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The Roma in Bulgaria: Education and Employment

Basic data

According to the census data Roma are the third biggest ethnic group in Bulgaria (after the ethnic Bulgarians and the Turks). According to the experts' estimations they are the second one. During the last census in 2001, 370.908 Bulgarian citizens (4.7% of the whole population) identified themselves as Roma. Experts estimated their number to be from 720 000 to 815 000 people (9-10% of the population) in 2007, using the data of local authorities and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1989 and different natural growth coefficients.

Roma are an extremely heterogeneous group. There are five major Roma linguistic groups in Bulgaria: Dasikane Roma, Xoraxane Roma, Kaldarash, Kalaydjies (Coppersmiths), Ludara, and more than 70 subgroups based on traditional crafts, religion, the level of nomadism/sedentarianism and endogamy. Part of the Roma lost their group language and replaced it with Bulgarian or Turkish. Roma differ largely on their religious affiliation, too. The majority are East Orthodox Christians. The number of Evangelists rose significantly during Post-Communism, and the number of Muslims decreased, but is still high – between one third and one half of the group, using different criteria (self-identification or others' labelling).

Historical data

Large Roma communities are widely believed to have settled on the Bulgarian territory in the 14th century. Certain small groups may have emigrated even earlier. Albeit indirect, the

arguments for this hypothesis are quite cogent. Ottoman tax registers mention the presence of a significant Gypsy population already in the early 15th century – around 3.5% of the households in Nikopol Sanjak, the majority of them Christians. At the end of 19th century almost 80% of the Roma have been converted to Islam. Ottomans put a lot of efforts to sedentarize them and at the end of the 18th century the majority of the Roma in the Bulgarian lands led a sedentary life or had at least permanent dwellings. Although the Roma in the Ottoman empire haven't suffered the persecutions of their brethren in Western and Central Europe during the Modern time, and part of them have been (partially) integrated in local Bulgarian or Turkish communities, they also had a low social status and were much poorer than the local Bulgarians and Turks, even those, who accepted Islam.

The Romas' social conditions didn't change much after the deliberation of Bulgaria (1878). They occupied the lowest social stratum. The majority of them was separated on an ethnic and religious basis and concerning the social status and was spatially segregated in „Roma mahali“ in the towns and cities. Their level of education was very low. In 1945, 81% of the people were illiterate. The main Roma occupations were seasonal agrarian work, different crafts, industrial works. Although discriminated, the Roma from the Bulgarian lands haven't been deported in death camps during WW2.

During Socialism (1945-1989), systematic efforts were made to “modernize” Roma everyday life and to include them (often under compulsion) in the state educational system and organized labour. Their incomes and living conditions improved. At the end of the 80s the employment ratio of the group was the highest in Bulgaria – 84% of the Roma aged 16-60 were employed. Roma educational level was still the lowest, but less than 10% were completely illiterate. Permanent efforts were made to assimilate Roma through education, controlled media and socialist propaganda, through the promotion of atheism, Muslim Roma names change, the prohibition of the nomad way of life, and through the replacement of Roma traditional rituals with the newly established “universal socialist rituals”.

Roma during Post-Socialism

Macroeconomic data

After 1989 Bulgaria passed through a deep social and class transformation. Already in 1990 the major part of the minorities' basic cultural, linguistic and religious rights was restored, but the economic and social situation of large groups, and especially that of the Roma, deteriorated.

The economic crisis of the post-communist period in Bulgaria was much deeper and longer than the Great Economic Depression in the USA and Germany in the late 20s. The Bulgarian economy was intrinsically tied to that of the Soviet Union and the other socialist states. With the collapse of the Soviet economy and the dissolution of the Union for Mutual Economic Help the industrial and agricultural production fell rapidly. The labour force was cut drastically. Bulgaria lost 1 300 000 working places in the period 1990-2003, and one must have in mind that the whole Bulgarian population, including children and elderly people, is less than 8.000 000. The liberalization of prices, the high inflation, the acquittal of the foreign debts and the cut of almost all social services, together with the frozen salaries and the high levels of unemployment led the majority of the population to mass and deep poverty.

Table 1

Macroeconomic data

| Macroeconomic indicators | 1991 | 1995 | 1997 | 2000 | 2004 | 2007 |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Real GDP growth (index, 1989 = 100) | 80.3 | 76.2 | 63.2 | 70.9 | 92.1 | 99.8 |
| Average annual rate of GDP growth (%) | -11.7 | 2.1 | -6.9 | 5.8 | 6.6 | 6.2 |
| Annual Inflation level (%) | 333.5 | 62.0 | 1082.3 | 9.9 | 4.0 | 12.5 |
| Employment ratio (number of employed as percent of 16-60 population) | 68.3 | 64.2 | 60.6 | 40.6 | 43.7 | 49.0 |
| Employment growth (index 1989 = 100) | 81.6 | 75.2 | 72.3 | 67.4 | 74.6 | 83.3 |
| Annual registered unemployment rate (%) | N.A. | 11.4 | 14.0 | 18.1 | 12.2 | 6.9 |
| Registered youth unemployment (age15–24) | 47.8 | 24.5 | 21.8 | 35.1 | 24.4 | 14.5 |
| General government balance (% of GDP) | -4.5 | -5.7 | -2.1 | -1.1 | 2.3 | 3.2 |
| General government expenditure (% of GDP) | 45.6 | 41.3 | 33.5 | 44.5 | 39.7 | 38.8 |
| Real wages (index, 1989 = 100) | 68.0 | 60.2 | 40.1 | 54.6 | 59.4 | 61.3 |
| Distribution of earnings: Gini coefficient | N.A. | 0.384 | 0.366 | 0.332 | 0.339 | 0.307 |

