



The Roma of Bulgaria: A Pariah Minority

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Introduction

The Roma remain to date the greatest pariah of ethnic groups in all of Eastern Europe. In the last decade or so, East European Roma have been attracting a lot of international attention as increasingly large numbers of them are abandoning their native countries to seek political asylum in the West, especially Western Europe. Probably as an indirect result of their highly publicized and unwelcome mass migration westward, many studies have appeared that try to explain the desperate predicament of East European Roma and their troubled relationship with the multi-ethnic societies of the region. The treatment of these Roma is emerging as one of the most important human rights issues in post-Cold War Europe, which cannot help but have a significant bearing on the planned expansion of the European Union (EU). An escalating mass exodus of the East European Roma (who comprise more than three-fourths of Europe's estimated 8 million Roma population) into the West European members of the expanding Union could easily turn into a political catastrophe by igniting an explosion of popular support for extreme nationalist politicians, parties and movements. It is the intention of this article to deal with the socio-economic and political status of the Roma community in post-Communist Bulgaria. It specifically discusses the Bulgarian Roma's tenuous position as an oppressed national minority and the numerous problems and obstacles they face in adapting to the difficult circumstances of their transitional homeland.

Bulgarian commentators, as well as the various Bulgarian governments of the post-Communist period, have been proudly touting their country's tranquil majority-minority relations as an 'ethnic model' to be emulated by other plural countries in Eastern Europe — and perhaps even beyond. Under the so-called 'Bulgarian ethnic model',

Each of the numerous ethnic and religious communities in Bulgaria is able to maintain its own integrity, which is accepted by the others as necessarily different. The positive element in accepting ethnic and religious diversity stems from the centuries-long experience of cohabitation and is linked to the generally stable informal relations among the different communities. 'Otherness' is accepted calmly and without prejudice, as something known, as a familiar strangeness, which blends into everyday experiences and is therefore not perceived as threatening.... The most distinct characteristic of the Bulgarian ethnic model is thus democratism — it is generated and controlled from below, by people living in the contact zones. It is this democratism that has, at least so far, rendered the model impervious to the threatening interference of xenophobic rabble-rousers and fanatical ideologues (Zhelyazkova 2001).

Any existing ethnic frictions, especially between majority Slavs and minority Turks, are blamed on the legacy of the former Communist regime's repressive policies against ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria (see Petkova 2000; Dimitrov 2000; Nedeva 1993; Eminov 1997, among others). But, as several Bulgarian-based writers have pointed out (see Nahabedian 2000; Petrova 2002; Petrova 2003), post-Communist Bulgaria's continuing discriminatory and oppressive treatment of the marginalized Roma minority¹ raises serious questions about whether its 'ethnic model' can stand up to close scrutiny.

¹ 'Minority' is understood here to mean an ethnically, racially, religiously, culturally, or linguistically distinct group living within the context of a larger society. As the term is used in the social sciences, a minority is usually (but not necessarily always) subordinate to the dominant majority within such a plural society, thus making both numerical inferiority and political subordinacy the main defining characteristics of a minority group (see Vassilev 2001, footnote 1, 38).



While it is true that many positive steps have been taken to protect the Roma community's ethnic and cultural identity and its right to self-organization and representation, Roma in post-Communist Bulgaria are the ones who are suffering the most from public intolerance and the government's less-than-benign neglect. Roma remain at the very bottom of Bulgarian society and their sub-proletarian socioeconomic status has in fact worsened significantly compared to the pre-transition past. Even though they are not victims of open, forcible segregation and ghettoization like the Roma in Slovakia (see Farnam 2003) or in the Czech Republic (see European Roma Rights Center 1999), nor is their physical survival threatened by ethnic cleansing and genocidal violence at the hands of a vengeful majority, as in Albanian-dominated Kosovo, the desperate situation of Bulgarian Roma is a cause for both political and humanitarian concern.² In spite of the much heralded 'Bulgarian ethnic model,' their fundamental human rights are still threatened. They are constantly ill-treated and harassed by the authorities and the majority population alike. The country's deep socioeconomic crisis has made them a convenient scapegoat for all the real and perceived ills of the post-Communist transition. Even as Bulgarian Roma keep growing in number — both in absolute figures and relative to the Slavic majority — the prospect for their integration into the mainstream remains remote and uncertain. In fact, they feel that they are being increasingly forced to the margins of society, discriminated against in nearly all walks of life,³ as well as detained and incarcerated at a disproportionately high rate. Many disturbing cases of racist violence and abuse targeting the Roma of Bulgaria have been recorded in recent years. As we shall see below, Bulgarian Roma have been denied even the right to unobstructed political representation and equal participation in the new, democratic order of their country.

