CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bulgaria: ethnic diversity – a common struggle for equality

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Even the most superficial acquaintance with Gypsies[1] in Bulgaria gives some idea of the great variety of its Gypsy communities, not all of which acknowledge a Roma identity. These include traditional communities (both nomadic and sedentary), plying their customary trades and retaining their language and distinctive ethnic and cultural traits, as well as communities who have integrated with the surrounding non-Gypsy population and are relatively well-educated and involved in wider society. For a better understanding of the present day situation of the Gypsy minority in Bulgaria we have to consider the fundamental ethnic and social parameters that affect them, to take into account their specific ethnic and cultural features, as well as to view their place in society from a historical perspective (Marushiakova and Popov 1997b). Only then do the current problems of Bulgarian Gypsies and the main trends in their development within the broader Gypsy community become more comprehensible.

Typology (and early settlement)

Bulgaria was populated by Gypsies mainly as a result of the influx of three migratory waves. The first wave resulting in large-scale settlement can be traced back to the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, but it is possible that there were prior contacts, perhaps even as early as the ninth century in the opinion of some scholars. From the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, many Gypsies settled in towns and villages throughout the Ottoman Empire, while others continued living as nomads and retained their traditional trades. Meanwhile a new type of semi-nomadic lifestyle emerged, where some Gypsies took shelter in a winter residence but travelled within regional boundaries for the remainder of the year.

In the second wave, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, large numbers of Gypsies entered the Bulgarian part of the Ottoman Empire from the Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. The third great wave

came from the same region during the second half of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, following the ending of Gypsy slavery in these principalities. Immigration of Gypsies from neighbouring countries, mainly Romania and Greece, continued during the twentieth century and was usually related to changing state borders as a result of war – namely the Balkan wars of 1912–13 and the two world wars which followed.

The Bulgarian Gypsies, like Gypsies everywhere, are not a homogeneous community. They are divided by many internal differences into separate metagroups, subgroups and yet further subdivisions. Nevertheless, all Gypsies in Bulgaria belong to the Roma stream and can be classified on the basis of language (or dialect), lifestyle, boundaries of endogamy, occupational specialisation, length of settlement in Bulgaria, etc. These classifications are related to structures of perceived identity and result in a complete picture of the state of the Gypsy 'ethnos'. This picture is by no means static or inflexible; it has changed in the post and in the future is liable to alter yet again. However, this chapter is concerned with the position today.

The metagroup community of settled Gypsies or *Yerlia* is the largest and most varied. These Gypsies are the descendants of the first migratory wave, who speak different dialects of the Balkan group of *Romanes*. Significant numbers had already settled in Balkan town or village *mahalas* (Gypsy quarters) during the period of the Ottoman Empire. The *Yerlia* community is divided into two main subdivisions: *Dasikane* Roma or 'Bulgarian Gypsies' (Christians) and *Xoraxane* Roma or 'Turkish Gypsies' (Muslims). Within these subdivisions there are some more or less endogamous groups, which have retained their traditional functions and occupations as well as an awareness of their identity as a distinct group.[2]

At the same time there are sizeable communities who remember their respective group divisions and previous occupations but no longer practice them. Here the boundaries between groups have been largely obliterated and the sense of belonging has shifted from a more localised identity to the frame of the wider community of *Dasikane* Roma or *Xoraxane* Roma, with 'Bulgarian Gypsies' living mostly in West Bulgaria and 'Turkish Gypsies' in East Bulgaria. These coalescing processes are mainly found in big city *mahalas*, where memories of old group divisions are weak. In some cases, especially after a number of changes of name and religion, such as those in Sofia, community awareness can be at a more general level (only as *Yerlia* or settled Gypsies). Here, as in the above example, the ethnic identification is as members of the metagroup.

Another large group, almost entirely within the *Yerlia* nowadays, is the community of *Vlaxichki* (Wallachian) Gypsies (an appellation used in Western Bulgaria) or *Laxo* (*Laxoria, Vlaxoria* as used in Eastern Bulgaria). These Gypsies use dialects of *Romanes* which belong to the Old Vlax dialect group and their ancestors arrived from Wallachia in the second wave of migration.

Formerly they were nomads, subdivided into *Sitaria* (sieve-makers), *Reshetaria* (colander-makers), *Zagundzhia*, etc., but during the 1920s and 30s, or even later, they began to settle, mostly in urban Gypsy *mahalas*. Here, they gradually joined the existing metagroup communities of *Dasikane* Roma and *Xoraxane* Roma and in the process some changed their religion so that those in Eastern Bulgaria are now Muslims. Today there is widespread co-existence between *Yerlia* and *Vlaxichki* Gypsies (*Laxo*) and intermarriage is common, but the different group origin of the latter is still remembered. *Vlaxichki* Gypsies sometimes differ in appearance and possess some cultural and behavioural traits, which give them a special place in the general metagroup frames of the communities they have entered.

Some members of these communities gradually become differentiated on the basis of their preferred ethnic identity, for example some 'Muslim/Turkish Gypsies' who have lost most of their group characteristics and are often bilingual (speaking Turkish and *Romanes*) or entirely monolingual (speaking only Turkish). They live primarily in East Bulgaria and prefer to introduce themselves as Turks or only as *milliet* (i.e. a nation or people). Other examples are the *Dzhorevtsi* (mules) who prefer to identify themselves as Bulgarian, and the *Agupti* in the Rhodope mountains who stand apart from other Gypsies and have almost blended in with the local Turks and Bulgarian Muslims (often referred to as 'Pomaks').

