

Commencement of Roma Civic Emancipation

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Abstract

The article offers a correction of the widespread approach in which in the studies of Romani movement for civic emancipation are examined only its international dimensions, leaving behind its origin and first stages, which occurred in individual countries. Based on the research of historical sources we will show the commencement and roots of the Romani movement. The departing point of the research presented in this article is the circumstance that Roma are not a hermetic social and cultural system. They exist in two dimensions, both as separate ethnic communities and as a part of the macro-society in which they live within the respective nation-states. Together with members of the macro-society they experienced breakdowns of old Empires and the establishment of national states. Under the conditions of historical turbulences in the period between two World Wars, Roma developed aspirations for civil emancipation, started to be civically engaged and politically institutionalised. On the basis of archival and media sources the article introduces the first manifestation of civic activities of Roma in an attempt to pursue their ethnic and community rights and their visions about their place in society and the future of their nation.

Keywords: Romani; Identity politics; Emancipation; Civic rights, Suffrage, Europe, Eastern

Introduction

In the last quarter century, the ‘Roma topic’ has become one of the hottest issues in the public space of united Europe, which accordingly reflects in the huge boom of academic studies devoted to Roma. The term ‘Roma’ is nowadays accepted as a politically correct umbrella designation of various communities, which local appellations used in different countries were commonly translated in the past in English as ‘Gypsies’.¹ Many of these communities are currently undergoing the process of nation-building accompanied by zeal to have their own common historical national master narrative, often based on national mythology and quasi-

¹ About the inadequacy and inappropriateness of this political substitution of the designations see: Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, ‘Who are Roma?’, in *Roma Culture: Myths and Realities*, ed. Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov (München: Lincom Academic Publishers, 2016), 7-34; Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies of Central Asia and Caucasus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1-7 (Chapter 1. Terminology and Methodology).

history. This process is well-known from the past history of the region where the majority of Roma live, and it is quite common and legitimate that they are repeating the patterns familiar to them. A worrying tendency is, however, that the model of shaping history according to political or ideological aims is found not only in work of the scholars from past centuries², but is, it appears, also in the academic studies today. Of course, the standard academic works on Roma movement for Civic Emancipation all mention at least briefly some early examples of Roma organisations in Eastern Europe,³ yet the newly appeared tendency in pro-Roma national discourse is palpable. In this discourse the commencement and the first stages in the Roma ('Gypsy' as was the terminology back then) movement for civil emancipation are only briefly mentioned (or are simply omitted), or are presented as 'preparing the ground for "Romani movement" of the 1970's'⁴. The 'real' beginning of the Roma movement for civil emancipation is often connected with the First World Roma Congress, held in London in 1971. One can read that at this congress the International Roma Union was established, which accepted national attributes such as usage of the common name Roma for all Gypsies around the world, the Roma flag and the Roma anthem. Even though the congress reports, which were published immediately after,⁵ do not confirm these sacred mantras of contemporary Roma nationalism (in fact, no one of them is fully true), they are uncritically reiterated not only in journalistic articles and different kinds of policy and 'expert' reports, but also in numerous academic studies, published in many different languages (listing all these publications would exceed the volume of this article). If not challenged, the observed phenomenon of adopting the Roma national discourse in academic research will underestimate the legacy of the first steps in the process of Roma civic emancipation and will exclude them from research scrutiny of scholars.

First Evidence

When talking about Roma civic emancipation, it is logical to start with the first steps in this direction. From a chronological point of view, the first documentary evidence of the appearance of a new civic awareness among Roma and of their aspiration towards civil emancipation and equal status of their nation can be found in the 19th century Balkans within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. At that time, the Balkan nations who were part of the Empire started the movement for independence with the aim to form their own national states, and Roma did not remain outside of these processes and have their own specific place in these emancipatory struggles.

² As shown e.g. by Thomas A. Acton, 'Scientific racism, popular racism and the discourse of the Gypsy Lore Society', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 7 (2016): 1187-1204.

³ Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1994); David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996); Ian Hancock, *We are the Romani people. Ame sam e Rromane džene* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002); Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, 'The Roma – a Nation without a State? Historical Background and Contemporary Tendencies', In *Nationalism Across the Globe: An Overview of the Nationalism of State-endowed and Stateless Nations*, ed. Wojciech Burszta, Tomasz Kamusella and Sebastian Wojciechowski (Poznan: School of Humanities and Journalism, 2004), 433-55; Ilona Klímová-Alexander, *The Romani Voice in World Politics: The United Nations and Non-State Actors* (Hants: Ashgate, 2005); Donald Kenrick, *The Romani World: A Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2007).

⁴ Compiled by the Editors, 'Institutionalisation and Emancipation'. In *Information Fact Sheets on Roma History*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Accessed September 18, 2017, at <http://romafacts.uni-graz.at/index.php/history/prolonged-discrimination-struggle-for-human-rights/institutionalisation-and-emancipation>.

⁵ Donald S. Kenrick, 'The World Romani Congress', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 50, no. 3 (1971): 105-108; Grattan Puxon, 'The World Romani Congress', *Race Today* 3, no. 6 (1971): 192-94; Mihailo Mladenović, 'Uz prvi svetski kongres Roma', *Ilustrovana politika* 14, no. 652 (May 4, 1971): 14-15; Slobodan Berberski, 'Rođenje', *Borba* 7, no. 84 (April 8, 1972): 3.

In 1867 in the Bulgarian newspaper *Macedonia*, printed in Istanbul, published a reader's 'Letter to the Editor' (the chief editor was Petko Rachov Slaveykov, a renowned Bulgarian enlightener, fighter for civic and national revival and for the independent Bulgarian church); the letter is signed with the pseudonym 'One Egyptian'.⁶ At that time in the Balkans the name 'Egyptians' (*Γυφτοι*, *Egyptsi*, *Gyupti*, etc. in the various Balkan languages) designated a community whose official name in Ottoman-Turkish was *Kipti* (i.e. Copts – the native Egyptians) or *Çingene*, and whose descendants today self-identify as Roma (and a small part in the Western Balkans – as Balkan Egyptians).

Summing up the content of the letter from 'One Egyptian': it is directed against the Greeks, because according to the author they are to be blamed for the plight of Egyptians and are a major obstacle to their civic development. In particular, the letter opposes the overall management of the Orthodox Church in the conditions of Ottoman Empire by the Greek church elite. This elite was called 'Phanariotes' from name of the neighbourhood Phanar (modern Fener) in Istanbul, where the court of the Patriarch resided and rich Greek merchants lived who influenced the Ottoman administration. The Greek church elite under the Ottoman system was recognised as both the spiritual and secular head of all the Orthodox subjects of the Empire (except those Orthodox under the spiritual care of the Patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria). They are accused for not allowing other Orthodox nations in the empire, as in the case of Bulgarians, to have religious independence. In the words of the author: 'the Phanariotes govern our faith' and 'only they have the right to it and only they are followers of the Apostles of Christ'.⁷

In his letter, 'One Egyptian' argues that the policy of the Greek Church is detrimental to all nations, but most severely affects 'the Egyptians', who are not allowed into the Orthodox Church. In the words of the author of the letter, the Egyptians 'do not change exactly in all mysteries of the Orthodox faith' because they are suspected of being 'semi-Christian and semi non-Christian in faith' and are considered by the Greeks to be 'completely unpleasing to God' and belong 'to the savages – idolaters believing'. With many quotations from Holy Scripture, the author of the letter argues that the Greeks have no reason for such an attitude towards 'the Egyptians'. Christianity does not divide different peoples into the 'chosen by God' and the 'unpleasant to God', because all people are equal before God, including the 'Egyptians' who are also entitled to have their own 'spiritual education'.⁸

Greeks are further blamed because they consider only themselves to be 'pleasant to God, and all others consider suspicious and unworthy', and they insist that only their language is appropriate for worship and forget that 'the Apostles speak all languages through the Holy Ghost and not only the Hellenic'. The letter to the Editor is full of vitriolic attacks against the Greeks:

But if you set to examine [them] about their affairs without others, you will find the very persecutors and destroyers of the faith and its rules making use of the beauty, simplicity and pure beauty of the other tribes, [they] use faith as a means of their wile and intrigue in order to stop time and keep it in a harness and slavery destroying all righteousness which was given from Our God Jesus Christ to everyone down under Heaven who believes in Him and is baptized in His name.⁹

According the Letter, the Egyptians historically, in their motherland Egypt, had 'reached a high degree [of] education [but] they did some disturbances in Egypt. From which some thousand

⁶ One Egyptian, "Pismo do redaktora," *Makedonia* 1, no.32 (August 8, 1867): 3.