Today Bulgarian Roma have reached a critical point in their struggle for political recognition and group survival. Facing unemployment, abject poverty, discrimination, and exclusion from the mainstream life of the country, many Roma have chosen either a life of crime or emigration. Quite a few of them have ended up as habitual offenders in prolonged periods of incarceration — in Bulgarian and foreign prisons (see European Roma Rights Center 1997). From a democratic point of view, the treatment of the most marginalized and oppressed segments of the population (the poor, the indigenous, illegal immigrants, other aliens, prisoners, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, etc.) is most important in measuring the extent and depth of the democratization of society. General public intolerance, discrimination, harassment, abuse and violence against such disadvantaged groups are an unmistakable symptom of a pseudo-democracy — sometimes referred to as 'Potemkin democracy' in the context of post-Communist politics (see King 2001)—that is, a transitional country which is democratized and liberalized only partly and superficially, and mostly to satisfy the vanity and complacency of Western patrons and donors.⁴ Thus, the tragic plight of the marginalized Roma minority is both a result and a symbol of the incomplete and shallow democratization of post-Communist Bulgaria, a candidate country slated soon to become a European Union (EU) member.

² Rifat Rifat, head of the Roma Youth Center in Dobrich (a city in northeastern Bulgaria with a large Roma population), complains: 'We, Roma, have been abandoned and left at the mercy of fate — until disaster strikes again. People remember us only when election time comes' (*Standart*, November 8, 2003).

³ According to Manush Romanov, the Democratic Romany Union leader and ex-member of parliament, Roma 'are discriminated against in health, education and the job market, and are lucky if they are hired at a starvation wage to sweep the streets. In factories they do the dirtiest jobs requiring no qualifications. At present the Romanies are the most deeply affected by the economic crisis because most have no reserves or savings to fall back on, and they are the first to be made redundant, which has happened on a large scale' (interview with Manush Romanov in Ward 1992, 31).

⁴ About the declining relevance and value of using 'transitologist' concepts and terminology to analyze the post-Communist transitions and realities, see Thomas Carothers 2002.

Demographics and History

According to the March 1, 2001 official census, ethnic Bulgarians (including Bulgarian Muslims known as Pomaks) make up about 84% of the total population of 7.9 million. After the Muslim Turks, Roma are the second largest ethnic minority in Bulgaria, numbering 370,908 and comprising 4.7% of the population (see Table 1). But such official statistics can be rather inaccurate and misleading. Largely due to the stigma attached to being a Roma,⁵ the Roma often tend to identify themselves either as Turks or as Bulgarians. Because of their divided self-identification, the exact number of Bulgaria's Roma is largely unknown. Some writers put that number at 550,000-600,000, others at 700,000-800,000 or even 1 million (see Ilchev and Perry 1993; Marushiakova and Popov 1995).⁶ More than half of them are Muslim and the rest are Orthodox Christian. The division between self-identified and non-self-identified Roma is usually based on religion and formal education: those who are Orthodox Christians and have received higher education think of themselves as ethnic Bulgarians and speak Bulgarian; those who are Muslims maintain that they are ethnic Turks and speak Turkish (see Troxel 1992).

Table 1: Bulgaria's ethnic groups (based on the results of the March 1, 2001 official census)

Ethnicity	Population	Percent
Bulgarians	6,655,210	83.9
Turks	746,664	9.4
Roma	370,908	4.7
Others	156,119	2.0
Total	7,928,901	100.0

Source: Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute (2001).

Unlike the other ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, the Roma are dispersed evenly throughout the country. More than half of those Bulgarian citizens who identify themselves as Roma by ethnicity and language live in urban centers like the capital city of Sofia, Sliven, Plovdiv, Burgas, Stara Zagora, Pazardjik, Montana, Lom and Dobrich, where they are concentrated in ghettoized neighborhoods (*mahalas*), such as *Fakulteta* (Sofia), *Nadejda* (Sliven), *Stolipinovo* and *Sheker Mahala* (Plovdiv), *Komluka* and *Meden Rudnik* (Burgas), which often lack running water, sewage systems, and electricity (see Ilchev and Perry 1993, 39). A typical example is Sofia's largest Roma district *Fakulteta*, a slum in which about 35,000 Roma live in squalor, penury, and hunger. Most of the rest live in poor isolated Romani villages scattered all over the territory of the country. Given their high birth rate — especially compared to the declining fertility rate of ethnic Bulgarians — the presence of a growing, impoverished and largely unassimilated Roma minority is greeted with feelings of unease and real concern among majority Slavs. Bulgaria's law enforcement officials have on occasion even voiced fears of possible Los Angeles-type race riots by the Roma lumpen-proletariat —like the civil disturbances that have periodically exploded in Stolipinovo, a suburb of Plovdiv (Bulgaria's second largest city) and the largest Roma ghetto in the Balkans.

