the laws and do not talk fluent Bulgarian. At the beginning of each school year we and some teachers go from one house to another to persuade parents to enroll their children in school. They don't care at all; especially those living in the hill (the secondary ghetto). Sometimes they even threaten us and chase us away with hoes.

In a summary, the segregated schools in Montana and Byala Slatina contribute to the early dropping out of school. The children attending these schools are oftentimes functionally, and sometimes completely illiterate. This hinders their continuation in secondary education.

The school in the village of Borovan is not entirely segregated but it can still be called a "Roma school" because about 80% of its students are Roma. The quality of education in it seems higher than in the schools in Montana and Byala Slatina and most of the children I had the chance to talk to could read and write and had basic numeric skills which were lacking among their peers from the town ghettos. The problem with the school in Borovan was the so-called *mixed classes*. These are class groups comprised of children of different age and different educational level. The curriculum is not standardized and teachers improvised. This lowers the quality of education and leads to dropping-out.

A common problem found in all three settlements was the fact that children did not attend kindergarten and pre-school. In most of the households, the main language is Roma which is the mother tongue of the children. During my fieldwork I did not meet a single child that has attended kindergarten. The segregation of the Roma communities makes the acquisition of Bulgarian an impossible task. This is a serious hindrance when children go to school. Because of their language problem, children are left behind which results in their demotivation and consequently, their dropping out of school.

The closed life of the Roma communities in the three settlements has created an additional premise for dropping-out of school. This concerns the illegal purchase of school diplomas. I only heard about this practice in Montana and Byala Slatina, and in Borovan I met a Roma from whom one could purchase any type of diploma. In our interview, he

admitted that the diplomas that are most sought after are the ones for upper primary because one cannot get a driving license without having gained this education level. The man revealed:

I've got many clients from different parts of the country. Even Bulgarians come to buy from me. It is much cheaper for the parents to buy a diploma for their child.

Conclusion

The problem of the integration of the Roma minority in Bulgaria has been largely neglected and overlooked in the first years of the Transition Period following the fall of the Communist Rule. The economic collapse and the numerous economic crises that followed had most severely affected the Roma, the majority of whom had migrated to towns in search of better opportunities. The urbanization of this ethnic minority has led to the emergence of ‘gypsy ghettos’ in towns where the problems of the Roma have only increased and worsened. Gradually, the state has acknowledged the fact that the problems of the Roma are not isolated within the ghetto itself but rather depicts the problems of the macrosociety as well, and has recognized the importance of the inclusion and the integration of the Roma as a prerequisite for the modern development of the country.

Education in the mainstream education system of a nation is seen as the single most important factor for the complete and equal integration of a small group of people into the dominant culture. From this perspective, education should be seen not only as a tool for the acquisition of a set of skills necessary for the performance of different jobs but also as a scene where the dialogue between the different cultures can happen. As of today, the most widespread problems of the Roma in Bulgaria can all be traced down to their lack of education – their high unemployment rates, poor health status, neglect and abuse of children and minors, criminal activities and incapability to determine the course of their development. The initiative for the improvement of the education options for the Roma are still to a large extent run by different nongovernmental organizations supported and finance by international organizations, such as The World Bank, Open Society Institute, etc. The Bulgarian state has still not shown strong political commitment to invest in the improvement of the education of the Roma and there still lack complete information about the real dimensions of the education status of the Roma and the mechanisms of the Roma children’s dropping-out of school.

Therefore one of the main objectives of this study has been to fill in this gap by bringing forth data from a less researched but equally interesting region in the country – the Northwestern region. Quite often state policy aimed at the Roma neglects regional differences and offers unified measures regardless of the local specifics of a given Roma community. The state policy towards the integration of the Roma has as its key notion the importance of education. Yet, good state intentions do not match real life commitments and in practice the Roma have benefitted little if at all from such state initiatives. In the

Northwestern region, where I conducted my fieldwork and which is the poorest economic region in the country, the Roma find themselves to the lowest economic and social level – there is a whole new Roma generation that is having extreme difficulties finding its place on the labor market. Being the youngest ethnic group, this new uneducated and unemployed Roma generation would comprise a large percentage of the active population in Bulgaria. This will be a huge burden for the state and if the same tendencies prevail the social inequality between the Roma and the non-Roma will only deepen, creating a serious prerequisite for social tension and conflicts.

My research has shown that in all three settlements in Northwestern Bulgaria, where I carried out my fieldwork, most Roma families live on the verge of survival and there is a huge discrepancy between the intention of the state to facilitate the integration of the Roma through education and the expectations of the representatives of the Roma minority in the region. The conditions under which the Roma find themselves are much worse than those shown in the statistical record. Dropping-out of school is the most serious problem of the Roma education. The factors underlying this phenomenon are various and intermingled and my analysis has shown that the Roma communities are not capable of tackling the situation by themselves. Therefore future efforts should concentrate on identifying the specific problems of each and every Roma community and applying measures specifically designed for the circumstances at hand.

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