All Ethnic Problems Solved?
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Bulgaria is often described as a model of ethnic tolerance in the Balkans. The authorities proudly claim that they have successfully solved all ethnic-related problems, and that, except for the forced expulsion of Turks during the last years of Communism, the country has never had any problems with its ethnic model.

Yet, many international human rights organizations, think tanks, policy organizations and other bodies, such as the US State Department, the European Union or the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, would judge Bulgaria to be discriminatory against minorities, namely the Roma population.

Is this a paradox? It should be noted that all Bulgarian governments since the collapse of Communism has led positive policy and has showed good will towards the Roma community; nowadays Roma have hundreds (384 according to the latest data) of associations, non-governmental organizations, and also every party in Parliament has deputies of Roma origin.

On the other hand, however, there have been many reports of police brutality against Roma, discrimination in terms of finding a job, and yes, almost all Roma live in extremely poor conditions—their districts usually lacking even electricity and water supplies, and their houses fall below all standards for normal living.

Illiteracy and unemployment

Unemployment is unusually high among Roma, exceeding a shocking 90 percent in some areas. Moreover, only one percent of them have higher education, 36 percent have reached only primary education, 40 percent have secondary education, and 16 percent of them are totally illiterate, according to official data dating from 1998. More recent surveys indicate that 80 percent of the Gypsies in Bulgaria have only primary education or are illiterate.

At the same time, secondary education is free for all Bulgarian citizens, no matter of their ethnic origin, and while other minorities living in the country, such as Turks, Jews and Armenians, are well integrated in society, this is not the case with the Roma.

Huge amounts of money are allocated for their integration into society from various programs and organizations—national, international, governmental and private—and while these projects surely achieve some relatively positive results, Roma still fail to live well with the rest of society, and often claim to be subject to discrimination.

This confusion is visible for all persons and bodies concerned with Roma welfare. The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, for example, declared in March 2000 that the Bulgarian government's program for equal integration of Roma into society should serve as a model for other European nations, but in the same document, the Commission criticized the bad attitude against the Roma.

Finding out who is responsible for this situation is not easy. It is not easy even to determine how many people of Roma origin are living in Bulgaria as the last census was conducted in 1992, and many non-Roma Bulgarians have fled the country since. But Roma demographic growth is, according to some surveys, at least three times higher than the average in the country.

Eight years ago, about 350,000 Bulgarians people identified themselves to be of Roma origin, and the overall populace of the country was roughly 8,5 millions. It is considered that even then the real
number of Gypsies was much higher but remained unknown, due to the unwillingness of some to disclose their ethnic origin.

Nowadays, the estimated number of Roma in Bulgaria is considered to be somewhere between 600,000 and one million. Due to various factors, it is almost impossible to determine the exact percentage of the Roma populace such as, the fact that about half a million among the most educated and intelligent people have left the country since 1989, the negative demographic growth in Bulgaria, and the economic hardships Bulgarians continue to face.

The majority in 2050

Roma leaders seem to understand this fact very well. During a recent conference of the National Association of Romani Foundations and Organizations, Roma leaders predicted that in the year 2050 the representatives of the current ethnic minorities will constitute a majority in Bulgaria.

Obviously, Bulgaria has a very serious problem with its Roma minority. The international image of the country will continue to be tainted by the striking misery of the Gypsies and by the reports of discrimination, unequal opportunity and intolerance against them, unless the situation visibly improves. And unlike other many other social problems that Bulgaria faces, resolving this does not depend that much on the government. Society, with all its ethnic groups, needs to change in order to diminish the huge gaps that set aside the Roma from the rest of the people.

One thing that is clear is the current situation within a large group equaling as much as ten percent of the whole population, living in misery separately from the others, should be resolved as early as possible. But who needs to change first, Bulgarians or Roma? And how should this change be encouraged, when it is often stated that Roma people have a specific culture that should be preserved, and when, at the other end, Bulgarians don't really care about Roma welfare, often thinking of them as of second-hand people.

Many Roma men work as non-skilled construction workers in the summer. But many young students and all kinds of unemployed people do the same as well. And while students earn pocket money and then go on holiday at the Black Sea coast, and while other unemployed people save money to feed their families, Roma people just continue to beg in the streets of all major Bulgarian towns—waiting for you in front of churches or museums, restaurants and bars, shops or administrative buildings, and a polite denial for giving them money sometimes does not work.

Here is the major problem in accepting Roma—if begging is an integral part of someone's culture, should it be tolerated? If 90 percent of the Roma are jobless simply because they would earn more money by begging and committing small crimes, then how will the tax-paying workers help them, if at all?

"I hate them"

"I hate them, I hate Gypsies," a friend of mine told me this week. To my question why she hates them, here is how she replied: "Because they are lazy, noisy, illiterate, dirty and stinking, because they are thieves and criminals."

According to a recent opinion poll conducted among non-Roma Bulgarians, less then one percent of them can imagine marrying a person of Roma origin, and less then ten percent of them would welcome Gypsy neighbors next door.
My friend has the right to hate somebody or not, but as President Petar Stoyanov recently said, "the road to the EU passes through solving Roma's problems." Indeed, my friend's hatred is purely aesthetical and moral, but unfortunately people who do not live in Bulgaria would describe it as ethnic hatred, racial discrimination and intolerance. In the best case, this attitude will be considered an unmerited prejudice.

If this negative attitude is really due to prejudice, the solving of this problem would not be easy either. As interesting proof to this statement could serve the number of widely used Bulgarian idioms, such as "you lie like an old Gypsy" or "you snore like a Gypsy's horse." Even the popcorns at the bottom of the microwave packet that have failed to burst are called "Gypsies." And Bulgarians have the notion of "Gypsy's work" which comes to say that a certain thing is not well done.

Well, it will not surprise anybody in Bulgaria that Roma people have a similar notion—they say "Bulgarian work" and the phrase has a negative context, according to an interview of Nikolay Kirilov, the leader of the Roma organization in the town of Lom, by a weekly national newspaper. What exactly Gypsies mean by saying this, however, I could not find out, although I asked some of them in the streets.

"Sis, give few money," a woman begging in a subway with her newly born child on her lap would simply answer. I had asked her about the problems of her community.

Matilda Nahabedian, 27 November 2000
photos by author