Sources: EBBR, NSI, author's calculations

The incomes and expenditures of almost the entire Bulgarian population are still significantly below the EU poverty line. The quality of services and life has much to improve. Nearly three-quarters of the population believe that they live in poverty.

Since 1997 (after the introduction of a currency board and a more aggressive privatization of large state owned enterprises) and especially after the EU-accession in 2007, the economic

situation in the country has gradually improved. But now many Bulgarians are afraid that the Bulgarian state and politicians are unable to meet the challenges of a new fiscal crisis and anticipated recession.

Roma employment

“We were the first to be kicked out of our jobs.”

Although de facto Bulgarian Turks were the first who faced the unemployment and the impoverishment which was unthinkable for peaceful times, the Roma were the worst affected by the social and economic transitions in the country. There was no political defense of their interests on the national or regional level for many years. The negative representations, stereotypes and attitudes towards the members of this ethnic group became extremely high. They hinder the implementation of any special policies towards the Romas` integration and equal treating, and lead to different forms of discrimination against them.

Roma suffer the most severe drop in employment – it decreased by 37-66% after 1989.

There is no other community in the country so terribly affected by mass and long-term unemployment. The first two large waves of Roma dropouts from the labour market were in 1990, when most of the industrial and communal low-qualified workers were fired. One year later most of those who were employed in the mining industry and in the construction works also became jobless. In 1992 the agrarian cooperative farms were dissolute and all the Roma who worked in them left out without work. Almost half of the Bulgarian Roma lived in villages in 1992. Their plight was much sadder than that of their neighbours, because as a whole Roma did not possess land or animals before the collectivization in 1945-1958, and didn't receive anything after the land restitution. Furthermore, the new Law of the Land states that only the ex-owners have the right to become members of the new agrarian cooperatives, so the unemployed Roma were only able to apply to be hired in these new cooperatives, but this rarely occurred. The result was an immediate rise in garden and orchard plundering, and this in its own turn led to a significant decrease of hiring Roma in the private farms or cooperatives. In the next few years in many villages Roma were proposed to lend some land and to cultivate it, but after being jobless for a few years, most of them were not able to pay the rent, the seeds, the fertilizers and the machine cultivation and to wait for the harvest, so most of them denied this option.

“No one takes us to work...”

Bulgarian state institutions do not gather current data on employment or other social indicators which are disaggregated on an ethnic basis. But there is reliable and fully representative information about ethnic unemployment, gathered during the censuses. There is also reliable information from several representative sociological surveys that could be very useful. They all show, that in the period 1990 – 2001 **the tendency among the Roma community was towards a permanent increase in both the share of the unemployed people and the duration of unemployment.**

Table 2

Economically active population (aged 16-60) by economic activity and ethnicity (%)

| Ethnic group (age 16-60) | Employed | | Unemployed | | Non active | |
|-----------------------------|----------|------|------------|------|------------|------|
| | 1992 | 2001 | 1992 | 2001 | 1992 | 2001 |
| Ethnic Bulgarians | 65.4 | 56.4 | 11.0 | 21.9 | 23.6 | 21.7 |
| Turks | 59.3 | 39.7 | 19.8 | 39.0 | 20.9 | 21.3 |
| Roma | 47.0 | 17.9 | 30.2 | 59.9 | 22.8 | 22.2 |

Sources: NSI, data from the censuses in 1992 and 2001

According to all available data, **between one half to four fifths of the Roma in a working age were unemployed during these twelve years.** In the large Roma ghettos and in the villages with significant Roma populations, 25% of the unemployed had never worked until 2000, 10% have been unemployed for more than 10 years. For 44% of the Roma the state of unemployment lasted between 5 and 10 years. 14.5% have been unemployed from two to four years and only 10% have been laid off during the last twelve months before the surveys.

The separate settlements and neighbourhoods displayed diverse characteristics. Usually there is a significant correlation between the size of the ghettos and the level of unemployment. The bigger the ghetto is - the higher are the unemployment rates. But the unemployed living in big cities had better opportunities to generate income through shady activities. Even in one and the same town, different Roma ghettos suffered different levels of unemployment, and the different sub-groups in one and the same ghetto often had different places in the labour market – both regular and grey. These differences depend on the level of education and qualification of their members, on their previous or traditional crafts, on the duration of their inclusion in the local economy before the changes. Furthermore we found out that the Roma

in the villages situated closer to big towns or cities were more severely stricken by the crisis up to 2002. As a rule, most of the men in these rural places used to work in the neighbouring cities' industries during Socialism, and were the first ones fired in the early 90's. They did not possess any land, or skills to cultivate it, and were not able to adapt to the changed situation.

