

**International Centre for Minority Studies  
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**MINORITIES' RIGHTS AND PROTECTION -  
THE SITUATION IN THE ROMA  
COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA**

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## **MINORITIES' RIGHTS AND PROTECTION - THE SITUATION IN THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA**

### *1. Survey and evaluation of the state of the minorities in 2000*

Demographic state of the minorities. Modern demographic characteristics are of particular significance for the adequate policy concerning the rights and the integration of the minorities. Unfortunately, the data from the last census in 1992 were inaccurate in their section about the minorities, for objective reasons: for the first time people were given the right to free ethnic and religious self-identification and they declared what they felt and what they preferred as their identity.

The new census, which will start in March 2001, offers to every individual the right to choose whether he or she wishes to make his/her ethnic identification public. The new census will probably also fail to give to statistics precise data about the number of the minority communities in Bulgaria.

According to the independent experts on the study of the minorities, the socio-economic situation in the country and generally the delicate geopolitical situation in the Balkans require a precise demographic picture of Bulgaria, especially concerning the numbers and the regional distribution of the minority communities. Anyway, the experts are obliged to conduct their own parallel counting and statistics, to deal with exact data, in order to be able to analyze adequately the ethnic and religious situation in the country.

In 2000, specialists - based on assessments made by sociologists, on analysis of the data from the social services and the employment services, as well as according to some analytical data provided by the researchers on the different ethnic groups - adhered to the following numerical parameters concerning the three largest ethnic and religious groups in the country:

- Roma – between 600,000 and 750,000;
- Turks – around 650,000;
- Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) - around 250,000.

The stronger attitudes in favour of emigration from Bulgaria became an essential element of the demographic tendencies, including with regard to the minority groups. Of particular interest in this respect are two new phenomena whose manifestations began to take shape three or four years ago and acquired clear outlines in 2000.

First: Some of the most conservative Bulgarians in this respect and most attached to their native places, the Pomaks from the Western Rhodope Mountains, began to leave Bulgaria. This is a population that has always returned to their homes until now, even after its traditional seasonal migrations to seek work far from their native places. This traditional model has been disturbed and the Pomaks are leaving not only their native villages, but the country as well. The Pomaks have several main directions in their search for a new economic and life alternative: Portugal, Spain, Turkey and the USA. In Turkey they are seeking ways of finding shelter, trying to find temporary or permanent work with the help of their relatives or fellow-villagers, who - as a rule - settle in the form of compact groups in the new places, in concrete settlements in the European and Asian part of Turkey.

The emigration to the United States is usually through active and persistent participation in the green card lottery. The participation in the lottery, the collective organization and the active

assistance by the village community and the clans to people who wish to leave Bulgaria, naturally with the involvement of fellow-villagers and relatives who are already in the USA, became a new phenomenon for the Western Rhodope region, a tendency towards new community attitudes, which should become the object of a specialized empirical and analytical study. This is a tendency that should evoke concern among the rulers in Bulgaria. I shall cite the example of just one municipality consisting of 14 villages with a total population of 19,000, of which 280 people are already with green cards in the USA. The respondents from this municipality reported that 15,000 people intend to participate in the lottery this year, i.e., all of them, together with the young people and the children. Naturally, this is not possible, but it is definitely an indicator of the changed attitudes of the population of this municipality. In 2000, between 1,200 and 2,000 people were absent from the villages of that municipality practically the whole year. These are men who are trying to extend their contracts, hoping that they would be able to take their families with them in Portugal or Spain. The absent men create extremely serious problems for the women, who have to cope with life alone, as well as with the survival of their children and small farms.<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that in the past 3-4 years we have been witnessing the destabilization of a centuries-old system of values, which until now had withstood all kinds of vagaries of fate. The State and the state institutions are unaware of that phenomenon, because they are not interested, and in the second place because they have abdicated from that region of Bulgaria altogether.