A second major and very distinct metagroup among Bulgarian Gypsies is that of the *Kaldarasha/Kardarasha* community, descendants from the third wave of migration. These were nomads until 1958 and are now scattered all over the country, living mostly in villages and small towns rather than in larger towns. They speak the New Vlax dialect of *Romanes* and are internally divided into further subgroups.[3] All *Kardarasha* are strictly endogamous within the wider boundaries of the community as a whole.

The Thracean *Kalaydzhia* (tinsmiths) are clearly distinguishable from the two major metagroups of *Yerlia* and *Kardarasha*. Their semi-nomadic lifestyle, strong endogamy within the boundaries of their community, primary role of group identity, etc., is similar to that of the *Kardarasha* but their language belongs to the group of Old Vlax dialects. Nowadays they live mostly in villages scattered throughout the Thracean plain and keep their distance from the other subdivisions of the Gypsy community.[4]

The third major and distinctive metagroup is the *Rudara* community who are called *Vlax* (Wallachian) Gypsies or *Vlaxs* by the Bulgarians. Its members speak a dialect of Romanian and have a preferred *Vlax* or 'old Romanian' ethnic identity. Until recently *Rudara* were nomads who had spread around the world during the 'great *Kelderara* invasion'. This community consists of two main subdivisions of *Lingurara* (spoon-makers), who make wooden goods, and *Ursara* (bear and monkey trainers) and is internally divided into regional sub-divisions.[5] The boundary of endogamy is within the greater

Rudara community. *Rudara* live all over the country, mostly in villages and small towns in their own *mahalas*.

Estimates of the number of Gypsies inhabiting Bulgarian lands in different periods differ. Official population censuses vary widely and by a margin of at least two or three times as is apparent from comparisons with data from other censuses carried out for administrative purposes. One such census of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1989 registered 576,927 Gypsies, while the National Census of Population and Housing Stock on 4 December 1992 registered 313,396 people who had declared themselves as Gypsies, of whom 310,425 people said that the Gypsy language (*Romanes*) was their mother tongue (Rezultati 1994). We estimate the number of people of Gypsy origin in Bulgaria as being approximately 700,000-800,000. One also needs to consider how many of them would want to declare themselves as Gypsies.

Unfortunately, we have to admit that there is no information on the population of the various Gypsy groups and their major subdivisions. We can only make a rough estimate. There is no doubt that more than half of the Bulgarian Gypsies belong to the *Yerlia* community (including the *Laxoria* who have joined it). *Xoraxane* Roma are more numerous than *Dasikane* Roma. As far as the other communities are concerned, we believe that *Rudara* are slightly more numerous than *Kardarasha*.

History

It is hardly surprising that centuries of co-existence between Gypsies and the surrounding population have led to cultural borrowings by Gypsies of certain patterns of social organisation from the wider macrosociety.

Gypsies in the Ottoman period had a special place in the overall social and administrative organisation of the Empire. Despite the division of the population into two main categories – the faithful (*Moslim*) and the gentiles (*Raya*) – Gypsies had their own, specific dual status outside these two categories. They were categorised on the basis of ethnicity, something quite unusual for the Ottoman Empire, with no clear distinction between Muslim and Christian Gypsies. All were tax-paying subjects of the Empire, included in its legislation and with a specific place in its social structures. On the whole, the situation of Gypsies was similar to that of the subordinated local population, with the exception of some minor privileges for Muslim Gypsies (Marushiakova and Popov 2001).

During the period of the Ottoman Empire, from as early as the Middle Ages, the Gypsies gradually became an integral part of society in spite of their lower social status and the attitude of the population towards them. There was a widespread sedentarisation of Gypsies in the towns, where they provided unskilled labour or worked as craftsmen, and in the villages, where they often made their living from farm work. During the first half of the

nineteenth century when the first Bulgarian textile factories were established in Sliven, most of the workers were Gypsies who played an active part in the syndicalist and other political struggles of the time. In Bulgaria, nomadic Gypsies (or rather semi-nomads) were far fewer than sedentary Gypsies; but they, too, had a fixed residence and civic duties. All these factors contributed to the social integration of the Gypsies and it is no accident that the first timid efforts to seek civil emancipation for the Gypsy community date from Ottoman times. One such attempt in 1867 was the appeal for the establishment of an independent Gypsy church made by Ilia Naumchev following the model of the struggle for emancipation of all Balkan nations at that time (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 39–45).

After the independent Bulgarian state had been established in 1878, the Gypsies began to search for their own place in its social and political structure. On 31 May 1901 an amendment to the Election Law was passed almost unanimously, suspending the right to vote of both the Muslim Gypsies (the majority) and the nomads, thus violating the constitutional principle of equal voting rights for all Bulgarian citizens. The ethnic Turkish and Bulgarian Muslim members of Parliament voted for this amendment to exclude their fellow Muslims. In response, the first Gypsy conference was convened in Vidin in 1901 and the decision was taken to start a campaign to revoke this unconstitutional change in the law. The Bulgarian lawyer, Marko Markov JD, and the '*tzari-bashi* of Bulgarian Gypsies', Ramadan Ali, drafted an elaborate petition, insisting that the Gypsies in Bulgaria should have the same rights as the rest of the population. This petition was submitted to the National Assembly on 1 June 1905. The lack of reaction led to the convocation of the first Gypsy congress in Sofia on 19 December 1905, where a new petition making the same demands was approved and brought once again to the attention of the National Assembly. Eventually, the National Assembly passed a new electoral law, where the restrictions on the voting rights of these Gypsies were dropped.