The studies also revealed that, as a rule, the unemployment in the big urban ghettos was much higher and more prolonged among women than among men. There was a strong interrelation between employment and the age of the respondents. The youngest Roma, the age group of 17 - 29 were the worst affected group. When we studied the correlation between the duration of unemployment and the age of the respondents, we found out again that the youngest Roma have been worst affected by the crisis. In 2000, 66% of the young Roma (17 - 29) declared that they had never had a job. In most of the Roma neighbourhoods the inequality rose and the extreme polarization of the residents between wealth and poverty now dismays the observer. One could see there the new large mansions with weird architectural forms and even marble-covered yards, with two or three Mercedes or other luxurious vehicles in them. The nouveaux riches display their newly-acquired fortune ostentatiously. At the same time, the shanties of "the naked" and of the new settlers coming from different parts of the country in search of a better means of livelihood, freeze the blood with the misery in them and with the hopelessness and despair of their inhabitants. This inequity not only raises frustration, but teaches the adolescents that "*in this country one could become rich and mighty only through crime*". For many of those living in ghettos, the chances for prosperity are connected with illegal activities and not with high education and hard work.

"They started to employ us, from the minority, because recently there are plenty of jobs ..., but they never pay us the same for equal work..."

2001 was the year with the highest registered levels of unemployment for the whole Bulgarian population. If we use the United States' criteria for social exclusion – the Bulgarian data about employment and average salaries of the employed were typical for a ghetto in a grave situation. And Roma comprised a specific ghetto in this "ghetto" in a hopeless position...

After 2002 the situation gradually improved. The major factor for this change was the **rise of foreign investments**, mainly those from the European Union, which led to the opening of new working places. The **active governmental policies** for the combat of long-term unemployment since 2004 also led to a significant drop-down of the registered unemployment. At the same time, the large-scale work emigration to EU countries eased the

pressure on the Bulgarian labour market. Roma were the last who entered this **work emigration**, but in 2007 18% of the Roma families declared they have members of the family working (seasonally) abroad – 1.8 persons at average. In some neighbourhoods 40% of the families have members who were working abroad - more than once during the last five years. In 2007 the official unemployment rate was very low and could be even lower if those who were looking for jobs were better qualified. The improvement of the macroeconomic situation of the country and the special social measures, addressed mainly towards Roma, who were the larger part of the long-termed unemployed, led to a visible improvement of their work status. Another factor is the increase of Roma work emigration since 2001. But the level of Roma employment is still very low.

Table 3

Ethnic structure of the employed, unemployed and non-active adult population in Bulgaria in 2004-2007 (%)

| Work status | Bulgarians | | Turks | | Roma | |
|---------------------------------|------------|------|-------|------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 |
| Employed/self-employed | 48.6 | 52.3 | 35.0 | 39.9 | 20.0 | 26.1 |
| Non-paid family business worker | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.7 | 0.4 | - | 0.6 |
| Unemployed | 12.1 | 7.6 | 34.2 | 26.8 | 56.2 | 48.3 |
| Student | 5.2 | 2.1 | 1.8 | 0.9 | 0.9 | - |
| Pensioner | 29.3 | 33.6 | 19.9 | 22.0 | 12.3 | 13.6 |
| Pregnant or in maternity leave | 1.9 | 1.6 | 2.3 | 1.3 | 3.5 | 1.7 |
| Chronically sick, disabled | 1.5 | 1.4 | 3.1 | 4.5 | 3.3 | 4.7 |
| Housekeeper | 0.8 | 0.9 | 2.1 | 3.4 | 2.6 | 4.4 |
| Other | 0.3 | 0.1 | 0.9 | 0.6 | 1.1 | 0.6 |

Source: Gender and Generations Study (GGS), Max Planck Institute, Rostock, Institute of Sociology, BAS

The comparative analysis shows that the positive effects of the economic progress in the very last years are sound for the Roma community. In 2007 less than half of the Roma claimed that

they were unemployed. Such a result has not been achieved since 1994. But **the level of employment in this group is still twice as less than that of the ethnic Bulgarians and refers to only one quarter of the adult Roma population.**

Many experts – mainly those from the Labour Bureaus and Agencies for Social Assistance - doubt the data about Roma unemployment gathered by NSI or sociological surveys. They claim that the actual employment of Roma is much higher. Usually mayors, experts on ethnic integration and Roma themselves assess the levels of unemployment much higher than the officials from the Agencies mentioned above. But all of them agree that there are more opportunities for Roma to find jobs in the last few years. The low salaries are the only reason for the fact that jobs which are available on the labour market are refused.

The main branches of activities where Roma find **seasonal or temporary jobs** are construction, agrarian works, processing industry, tourism, timber industry, and roads maintaining. Many Roma are engaged in the infrastructural projects in Roma ghettos. Thousands of Roma families gain additional incomes through gathering scrap, herbs and mushrooms.