⁵ The Bulgarian word for Roma is *tsigani*, which is usually seen as pejorative and disdainful when used by non-Roma. Since the early 1990s the more politically correct word *romi* has also been used to refer to the Bulgarian Roma. *Roma* is the Romani word for 'people' in the plural masculine gender, with a strong connotation of 'men' or 'husbands' (Petrova 2003, 112).

⁶ The Democratic Romany Union, for one, claims that the actual number of Bulgarian Roma is between 800,000 and 1 million. In either case, such estimates — if true — would make Bulgaria's Roma minority one of the largest Roma communities in the world (Romania with between 2 and 3 million Roma is believed to have the largest Roma population in the world, followed by Spain and Hungary).



Bulgarian Roma were primarily nomadic or semi-sedentary until 1958, when the Communist regime launched a campaign of forced assimilation, restricting traditional Roma religious and cultural customs and practices, while compelling the Roma population to abandon its transient lifestyle and settle either in collective agricultural farms in the countryside or in drab, overcrowded housing projects in the cities (see Konstantinova 1992). In 1974, many of them were coerced into giving up their Roma names and adopt instead Christian-Slavic names — in one of the repeated name-changing campaigns that targeted Roma, Turks, and Pomaks in Bulgaria (see Perry 1991; Simonov 1990; Eminov 1997; Dimitrov 2000). As part of its policy of forcible assimilation aimed at dissolving the Roma into the larger Slavic community, the Communist government also banned the public use of Romany, the Indo-Iranian language spoken by most Bulgarian Roma (which is written in the Bulgarian Cyrillic alphabet, but lacks written literature).

The Roma have been historically Bulgaria's most disadvantaged and maligned ethnic minority. Not only have the Bulgarian Roma been the target of periodic official name-changing drives, but the majority of them have been forced to live in extremely poor, unhygienic, and substandard conditions, isolated from the mainstream of Bulgarian society by discriminatory government policies and by the long-standing Roma tradition of preserving ethnic customs and mores at all costs. The Communist regime tried to help the Roma community, but while social-welfare, employment and other government programs did improve the lot of the Roma, very often public assistance meant the construction of new, separate housing and schools which further divided the Roma from ethnic Bulgarians— instead of integrating them into the larger society. Another unfortunate consequence of such imposed isolation was that in a Communist society plagued by severe labor shortages and providing plentiful minimum-wage jobs, many young Roma dropped out of school to work as unskilled manual laborers, resulting in significantly higher illiteracy rates and lower educational and cultural standards among the Roma community compared to ethnic Bulgarians. Affirmative-action policies also created a small, favored ethnic elite of public officials, artists, musicians, dancers, teachers, scholars, and white-collar professionals forming the numerically small Roma intelligentsia, which was politically loyal to the Communist regime but has been active in defending Roma political and cultural rights in the post-Communist era (with the exception of those Roma in high places who are reluctant even to admit being of Roma origin).

Political Organization and Representation

The earliest post-Communist organization of Bulgarian Roma, the Democratic Romany Union which claimed to represent over 50,000 Roma throughout Bulgaria, was formed soon after the fall of Communist leader Todor Zhivkov on 10 November 1989. It gained political recognition when its leader, prominent theater director Manush Romanov, was elected to the constituent Grand National Assembly on the party list of the anti-Communist Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) in the first democratic election of June 10-17, 1990. After the Democratic Romany Union was prevented by the newly established Constitutional Court from participation in elections, its influence sharply declined. The Democratic Romany Union and other early Roma organizations were denied the status of electoral parties on the grounds that this would violate the constitutional prohibition on parties with a racial, ethnic, or religious basis. While providing — at least on paper— extensive legal protection for individual rights and liberties, the new, post-Communist Constitution of 12 July 1991 avoids explicit acknowledgement of minority rights and prohibits the electoral participation of parties based on ethnic or religious allegiance.⁷