A new stage in the Gypsy movement for civil equality began after the end of World War One with the establishment in Sofia of the 'Egypt' organisation, headed by Shakir Pashov. This organisation was outlawed in 1925 but was later re-established under the name of *Istikbal* (Future). In 1931 the Gypsy 'Mohammedan Cultural Organisation for National Education' began publication of the newspaper *Terbie* (Education), with Shakir Pashov as editor-in-chief. The following year the Mezdra conference attempted to broaden the national influence of this organisation but after a *coup d' état* on 19 May 1934 overthrew the elected government, the organisation was dissolved and its newspaper suppressed.

During World War Two the Gypsies in Bulgaria were not sent to concentration camps or subjected to mass annihilation, as happened elsewhere in Europe, nor are there any documents providing evidence of such intentions

(Kenrick 1999: 89–94). The Gypsies were not mentioned explicitly in the anti-Jewish *Law for the Protection of the Nation* and the only reference to them in the official legislature of that time was Decree 4567 of the Council of Ministers, which declared:

> Jews are prohibited ... from having marital or sexual relations with people of Bulgarian or similar origin, such marriages concluded after this law is enacted will be considered invalid. Note: The regulation also refers to the marriages of Gypsies to people of Bulgarian or similar origin.
>
> State Gazette, 29 August 1942

There is no information on how this part of the regulation was observed in respect of Gypsies or if it was ever applied. During the war many Gypsies were rounded up for compulsory labour, mainly harvesting or work on roads, railways and other public utilities. Meanwhile their free movement in towns was restricted with the excuse that they were spreading contagious diseases. A number of Gypsies joined the anti-fascist struggle and a few died as partisans or in helping them. Gypsies in the town of Sliven were particularly active, continuing their former radical tradition. The number of Gypsies who participated directly in the anti-fascist movement in Bulgaria was relatively small but this was clearly a reflection of their place in society at that time.

Gypsies during the so-called 'epoch of socialism'

Following the Communist take-over, on 9 September 1944, the policy of the incoming government was to involve the Gypsies in actively 'building a new life' as an ethnic community with their own identity and equal rights. However, this policy, supposedly based on the Soviet model, was only to last from the late 1940s until the early 1950s.

On 6 March 1945 an 'All-Gypsies' Organisation against Fascism and Racism and for the Promotion of the Cultural Development of the Gypsy Minority in Bulgaria' was established, once more headed by Shakir Pashov. The following year the newspaper *Romano Essi* (Gypsy voice) made its appearance and in 1947 the Gypsy theatre 'Roma' was founded in Sofia. On the political front local branches of the Gypsy organisation, with equal rights to other non-Gypsy branches, were formed as sections of the Fatherland Front – a mass umbrella organisation for civil societies under the guidance of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). A National Conference of Gypsies in Bulgaria, held on 2 May 1948, confirmed its commitment to the policy of the new Communist government.

However, this policy of engagement with the Gypsy community proved short-lived. In the 1950s the independent Gypsy organisations were abolished and popular Gypsy leaders were isolated and excluded from public life. This marked the shift to a new policy towards Gypsies, the final goal of which

was their complete assimilation into the 'Bulgarian socialist nation'. A number of measures were taken in order to achieve this aim:

- restricted and decreasing reference to Gypsies in official documents and the mass media, starting with a terminological shift when 'gypsies' suddenly became 'citizens of gypsy origin'. Later, all explicit use of the term 'gypsies' vanished and was replaced by various euphemisms such as 'dark skinned citizens', 'children who don't speak Bulgarian', etc.
- no more state support for the development of Gypsy culture
- termination of the processes of 'Turkisation' of the Gypsies through the obliteration of Islamic elements in their culture – primarily by 'renaming' Muslim Gypsies, i.e. substituting Bulgarian names for their original Turkish-Arabic ones.[6]
- provision of permanent residence and regular occupations for all Gypsies. The first step in this direction was the ban on nomadic lifestyle with Decree no. 258 of 17 October 1958, whereby 'vagrancy and panhandling' were prohibited and citizens were obliged 'to undertake labour beneficial to society and to work according to their strength and abilities'.

At the end of the 1970s, following consultations with other socialist countries, Decree no. 1360 of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the BCP of 9 October 1978 specified the general directions of the new Gypsy policy:

> The emphasis should be placed on their involvement in labour which benefits society, on progress in their education, on improvement in their living standards, on an increase in their consciousness and self-confidence as fully-fledged citizens of socialist Bulgaria, on their growing participation in building a developed socialist society.
>
> Decree no. 1360

This decree also specified some concrete measures (although in practice little was done to implement them) which sometimes achieved the opposite of what was intended, in spite of excessive requirements for formal reporting. For example, the segregated Gypsy *mahalas* were supposed to be abolished and their inhabitants rehoused in districts where they would be surrounded by Bulgarian neighbours, but only thirty-six out of the 547 mainly urban *mahalas* were 'closed' and some of these reappeared a few years later. Even though the Decree explicitly stated that 'segregated schools should not be allowed' for Gypsies, schools of this kind not only survived but even acquired legal status, concealed by the euphemism 'schools for children with low standards of living and culture'. The limited aims of such schools were to teach 'elementary literacy and some professional skills and discipline'.