The firms for communal services usually employ mainly Roma on **permanent jobs**. A large number of Roma is engaged in different (and often unofficial) trades. These are the people who sell fruits and vegetables, clothes and other stuff in the open markets or in Roma neighbourhoods. The sale of flowers and second hand furniture is the Kaldarash monopoly since years. Many are engaged in “suitcase trades”, travelling for cheap goods to Turkey or Romania and reselling them in Bulgaria or other countries. The number of those engaged in the trade of second-hand cars from Western Europe increased. Many Roma found permanent jobs in different industrial enterprises during the last two years. But nevertheless a large portion of Roma, especially women and youth, are still out of the labour market.

Not only the employment of Roma people is very low, but also the incomes of a large portion of those of them who work lag behind those of the other Bulgarian citizens.

Roma are often employed for seasonal or temporary jobs or without any contract. This practice leads to permanent violation of their social rights. Roma often lack social, medical and work insurances and rarely enjoy the additional social gains such as paid holidays, qualification courses, work dress, talons for food, additional medical insurance, etc. The risk that their work is not (fully) paid in the case they have no contracts is very high. The working conditions in the grey economy are often much worse than in the regular sector and those who are engaged there rarely receive any health or syndicate protection. The differences of the work status of the three largest ethnic communities in Bulgaria are shown in Table 4.

Table 4**Work characteristics of the employed representatives of the large ethnic communities in Bulgaria in 2004-2007 (% of the employed)**

| Work characteristics | Bulgarians | | Turks | | Roma | |
|----------------------------------|------------|------|-------|------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 |
| Work fulltime | 92.8 | 95.6 | 83.9 | 87.8 | 77.1 | 77.6 |
| Work whole year | 93.3 | 95.3 | 85.6 | 82.6 | 66.0 | 75.8 |
| Managerial occupations | 27.5 | 25.5 | 9.9 | 8.9 | 5.1 | 4.1 |
| Have permanent work contract | 73.7 | 82.5 | 56.3 | 65.1 | 28.3 | 44.3 |
| Have temporary work contract | 16.7 | 10.0 | 23.6 | 14.0 | 35.4 | 17.5 |
| Work without contract | 5.4 | 3.5 | 13.3 | 12.3 | 25.3 | 27.7 |
| Receive working dress | 55.0 | 59.0 | 43.6 | 57.2 | 37.0 | 36.1 |
| Receive food coupons | 18.9 | 19.4 | 14.8 | 16.9 | 4.0 | 8.2 |
| Enjoy free qualification courses | 9.2 | 9.7 | 2.3 | 3.8 | - | 2.1 |

Source: GGS, Max Planck Institute, Rostock, Institute of Sociology, BAS

Roma often stress the objective inequality they face on the labour market. One interesting result of the second stage of Gender and Generation Study is the diminishing satisfaction with work within a part of the Bulgarian citizens, especially within the Roma population.

Table 5: Satisfaction with work by ethnicity in 2004 and 2007 (%)

| Satisfaction | Bulgarians | | Turks | | Roma | |
|---------------|------------|------|-------|------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 |
| Content | 61.8 | 64.5 | 61.4 | 57.1 | 47.0 | 40.0 |
| Ambivalent | 31.0 | 26.5 | 30.3 | 30.5 | 37.0 | 37.9 |
| Not satisfied | 7.1 | 9.0 | 8.4 | 12.4 | 16.0 | 22.1 |

Source: GGS, Max Planck Institute, Rostock, Institute of Sociology, BAS

One possible explanation of these data could be that in 2004 many Roma were just happy to have any job, while in 2007 they tend to express their frustration concerning the comparative

deprivation they are exposed to. As one respondent from Plovdiv ghetto “Sheker mahala” told us:

“I think, the unemployment in our neighbourhood shrinks. They started hiring us, the minority, too... But why? A Bulgarian will never work like a horse for 360 leva – to carry on three tons of concrete up to the sixth level on a wheelbarrow every day... Bulgarians do the same job as we do, but for 700 leva, and they are always discontented with the payment and the work, and leave abroad. But the work has to be done and they started hiring us for lower payment. And the people feel robbed, but work in order to take the craft and then leave abroad for better salaries. When they see your darker complexion here they never hire you as a master. Look at me. First, they ask “Do you have a diploma?” I answer I have. Then they start to humiliate me and claim they don’t need qualified workers and hire me as unqualified, with the lowest salary...” (Interview with a Roma, male, 48, Plovdiv, November 2007).

Explanations for the reasons for the high Roma unemployment

Usually the Bulgarian politicians and officials, and sometimes the economists and sociologists, explain the devastating levels and the long duration of Roma unemployment with their **low education and qualification**. Up until 2007, Roma themselves used a different explanation – **discrimination** on the labour market. This difference in the explanations of one and the same situation provoked tensions and deepened the gap between the groups.

Undoubtedly, it is true that Roma are much less educated and qualified than the other ethnic communities in Bulgaria. This fact makes them more vulnerable in any economic crisis and more of them start to understand how important education in the modern world is. But there is discrimination on an ethnic basis, too. This discrimination becomes obvious when one compares the shares of the unemployed people with an equal level of education from Bulgarian and Roma origin (the data is from the last census).