⁷ According to Article 11 (4) of the Republic of Bulgaria's 1991 Constitution: 'There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial, or religious lines, nor parties that seek the violent usurpation of state power.' Foreign critics have charged that the constitutional ban on ethnic and religious minority parties is both discriminatory and at variance with the new Constitution itself, which requires conformity with the universally recognized norms of international law. But domestic proponents of constitutional Article 11 (4) maintain that its intention is not so

This constitutional prohibition, as well as the controversial decision of the Constitutional Court upholding it, made Bulgaria the only country in Eastern Europe in which the Roma could not participate in national elections through their own political parties (Barany 1994, 247)—a fact which prompted the Council of Europe to criticize the new Bulgarian Constitution for practically banning ethnic parties, such as the Democratic Romany Union.

Because Bulgarian courts have effectively ignored the controversial constitutional limitation and allowed their registration (Petrova 2003, 156), several Roma organizations were able to compete for the first time in the local elections of late 1999, including Free Bulgaria, which had been established in 1997 by Tzar Kiro, the self-proclaimed 'monarch' of all Bulgarian Roma. In that election, Free Bulgaria elected three Roma mayors and over sixty Roma municipal counselors. In the general election of June 17, 2001, Evroroma, another organization representing Bulgarian Roma, fielded candidates of its own on the party lists of the Coalition Movement for Rights and Freedoms, an electoral alliance including also the Liberal Union and the Turkish-dominated Movement for Rights and Freedoms. The Coalition Movement for Rights and Freedoms won 7.45% of the popular vote and 21 parliamentary seats or 8.75% of all 240 seats in the National Assembly, the elective Bulgarian legislature.⁸ But none of the Coalition's 21 representatives in the Assembly is a Roma. The Coalition of the National Union Tzar Kiro also participated in the June 17, 2001 contest. Based on Free Bulgaria, now led by Tzar Kiro's son, Prince Angel Rashkov, the Coalition garnered 27,636 ballots or about 0.6% of the popular vote, thus failing to breach the 4% electoral threshold of representation. Of the two Roma representatives who serve in the current National Assembly, one, Toma Tomov, was elected as a result of the electoral coalition of his party, the Citizens' Union Roma (or simply Roma, as it is better known), with the ex-Communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The other, Alexander Filipov, was elected from the party lists of the ruling National Movement for Simeon II (NMSII), which won an impressive victory in the 2001 parliamentary election. The Roma population is thus clearly underrepresented: in a country with a strong proportional-representation (PR) electoral system, in which Roma are officially 4.7% of the total population (see Table 1), there should have been at least eleven Roma representatives in the national legislature.

Several of the 23 presently registered Roma political formations also participated in the most recent local (municipal) elections by presenting their own candidates—alone or in electoral coalitions with non-Roma parties. In the local elections of October 26, 2003, at least 156 municipal counselors (over 100 of them Roma)⁹ were elected with the support of Roma-dominated organizations such as Evroroma, Roma, Free Bulgaria, and Roma Drum (*Drom Dromendar*, October 31, 2003). However, the Roma inhabitants of many municipalities have remained unrepresented by Roma office-holders, mainly because the local authorities have failed to facilitate the inclusion of Roma representatives in local elective bodies. Each post-Communist election has also seen the open and unbridled buying of the Roma vote by competing non-Roma politicians offering cash handouts,

much to ban political parties organized along ethnic or religious lines, as to promote the development of a more stabilizing, interest-oriented party system in Bulgaria and avoid the danger of ethnic separatism and religious conflict. Many Slavic Bulgarians fear that ethnic-based and religious parties would threaten the integrity and security of their 'nation-state.'

⁸ According to a conference report issued by the US-based Project of Ethnic Relations (PER), 'Romani politicians remain strangers in the world of Bulgarian politics, and the Romani MPs within the mainstream parties play very minor roles. They are obliged to tow the party line and actually have very little to do with the elaboration of policy. They have little or no communication with their colleagues from the parliament, and they do not participate actively in the bargaining processes that are the hallmark of Bulgarian politics. This situation leads to disappointment among Romani MPs as well as their constituents, so they are rarely elected a second time.... The situation of the Roma on the municipal councils...is quite similar' (Project on Ethnic Relations 2002, 22).