The last phase in the government's special policy towards Gypsies coincided with the 'Process of Revival' of 1984–5, the goal of which was the

assimilation of Bulgarian Turks by means of 'scientific proof' of their Bulgarian origin and compulsion to change their names. As it proved impossible to apply this approach to the Gypsies, the official position was to deny their very existence in Bulgaria. The authorities considered Gypsies officially non-existent – all mention of them in public life and the media vanished, and in some places the Gypsy *mahalas* were hidden behind high concrete walls.

Naturally, such an absurd policy yielded no results – the Gypsies did not cease to exist. Yet, at the same time efforts were made to improve the living conditions and raise the educational standards of Gypsies in order to make them equal citizens, even if the practical implementation of these measures was inadequate and hampered by superfluous paper-work. If we are to be objective, it must be acknowledged that overall social development during the state socialist era brought certain positive benefits for the Gypsies. Even the ban on the nomadic lifestyle was perceived in a very positive light by Gypsies at the time, especially from a present-day perspective, since the nomads were given the opportunity to receive favourable credits, to settle permanently and build their own houses, etc. The standard of living and civil status of the Gypsy community improved rapidly and significantly compared to the previous period. The Gypsies had permanent employment, since unemployment was virtually unknown during state socialism, thus improving their living conditions. With active support from the state many Gypsies succeeded in obtaining a relatively good education, including higher education, and for a time some sections of the Gypsy community were able to play an active part in the social and political life of the country. However, these positive trends were accompanied by a multitude of unsolved problems. As regards the contemporary situation, it is far more important to recognise the actual impact of this policy on the Gypsy community than to consider the often unrealistic, strategic goals of the Communist government.

From a historical perspective there are no essential differences in the attitude of the Bulgarian state towards the Gypsies during the two major periods of policy development (1878–1944 and 1944–1989). Indeed, the basic approach of all Balkan nations to the Gypsies was not one of confrontation but was rather a condescending attitude adopted towards a community of a lower status whose members did not deserve special attention, provided 'they knew their place' and did not create problems. This explains why, for long periods, the Gypsies were not the focus of any special state policy and also why, whenever such a policy was introduced, it was inconsistent, out of touch and produced no tangible results. In fact, whenever the Gypsies became the focus of state policy, they were always the secondary and additional target of political decisions aimed at some other minority, other social structures or society as a whole. For example, the ban on Gypsy organisations in 1925 was enforced by a law intended to eradicate the political power of the Left. Likewise, the ban on their organisations in 1934 was a by-product of the

attempt to put a stop to the activities of Turkish minority organisations. Similarly, restrictions on Gypsies during World War Two were applied in the context of anti-Jewish legislation. Even the ban on the nomadic lifestyle was a result of similar bans imposed on nomad shepherds (Karakachans and Aromanians) and followed from the adoption of the principle of a sedentary life for all citizens of the country. Finally, all further actions taken by the state in the 1960s, 70s and 80s were a part of an attempt to assimilate members of the Turkish (and, more broadly, Muslim) population or alternatively to force them to emigrate.

This general pattern in the approach of the state towards the Gypsies, which has endured throughout the centuries, helps to explain the processes taking place after the change of regime in 1989 until the present day.

Post-communism

In Bulgaria the collapse of the Eastern European state socialist system in 1989 was followed by a long transition period, which is still continuing, accompanied by permanent social, economic and political crises. This general state of crisis strongly affected many aspects of the Gypsies' situation in Bulgarian society. In the economic restructuring after 1989 the Gypsies were the first to suffer since most were soon thrown out of work – in the cities after factories were closed and in the villages after the demise of co-operative farms. Unemployment and the lack of social support completely changed their way of life. Gypsies adapted relatively quickly to the new situation by taking refuge in the 'black' (or shadow) economy, which is a significant force in Bulgaria. This fact needs to be emphasised because, according to official statistics and representative sociological data, there appears to be no way Gypsies in Bulgaria could be able to live since almost all are unemployed, with no registered income, and only a few receiving occasional social support.

The Gypsies have adopted various economic strategies. Many, mostly in towns, have taken up peddling, not only at home but often abroad as well – mostly in Turkey and Yugoslavia. Others rely on being hired for occasional unskilled work, e.g. in construction. Some Gypsies, mostly living in villages, make a livelihood by seasonal agricultural work and by gathering wild herbs and mushrooms. Yet others have gone back to their old traditional crafts, although sometimes in modified form, such as different kinds of blacksmith's or tinsmith's work, weaving straw mats and basket-making among others. Some of these crafts involve a nomadic lifestyle. There are frequent trans-border labour migrations, especially of the *Rudara*, who are employed illegally as agricultural workers on farms in Greece, Italy and Spain. Some Gypsies, mainly *Kardarasha*, have secured relatively good positions in the black economy (manufacturing alcoholic beverages, undertaking building projects, buying and selling metals or agricultural produce). The overall

picture is very varied and is related to a number of factors, including the internal differentiation among the Gypsy community itself.