Even if Roma have the same educational level as Bulgarians or Turks, when work is scarce, the level of unemployment among them is twice as high as in the other two groups. The main reason is the widespread **negative stereotype** about Roma (they are represented as “lazy”, “unreliable”, “undisciplined”, “not loyal”, etc.). The other reason is that they possess **less “social capital”**. During the recession the distribution of rare jobs usually happens through different social networks – those of relatives, friends, school and university mates, political affiliation, etc. The majority of the Roma has no access to people who could help them finding a job during the economic crisis.

The **spatial segregation** of the Roma also influences negatively their chances to find a job. One of the worst changes in Roma life during Post-Socialism is the increase of their spatial isolation. Around 40% of them lived segregated in Roma neighbourhoods before 1989. Now around 78% of them live segregated. In his studies of the new urban poverty, William Wilson (1999) analyses the social constraints faced by the jobless ghetto residents. According to him, these neighbourhoods offer few legitimate employment opportunities. They create inadequate job information opportunities. Usually the schools in them are also poor and the level of drop-outs is very high. Many people lose their feeling of connection to work in the formal economy. They no longer expect work to be a regular and regulating force in their lives. Young people grow up in an environment that lacks the idea of labour as a central experience of adults' lives. These circumstances increase the possibility that the residents will rely on illegitimate sources of income, thereby further weakening their attachment to the legitimate labour market. Such type of ghetto-related behaviour and attitudes could be observed in all big urban Roma ghettos in Bulgaria.

Roma education

The socialist state's educational policy

According to the 1946 census, 81% of adult Roma (above 16 years old) in Bulgaria were illiterate. In the 1950s and 1960s the slogans were for the elimination of illiteracy and the improvement of education for the whole population. Education was seen as one of the major institutions for the transfer of communist ideals and for social unification. After 1956 its concealed task was to promote the assimilation of all diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in the country.

The communist educational programme faced the hardest difficulties with the Roma. Many efforts and initiatives of "people's power" came to grief because of the passive resistance of the Roma community, which saw schools as alien and hostile institutions aiming to destroy their traditions and to assimilate them. On the other hand, Roma couldn't find the practical use of education. The low level of industrialization of Bulgaria's economy gave them the opportunity to work even when illiterate or with a very low level of education. Something more, Bulgaria was not a meritocratic society, but a "workers' state". The workers engaged in heavy industry or people with bad working conditions were paid much better than some professionals with university education. That is why most families found it more reasonable

for their children to receive only basic education (8th grade) and then to get married and start working.

Compulsory education was introduced in the late '40s. First it was up to 8th grade, and later – in the '70s – up to 11th grade. Administrative punishments of varying severity were inflicted on the parents of truant children. Schoolteachers' and head teachers' references depended on “the full range of the contingent subject to education” as an indicator. There was a practice among teachers to visit Roma districts every morning to collect the children from their homes and take them to school.

A diversity of initiatives was undertaken to stimulate Roma families to assist the State's efforts to educate children and youngsters. Local cooperatives and town halls were paying for the canteen food in most village and small town schools as well as in the newly–built schools in Roma neighbourhoods. Up until 1992 most textbooks were free for the pupils. Around one tenth of Roma children was educated in boarding schools. In these schools, the State paid for all the food, clothing, heating, textbooks, sport, daytime lessons and upbringing (but as a rule the living conditions there were not attractive). The State also paid a high proportion of the food, heating and educational expenses for the youngest children in nursery schools, and all the expenses for families with more than two children.

Roma reacted in a specific way to this new social pressure to be educated. They were compelled to submit to the obligation of sending their children to school at least for a while and readily used the social benefits allocated for this matter, but they still didn't include education in their scale of most important values. Many children attended school irregularly, or left prematurely.

A part of the Roma-population, especially those whose ancestors were engaged in industrial enterprises for a long period of time, learned that better education gives a better chance for an interesting and prestigious job, for a higher social status of the individual and the family. The members of these families as a rule had a better education. A significant part of those with higher education preferred to leave Roma neighbourhoods and became members of Bulgarian or Turk's groups and many succeeded. But the success of the individual or the family was a loss for the Roma group.

Education during Post-Socialism

“We won’t let our children go to school if the State won’t do anything for us”

From 1989 up to 2004, most of the social benefits which pupils availed themselves of, such as free or almost free food, clothes, textbooks, etc., were abolished. Most of the representatives of the Roma community saw this as a discriminatory measure against them, as they were having more children and were in a more difficult social position. They interpreted the shrinking of social benefits for education as a unilateral breach of the contract between the state and its citizens on the part of the state. Their unorganized mass protest against the governmental social policy in the ‘90s was withholding their children from schools. In all ghettos the angry people declared: *“We won’t let our children go to school if the State doesn’t do anything for us”*. Unfortunately this type of protest was self-devastating for the community. Many Roma parents were looking at the school mainly as at an (alien) state’s institution and not as something necessary for them and their children. They found out that the education they had/received was not able to guarantee them work and often expressed their frustration with the words: *“The school is no good at all. They keep these schools, so that the Bulgarians don’t lose their jobs. They sponge on us. That is why we stopped the child from going to school.”*

“We’re poor. That’s why the children don’t go to school.”