Second: The categorical attitudes among the Roma communities are that they have to leave Bulgaria, in order to seek an economic and social alternative in Europe. Of course, many of them will never materialize these intentions on account of poverty and the objective impossibility to turn such plans for their life into a fact. According to our forecasts, approximately 20-30% of the Roma people in Bulgaria, who have some financial potential, education, qualification and prospects for job realization, are already waiting eagerly for the visa restrictions to be abolished, so that they can leave the country. Incidentally, this is a part of a process that has been developing gradually over the past ten years, which we have termed provisionally as "renomadization" of the Bulgarian Roma population. In other words, just the opposite to what happened with the Pomaks occurred with the Roma population: they returned - through shock and coercion - to a traditional value, namely the free movement for subsistence. This renomadization started with their brutal and irrational social and economic marginalization, especially among the rural Roma communities, pursued for ten years by all governments. It is manifested in the movement of a totally unknown number of Roma families from the rural to the urban areas and back for the sake of survival, in their unrestrained movement across borders in recent years for "shady" business, and already in 2000-2001, in anticipation of the opportunity, officially and with regular passports, to return to their traditional disregard for borders and to move in the freely chosen direction of their choice: France, Belgium, UK, Germany, etc.

The answer to the question "Why?" and "What are the reasons?" is brief: lack of knowledge and no responsible strategy and policy for the development of the mountainous and border regions, for preferential attracting of investments and for creating new jobs, as well as lack of a special policy for qualification and employment of the Roma population in the cities and for the urgent allocation of land to the Roma communities in the villages.

In 2000, too, the general tendency towards lower birth rates in the country continued to include the representatives of the minorities as well. The average coefficient for the country concerning live births per 1,000 population was 7.9 in 1998. This coefficient is higher for the Roma communities, but is nevertheless lower than the traditional value for them: around 10.0 per

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<sup>1</sup> The data were collected by the "urgent anthropology" method by IMIR in January 2001.

1,000. With an average infant mortality rate of children below 1 year ranging between 14 and 16 per 1,000 live births, among some Roma communities this parameter ranges between 20 and 33. The birth rates and the mortality among the Turks are close to the average values for the country. It is interesting to know that the birth rate among the Pomaks is higher than that in the Roma communities, being also naturally higher than the average figures for the country: around 12.6 for 1996. Of course, this cultural and religious community also demonstrates a tendency towards a decline in birth rates (for the sake of comparison, this parameter was 17.6 for the Satovcha municipality in 1994).<sup>2</sup>

Socio-economic status of the minorities. The different educational and qualificational characteristics of the Bulgarians, Turks, Pomaks and Roma define also the different unemployment levels, which further complicates the real poverty, on the account of the greater number of children.

If the average unemployment in the country varies between 18% and 26%, the unemployment among the Roma communities exceeds 80%. It could be claimed that experts have observed unemployment exceeding 95% in some settlements or neighbourhoods with a compact Roma population.<sup>3</sup>

The unemployment rates among the Turks and the Pomaks are about 35-38% on the average for 1999 and 2000. However, unemployment actually exceeds 55% in some municipalities in the Eastern and Western Rhodope regions.<sup>4</sup>

The general economic crisis in the country has its specific manifestations in the regions with a compact Turkish and Pomak population. For the past ten years these regions have focused the negative impacts and tensions caused by the high structural unemployment, due to the closing down of the enterprises with obsolete technology in the mining industry and machine building. Tobacco growing was a traditional means of subsistence for the Turks and the Pomaks, and they were badly hit economically by the abolishing of the state subsidies, by the liberalization of the prices and by the shrinking of the markets. Many of the Turks and Pomaks – about 70%, and a small portion of the Bulgarians – around 15% - live in regions where the economic infrastructure is less developed compared to the average level for the country.

Living conditions and health of the minorities. Most of the Roma neighbourhoods in the towns and villages have the typical appearance of ghettos. Overpopulation in these ghettos is a norm. In about 17% of the slums there is no furniture, not even beds. It is a common practice for one room to be shared by a two-digit number of inhabitants, often from four generations. The places for waste disposal in the slums breed insects, rats and various diseases. There is no running cold water for at least 52% of the Roma households in the neighbourhoods with a compact Roma population; 74% have no toilets and 89% have no running hot water.<sup>5</sup>

\*Source: Studies from the cycle "Poverty and Ethnicity" 1998-2000, IMIR archives.

The members of the Roma communities in Bulgaria marry exclusively inside the group, most often in accordance to their belonging to the isolated subgroup. The incidence of intra-group marriages is higher than 90%. These endogamous marriages result in genetic diseases that are typical for the Roma communities, most widespread among them being about 12 types, which I

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<sup>2</sup> The data on the birth rates and mortality are from the studies of the Economy-2000 Club.