⁹ Out of a total of 5,281 elected municipal counselors.



food, jobs, and promises of other post-election services and benefits to Roma voters.¹⁰ Otherwise, the non-Roma parties have generally ignored Roma issues both in their platforms and in their electoral campaigns. Even though some believe that there is no link between political representation and socioeconomic status (which would make modern democratic politics largely meaningless), there is the danger that without full and equal representation providing open channels of communication and dialogue with the central and local authorities, the Roma community in Bulgaria will remain without an effective voice in the halls of government and may descend even further into marginalization, isolation, immiseration, and despair.

By contrast, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) representing Bulgaria's largest ethnic and religious minority, the Muslim Turks, was permitted to participate in all post-Communist elections and the Constitutional Court ruled in February 1992 that the constitutional ban on ethnic and religious parties should not be enforced against it. The reason for such preferential treatment is that Roma are usually perceived as being at the lowest rung of society and thus beneath ethnic Turks in Bulgaria's unofficial hierarchy of minorities. Among all ethnic minorities in Bulgaria only the Roma are seen by the Slavic majority as almost subhuman and certainly unworthy of participation in politics.¹¹ Another probable reason is that—unlike the more numerous and politically better-organized ethnic Turks—Bulgarian Roma are without any real bargaining leverage, nor do they have a powerful foreign protector like neighboring Turkey to defend their rights and interests.¹²

Continuing Mistreatment of the Roma

The fall of Communism following the November 10, 1989 ouster of Zhivkov has promoted greater respect for the political and civil rights of the Roma, who can now express their ethnic self-identity by forming cultural and human rights associations (like the United Roma Federation or the Confederation of Roma that were formed in October 1992 and May 1993, respectively), publishing newspapers and magazines dealing with their own problems (like the Roma magazine *O Roma* or the monthly newspaper *Drom Dromendar*), broadcasting their own radio and TV programs, and studying the Romany language without any obstruction or interference from the government. For example, Romany is now being taught in some primary schools attended by Roma students¹³—a departure from the more restrictive educational policies of the Communist regime. The new democratic authorities in Bulgaria have acknowledged the minority status of Roma and have encouraged greater public tolerance towards them and respect for their choice of ethnic and religious identification. In 1995, the government, led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), set up a consultative group on Roma issues to ensure the protection of the constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms of Bulgarian Roma. In April 1999, the UDF-led government of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov went further by

¹⁰ Vasil Danev, leader of the Federation of United Roma Communities (FORO), has complained that the ruling National Movement for Simeon II (NMSII) had promised FORO members in the city of Dobrich (see footnote 2) 20,000 pairs of new shoes if they vote for the NMSII candidates in the October 26, 2003 municipal elections. According to Danev, after the NMSII lost the local election, however, the promised new shoes were never delivered (*Standart*, November 8, 2003).

¹¹ See 'Za kogo romite sa nejelani v politikata?' [Who Does Not Want to See Roma in Politics?] *Drom Dromendar*, no. 14, 2003.

¹² Turkey has taken a most active interest in the treatment of the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, especially since the 1984-1985 name-changing campaign. Ankara's vocal denunciations of Bulgaria's assimilationist policies created a severe crisis in Bulgarian-Turkish relations in the late 1980s. Bulgarian nationalists have often accused Turkey of aiming to impose the so-called 'Cyprus scenario' in Bulgaria— that is, using military force to divide the country between majority Bulgarians and minority Turks.

¹³ The poor quality of schools in ghettoized Roma neighborhoods has prompted the initiation of the Roma Participation Program of the Open Society Institute with the direct involvement of the Roma organization Drom in Vidin, Sofia, Sliven, Kiustendil and several other Bulgarian municipalities. Under this project, Roma students ride daily on Drom-rented buses from their shantytowns to mixed regular schools with better facilities and higher quality of education (see *Roma Rights* 4, 2000; Project on Ethnic Relations 2002, 25).

approving a Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society. Drafted with the direct involvement of representatives from the Roma community, the Framework Program formulated several steps to be taken by the Bulgarian authorities in alleviating the disadvantages of Roma children in education: (1) desegregation of Romani schools; (2) ending the widespread practice of sending Romani children to be educated in remedial schools for the mentally disabled; (3) eliminating manifestations of racism in the classroom; (4) ensuring the opportunity to study the Romany language at school; (5) increasing the number of Roma with university or college education; (6) setting up adult education programs for the Roma population (*Roma Rights 2000*).