The rapidly increased poverty among the Roma also prevented them from sending their children to school. Most of the Roma families were not able to buy textbooks and teaching materials, or even clothes and food for their children. The average price of the textbooks and teaching materials for a student was almost equal to the whole year’s social benefits for raising a child. Many children complained that in winter time they were freezing in their homes and were not able to get out of bed or to go to school without (proper) shoes.

The World Bank (2002) experts showed that more than 60% of the people from non-poor households had secondary or higher education, while the same share for individuals from poor households was below 30% in 2001. While 65% of the ethnic Bulgarians have completed secondary or post-secondary education, for the Roma the percentage is 10.

Poverty influenced badly not only the access to the highest levels of education, but also to pre-school education. The high levels of unemployment and poverty in the country prevented the majority of the families from sending their children to kindergartens. Between 1995 and 1997, attendance concerning preschool education fell from 44% to 14% for all Bulgarian

children. It was even lower for the Roma – only 5% of the Roma children aged 3-6 attended kindergartens in 1997. Their share rose to 16% in 2001. But for the majority of the Roma children who do not speak Bulgarian at home this fact meant that they entered school absolutely not-prepared to study – they had poor knowledge of Bulgarian, they had never been exposed to requirements close to that in schools, they lacked many skills needed for successful learning of reading, writing and calculating. This was a significant reason for their early drop-out of the educational system.

“It doesn’t make a big difference if they go or don’t go to school. There are no jobs for us.”

Many impoverished parents relied on their children’s work and support for the family to survive. The number of students above the age of 16 fell sharply. This was also related to the labor legislation. The young people were able to find a job more easily because the principals were not obliged to provide social security coverage for children under the age of 16. In most of the cases the children did not sign any labour contract; they were hired on a verbal agreement and were paid on a daily basis. Another reason for early school drop-out was the conviction of many Roma parents that discrimination against Roma would prevent their children from getting any job no matter what their education is. These parents were convinced that it is a pure waste of money to pay for their children’s education and even to provide for their living during their school years. Many children shared these ideas too, and had no motivation to study.

„I married when I became 14 and that is why I dropped out of school.“

Another reason for early dropout was the early marriage. In many Roma subgroups the control over women’s behavior is extremely strong. The virginity of the girl is obligatory for the good marriage in these groups and the first menstruation of the girl is usually considered as a sign that she is mature and must marry. Early marriages are often considered to be the strongest means to keep the young people in the group. The drop in the institutional control led to a rise in the early marriages in the first half of the ‘90s and to a relative increase of practices like “Baba hakh” – the payment that girl’s parents receive for the right of the husband to “take her virginity” and to keep her future children in his family.

“The school is no good at all...”

Many negative changes in the educational system in this period resulted in a higher dropout of the children from vulnerable groups. The low financing of the educational system led to severe cuts in many school-related activities. The additional classes for linguistic education of those children, whose mother tongue was not the official state's language, have been cut out at first. The same thing happened with the classes for pupils with learning problems. All extracurricular classes for the development of special talents or interests were also cut out.

The emigration of hundreds of thousands of Bulgarian citizens and the extremely low fertility in the country led to a permanent decrease in the number of the students. In many rural schools children were not enough to form classes, so the students from two different grades were combined in a common class and the quality of education was very poor.

The impoverishment of the society hit the schools severely and most of them were badly maintained – often cold, without enough teaching equipment. Low-paid teachers were not motivated to work hard with children, especially with those with low learning aspirations.

At the same time the discipline in the schools dropped significantly. Most of the teachers were engaged in permanent strikes in the early 90's for the defense of their social rights or in the support of different political parties. The disorder in the country was also reflected in the schools' lack of discipline. As a result many students were missing classes without any sanctions, they were not fulfilling their school tasks, they were breaking all rules systematically and some were dropping out after the first year of schooling or never even entered the school.

Most of the Roma children still study in segregated schools in the big urban Roma ghettos or in small rural schools. The quality of education in these types of school is very bad as a norm. Neither the children nor the teachers are motivated to work hard there. The teachers' expectancies about their students' abilities and achievements are very low. The result is mass illiteracy and a high level of drop-outs.

Multiculturalism and civic education are not enough developed. Despite some improvements in teaching materials, stereotyped and prejudiced descriptions of Roma still exist in some history and literature textbooks.

The result was the **deterioration of Roma education** at least for the period 1989-2001.

Table 6**Roma education – data from the last censuses (1992, 2001)****(% of the population above the age of 7)**

| Level of education | 1992 | 2001 |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| University/ college | 0.3 | 0.16 |
| Secondary (grades 11-13) | 4.9 | 4.6 |
| Basic (grades 8-10) | 32.3 | 32.2 |
| Elementary (grades 4-7) | 31.1 | 29.5 |
| Not completed elementary (1-3) | 20.1 | 18.3 |
| Illiterate | 11.2 | 15.2 |

Source: NSI 1994, 2004 (author's calculations)

In order to avoid the risk of interpreting data incorrectly, having in mind the large number of children in Roma communities, I have calculated the last census data about education of the adults (people over 20 years old) from the largest ethnic groups.