<sup>3</sup> The data on the unemployment are for 1999 and are according to a study conducted by IMIR.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Ivaylo Turnev, Regional and group-specific health problems of the Roma population in Bulgaria, studies in the 1996-1999 period.

do not intend to list here on account of the specific medical terminology, but the only way to break into this closed circle is by investing in disease prevention and health culture.

The Roma families need the specialized care of nurses on account of the high level of invalidity, as well as of sanitary inspectors and other auxiliary medical personnel, who are familiar with the communities and can assist them to raise their health culture and disease prevention. According to the official statistics, the invalidity rate in the Roma communities is 32.3 per 1,000, whereas according to the study of IMIR from 1995, the invalids among the Roma community above the age of 16 years are 81.0 per 1,000 population, i.e. twice higher than the average level for the country.

The Roma population is characterized by low health culture and they are, on the whole, the most threatened community in terms of health.

The Turks and the Pomaks have a cult of their home. They do everything in their power to build houses with two and even three stories, so that there would be room for the families of their sons. In recent years, their notion about their homes underwent a modernization and they added to the building plans of their new houses a unit consisting of a bathroom, toilet and boiler for hot water. Of course, in every village, as well as in the cities, there is a sufficient number of poor dwellings of Turks and Pomaks, with no conveniences and no compliance with the necessary sanitary norms.

The invalidity coefficients among the Turks and the Pomaks are close to those of the Bulgarians and to the average values for the country, even lower in some municipalities. The mortality rates per 1,000 population are twice lower than in the rest of the country. Naturally, these coefficients are different throughout the country's territory.

The problems of the health status of the Turks and Pomaks stem from the poverty and poor infrastructure in the places where they live. The health care services in the Rhodope Mountains, which exist practically in every village, are not equipped and they sometimes lack even the most elementary medicines and bandages. Many of the health care services need ambulances. The roads are bad and they are virtually inaccessible in winter. The patients are usually treated in their homes, medical or specialized care being sought only after the patient's condition deteriorates.

The health care reform is far from being implemented among the minority communities, in the Roma ghettos, and in the remote mountainous and border regions.

The education of the minorities. The problems of the minorities in the sphere of education are numerous, but I shall discuss only the most important among them: the mother tongue issue. Practically all Turks – 98% - speak their native Turkish language in their homes. In only 1/3 of the families Bulgarian is spoken as well, so that the children grow up to be bilingual even in pre-school age, having a sufficient proficiency in the official language of the country and having no problems with their adaptation in school.

The children of the Pomaks are best prepared, because - although they are a clearly differentiated and relatively closed cultural and religious community - Bulgarian is the language spoken in their homes as mother tongue, and for 98% of the families this is the only language they are using in their home and out of it.

The most intricate problem concerns the language used by the Roma families in Bulgaria. Many of them are bilingual, some are even trilingual, but at a very elementary level of language proficiency. Bulgarian is not spoken at all in the homes of 46% of the Roma population in Bulgaria, 34% speak Turkish and 67% speak Romani. These percentages clearly suggest the problems related to the pre-school adaptation of the Roma children, the difficulties they encounter with integration in the elementary school, and the subsequent obstacles for obtaining a better education and for acquiring good professional qualification.<sup>6</sup>

The curricula in the Bulgarian schools fail to take into account the fact that Bulgarian is not the mother tongue for most of the Turkish and Roma children. Due to the great poverty of the population as a whole, only a very small percentage of these children go to kindergarten or pre-school nurseries, where the children from the minorities would have the opportunity to master Bulgarian at an acceptable level and to be prepared for school. At present, less than 10% of the Roma children aged 3-5 years have been to kindergartens or nursery schools.

