

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES IN THE LIVES OF BULGARIAN GYPSY POPULATION (1945 – 1989)¹

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Abstract. *The article discusses the changes in the lives of the Roma population during the period 1944-1989. Roma's education, work (employment) and housing issues are thoroughly construed in terms of state policies aiming at changes in their lives. The results and consequences from the implemented policies during forty-five-year period are also critically assessed and analysed.*

Key words: Roma, Gypsy, People's Republic of Bulgaria, education, work, housing

The period between 1944 and 1989 marked a time of great transformations in the public, political and the cultural spheres in Bulgaria. The end of the Second World War in Bulgaria came in the form of Soviet military forces marching in the country (8th-9th September, 1944) and the coming to power of the "Homeland Front" coalition, dominated by the Bulgarian Workers' Party (communists) – BWP (c). Monarchy was abolished in 1946, while, under the government of the BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party), the agricultural and industrial sectors were nationalised and entrepreneurship was practically destroyed throughout the next 40 years. This so-called "socialist period" changed the everyday life of all citizens in the country, regardless of their ethnic descent. Bulgarians, Turks, Gypsies², Armenians, Jews and others were forced to organise their lives in accordance to the new political realities.

The years of socialism mark the first time in which the authorities not only expressed interest in the Gypsies, but actually put in a lot of efforts in changing their traditional lifestyle, occupations and customs. This approach was enforced due to the fact that a large part of the various Gypsy groups in the country led a different pattern of everyday life compared to the prevailing Bulgarian population. Thus, in one way

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² Gypsies or Bulgarian citizens of Gypsy ancestry are names that were used during the Socialist period in both the Bulgarian society and the official documents. This is the way Gypsies called themselves during the period covered in this analysis. Therefore, as this paper deals with the Gypsy problem in this particular period (1944-1989), the term "Gypsy", rather than the politically correct *Roma* imposed in recent years, will be used.

or another, the authorities interfered in the everyday life of Gypsies with the intention to make it as similar to that of the Bulgarian ethnoses as possible. The authorities identified three most important areas to focus the majority of its policies on – education, employment and development of Gypsy neighbourhoods. These areas were also the three most important aspects of the life of the minority throughout the period studied in this article (1944-1989).

The transformations in the life of the Gypsy minority in Bulgaria began almost immediately after the political changes of 9th September, 1944. These changes were mainly related to Shakir Pashov, the Gypsy leader at that time.

He was a long-time member of the BCP and, as such, was elected a Member of Parliament in the Constitutional Assembly from the lists of the Homeland Front³. Thus, for the first time in history, a Member of Parliament of Gypsy descent was elected in Bulgarian Parliament. Shakir Pashov quickly became popular among all the Gypsies in Bulgaria, despite the differences they shared in other aspects of life, such as religion, language, or ways of earning income. As a result of the government policies, a Gypsy organisation called EKIPE⁴ (Unity) was established on 6th March, 1945 in order to encourage the self-determination of minorities. The publication of “Romano esi” (Roma voice)⁵ commences, while the Roma state theatre – Roma⁶ was opened in 1948. All these establishments were strictly unprofessional and brief in existence. In the beginning of the 1950s, the idea of equality of the Gypsy minority quickly morphed into the government’s intention for Gypsies to adopt the lifestyle of the general Bulgarian population. Gypsy emancipation was renounced and Shakir Pashov was sentenced into exile in the town of Belene, an arrest that marked the end of his political and public careers.

However, some of the ideas that he advocated continued to be present among the policies of the state regarding minorities. One of those ideas was about the education of Gypsy children.

EDUCATION

The first “Gypsy” school was opened in Fakulteta neighbourhood, Sofia, in 1947. There was not much interest in the newly built school in the beginning, despite a BGN 3 156 000 government investment to complete the project⁷. Only 40 students attended the school in 1948. However, three years later, this number increased to 500⁸. The establishment of schools in Gypsy neighbourhoods continued throughout the following years, with functioning schools in the towns of Nova Zagora, Stara Zagora, Vidin, Berkovitsa and Kiustendil⁹ by the end of the 1950s.

³ Marushikova, E., Попов, В. Циганска политика и цигански изследвания в България (1919 -1989), *Studii Romani*. Том VII: Избрано. С., 2007., с. 129.

⁴ Ibid, p. 128.

⁵ Central State Archive, ф. 1Б, оп. 8, а.е. 596, л. 53

⁶ Central State Archive, ф.1Б, оп.8, а.е. 596, л. 61

⁷ Бюксеншютц, У. Цит съч., с.48.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mizov, В. Българските цигани. (Бит, душевност, култура), т.2., София, 2006, с.238.