The National Assembly passed a new law in September 2003 outlawing all forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, age, education, property, sexual orientation, etc. The Assembly also created an anti-discrimination commission, an independent executive agency responsible only to the national legislature, to deal with all cases of discrimination in Bulgaria, impose sanctions, including monetary fines, initiate court proceedings, as well as help the victims of discrimination. But Bulgarian Roma generally remain skeptical as to whether such affirmative-action and anti-discrimination programs and documents would be truly implemented (see Petrov 2002). For example, the 'Declaration of Stolipinovo on the Romani Issue,' a document issued by the Coalition of Citizens Organizations of Stolipinovo on November 8, 2002, denies that any real progress has been made in tackling the Roma problems in post-Communist Bulgaria (see Declaration 2002).

Without a doubt, the Roma of Bulgaria remain an oppressed class-ethnic understratum, suffering from widespread joblessness, misery, prejudice, and persecution. Their rights continue to be ignored and infringed upon by the central and local authorities. The economic collapse and social crisis of the post-Communist period have hit the Roma particularly hard, further depressing their already low living standards. While the Communist regime used to provide Roma with jobs and generous financial assistance, many of these jobs disappeared in the crisis-ridden 1990s, as did most welfare payments. Not only are Bulgaria's Roma the poorest of the poor in a country with the lowest standard of living in Europe, but many of them now live in deep poverty similar to that found in sub-Saharan Africa, as a result of which social despair and criminality, including juvenile delinquency, violent crime and recidivism, have dramatically increased among them. This has resulted in numerous violent confrontations with law enforcement officers and the Slavic majority. Like Roma in many other parts of the former East bloc, the Bulgarian Roma face segregation and discrimination in employment, housing, education, health care, criminal justice, and the military. Many of them have fallen victim to racially motivated violence, both by the police and by racist elements among the majority population. There have been a large number of cases of police raids on Roma neighborhoods as well as cases in which Roma died in police custody as a result of severe beatings and torture. Even after signing the Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society, the Bulgarian government was still denying the charges of police brutality made by Amnesty International and other international human rights organizations, and was trying to cover up outrageous cases like that of Tzvetelin Perov, a 16-year-old Roma who had been set on fire and badly burned while in police custody. At the same time the law enforcement authorities and the courts have failed to respond to numerous incidents in which racist mobs of ethnic Bulgarians, especially skinhead youths and private security guards, assaulted Roma over the years, killing dozens of them and injuring numerous others. Many of these allegations have been substantiated by Bulgarian and international human rights groups, which was one of the reasons that forced the BSP-led cabinet of Socialist Prime Minister Zhan Videnov to fire the national police chief in 1995.



While various human rights reports assert that civil and political liberties in post-Communist Bulgaria are more or less respected, they confirm the evidence of severe human rights abuses by the police against Roma suspects. The office of the country's own Chief Prosecutor reported in 1998 that incidents involving police brutality and the illegal torture of Roma detainees were rampant. Law enforcement officers routinely harass, arrest and physically abuse Roma street children. Roma prostitutes, including many minors, have been detained, mistreated, or raped in police detention. These disturbing findings have been confirmed by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee in its non-governmental national reports on human development describing human rights violations in Bulgaria. Reports issued by the Council of Europe's Commission Against Racism and Intolerance have charged that Bulgaria lacks institutions and policies to deal with cases of racism and intolerance, and that the serious mistreatment of Bulgarian Roma is particularly worrying (BTA, June 17, 1998). The 2002 world report of the Human Rights Watch also highlights the plight of Bulgarian Roma as victims of racially-based persecution, violence and abuse (see Human Rights Watch 2002).

Public opinion surveys show that Roma respondents believe far more than their Slavic Bulgarian or ethnic Turkish counterparts that the Bulgarian government does not take sufficient care of their rights (see Table 2). As a result, members of the Roma community have gone on hunger strikes and other public protests to draw attention to their tragic fate as victims of discrimination, social ostracism, police violence, and widespread racist abuse. Their protests are also directed against the refusal of Bulgarian employers to hire Roma as well as against media coverage that ignores their numerous problems and focuses instead on law-breaking activities in the Roma community, thus contributing to the spread of ignorance, prejudice, racial stereotyping, and ethnic scapegoating among the Slavic majority. In June 1998, a Bulgarian Roma even set himself on fire as a gesture of social despondency and hopelessness about the future. Official statistics dealing with the lot of the Roma are rarely published, but according to the Democratic Romany Union, 92% of working-age Roma living in Bulgarian cities were unemployed in 1998; they also constituted 90% of all prison inmates (BTA, May 30, 1998). This has been confirmed by social workers who estimate that 90-95% of Bulgarian Roma are chronically unemployed due to their illiteracy and lack of training as well as anti-Roma prejudice and Bulgaria's severe economic slump (Petrov 2002).