The percentages speak eloquently in themselves about the "equal opportunities" of the children from the minorities to receive education: between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in the general education schools the Roma children account for about 14-15% of all schoolchildren, who numbered 763,862 for the country as a whole in 1998. Between 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade this percentage drops to 9% and after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade the Roma children are only 0.9%.<sup>7</sup>

State institutions and social sciences on the problems related to the integration of the minorities. State institutions demonstrate an astounding lack of interest in the possibility to acquire real, accurate and scientifically substantiated data and analyses about the state of the minority communities, about attitudes within the communities, as well as about the dynamic changes in the stereotypes - negative and positive - of the majority to the different minority groups, and vice versa. There is a typical paradox about Bulgaria: NGOs and independent experts find donor resources and conduct research in various fields of the social sciences, they can prepare empirical and analytical studies on the minorities, which evoke the respect of the international academic community and which give an opportunity for correct decision-making at government level, but these research results are not used by the government and by the state authorities. It is even less likely for interested state and local institutions to allocate portions of their budgets to order fundamental and long-term studies related to the problems of the minorities, or even express interdisciplinary analyses, which would allow them to act more precisely in the implementation of the respective practices of management and government. Briefly, politicians and rulers, due to partisan considerations and simplicity of thinking, ignore and underestimate the potential of the social sciences and therefore continue to multiply the same errors with respect to the integration of the minorities and the urgently needed measures in the social and regional-economic sphere, in health care, education, culture, etc.

The approach of the local authorities is relatively more responsible. The mayors and the municipal councilors in the regions with a mixed population in terms of its ethnic composition are closer to the concerns of their population, and more specifically to the problems of the minorities, and they readily accept the cooperation and assistance offered by non-governmental organizations, with a view to solving the problems of the minority communities and of co-existence.

The absence of good contacts and partnership between the academic community, the independent experts, and NGOs, on the one hand, and on the other - the state institutions and

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<sup>6</sup> Ethnic and cultural situation in Bulgaria 1992, 1994, IMIR archives.

<sup>7</sup> Ilona Tomova, The Gypsies during the period of transition, 1995, IMIR.

politicians, results in unsatisfactory solving of the problems of the minorities and to meaningless and ineffective measures on the part of the government. Due to the lack of support for the efforts of NGOs, the projects which they target to the Roma, Turkish, Pomak and the other minority and religious communities, have the common major shortcoming of being fragmentary, totally lacking a comprehensive approach and the possibility to conduct "integrated interventions".

Another major deficiency is that fundamental and long-term theoretical strategies for the development of society as a whole and of the minorities in particular, are fatally lagging behind for lack of financing and support, and that this delay will be too late to compensate in the future. No comprehensive database has been created for the problems and needs of the minorities, which would focus the research information collected both by the government institutions and by the teams of non-government experts. Such a unified database would allow to outline clearly and accurately the needs of each of the minority communities in the country, and would allow to develop more effective programmes and strategies for solving the problems and for integration of the minorities.

Even in the rare cases when good will exists on the part of some state institutions for cooperation on a certain problem, there is the objective obstacle that the specialists from the non-governmental organizations and the officials in the ministries are working with a discrepancy in time and space of the levels of red tape, the schedules and tempo of organization, the philosophy with respect to the terms of implementation of projects and activities, as well as with respect to the responsibilities both to the target groups and to the donor resources.

## *2. Survey and evaluation of the information, criticism and recommendations in the EC Regular Report, and evaluation of the information for 2000*

The annual EC Progress Report for Bulgaria for 2000 has devoted four pages in its item 1.2. on human rights and protection of the minorities, of which a page and a half are devoted specifically to the rights of the minorities and to their protection. In this sense, it is obviously clear that the problems of the minorities are presented most generally, without details and highlights. The general frameworks of the findings and of the problems raised are directed above all to the opportunities for legitimate and adequate representation of the minorities in the public and political life. Justified remarks have been addressed to the government that the framework programme for the integration of the Roma population is being implemented slowly. Along general lines, another justified remark is that the administrative and financial capacity - and I would also add the intellectual potential - of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Matters are insufficient and that their activities are ineffective.

In the sphere of education, a certain progress is noticed and a certain improvement in the study of Turkish as a mother tongue in the Bulgarian schools, overlooking however the much more shocking shortcomings in the educational system with respect to the learning of the Bulgarian language, as well as the total absence of specialized teaching aids and curricula, which take into account the needs of the different social and cultural groups, omitting the fact of the absolute poverty in the schools where predominantly Roma children are studying, as well as the schools in the mountainous and border regions, which lack elementary teaching aids, let alone modern equipment and computers.