⁷ One Egyptian, "Pismo," 3.

⁸ One Egyptian, 'Pismo', 3.

⁹ One Egyptian, 'Pismo', 3.

[people] were displeased and moved to Hellas. There, in Hellas, they brought together with them their eternal arts and alphabet'.¹⁰

The Greeks themselves were once wild men, and 'oafs and as we say, were grazing grass [i.e. they are like animal, stupid and dumb]' and only 'with the tireless attempts of the Egyptians to educate them they acquired a more tamed order'. The letter ends with an appeal to the Greeks:

If they want to be proud before Europe that they are enlighteners, let them first bow and prostrate themselves at our feet, to recognize their enlighteners and do their duty with which to show a faithful example for the others, and then they would have the right to ask.¹¹

'One Egyptian' tries to identify 'where our [i.e. Egyptians – authors' note] moral sickness comes from' and detects it in the fact that 'an Egyptian obeys two and three faiths at the same time', for which, however, the Greek patriarch is to blame who 'either from ignorance or from some peculiar whims and hostility that His Holiness felt for the Egyptians, and in his anger to punish them he forbade officiation'. Therefore,

... an Egyptian ... being a Christian and seeing that he is not allowed into all the mysteries, and mostly that he is suspected by the other Christians, he resorts to another faith and yet preserves the primary one. And thus, the Egyptians being dispersed and being out of the frying pan and into the fire, and being in a terrible despair, they cannot make a society and take care of education.¹²

The author of the letter used arguments to plead for the right of the Egyptians as an ancient people. He wrote: 'we are a breed of the old Egyptians, which is proved live not only by our advantage and abilities, but by our very language and the appellation "Egyptians" which we still hear today'. Because of their glorious past they have right to have religious worship in their own language and to 'create a society and taking care of education'.¹³

This letter can be properly understood only in the context of social movement of Bulgarians during this period against the Greek Patriarchate in an effort to have their 'own' Bulgarian church. The newspaper *Macedonia*, where the previously discussed 'Letter to the Editor' was published, was the main speaker on this movement, and its editor in chief, Petko Slaveykov, was one of its leaders. For the author of the letter, 'One Egyptian', and similarly for the Bulgarian national revivalists, these 'church' struggles were religious only as a form, but in fact they were a movement for the protection of the fundamental right of every nation to religious and civil equality respectively. The author feels the disparaging (in the best case) attitude of the macro-society towards Gypsies and suffers from restrictions imposed on his people by the Christian (and in general the religious) institutions of that time. In his letter he shows the injustice of such an attitude both in terms of the essence of the Christian religion and in terms of the historical fate of individual nations. In defense of his theses about the 'historical right' of the 'Egyptians' to 'create society and [take] care of education' he uses the historical knowledge accessible to him. This is the article entitled 'The Gypsies' written by Petko R. Slaveykov, published in *Gayda* newspaper in 1866,¹⁴ which actually inspired him to write his letter to the editor.

The content of the 'Letter to the Editor' confirms once again what we know from other historical sources. In the Ottoman Empire, the Gypsies were integrated into the social fabric with their own social and civil status, which was very similar to the status of other nations'

¹⁰ One Egyptian, 'Pismo', 3.

¹¹ One Egyptian, 'Pismo', 3.

¹² One Egyptian, "Pismo," 3.

¹³ One Egyptian, "Pismo," 3.

¹⁴ Petko R. Slaveykov, "Tsiganite," *Gayda* 3, no. 16 (August 15, 1866): 2-3.

subjects of the Empire. At the time of the Ottoman Empire, the distinction between Roma and Balkan Egyptians did not exist: they were one community, so we are using the English umbrella term 'Gypsies'.