Considerable changes have also taken place in social relations. The economic crisis and political struggles created social tensions which, in turn, often led to escalating problems in relations between ethnic groups. At the start of the transition period the Gypsies were inevitable scapegoats in the popular search for those to blame for the social crisis. This victimisation often went as far as pogroms, murders of Gypsies by skinheads and police violence (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 1994–9, Human Rights Project 1994–9, Zang 1991). Gradually, however, the situation became calmer and these relationships gradually resumed their former customary pattern. The Gypsies are still discriminated against and remain victims of violence, at an inter-personal level and in certain everyday situations, as well as at the hands of state institutions – mainly the police. However, the predominant pattern is once more for Bulgarians to despise Gypsies as an inferior people who have to know their place and problems usually arise when Gypsies are no longer willing to remain in this allotted place. Due to their raised consciousness of civil rights Gypsies now seem to have become more sensitive to discriminatory attitudes. Meanwhile small, unorganised groups of Bulgarian young men proclaim themselves as skinheads in imitation of similar movements in the West. However, attempts to create a popular movement based on racist ideology and directed against the Gypsies amount to little more than media sensations and have no real potential to develop further in Bulgaria.

The Gypsy policy of state institutions and local authorities since 1989 can be summed up as abdication of real political action and, instead, simulation of action, although the form this takes differs over the years. In 1991 a new constitution was adopted based on the premise of individual civil rights. The most frequently cited Gypsy-related excerpt from this constitution is Art. 6, para. 2, which does not allow for 'any limitations of the rights or privileges based on ... ethnic belonging ...'. Consequently, when the problems of minorities are raised, the typical reply is that according to the constitution all Bulgarian citizens are equal, and no special privileges can be granted. However, in November 1992 the Constitutional Court gave an interpretation of the above text, which allowed for 'certain socially justified privileges' for 'groups of citizens' in 'an unfavourable social situation'. This at least served as a basis for encouraging a more positive state policy towards Gypsies, although mostly confined to improving their socio-economic position.

Executive government's method for dealing with this policy area remained almost unaltered in spite of changes of government and cabinet personnel. There were discussions about creating a special body, attached to the Council of Ministers and including representatives of various ministries, which would introduce a co-ordinated state policy for Gypsies. Finally, in 1994 an Inter-departmental Council on Ethnic Problems was organised.

In 1995, with the coming to power of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), this council was transformed into the Inter-administrative Council on Social and Demographic Issues but it remained completely inactive.

At the start of 1997 the new government of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) established the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers but this council was very inactive and this lethargic attitude of the state forced Roma organisations to take the lead themselves. The Human Rights Project initiated and organised the preparation by Roma leaders and independent experts of a Framework Programme – *For Equal Participation of Roma in the Public Life of Bulgaria* (Programme 1998). This Programme turned its back on cheap speculation about specific social and economic problems and instead paid particular attention to their major cause, the unequal position of the Gypsies in Bulgarian society. It outlined the main course of action the state had to follow in order to implement its Gypsy policy: establishment of a state body to fight discrimination, desegregation of 'Gypsy schools', legalisation of existing Gypsy neighbourhoods, provision of access to the national media and so on.

The Framework Programme was discussed in detail, supplemented and approved by all Roma organisations in the country at a National Round Table in October 1998 and was proposed to the government as a basis for its future work. In response to this initiative of the Roma organisations and in view of the then approaching local elections, the government adopted the slogan of integration of the Gypsies through their participation in local authorities. The government, with the collaboration of a well-known international NGO, also tried to impose its own programme, prepared by Spanish experts from the Council of Europe. However, the Roma leaders rejected the government proposal and after long negotiations an agreement was signed between the Roma organisations and the Council of Ministers on 7 April 1999. The Council of Ministers discussed and approved the Programme proposed by the Roma in a special decision at its session of 22 April 1999. To this day, however, the Bulgarian government has limited itself to appointing a single Gypsy, Yosif Nunev, to the National Council as an expert and to making a number of statements in the media and at international forums, without implementing any specific activities for the accomplishment of the programme goals.

The Gypsy policy of the state can be characterised as a lack of any real desire to change the existing situation. On occasions when, for one reason or another, the Bulgarian state needs to have a position on specific problems related to Gypsies (such as participation in certain programmes of European institutions), it still prefers to simulate activity instead of making use of the existing potential for change. This situation is not affected by differences between political parties because the attitude of the state towards the Gypsy issue has been predetermined by underlying stereotypes and prejudice

towards Gypsies in Bulgarian society.

Since 1989 a new and important factor influencing the development of the Gypsy community has been the rapidly developing non-governmental sector (Marushiakova and Popov 1997b: 37–56). In Central and Eastern Europe non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were created after the regime changes in 1989 and exist thanks solely to the financial support of programmes and foundations abroad. The number and activities of NGOs in Bulgaria expanded rapidly and these now form one of the few successful business sectors, following a Western, mostly US-inspired, pattern of development. The non-governmental sector firmly believes that the problems of the Gypsies are the main priority of their sponsors and that is why they include them among their own priorities. According to the Association of Bulgarian Foundations and Societies, there were 1,200 organisations aiming to work with minorities (mainly Gypsies) in 1997.