Table 7**Education by ethnicity (% of the population above the age of 20)**

| Level of Education | Bulgarians | Turks | Roma |
|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------|
| University and college | 19.2 | 2.4 | 0.2 |
| Secondary (11-13 grades) | 47.6 | 21.9 | 6.5 |
| Basic (8 grades) | 24.9 | 46.9 | 41.8 |
| Elementary (4 grades) | 6.9 | 18.6 | 28.3 |
| Illiterate | 1.4 | 10.2 | 23.2 |

Source: NSI 2004 (author's calculations)

Most of the Roma who spent only 1-4 years at school have poor reading and writing skills, and usually they lose those skills completely soon after leaving school. This is especially true for those of them whose mother tongue is Romanes or Turkish. So it will be no exaggeration to claim, that half of the adult Roma in 2001 were functionally illiterate. Illiteracy spread back to the youngest generation. It is much more frequent among Roma women. Having in mind that the mothers are entirely responsible for the children's development, in Roma families the insufficient education of women negatively affects their ability to motivate the children for high school achievements and hampers the possibilities of the family to assist and help the

child in his/her studies. This increased the risk to pass illiteracy (and unemployment, and poverty) to the next generations.

Educational policies and achievements after 2001

Roma access to school has slowly started to improve since 2001. The school enrollment for pre-school education and for all school levels has increased, although the data are still not stable. Preschool enrollment and the enrollment in the elementary school showed the highest levels in 2002-2003 and then slowed down. In 2003-2004, the Government introduced **one year obligatory preschool education for all children**. This was a necessary measure, especially for the children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian, but it is still not sufficient. Something more, in 2007 we found out that although this preschool year is obligatory, a large number of children from the poorest families in the urban ghettos and in the small villages actually misses it.

There is a slow increase in the number of Roma students who continue their education after completing the basic level. Roma elite in town districts (intellectuals, rich merchants and artists) do their best to give their children the opportunity to study and to receive diplomas from the most prestigious schools in their towns. According to the data of the Open Society Foundation and of the International Center for Minority Studies, in the late '90s and in the beginning of the new millennium over 300 young Roma from all over the country received scholarships for university and college education. About half of the Roma, who completed university education apply for scholarships for further qualification – different Summer schools, language courses, master or doctoral degrees even in European and American universities.

Another governmental measure for improving the access to school education is the promotion of **free textbooks** for all students in preschools and elementary schools (1-4 grades) in 2003. There is a promise that after the 2008-2009 school year the textbooks for 5-8 grades will also be free. This is an extremely important measure. According to the headmasters and teachers in the segregated Roma schools in 2007, between 70 and 90% of Roma children in 5-8 grades didn't have any textbooks, while the rest of the children often only have a part of all the necessary textbooks. This makes the teaching process absurd and leads to very high drop out rates of Roma children from the educational system.

The students from 1-8 grades who study in schools outside their villages could use **free transportation** to the nearest village or town in which they are enrolled. In 2006, the Minister of education reported in front of the Parliament that his ministry has bought 219 school buses,

but needed at least as much more. A part of the students from small villages uses the public transportation to their schools.

From 1999 until now the students of the elementary level were receiving free **snacks** at school, while after this school the state will subsidize only part of these meals.

There is no permanent and sustainable state policy for school desegregation. The majority of the Roma students still studies in segregated schools with a bad infrastructure, a lack of teaching materials and a low quality of education. This segregation has a long history. It started with the building of schools in Roma neighbourhoods in the 1950s and 1960s and with the rapid emigration processes among rural ethnic Bulgarians in the same period. Slowly the vast portion of the rural schools became almost entirely “Turkish” or “Roma”. The increase in the number of Roma children also led to the increase in the number of Roma schools in the towns. According to the data from the Open Society Institute’s survey in 2005, there were 554 schools where Roma children comprised more than 50% of the students. This means nearly 20% of all Bulgarian schools. In 106 of them almost all the students were Roma. In another 960 schools (or 35% of the Bulgarian schools), more than 30% of the students are Roma.

Since 2000 a few Roma non-governmental organizations have started desegregating Roma students in a dozen of towns and villages. In 2005 they claimed they have integrated around 2000 children in the local schools. In 2008 the Deputy Minister of education reported to NCCEDI that 18 000 Roma students are already integrated in Bulgarian schools. The problem is that most of them are just local rural schools where the children from several villages study together and the vast majority of children is still Roma. Although slow, the process of desegregation is visible in the urban schools, too. As a matter of fact, this is due not to the active state measures for desegregation, but to the demographic processes in Bulgaria. The number of students permanently decreases – mainly because of the low fertility rate after the late 1990s and the emigration. Many schools were threatened to be closed or to short down the number of classes and teachers in them because of the diminishing number of students. The teachers started to invite Roma children to fill the lacking number of students. In some places they enrolled the best Roma students from the preschool classes of the vicinity schools and kindergartens. The other practice is to enroll the best students from the segregated schools in the town. Very often the selection is based on the social status of the Roma families. At the same time there are no local active plans for desegregation. On the contrary, most of the ghetto schools received finances for repayments and for improving the conditions in them. The experts from regional offices of the Ministry of education deny any perspective these schools to be closed.

