

WHAT IF THIS BELGIUM WERE IN BULGARIA?! MIGRATION OF THE ROMA FROM BULGARIA TO BELGIUM

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Abstract. *The article presents research results concerning the Roma migrations from Bulgaria to Belgium and their economic and welfare dimensions. Important factors concerning Roma's motivation to leave their home country (Bulgaria) and search for better life and opportunities in another EU host country (Belgium) are explored and discussed. Roma's contribution to Belgium's economy and welfare system are also discussed and analysed from sociological perspective.*

Key words: *Roma external migration, Roma contribution to economy*

CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, a significant number of Roma from Central and Eastern Europe migrated to Belgium and other Western countries. Many of them have already brought their families and plan to stay permanently. Their status is different, depending on the status of the countries whose citizens they are. The largest proportions of recently arrived Roma are from Bulgaria. Experts estimate that now their numbers exceed the numbers of local *Sinti*¹. Thus, unsolved problems of integration of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe led to the need for the host country to launch and implement a series of policies and measures for social inclusion of Roma migrants.

Brussels and Ghent are among those Belgian cities where a large number of Roma from former socialist countries arrived, especially after 2001. Immigrants from Bulgaria, Slovakia and Romania have constituted the largest share of the Roma population in both cities since 2007. As a result of their emigration, this share increased tenfold, reaching 2% of Ghent's inhabitants in mid-2012² (VDAB, Gent,

¹ Belgium is a country with a negligible share of a native "Roma" population – mostly groups of *Sinti* and *Kalo*, predominantly nomadic, constantly migrating between Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

² At the end of 2003, the number of immigrants from Bulgaria in Ghent constituted 341 persons, which then grew to 667 as of 31.12.2006. Their number reached 5 840 people by 31.08.2012. Experts estimate that about half of them are Roma (Interview with the Director of VDAB, Ghent). It should be borne in mind that these figures cover only registered residents. Due to restrictions on Bulgarian citizens, a significant proportion of immigrants from Bulgaria, the majority being Bulgarian Turks and Turkish-speaking Roma, live there without residential registration. Thus the share of actual residence of Bulgarian Roma in the city is probably much higher.

2012). Belgium allocated more resources to integrate these communities, which already placed a growing burden on the education system and quality of social services. The rapid increase in the number of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe hampered their integration, increasing social inequality, creating conditions for increasing tensions and conflicts between them and the local population.

The global economic crisis led to higher unemployment, even in the developed and prosperous Western European countries, especially among the young population, immigrants and people with disabilities. The Belgian labour market faced additional difficulties in absorbing new waves of migrant jobseekers, especially those who knew neither French or Flemish nor English, and those with lower education and qualifications. The Director of VDAB in the city of Ghent summarised the challenges his office was facing in the changed economic and demographic situation:

I could cite you some data about the recent migration into Ghent of Bulgarians and Slovaks and respectfully – of Bulgarian and Slovak Roma. In 2004, Slovaks in Ghent with address registration were 281, and Bulgarians – 392. In 2011, the number of Slovaks rose up to 1,930, almost 7 times; and the registered Bulgarians were already 5,630. Bulgarians reached 5,840 in August 2012 – almost 15 times more, as compared to 2004. According to experts' estimations, 90% of Slovak and Czech emigrants are Roma, and around 50% of Bulgarians in our city are also Roma. At the moment, 22.8% of all registered unemployed jobseekers in Ghent are immigrants. Their integration into the labour market is difficult – they do not speak Flemish; 86% of Slovaks and 68% of Bulgarian migrants have low qualifications.

We have to provide various policy actions tailored to the needs of jobseekers: language courses, integration courses, vocational training and requalification for those who would prefer to start another job. We would like to offer them increased guidance towards a job: qualification courses; professional reorientation; realistic job targets; to help some change their attitudes and improve their communicative skills. However, the crisis and the increase in the number of applicants for training vouchers led to some social restrictions – amounts paid before 2009, have been halved since 2009...

In August and November, 2012, a qualitative research on Bulgaria's Roma migration to Belgium was carried out; semi-standardised interviews were conducted with experts from the local government, the social services, the NGOs. In addition, observations was realised in emigrants' homes, at the Bulgarian Divine Church in Ghent, at the workplaces of some emigrants and documents were analysed. The fast increase in migrant numbers, and the difficulties they and the local institutions and people face, concerning their integration, were the reasons why Brussels and Ghent were chosen for the site of the qualitative research. During the field work a total of 32 Bulgarian Roma emigrants to Belgium were interviewed. Out of them: 19 females, 13 males; 14 – married, 11 – not married, 7 – divorced; 8 – with college or university education, 12 – with secondary education (3 of them without diploma), 7 – with primary education (at least grade 8), 5 – lower primary (grade 4–7). The age structure of the interviewed was: up to 29 – 11 people; 30–39 – 10 people; 40–49 – 6 people; 50+ – 5 people.