So, the Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire who were full-fledged subjects of the Sultan have had civil rights since the 15th century, unlike the Gypsies in Central and Western Europe who achieved this social status much later. As a result, the development of the Gypsies, at least on the level of ideas, was very similar to the development of the other Balkan nations among whom they lived. The letter shows that at least some members of the Gypsy community in the Balkans in the nineteenth century reached a new stage in the development of their community consciousness. This new stage is characterised by exiting the 'internal' traditional frames of the community and seeking equal place in the new 'external' socio-cultural realities, according to the norms and values that predominate. It is the Balkan context that determines the shape of this new public appearance of Gypsies – they, like other Balkan nations, are searching actively for proof of a 'glorious' historical past. They are questing for the creation of a new national historical mythology that will serve as support and argument in the struggles for their civil emancipation as separate but equal to other Balkan nations' communities.

As a whole the logic of Gypsy community development, as seen in the 'Letter to the Editor' is a repetition of the pattern of development of the other Balkan nations in the 19th century in all its segments – the creation of their own system of education, their own church with services in their own language, and eventually, without especially mentioning it, the implied perspective of their own state. Whether these ideas were altogether realistic in the view of the situation of the Gypsy community in the Balkans at the time is another question. However, the emergence of such ideas is a fact which cannot be ignored.

The question remains – who was the author of the 'Letter to the Editor'; who was the person who signs as 'One Egyptian'? The author impresses with his literature style and especially with his high level of literacy. From numerous references to theological literature and to the publications in periodical press it is palpable that the 'One Egyptian' was well educated for his time and particularly in relation to his peers. We found the answer to the question 'who was the "One Egyptian"?' in the materials published by a famous folklorist from the end of the 19th century, Marko Tsepenkov. Describing existing guilds in the town of Prilep (now in the Republic of Macedonia), he noted the existence of separate Gypsy guilds (of blacksmiths, violinist and porters) with their respective Patron Saints' holidays (St. Athanasius and St. Anthony) and explains:

The reason behind all this is a Gypsy called Ilia Naumchev, a barber. This Naumchev, to him went more educated people in his barber shop and day by day he advanced and accepted his ethnicity and he was not ashamed to call himself an 'Egyptian', because, as he explained, the name came from Egypt. This Ilia hoped very much for a priest of Gypsy ethnicity. Many years have passed, but he still desired to have this rank among them and was tireless working among the Gypsies to fix them from drunkenness and all their bad behaviors. After he gained influence among the Gypsies he convinced the three guilds to celebrate St. Anthony's day. 2-3 years ago he succeeded to become himself a priest in the Holy Exarchate.¹⁵

A sufficient dose of confidence may suggest that this Ilia Naumchev is the 'One Egyptian', who wrote the letter to the editor of the *Macedonia* newspaper.

As it also becomes clear from this note, his enlightenment activities among local Gypsies eventually were crowned with at least partial success, particularly with the creation

¹⁵ Marko K. Tsepenkov, 'Obichai: Ot Prilep', *Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia, nauka i knizhnina* 15 (1898): 181.

and public validation of their own Patron Saint's day of the three Gypsy guilds. On the Balkans, the Patron Saint of blacksmiths, St. Athanasius, and rarely also St. Anthony, are honoured by the Christian majority. In the city of Prilep the Patron feast of the local Bulgarian guild of blacksmiths was on the day of St. Athanasius (18th January), while the guild of 'Gypsy blacksmiths' and the guilds of 'fiddlers and porters' (separate ones) venerated St. Antonius, which is on the 17th January, i.e. demarcation of the guilds on ethnic lines was clearly visible at that time.¹⁶

Here a brief explanation about the significance of the Gypsy guilds in the Ottoman Empire is needed to aid understanding of the early Roma movement. The Ottoman sources strongly contradict the imagination of Gypsies as free, eternal nomads, 'un peuple sans patrie',¹⁷ which continues to be one of the most durable public and academic stereotypes. These sources, in contrast to the above stereotype, prove that already in the Ottoman Empire the Gypsies were full-fledged subjects of Sultan, or to say it with modern social and political terminology – full-fledged citizens. At the same time, they were also clearly demarcated as a distinct ethnic community (something that is relatively rare in the Ottoman Empire).¹⁸ The majority of them led a settled way of life, and as such they were included in the existing social structures. A typical example in this respect is the participation of Gypsies in the overall system of the *esnaf* which is the Ottoman Turkish term for 'guild', with the same meaning of powerful professional association for mutual aid, and who controlled the practice of their craft in a particular town and represented, negotiated and defended the interest of its members.