Table 2: Belief that the Bulgarian government is attentive to human rights (in percentages) Question: In your opinion, are the authorities concerned about your rights?

	Bulgarians	Turks	Roma
Yes	12	15	8
To a certain degree	40	42	19
No	49	43	74

Source: Bulgaria's National Center for Public Opinion Polls, 'A Study of Ethnic Groups and Political Power' (1997).

About 70% of Roma children have either never attended school or dropped out of the overcrowded 'Gypsy schools' in the early grades. As a result, over 80% of Bulgarian Roma have only the most rudimentary education or are practically illiterate (Nahabedian 2000). According to data collected by two Bulgarian NGOs, about 8% of all Roma adults are illiterate, 46% have completed only primary education, 8% have finished secondary education, and less than 1% have university degrees. This is a direct result of the deliberate segregation and exclusion of Roma children from ethnic Bulgarian schools and classes due to 'deep-rooted and widespread negative attitudes toward Roma in the majority society' (Tanaka 2000).

The result is an army of uneducated, jobless, destitute, and alienated Roma, who are out of work, out of school and all but out of hope — as any possible paths of upward social mobility are totally blocked for them. Lacking any social prospects or aspirations for the future and disconnected from society's mainstream, they pose a severe long-term threat to Bulgaria's social well-being, national unity, and ethnic peace. Facing mass unemployment, poverty, discrimination, lack of education, and exclusion from the mainstream life of the country, many Roma have chosen legal or illegal emigration, especially to the countries of Central and Western Europe. Others have drifted into the devastating clutches of begging, petty theft, money hustling, currency violations, contraband, drug peddling, prostitution, and other illegal activities. Many young Roma mothers have chosen either to sell their babies illegally at home or abroad, or have given them up for legal adoption by foreign adoptive parents. Roma children are increasingly used in burglaries, narcotics distribution, and child prostitution rings. Some of the crime-infested Roma neighborhoods such as Stolipinovo near Plovdiv are practically off limits even to the police.

Probably as a result of the severe hardships and deprivations experienced by nearly all Bulgarians, intolerant, racist, and even violence-prone opinions about the Roma have spread since the collapse of the Communist regime. Public opinion polls show that the level of anti-Roma sentiments among the majority population is very high, contributing to a climate of intolerance, discrimination, and organized mob violence against the Roma community. When asked to rate various ethnic minorities in their own country, Bulgarian respondents are distinctly more negative in their ratings of Roma compared to the other ethnic groups in Bulgaria. For instance, only the Roma come out with an unfavorable rating of more than 50%, while all other ethnic minorities, including Muslim Turks and Pomaks, receive more than a 50% favorable rating (see Table 3). Such survey findings come as no surprise, as Slavic Bulgarians tend openly to stereotype the Roma (whom they euphemistically call the 'swarthy ones' even in the mainstream media) as being unwashed, dirty, illiterate, ignorant, lazy, thieving, violent, and sexually promiscuous. For example, while the authorities attribute 25-30% of all recorded crimes to Roma perpetrators, ordinary Bulgarians frequently claim that Roma are responsible for nearly all crimes committed in Bulgaria. Even well-educated Bulgarians openly blame the post-Communist explosion in violent crime on the Roma. They also accuse Roma men of preying upon both Roma and non-Roma women, including Bulgarian women and women from other East European countries, as well as engaging in pimping, forced prostitution, and sex slavery both at home and abroad.¹⁴ Such accusations are, however, motivated by anti-Roma prejudice and racism, since most of these crimes are in fact committed by highly organized and vicious criminal gangs composed predominantly of ethnic Bulgarians, known as the Bulgarian Mafia.

¹⁴ Trafficking in women for the purpose of forced prostitution is a serious problem for a country, in which thousands of young women and girls as young as 13 years of age are kidnapped and smuggled abroad each year. This is a very lucrative business for Bulgarian criminal gangs and for local police officers collaborating with the sex traffickers. Victims, many under the age of 18, range from those who are duped into believing that they would find decent jobs abroad to those who expect to work as prostitutes but are unprepared for the violence, abuse and exploitation to which they are subjected. Contributing to the very large number of trafficking victims is the high jobless rate among young women, as well as the difficulty of obtaining work permits for Western Europe, which has given rise to numerous bogus job-search agencies that promise to expedite the process of obtaining a visa. Even before they are smuggled out of Bulgaria, the young women — including many transiting from other post-Communist countries — are locked up, raped, and subjected to severe physical and psychological pressure to make them more pliant. Once they arrive in Western Europe, their passports and other identity papers are taken away, and they are forced to work as prostitutes under conditions of near slavery (see Area Studies—South Central Europe: *Bulgaria/Basic Facts*).



