

# GYPSIES AS AN OBJECT OF ASSIMILATION POLICY (FROM THE END OF 1950S UNTIL 1980S)<sup>1</sup>

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***Abstract.** The article presents a document research of archives that provide information about the nature of assimilation policies against Roma during the period 1950-1980. A number of measures focused on members of the Roma minority and related to their self-determination, education, labor and so forth are analysed and discussed in detail. Successes and failures of various measures and policies during period under discussion are also critically analysed.*

**Key words:** Roma, Gypsy, assimilation policy, assimilation measures, People's Republic of Bulgaria

In the present article I will, once again<sup>2</sup> justify my statements that the Gypsies<sup>3</sup>, at the time of socialism, were spatially and socially isolated in a way much similar to today's; that they were labelled as a minority, although rarely called "minority"; that the Gypsies were an object of special interest on behalf of the institutions of the socialist state.

The need to verify the presented statements in the two cited articles is directly related to the investigation of the two largest Roma neighbourhoods in Sofia. The major aim is to elucidate the state of the Roma population prior to the beginning of the democratic changes in Sofia in order to clarify the starting point of the so called process of integration of the Roma population – a process initially announced as a necessity in different documents of Bulgaria's government after 1989 and, more precisely after 1999, in which the Council of Ministers (CM) passed the first strategic document "Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in the Bulgarian Society".

The main emphasis of the documents is their secondary aim – the dispute over the popular statement about the integration of Roma in the Bulgarian society during the socialist period, as well as their economic hardship after the democratic changes – a hardship that has led to their marginalisation in the Bulgarian society nowadays. Hence, the current hardships of Roma stem (directly or indirectly) from the transition to democracy of the Bulgarian society.

If the focus of the cited publications on the topic is, more or less, on the activity of the local authority to "recreate" the decision of the party and/or that

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<sup>1</sup> This article was translated by Mrs. Theodora Ivancheva-Atanasova; the translation was edited by Mr. Lubomir Stoytchev.

<sup>2</sup> See Grekova, et al. 2008 (Chapter 2); Grekova 2006.

<sup>3</sup> I adopt the term "Gypsy" (minority, population) as far as, for the period, it was applicable respectively to the group and to those individuals pertaining or belonging to it.

of the government, the attention here is drawn to the specific content of those decisions.

As the title self-sufficiently suggests, I omit the first decade of the socialist regime – my statement for the period is that the Gypsies were not an object of any special interest of the regime. The only archived document belonging to that period I discovered, which seems to have been directly related to the Gypsies and have touched on any policy concerning them, is “Report on National Belonging of Certain Categories of Minorities”. The report was discussed at a meeting of Politburo on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1953.

*“In 1950, with the expatriation of the Turkish minority from Bulgaria and especially this year with the process of passport issuing [passport issuing started on 5<sup>th</sup> January, 1953 – see Central Party Archive (CPA), fond 1, inventory 6, archive unit 1712]”, the Executive Committees of some People’s Councils made a number of enquiries at our office in relation to the demand of Roma-origin citizens to be registered with Bulgarian or Turkish nationality... Concerning the pressing request of Roma-origin citizens to be registered with Turkish rather than Roma nationality so as to be able to emigrate to Turkey, the Ministry of the Interior Affairs of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria (MIA) together with “Organisational-Instructional Department for the Executive Committees of the People’s Councils” at CM sent a circular letter №5-434 dated 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1950 instructing the change of nationality of the Gypsies in question... Another category of those citizens are Orthodox Gypsies that persistently demand nationality acceptance. These citizens have Bulgarian names, speak merely Bulgarian, feel entirely Bulgarian and refuse to be treated in registers or issued documents as Gypsies, which is the case with the Gypsies in the town of Botevgrad... Concerning the above we offer: 1. **Allow change of nationality of all these citizens and register them with nationality in accordance with what they feel – Bulgarian or Turkish, despite the entered nationality in the national registers.**”<sup>4</sup>*

A handwritten slip of paper is attached to the document, which says:” *The proposal was discussed at a meeting of Politburo on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1953. It was agreed that it would be unjust to accept the proposal that is why it is considered irrelevant* “(CPA, f.1, i.6, a.u. 1843, pp.4, 175-176). The offer to legalise the “determination” of Roma’s national status (as well as that of Sarakatsani/Karakachans and Vlachs) was disproved, although the quoted circular letter №5-434 dated 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1950 (of MIA or CM?) made it possible at least in 1950, when the first great wave of socialist-power-controlled expatriation of Turks to Turkey happened (i.e. those who identified themselves as Muslims or those who spoke Turkish). That is why the document

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<sup>4</sup> The highlights of cited documents here and throughout the whole article are mine. M.G.

<sup>5</sup> In “Report by Head of Departments...” dated 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1961 that “circular letter” is “letter № 5-434 dated 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1950 of the Department of “Civil State” of MIA (see Central State Archive (CSA) f.1b, i15, a.u.765, p.3) and the established “law” that “every citizen can file a request at the local national council to register as Turk at the presence of two witnesses to verify their being Muslims or speaking Turkish” is defined as a non-scientific and harmful statement about establishing nationality and national identity” (CSA f.1b, i15, a.u.765, p.3).