The *esnafs* have occupied an important place in the overall social structure of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹ Formally the Ottoman Empire legally regulated the activities of the guilds only from 1773, but the historical data shows that many Gypsies living in Istanbul were members of different guilds in previous centuries. An important source about the place of Gypsies in the guild system is the notes of famous author Evliya Çelebi who used the list of *esnafs* in Istanbul, made on the orders of Sultan Murad IV (1623-1640). The formation of *esnafs* according to ethnicity can be noticed in these notes. At that time the Gypsies were living in the neighbourhood Ayyansaray in the Balata quarter. The list contains 57 *esnafs*; the Gypsies are mentioned for the first time in the 10th *esnaf*, that of the bear-trainers, which consisted of 70 men in total. The 15th *esnaf* is of horse-traders (*cambaz*) consisting of 300 men, and as Evliya Çelebi wrote:

These horse-traders are wealthy traders, each one of them having stables of 40-50 Arab horses; most of them are Gypsies although there are some who belong to other peoples. The 43rd guild that of the musicians, consisted of 300 people, also mostly Gypsies. The 45th guild comprised the actors, mime artists and boy dancers. This guild had 12 sub-divisions, the first one of which consisted of 3,000 persons, most of them Gypsies.²⁰

The ethnicisation of the guilds in the 19th-century Ottoman Empire was directly related to general processes of ethnicisation in the Empire, and the guilds were part of the national

¹⁶ Tsepenkov, 'Obichai', 181.

¹⁷ Michael Stewart, 'Un peuple sans patrie', *Terrain* 17 (1991): 39-52.

¹⁸ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), 38-9.

¹⁹ Suraiya Faroqhi, 'Understanding Ottoman Guilds', in *Crafts and Craftsmen of the Middle East: Fashioning the Individual in the Muslim Mediterranean*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi. and Randi Deguilhem (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 3-40; Onur Yıldırım, 'Ottoman Guilds in the Early Modern Era', *International Review of Social History* 53 (2008): 73-93.

²⁰ Çelebi, Evliya, *Seyahatname* (Istanbul: Zuhuri Danışman Yayınevi, 1967), 207-336.

movements of the Balkan peoples during this period, which, with some delay, encompassed also the Gypsies.²¹

The Gypsy guilds do not disappear with the end of the Ottoman Empire, and they continued to exist, albeit for a limited period of time, also in the new independent states in the Balkans that arose during 19th century after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. In Bulgaria's capital city Sofia, for example, in the last decade of the 19th century, in two of the existing neighbourhoods, in the *Shakh mahalla* and *Hadji Manov bridge mahalla*, only the settling of Gypsy blacksmiths and tinsmiths was allowed,²² which shows that even the homes of the members of Gypsy guilds were territorially detached. The Gypsy esnafs took active part in the public life of the city. This is confirmed by the historian Konstantin Jirecek: 'On official holidays beside Bulgarian and Turkish craftsmen and beside Jews with their gold scrolls goes Gypsy guild with their red flag'²³, i.e. with their guild's banner.

Returning to the fate of Ilia Naumchev: so far as is known, the independent Gypsy Orthodox Church for which he appealed was never created. The fight of Bulgarians for an independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church was more successful, and as a result in 1870 the Bulgarian Exarchate was created with Firman [decree] of Sultan Abdulaziz. It granted the right to establish an autonomous Bulgarian Exarchate for these dioceses, wherein at least two-thirds of Orthodox Christians were willing to join it. In the plebiscite in 1873 in the town of Prilep more than two-thirds of the inhabitants of the city, including local Gypsies, declared their wish to belong to the Bulgarian Exarchate, which is further indirect proof of the impact of Ilia Naumchev's enlightenment activities among his people.