The Report mentions the positive fact that the state TV broadcasts show news bulletins in Turkish, but there is no criticism of the circumstance that this is actually translation of the Bulgarian news into Turkish and that this is in fact a false gesture of loyalty to the Framework Convention for Protection of the Rights of the Minorities. Because the minorities, and the society

as a whole need varied programmes and broadcasts in order to popularize their culture at different levels, higher and lower, to make their traditions and customs better known, and - of course - news coverage of events related to their problems. The Report also omits the alarming tendency that the State refuses to allocate funds for supporting the newspapers of the minorities, as well as their magazines and radio broadcasts. These are not and cannot be commercial editions and they have to be subsidized.

Briefly, the problems of the integration of the minorities and their equality concern the entire Bulgarian society, they are a problem of Bulgaria and of the Bulgarian governments. This is why, it is only too natural for the independent experts from the non-governmental organizations, monitoring that sector and working with it, to be far more critical and exhaustive, compared to the European observers.

### *3. Information about new developments in the sector*

On 24 January 2001, the Prime Minister met with 26 representatives of the Roma organizations in order to listen to the most pressing needs and high priority demands of the Roma community, and to give new pre-election promises. The Prime Minister promised some very good and extremely needed measures to be taken for alleviating the social crisis among the Roma population, but it is yet to be seen whether these promises will be fulfilled. I personally am pessimistic, because the problem of giving land to the Roma communities has been on the government's agenda for nearly eight years and the decision-makers have not shown understanding. For several years NGOs have conducted, with their own resources and in some places with the support of the local authorities, such type of assistance to the Roma communities, by giving them land and seed money so they can start cultivating that land until the first harvest. The experiments proved to be a complete success, but state institutions to this day have shown no wish to multiply the positive experience of providing land to those who have no means of subsistence.

As regards the continuing persistent wish of the Roma leaders their children to learn their mother tongue from the earliest age possible, this means that they fail to see the real problem for their own children: the fact that they do not know Bulgarian. The children should learn Bulgarian at an acceptable level in pre-school age and only in the later educational phases they should start studying Romani, so that they would have guaranteed conditions for equal chances to acquire education and for integration in society.

### *4. Proposals for attaining progress with respect to the situation and the rights of the minorities in Bulgaria*

Above all, if there is to be progress in the process of integration of the minorities, as well as in the real resolving of their problems, it is necessary for us to know them well and to be clearly aware of their attitudes and intentions for the future. For example, it would be good to know what the attitudes of the ethnic groups in Bulgaria to state control and state support are, and to what extent it would be possible to rely on their initiative and self-organization. This is important both for the state institutions and for the NGOs working with and for the minorities. According to the studies conducted by IMIR, the Roma tend to manifest the highest reliance on the state among the ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The widespread expectations among the representatives of this ethnic community are that the State should take care of them. More than 2/3 of that community share the extreme form of that convictions, namely that the State only has the obligation to provide everything they need for a normal life. Among the other ethnic groups it is interesting to note that the Pomaks tend to trust least the State and the institutions, relying



always on themselves, on their immediate and extended families, and then on their fellow-villagers. Clear liberal attitudes are perceived among the Bulgarians, who tend to be characterized by a traditional individualism in principle.

Ethnic group	Reliance on the state	Tendency to the individual	No response
Bulgarians	37.5	52.1	7.3
Turks	49.6	44.2	5.7
Pomaks	33.2	44.2	15.3
Roma	71.8	20.2	5.8

\*Source: The ethnic and cultural situation in Bulgaria, 1992, 1994-6 IMIR

These data are in themselves basic for the approach to the different ethnic communities in developing economic, social and educational programmes.

This is only an example that for the drafting and implementation of constructive programmes for solving the problems of the minorities and for their integration, it is necessary first and foremost to invest in interdisciplinary social studies, and then the practical approach and the management decisions would be accompanied by least errors.

As regards the role of the State and the role of the NGOs, for ten years the activities related to the restoration of the rights of the minorities, the preservation and development of their traditional culture, equitable education, equality in the social and economic sphere, etc., are organized exclusively with the potential and resources of the NGOs, or by the state institutions—not through conviction, but under the pressure of the civic associations and of the European institutions. It is not necessary in the concrete case to list positive practices that would result in overcoming the criticism in the annual report of the European Commission. It would be sufficient to study the experience of the civil organizations specialized in working with and for the minorities, as well as the experience of the regional organizations of the ethnic groups, benefiting from their experience, both positive and negative, so that the programmes that have proven their qualities could be supported and developed by the state institutions.

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