Table 3: Majority opinion of different ethnic minorities in Bulgaria (in percentages)
 Question: I'd like you to rate some different groups of people in Bulgaria according to how you feel about them. For each group, please tell me whether your opinion is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable or very unfavorable?

	Very favorable	Mostly favorable	Mostly unfavorable	Very unfavorable
Turks	13.7	38.4	28.4	10.9
Muslims (Pomaks)	13.6	47.6	17.4	4.3
Jews	11.1	52.1	8.3	1.3
Armenians	15.1	52.6	5.8	1.3
Roma	5.5	15.2	31.8	39.3

Source: Times-Mirror Center for the People & the Press, East/West Poll (1991).

It is mainly as a result of such racist stereotypes and myths that there is no grassroots-level dialogue or political communication between the two ethnic communities. Hate speech against the Roma only deepens the negative perceptions and images which pervade Bulgarian public opinion and make such dialogue impossible. Another troubling consequence of widespread anti-Roma prejudice, intolerance, and animosity is that many Bulgarian Roma have expressed a desire to depart for Western Europe once their country is admitted to membership in the European Union (Bulgaria's EU entry is scheduled to take place on January 1, 2007). While Western government routinely subject them to visa denials, deportations and other humiliating obstacles to their right to travel freely abroad, Roma still constitute a significant portion of the nearly 2.5 million Bulgarian citizens who have officially applied to emigrate.

Conclusion

The social integration and everyday treatment of the Roma community continue to present a daunting challenge to the post-Communist authorities in Bulgaria. In spite of the much touted 'Bulgarian ethnic model,' protection of the ethnic and cultural identity of Bulgarian Roma is still quite inadequate. They face a bleak, isolated existence, chronic poverty, social ostracism, estrangement, and non-inclusion in the majority society. Roma are discriminated against in all spheres of social life, including education, the work place, housing, criminal justice, administrative and other services, and health care. They are also over-represented among the victims of violent crime and police brutality, while being grossly underrepresented in political, social, and economic decision-making bodies. Though apparently more tolerant towards other ethnic groups in the country, Bulgarians have manifested high and increasing levels of racist hostility and violence against the Roma population.

Roma participation in Bulgarian politics through normal electoral channels was initially limited by the constitutional ban on political parties based on racial, ethnic and religious affiliation. Because Bulgaria has done very little to promote the participation of the Roma minority in public administration or facilitate the training of Roma politicians, the newly-registered Roma organizations lack the resources necessary to compete on an equal basis in elections and thus obtain adequate representation in national and local policy-making bodies. Non-Roma political parties have neither integrated Roma in their ranks, nor addressed pressing Roma problems in their platforms and electoral campaigns.

Eastern Europe has already demonstrated that importing multiparty systems, elected parliaments, free media, and other pluralistic institutions cannot establish a democratic civil society, because 'democracy grows from the bottom up and cannot be imposed from the top down,' and therefore 'civil society has to be built from the inside out' (Barber

1992: 63). It is clear that the human rights situation of the Roma minority in Bulgaria will not improve perceptibly until and unless the ruling elite and the majority population find the will to build a stronger civil society with equal rights and democratic freedoms for all Bulgarian citizens. Such an overdue step would go a long way towards correcting the existing power asymmetries and socioeconomic differentials between non-Roma and Roma. It is necessary in particular to adopt more adequate and effective anti-discrimination legislation to protect minority rights and allow the Roma and other underrepresented minorities a greater degree of political representation and participation.

If the plight of the most disadvantaged and oppressed segment of society, such as the Roma in Bulgaria, is taken as a measuring rod to gauge the success or depth of post-Communist democratization, then the Bulgarian transition to liberal democracy is still very far from being a complete success, especially in promoting greater respect for human rights, individual liberties and the rule of just law. With the vast majority of its Roma citizens feeling so deprived, discriminated against and repressed in their own country that they want desperately to migrate westward, Bulgaria's prospective entry into the EU will not solve its inter-ethnic problems and tensions but will only make them part of Western Europe's own.

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