By irony of the fate but completely logically as result, in the mid-1890s Ilia Naumchev received the post of an Orthodox priest in the Bulgarian Exarchate. In all likelihood his congregation encompassed the Gypsies in the town of Prilep, and although he did not become a priest in an independent Gypsy church (what he advocated for in his letter), at least he was a priest serving the Gypsy community.

The latest historical evidence about Ilia Naumchev is from 1900, when he continued to be a priest in his native town of Prilep in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.²⁴ Unfortunately, his further fate after the adoption of the priesthood is not yet known, and today in his hometown any memory of him disappeared among the local Gypsy community. And something more, the communities living today in the town of Prilep, which are heirs of 'One Egyptian' are all Muslims and Protestants. One part of them identify as Roma, while others prefer to be identified as 'Balkan Egyptians', and from the point of view of religion they still are considered to be 'semi-believers', similar to the times of Ilia Naumchev. The possibility of an independent Gypsy church appeared only much later with the penetration of evangelical churches among Roma in the Balkans, and nowadays in his native town Prilep there are quite a few Independent Gypsy churches; however they are not Orthodox, but Protestant. This is another story.

First Congress

After the disintegration of the Ottoman empire and establishment of new ethno-national states on the Balkans among Roma, who became citizens of the new established states, the aspirations for civil emancipation were further developed. Based on archival and media sources we may

²¹ Marushiakova, Elena and Veselin Popov, 'Gypsy Guilds (Esnafs) on the Balkans', in *Roma: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Hristo Kyuchukov, Elena Marushiakova and Veselin (München: Lincom Academic Publishers, 2016), 76-89.

²² Boyko Mizov, *Balgarskite tsigani: Bit, dushevnost, kultura* (Sofia: Avangard Prima, 2006), Vol. I, 217.

²³ Konstantin Jireček, *Knyazhestvo Balgaria* (Sofia: Hristo G. Danov, 1899), Part II, 33.

²⁴ Vasil Kanchov, *Makedonia: Etnografija i statistika* (Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov, 1996), 115.

identify the very first manifestation of an already organised civic movement for citizenship rights of Roma.

After the war between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in 1877-1878, the subsequent San Stefano Peace Treaty, the Berlin Congress and adoption of the Constitution (known as the Tarnovo constitution) in April 1879 in the city of Turnovo, a new Bulgarian State was created (initially the Principality of Bulgaria and from 1908 the Kingdom of Bulgaria). The Tarnovo constitution promulgated citizenship and equality for all inhabitants of the country (i.e. including Roma) – cf. Art 57 (‘All Bulgarian subjects are equal before the law’), and Art 86 (‘Voters are all Bulgarian subjects above 21, who have civil rights and political rights’).²⁵ At least from a legislative point of view all Bulgarian citizens were declared equal, but only circa two decades later, it becomes clear that the new state didn’t perceive all citizens as equal, and this was also reflected in legislation.

On the 3rd of May 1901, a law for the amendment of the election law was debated and voted by the 11th National Assembly (at 61st extraordinary session). The amendment was proposed by the government, headed by Petko Karavelov (till December 1901) and after that by Stoyan Danev, which came to power as a coalition between the Democratic Party and the Progressive-Liberal Party and is known in Bulgarian history as a progressive one. According to the provisions of this law, item 2 under Art 4 and Art 7 (‘Who is banned from voting’) a text ran as follows: ‘In that number the Gypsies non-Christians, as well as all those Gypsies without any fixed abode’.²⁶ In this way Muslim Gypsies were deprived of voting rights (at that time the majority of Gypsies in Bulgaria), as well as nomadic Gypsies (more exactly, those without administrative registration).²⁷ As it became clear from the discussion in the parliament, the reason for proposing this amendment was the general practice of ‘vote buying’ of Gypsy votes at elections, and the perception of Gypsies as people with ‘low-culture’ and with ‘aversion to work’. The proposal was that the right to vote should remain only for those Gypsies, who ‘don’t differ from Bulgarians’, which was considered a defining sign of integration. It was followed by a heated discussion about where in the country ‘undercover Gypsies’ are living.²⁸

