

# BULGARIA'S ROMA EXTERNAL MIGRATION: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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**Abstract.** *Do Roma people migrate abroad for the sole purpose to abuse generous social systems in wealthy countries? This is a major issue discussed in the present paper. It becomes more and more relevant in a situation of fear from the waves of immigrants in many European host countries, and in particular the panic caused by the Roma immigrants from CEE countries. The attractiveness of host countries has been investigated from potential migrants' standpoint, i.e. in terms of what people know and understand when they decide to migrate. Pro and con arguments are given via examining the subjective perceptions, attitudes and expectations vis-à-vis declared intentions for future migration. The latter were verified in terms of the declared values, level of satisfaction in different life aspects and life strategies that the respondents opted for.*

**Key words:** *Roma migration, social systems, potential migrants, income, life satisfaction, life strategies, magnet thesis*

## INTRODUCTION

A prejudice against Roma spreads in Western, highly developed countries that they abuse social welfare and services, and travel abroad to make use of the advantages of socially-oriented western countries. The question is contradictory; it triggers off public debates and coincides with immigration policy changes that are more restrictive (Hansen and Lofstrom 2006, Cherkezova and Tomova 2013).

The emigration of Roma from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe attracts the attention of researchers to a lesser degree. Some research is focused on the reasons for migration: whether the migrants, who can most probably receive social welfare (those low qualified with limited employment opportunities) are attracted to more generous affluent countries where they can get social benefits. Such a thesis partially explains the increasing number of immigrants. Unequivocal evidence for the reliability of the above thesis does not exist. Some research does not support the thesis that immigrants abuse social benefits and are a burden of generous affluent countries.<sup>1</sup> However, the public debates about the immigrants' financial burden have been relevant more than ever over the last few years, especially in the countries with an increasing number of immigrants and disturbed fiscal balance after the beginning of the world financial crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> For example De Giorgi and Pellizzari 2006, Barrett and McCarthy 2006 и 2008, OECD2013: 125-160

Roma abroad are concurrently immigrants, ethnically different and poor, and can be discriminated against in three different ways. Stereotypically they are people that create problems and are seldom accepted positively (FRA 2009: 8). The panic about the influx of Roma immigrants caused and spread by western mass media and public opinion frequently makes the public authorities approach the newcomers as if they were rascals whenever they apply to obtain certain rights, social benefits included (Cahn et Guild 2010 : 15). The above lead to their exclusion in many aspects – the labour market, the education of their children, the application for some social services, access to accommodation, etc. The attitudes towards the Roma in host countries sometimes have some of them feel even more marginalised than they are in their home country (FRA 2009: 8, Tomova and Cherkezova 2013).

The focal point of the present research is to test the extent to which the thesis of welfare magnet is applicable to Roma emigrants from Bulgaria; to search for evidence for or against it.

Any conclusive proof or disproof of such a thesis requires the use of at least two sources of information. Most research is based on information about immigrants in host countries. Official data are used for the contribution of the tax and insurance systems and the amount of the flow of social benefit payment, which support immigrants and their families; or social benefit payment to locals and immigrants, etc. The task is hard to do, bearing in mind that, in most countries, there is no statistical data about the type and nationality for the addressee of the social benefit payment. It is even harder to investigate the behaviour of a specific ethnic group within certain nationality. Ethical data is not gathered. Another restriction is the incongruence between the actual number of immigrants and the data that represent the officially registered immigrants, which do not reflect the actual number of immigrants – part of them can stay illegally; some may have received refugee status, but still await statistical registration; some may await refugee status; others may reside legally but work illegally, etc.

Most studies do not consider all aspects of welfare; they focus on the financial aspect. Even if accepted as adequate, such consideration leaves out the attitudes and migration reasons excluding the actual act of resettlement. Having investigated the magnet thesis of host countries, it is logical to investigate that magnet from the point of view of what the people who take the decision to migrate know and understand. What the migrants know before they migrate most probably differs from what they get informed, having already migrated. In other words, their reasons for emigration must not be looked for in their post-emigration conduct. These are indirect reasons.

On the other hand, a subjectively declared opinion about one migrant's reasons to migrate does not always reflect the whole truth. The reasons for emigration that the respondents give are useful in a sense that they help the researcher get oriented with the determinants that define future behaviour. On their basis, the researcher can assume what might be the behaviour of any potential migrant. However, to form a scientific knowledge based on subjective opinion can lead to voluntarism and distortion of reality. Hence, to draw plausible conclusions as regards the thesis of the factors of magnetism, it is necessary to use information both for the attitudes of potential migrants as well as the conduct of immigrants in host countries, reflected in the money flow of income distribution.