Around 110 Roma assistant teachers are employed in 17 regions of the country. Most of them assist in the processes of desegregation.

There are many data which indicate that Roma children often suffer different forms of discrimination both in segregated and in desegregated schools. Many teachers are not prepared to work in a multicultural milieu. Negative prejudices and stereotypes against Roma are spread among children and teachers. They often lead to labelling and bullying and are demotivating some of the Roma to go to school. Teachers' low expectations often reinforce the difficulties Roma children face at school and lead to hidden drop outs – Roma children are enrolled, but actually don't go to school or miss more than 100 hours per year.

The Bulgarian cultural model is dominant in the educational system. The textbooks on literature, history, geography, etc., do not contain the slightest hint that Roma also live in this country. This is another factor which influences the lack of motivation of some Roma children to study. The Bulgarian educational system does not provide for the use of teaching materials and programmes tailored to fulfilling the needs of various cultural and social groups. The curriculum is not sensitive to the fact that Bulgarian is not the mother tongue for many (Roma) children. The Roma language was taught to less than 80 Roma students in only two schools – in the town of Gorna Oriahovitsa and in Sredishte – a village in Silistra region. The introduction of multicultural and civic education proceeds slowly and its effects are not studied yet.

Conclusion

The Roma are worst affected by the social and economic transitions in Bulgaria. They are the least represented group in the central and local levels of political power, and in the institutions. The negative representations, stereotypes and attitudes towards Roma are extremely high. They hinder the implementation of special policies towards Roma integration and equal treating, and lead to different forms of discrimination against them.

Roma suffer from the most severe drop in employment – a decrease by 37-66% after 1989. The prolonged drop-out of the labour market is the most significant indicator of the Romas' social exclusion. During Post-Socialism the Roma employment ratio varies between 18 and 47%. The average unemployed Roma has been out of work for more than eight years in 2007. 28% of the Roma have never been employed for more than six consecutive months. Only about 44% of the employed Roma work on permanent terms. The rest are seasonal or part-time workers, often without working contracts and social insurances. The majority of the Roma occupies low-qualified jobs, often in sectors which are considered undesirable by the

rest of the population. Only 4% of the employed Roma work as managers or superintendents (usually in their own firms). The share of Roma, occupied with their own business, is three times less than that of ethnic Bulgarians and as a rule the scale of the business is much smaller.

The extremely low levels of Roma employment and the length of joblessness could only partially be explained with Roma lower education and qualification. The mass spread of negative prejudices and stereotypes about Roma lead to their discrimination on the labour market during economic crises. During Post Socialism Roma spatial segregation increased significantly – around 78% of the Roma now live in segregated neighborhoods or ghettos (in the '80s - less than half of the Roma were segregated). This poses certain social constraints on the choices they can make in their everyday lives. Ghetto-related behavior and attitudes often reinforce the economic marginality of the ghetto residents.

Roma education is another trouble zone. It deteriorated during Post-Socialism. (Functional) illiteracy spread back to the youngest generation. This increased the risk of passing illiteracy (and unemployment, and poverty) to the next generations. The education of Roma women is much lower than that of the men. This fact negatively affects the children's motivation to study and the possibilities of the family to assist and help the child in his/her studies. Roma children enrollment in pre-school education is much lower than the average level of the country (in 2007, 78% of ethnic Bulgarian and only 54% of Roma children were enrolled in kindergartens). Since 2003 one year free preschool education has been promoted, but it is not enough to compensate the difficulties, stemming from the fact that Bulgarian is not the mother tongue of the vast majority of Roma children. High drop-out rates and absenteeism continue to pose serious problems. The levels of enrolment among Roma children are much lower for basic, secondary and college levels of education. The majority of the Roma children studies in rural or in segregated ghetto schools with a bad infrastructure, a lack of teaching materials and a low quality of education. Bulgarian teachers demonstrate strong prejudices against Roma children and have low expectations concerning their school success. Multiculturalism and civic education are not enough developed. Despite some improvements in teaching materials, stereotyped and prejudiced descriptions of Roma still exist in history and literature textbooks for different grades.

Roma face severe disadvantages in gaining equal access to education. They stem from poverty and poor living conditions; poor knowledge of the official Bulgarian language and from a lack of bilingual education; marginalization and discrimination; spatial and school

segregation. The Bulgarian state policy tries to overcome the disadvantages connected with the poverty by providing free textbooks for elementary schools, some transportation and meals. Since 2003-2004 it started to address the disadvantages stemming from the poor mastering of the official language through the introduction of one obligatory preschool year and the employment of Roma assistant-teachers. It plans to introduce more extra-curriculum classes for studying Bulgarian and mathematics in elementary schools in 2009. There is a slow process of school desegregation led mainly by NGOs and stimulated by the demographic crisis in Bulgaria.