The debates and the very inclusion of the cited amendments to the election law are the clearest indication for the reluctance of the Bulgarian political elite to accept Gypsies as an integral part of Bulgarian society and of the Bulgarian nation. During the continuous debates on the passing of this amendment (in the presence of the Prime Minister Petko Karavelov and all Bulgarian political leaders at the time), only a handful left-wing deputies spoke against such discriminatory and anti-constitutional limitations of the rights of the Gypsies. It is appropriate here to quote excerpts of at least two speeches against the amendment in the Parliament:

Yanko Zabunov (Bulgarian Agrarian Peoples Union): I, gentlemen Deputies, really see in the denial of electoral rights of the Gypsies, a breach of the Constitution. I admit, Gypsies played a pitiful role in the elections; I also admit there has been much abuse from them, but you must agree gentlemen, that whatever the case, they pay their taxes to the state. [...] Gentlemen, this is a step back.²⁹

Todor Vlaikov (Democratic Party): I am against this amendment. [...] There is abuse with a small number of people, at the same time a sacred principle is breached, once breached, we

²⁵ *Konstitutsiya na Balgarskoto tsarstvo* (Sofia: Darzhavno knigoizdatelstvo, 1945).

²⁶ *Balgarski zakoni za izbirane na Narodno sabranie* (Sofia: Narodno sabranie, 1991), 137.

²⁷ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies (Roma) in Bulgaria* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).

²⁸ *Stenografski dnevnici. Bulgaria. Narodno sabranie, Obiknoveno XI. Sesia 1.* (Sofia: Narodno sabranie, 1901), 254-61.

²⁹ *Stenografski dnevnici*, 256.

can take on the road downhill and nobody knows where we shall stop. Not only have the votes of Gypsies been exploited.³⁰

The discussion lasts for about an hour, and in its final speech Prime Minister Petko Karavelov puts forward the final argument in defense of the proposed legislative draft:

A few words more I will say for clarification. [...] We do not need voters from a nation with low culture. If they leave the country, they will do very good for us. If an USA nation does not allow such a thing for the Chinese people, then we will do well too if we remove the Gypsies who are not capable of any work.³¹

The comparison with USA was decisive. Following this parliamentary discussion, despite the objections raised, the law was voted almost unanimously, with 90 votes for out of 96 present.³² Only the representatives of the left-wing political parties voted against, including the Bulgarian Workers Social-Democratic Party (the future Communist Party). The new law for the amendment of the election law immediately came into force by Decree No 271 of Prince Ferdinand I.³³

The reaction of Roma surprised Bulgarian society. Immediately after the adoption of the amendment to the electoral law an improvised Gypsy conference was held in Vidin, where the protest against the limitation in the electoral rights of Gypsies was voiced.³⁴ Even more surprising was that Roma commenced a real campaign for a rejection of the adopted amendments. Roma were supported in this by Dr. Marko Markov (1891-1939), a famous, eccentric and odious public figure at that time, a lawyer and journalist. Marko Markov was born around 1891 in Tulcea (at that time Ottoman Empire, in present day Romania), studied at Robert College in Istanbul and continued with law studies at universities of Bern and Zurich. Subsequently he defended his doctoral thesis in University of Liege. According to the memories of his contemporaries, he was exceptionally educated, knew many languages and was correspondent of many West European newspapers.³⁵

According to the media sources, along with Dr. Marko Markov the leader of the protest initiatives was a Roma man, Ramadan Ali, a *mukhtar* (representative of the Mayor for the Gypsy quarter, appointed by the municipal authorities) in the Sofia Gypsy neighbourhood, who according to the media was called ‘*tsari-bashi*’ (literally ‘Tsar Head’, which is composed from combination of Bulgarian and Turkish, referring to ‘*cheri-bashi*’ – the title of the head of Gypsy tax unit³⁶ – authors’ note) of the *Bulgarian Gypsies*’ or mockingly ‘*Korean emperor*’. Initially they drew up a petition demanding equal rights for Gypsies with the remaining Bulgarian citizens. The petition was presented to the chairman of the National Assembly, and as there was no answer in order to make it more convincing, a decision was taken for holding a Roma congress.³⁷

In the press this Congress was referred to as ‘Tsiganski’ (‘Gypsy’ in Bulgarian), while the organisers themselves spoke of it as a ‘Coptic’ Congress, and called themselves ‘Copts’, ‘Coptic population’. At first glance this is easily understandable considering the dominant idea in Bulgarian society (among Roma as well) at that time, that Gypsies originated in Egypt and

³⁰ *Stenografski dnevnici*, 258.