However, one should not be misled by such statistics for neither Bulgarian society as a whole nor the Gypsies themselves have a clear idea about the number of people and organisations 'taking care' of them. Most of these organisations deliberately remain only semi-legal. They are registered officially and report their 'activity' to sponsors from abroad, while rigorously avoiding any mention of their activities in Bulgaria. The numerous larger-scale projects on civic education, conflict resolution, 'open education', sexual literacy, family planning, protection of Gypsy women from violence and others belong to this type of activity. They usually take the guise of endless courses and seminars, which have led to the formation of a small and self-closed stratum of paid 'professionals in the NGO sector' and a small circle of Gypsies, who have become professional 'seminar attenders'. The activities of NGOs have often been used by the state to distance itself from the problems of Gypsies and transfer its own responsibilities to the non-governmental sector, for example, in the case of homeless children. It is extremely dangerous that the non-governmental sector frequently not only does not urge the state to perform its functions, but on the contrary has provided it with an excuse to ignore the problem.

We can see with increasing clarity a merging of NGO models of working with those of state institutions. Indeed, these are often partners in various European programmes and their interests coincide to the detriment of the Gypsies. A single example is enough. In the spring of 1998 a seminar was held in the town of Lom, where representatives of government, local authorities and the organisers (a well-known international NGO) proclaimed their success in establishing a model of collaboration for solving the social and economic problems of Gypsies. Only few weeks later Roma from this same town, who had not receive their social support payments for over a year, tried to set fire to themselves in public (PER 1998).

In other cases there is a direct clash of interest between the NGO sector

and the Gypsy community, as in the case of segregated Gypsy schools. Several NGOs are carrying out a number of educational projects involving Gypsy children which would no longer be required if these schools cease to exist.

Nevertheless, in spite of the emergence of a parasitic 'Gypsy industry', the non-governmental sector and especially the Romani NGOs have still made contributions to positive change in Bulgarian society.

Roma organisations and their political activity

After 1989 Gypsies were free to proclaim their identity and organise their own unions and consequently organisations gradually began to emerge, influenced by the surrounding social and political environment. However, as elsewhere, whatever potential existed for formal political mobilisation has as yet remained largely unfulfilled, although it must be acknowledged that in reality these possibilities were severely limited.

Between 1989 and 1997 many new political organisations were formed to represent Gypsies, all of them claiming to be 'national' and to have clear-cut political aims. These were invariably closely associated with their leaders: Confederacy of Roma in Bulgaria (Peter Georgiev), United Romani Union (Vassil Chaprazov), Democratic Union Roma (Manush Romanov), Federation of the United Romani Communities (Vassil Danev), Romani Union for Social Democracy (Milcho Russinov), Independent Democratic Union Roma (Assen Hristov), Club 'Union' (Toma Tomov), Roma Public Council '*Kupate*' (Agreement), established in 1997 as a satellite organisation of the UDF and led by Zlatko Mladenov and Simeon Blagoev. These so-called 'national' organisations consisted mainly of their own leaders and an insignificant number of activists; they had almost no organisational activities and no effective political lobby. Unsurprisingly, their popularity among the wider Gypsy population in Bulgaria remains insignificant. Fuller details of Gypsy political mobilisation are given in the appendix.

Disappointment in the 'political road to development' gave a powerful impetus to the growth of the Gypsy NGO sector and led to its rapid expansion. More than 150 Gypsy NGOs have already been registered and are now functioning. They carry out their projects with financial assistance from various sources, often with salaries that are many times higher than the average Bulgarian income. The few attempts to unite and co-ordinate the activities of all Gypsy NGOs have been unsuccessful and the optimistically named Association of Roma NGOs, established by Peter Kostov and headed by Toma Tomov, has turned out to be an NGO without the participation of any members from already existing organisations.

A much more promising approach has been that of the Human Rights Project, a Bulgarian Gypsy human rights organisation established in 1992,

which co-operates actively with other organisations in Bulgaria and abroad. It has ceased to be a typical human rights organisation and is really working for the development of the Gypsy community instead of merely servicing what might be termed the 'Gypsy industry'. In the process of preparing and approving the Framework Programme, the Human Rights Project succeeded in achieving an informal association of Gypsy organisations, which in spite of their many differences have united behind common principles and positions that they have had to defend before the Bulgarian government.

Here we should question the extent to which these attempts at formal political mobilisation have affected the life of most Gypsies in Bulgaria. We can say with certainty that at present they involve only a small part of the Gypsy population in certain areas. Large parts of the community remain virtually unaffected by Gypsy politics, for example the *Rudara*, most Turkish-speaking Gypsies and many traditional Gypsy groups, etc.

The involvement of Kardarasha in politics

Initially the *Kardarasha*, too, kept their distance from these post-Communist mobilisation processes. *Kardarasha* Gypsies maintain strong ethnic and cultural traditions including internal self-government (the *Meshariava* or Gypsy court) and strong endogamy. Yet, although 'traditional' in some respects, *Kardarasha* are also innovative and are always seeking new economical niches and, compared with other Gypsies, their community is relatively well off. It was therefore an entirely rational idea for them to turn to these new social activities, since they saw in them a way of partially legalising their businesses and also involving them with public procurement, the most profitable type of business at present.

Consequently they soon sent their representatives, for example Vassil Danev, Toma Tomov, Zlatko Mladenov and Alexander Philipov, to participate in the new system of Gypsy NGOs, and to the Rroma Soros Foundation and the Roma Program of the Open Society Fund. They also pursued a parallel strategy with the help of the media, presenting a more familiar style of leadership by 'Gypsy kings' (such as Kiril Rashkov '*Tzar* Kiro'). Meanwhile, they experimented with a transformation of the traditional form of internal self-government by creating a 'Supreme *Meshare*' headed by Zlatko Mladenov.

