

# IN TRANSITION: THE ROMA WITHIN THE BULGARIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. ACTIONS, TRIALS AND PERSPECTIVES

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***Abstract.** This paper is an attempt to analyse, diagnose and provide general recommendations concerning the Roma-related problems in the educational system of the Republic of Bulgaria from the standpoint of an external to the country analyst. Besides purely educational and ethnic issues, particular factors that create the context in which function and develop the educational system and interethnic relations after the 1989 changes are presented. Major challenges facing the education system and the associated with the Roma community issues (for example, reducing the share of Roma in the higher classes of secondary school), the necessary/pending reforms and current policies are discussed. A review of what has happened so far is also made.*

**Key words:** Roma education, educational measures, educational policies

## ROMA IN BULGARIA: A SHORT OVERVIEW

Among the ethnic groups that are historically present in the Bulgarian territory, Roma constitute the third largest group after ethnic Bulgarians and the Turkish minority. In the 2001 national census, there were 370 908 people (4.7%) who identified themselves as Roma (REF, 2004); while the official data from the last census from February 2011 put the Roma population at 4.9 %, although this number is considered by many researchers largely underestimated (Bogdanov and Zahariev, 2011, p.4).

Early traces of presence of Roma groups in the Bulgarian territory can be found between the eighth and the fourteenth centuries, and were documented by a number of historical sources, in particular during the rule of the Ottoman Empire and for all the course of the XIX century (Marushiakova and Popov, 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

Socialist policies toward the Roma shifted from an initial support during the decade from 1940 to 1950 to a decisive shift toward a process of minorities “Bulgarianisation” which begun in the mid-fifties. After an initial support to Roma organisations which led to the creation of a Roma newspaper and of a Roma theatre, the early fifties saw a decisive shift in this policy (Tomova, 1995; Crowe, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> Historically the Bulgarian territory has always been homeland to several different minorities. The Congress of Berlin tied the acknowledgement of the new states of Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Romania to the protection of the internal minorities of these states. The Treaty of Berlin (1878) granted with its Article 5 religious freedom to all subjects.

After the Second World War, the Roma became the target of a series of state policies which were aimed at ensuring their cultural homologation under the idea of a single national Bulgarian identity.

A systematic set of legislative actions were undertaken in order to assimilate the Roma through education and by mean of a series of specific acts directed to the removal of traditional features of the group. Such measures were touching all aspects of Roma life, and they ranged from the prohibition of practicing nomadism (as required by a State Decree in 1958) up to procedures such as that of the Muslim Roma name change. These policies did not target only the Roma but also large numbers of Bulgarian Turks and Bulgarian Muslims (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 1999 p. 3); it was a practice repeated several times in the history of Bulgaria starting from the 1950s up to the early 1980s.

When the Socialist government fell in 1989, Roma began their journey in the newly reformed Bulgarian state, but the road to full citizenship rights was going to be challenged by a series of major obstacles, first of all, economic and occupational ones.

The transition to the market economy from that of the centrally planned system brought many jobs losses in many economic sectors such as those of agriculture, manufacturing and mining. These were the occupational areas in which traditionally a large number of Roma were employed. Consequently, many groups abandoned the mining and agricultural areas to start a process of migration toward national urban centres and, later on, also abroad<sup>2</sup>.

After 1989, employment rates decreased by 37-66 per cent, and underemployment rose enormously. If we observe and compare the average national distributions, “not only the employment of Romani 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” (Tomova, 2007, pp.4-8); data which confirm the substandard situation which has become common for this minority.

These processes led to new and more severe forms of marginalisation, i.e. “inadequate access to decent education and jobs in the formal sector, substandard housing, poor health and low life expectancy” (UNECE, 2011, p.2). Spatial segregation, unemployment, underemployment and low literacy skills became determinant factors for the growing ghettoisation of Roma. The process of urbanisation that took place during Socialism based on destruction of the former Roma slums and their resettlement in blockhouses soon turned into abandon, and rapidly gave way to the transformation of the former *Mahalla* model into that of the global contemporary urban slums and hyperghettos<sup>3</sup>.

Today the Roma situation in Bulgaria remains affected by a complex series of problems in the fields of housing, employment and worsened by the lack of an adequate and systematic access to economic and educational opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> “In 2007, 18% of Roma families declared they have members of the family working (seasonally) abroad” (Tomova, 2007, p.7).

<sup>3</sup> For the transformations from ghetto to hyperghetto see Rossi M., 2011, “Fiori nella discarica: forme di resistenza nell’iperghetto”. In: *Inchiesta*, N. 174 October - December.