The *Kardarasha* community recently became the basis for a new stage in the development of the Gypsy community through the activities of the Euro-Roma organisation. This was inspired by Tsvetelin Kanchev, an ethnic Bulgarian who has been adopted into the *Kardarasha* community. Kanchev is a rich businessman and has been a member of parliament since the autumn of 1997, originally aligned to the Bulgarian Business Block but later as a member of the Bulgarian Euro-Left. After lengthy preparation, the founding congress of the National Euro-Roma Association was held in Sofia in

December 1998 and was attended by 3,386 delegates from 205 municipal organisations from every region of the country. This was the largest public event of its type to be staged in Bulgaria and, equally importantly, it was the first time in modern Gypsy history when subdivisions co-operated as independent participants in the political life of the country. The establishment of this new Euro-Roma organisation was proof that Gypsies did not need the shelter of others' political umbrellas but could rely on their own power. The current constitutional ban on ethnically-based parties was no real limitation since it had proved ineffective and could be ignored with ease. Euro-Roma was very active in 1999 in preparation for the coming local elections as were other Gypsy political parties.[7]

Such intensive mobilisation by Gypsy parties alarmed the government, which retaliated in the summer of 1999 – just before the local elections – by striking against the most popular organisation, Euro-Roma, by depriving Kanchev of his parliamentary immunity. He was detained on criminal charges, although public opinion did not regard these as genuine. This government action was reminiscent of the similar case of Kiril Rashkov, who was detained for several months on speculative charges which were not proven. However, the arrest of Kanchev was a severe setback for Gypsy hopes of achieving economic power and political influence through their own political representation.

The gap left by the attack on Euro-Roma was partially filled by the Free Bulgaria party, whose election campaign relied on the principle of people supporting those in their own ethnic group, with Roma voting for Roma and *milliets* voting for *milliets*.[8] The results of these local elections, in October 1999, were a great shock for Bulgarian society. The Free Bulgaria party received 52,300 votes and eighty-one municipal councillors, which ranked it among the top ten political groupings. Euro-Roma itself had fifty-six municipal councillors but over the whole country Gypsy parties, separately or in various local coalitions, received about 2 per cent of the votes and about 200 municipal councillors. In addition, they gained key positions in a number of municipal councils, as well as the office of mayor in several of the larger villages. In this way the Gypsies and their parties have become an important factor in Bulgaria's modern political progress and only the future will reveal how these processes will develop.[9]

The influence of the evangelical movement

A different path in the search for community development is demonstrated by the growth in influence of various Evangelical churches among the Bulgarian Gypsies. The first Evangelical churches were built in Gypsy neighbourhoods between the two World Wars and although limited in numbers, their work never stopped. After 1989, they were joined by a number of new churches,

whose activity was directed mainly toward Gypsies. These Gypsy church communities gradually became differentiated on an ethnic basis: they elected their own pastors, began to build their own churches in Gypsy neighbourhoods and are now only formally related to the broader church organisations. Recently many Bulgarian Gypsies have been attracted to these 'new churches', while a wholly independent Roma Church is currently being registered.[10]

Conversion to a different religion is often seen as a method for seeking an altered place in society, a way of adjusting to new conditions and as a means of escaping from the crisis in one's own ethnic community. In Balkan conditions, where ethnic and religious identities are often confused, this could lead to changes in ethnic affiliation.

Conclusion

It is not easy to summarise the development trends among Bulgarian Gypsies. Current approaches have proved disappointing and bitter experience has convinced Gypsies that these do not have the potential to ensure any real improvement for their community. The paternalistic approach of the 'benevolent white brothers', all too evident in the activities of political parties, the state and NGO sector, has placed Gypsies in the position of being forever taught and protected. Yet, at the same time, it has destroyed the adaptive mechanisms of the Gypsy community and in the long run will hinder their potential for natural development. This is demonstrated by the fact that whenever there has been an opportunity for independent Gypsy action or initiatives, such as Euro-Roma or the Framework Programme, the state and NGOs – with a few exceptions – have used lame excuses to unite and unanimously oppose the Gypsies (or refuse to support them). The political parties (and the governments that are based on them) need the Gypsies as voters, while the NGOs (including those based outside Bulgaria) need a community with problems in order to protect, care for and defend its rights, etc. However, these bodies do not see themselves as benefiting from the development of a community able to solve (or try to solve) its problems independently.

It has become clear that international institutions cannot solve the problems of Gypsies in individual countries, and the many examples of the 'Gypsy industry' sector at various levels (both state and NGO) only serve to confirm this belief. Moreover, the models proposed by the West are often inadequate or lead to results that are the opposite of those intended (as in Bosnia and Kosovo). Meanwhile, the abolition of restrictions on international contacts by Gypsies shows that all-Gypsy unity is still only an ideal which will take a long time to achieve and will become successful only if it is based on what Gypsies have achieved in each particular country.

In conclusion it is not easy to say whether the Bulgarian Gypsies will

have the strength to take their destiny into their own hands, either through NGOs or through political movements, but it is evident that this goal is clearly perceived and despite inevitable disappointments is hardly likely to be forgotten.

Appendix
Attempts at Gypsy political mobilisation in Bulgaria – 1989–99

At a founding conference on 17 March 1990 the decision was taken to establish a Democratic Union Roma, whose chair became Manush Romanov. The initiative for this union came from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) but as a consequence of acute political conflict during what was called a round table meeting, Manush Romanov steered this union towards the rival UDF party. Shortly before the elections in the spring of 1990 and prompted by the BSP, alternative local Gypsy organisations began to emerge all over the country, such as the Movement for the Social and Cultural Development of the Gypsies, Organisation for the Social Development of Gypsies – Ascent, Cultural and Educational Society of Gypsies, Unity, Club of Gypsy Intellectuals and others. The majority of these associations had an uncertain status and most of them ceased to function after the parliamentary elections.

For a time the activities of these organisations were limited, even though there were three Gypsy members in Parliament: Manush Romanov (UDF), Sabi Golemanov and Peter Alexandrov (BSP). Only in the summer of 1991, when political conflicts in the country were on the rise and new elections were approaching, did these Gypsy organisations reactivate themselves. Manush Romanov failed completely in his attempt to transform the Democratic Union Roma into a political power. In the autumn of 1991 he left the UDF, where he had the undefined status of 'observer', because he was ignored in the pre-election coalition.

In early 1992 there was a move towards unity among the existing Gypsy organisations, irrespective of their political views. After a number of preliminary meetings the United Roma Union was created, with Vassil Chaprazov as its chair, at what was called the Uniting Conference in Sofia on 17 October 1992. However, supporters of the confederate model refused to join the new leadership and declared that they would not dissolve their own organisations. At the same time other Gypsy leaders boycotted the conference (Marushiakova 1992: 51–62, Popov 1992: 41–50).

At the start of 1993 the leaders of some Gypsy organisations proposed a new union whose individual organisations would preserve their independence and on 8 May 1993 this new organisation was officially named the Confederacy of the Roma in Bulgaria, led by Peter Georgiev. The goal of the Confederacy was to work for the unity and ethnic emancipation of Gypsies in

Bulgaria and to 'enter the corridors of power' as a self-declared 'non-political organisation'.

These Gypsy organisations were relatively inactive until the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 1994. After long pre-election negotiations, some Gypsy leaders were included in the electoral lists of various political parties and unions. However, their low placing in these lists made their chance of being elected almost negligible. The pre-election agreement of Georgi Parushev with the Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the party of the Turkish minority, is especially interesting. It gave Gypsies the right to participate in the elections as MRF members in more than one third of the electoral districts (where there was no Turkish population and the MFR received no votes). However, this did not result in a Gypsy presence in Bulgarian political life after the elections. Only one Gypsy was elected as a member of the new parliament – Peter Georgiev from the BSP. Somewhat later, in 1996, Dimitar Dimitrov from Vidin also entered Parliament as a member of the BSP and a substituting deputy.

The political crisis in late 1996 and early 1997, as well as the elections in the spring of 1997 galvanised the Gypsy organisations into action once more. They had several meetings in order to prepare a joint policy and action plan and joint candidates for parliament, but no agreement was reached. Although some Gypsy leaders were included in the electoral lists of some parties, these were once more in places where the chance of being elected was almost non-existent. Others ran for parliament as 'independent' candidates, but on the whole Gypsies did not obtain any political representation in these elections. Subsequently, Assen Hristov (substituting deputy) became a member of parliament as a representative of the UDF in 1998.

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Notes

1 The term 'Gypsies' is preferred to Roma because of the variety of Romani groupings, not all of whom consider themselves to be Roma.

2 For example, among *Dasikane* Roma such groups are: *Kalaydzhia* (tinsmiths); *Burgudzhia* (gimlet-makers), *Koshnicharia* (basket-makers), *Dzhambazia* (cattle dealers) etc.; among *Xoraxane* Roma there are: *Muzikantia* (musicians), *Fichiria, Futadzhia, Koshnicharia* (basket-makers), *Dzhambazia* (cattle dealers), *Zvancharia* (bell-makers), etc.

3 Such as *Zlataria* (*Grastaria, Nitsuleshi, Serbian Gypsies*), *Dodolania, Tasmanaria, Zhaplesh, Layashil Laynesh, Nyamtsuria* (German or Austrian Gypsies), etc.

4 The Thracean *Kalaydzhia* are divided into two subgroups – the *Wlaxorya* and *Salatsi*.

5 Such as *Monteni, Thracieni, Zagoriani*, etc.

6 This process took place in several stages, beginning in 1962 (after the special Decision A101 of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the BCP, whose purpose was 'to curb the negative tendencies ... among Bulgarian Muslims, Gypsies and Tartars to identify with the Turks ... and to enhance patriotic education') and ending in 1984-5.

7 These included the Democratic Congress Party (led by Ramadan Rashid), the Union for Democratic Development (Ivan Kirov), the Bulgarian Party 'Future' (led by Russi Golemanov), the 'Free Bulgaria' Party (led by Angel Rashkov, the son of '*Tzar* Kiro') and the small *Rudara* Party 'Political Party Democratic Movement *Rodoliubie*' (recently created and led by Ivan Kostov – a member of *Rudara* community).

8 A *milliet* (millet) was a faith community (religion), which broadly denoted a people ('nation') and was used as the basis for community self-regulation during the Ottoman Empire.

9 The chapter includes the period up to the end of 2000.

10 This church is led by Boris Borisov from the town of Lom.