³¹ *Stenografski dnevnici*, 259.

³² *Stenografski dnevnici*, 260.

³³ *Darzhven vestnik* no. 139 (June 30, 1901): 3.

³⁴ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies (Roma) in Bulgaria*, 24.

³⁵ Georgi Kanazirski-Verin, *Sofia predi 50 godini* (Sofia: Balgarska kniga, 1947), 79.

³⁶ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*, 39-41.

³⁷ No author, “Kongres na tsiganite v Balgaria,” *Vecherna poshta* 6, no. 1557 (December 14, 1905): 2.

are descendants of the ancient Copts, which is directly related to the most commonly used designation of Gypsies as ‘Kıptı’ (i.e. Copts) in official records from the Ottoman Empire.³⁸

The Congress, attended by 50 delegates, representatives of Roma communities from various towns in the country – Plovdiv, Haskovo, Kyustendil, Pleven, Byala Slatina and elsewhere (50 – that is the number of signatories of the petition adopted at the Congress) took place in the San Stefano restaurant in Sofia on the 19th of December 1905. Those unable to attend the congress in person sent telegrams to the congress. Telegrams were received from almost all cities with Roma neighbourhoods, such as Vidin, Varna, Silistra and others.³⁹

Dr. Marko Markov chaired the session of the Congress, which elected him a chair. The leadership included also Ali Bilyalov from Sofia, Ali Mutishev from Plovdiv, Iliia Uzunov, Ali Mola, Riste Mustafa and Evtim Ikonov, as well as Ibrahim Ismailov as treasurer, and for book keeper a Bulgarian, Ivan Paraskevov, was elected.⁴⁰

A telegram was written to the Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria with the following text:

Telegram to His Royal Highness, Sofia

The delegates of the Coptic population of Bulgaria met today, at their 1st Coptic Congress in Sofia with the aim to win back and get their rights, refused them in 1901, regardless of the provisions of the Berlin Treaty, in spite of the provisions of the Constitution, express the hope that His Royal Highness under whose guidance the ministers rule the Principality, shall have the kindness and point out to the Prime minister to whatever is necessary in the National Assembly, so that our human rights be restored. We serve in the army, pay all our taxes, and no exception is made for our obligations; as to rights, we have none. We would like to go to school, yet we have no schools. Our claims are legitimate and we hope, that His Royal Highness would exert Your influence, so that we do not lead a life of pariah in a free and constitutional Bulgaria.

Long Live His Royal Highness!⁴¹

A delegation was also elected, led by Dr. Marko Markov who presented the congress’ petition for the revoking of the amendments voted in the election law, denying Gypsies of election rights. The delegation was received by the Parliament Deputy Chairman Dobri Petkov, who promised to convey the petition to the deputies after the Christmas vacation.⁴²

After the Congress finished, a public campaign for the restoration of the civil rights denied to Gypsies was launched. At the beginning of 1906 Dr. Marko Markov delivered several public speeches in various towns in the country – Ihtiman, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv (on the 7th of January 1906 in the Luxemburg theatre) and others.⁴³ At the end of January, Dr. Markov and his supporters organised a large meeting in Varna, voting a telegram be sent to the Prince ‘on behalf of the Copts of Varna and the remaining inhabitants of Varna’. The public figures present at the meeting began an argument with Dr. Markov and sent a second telegram to the Prince, explaining that the resolutions adopted at the meeting do not reflect the desire of all Varna citizens, but only of the Gypsies.⁴⁴

Together with touring around Bulgaria, Dr. Marko Markov sought support for the Gypsy cause from foreign journalists living at the time in Bulgaria, for example James

³⁸ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*, 19.

³⁹ No author, “Tsiganski kongres,” *Vechna poshta* 6, no. 1563 (December 20, 1905): 2.

⁴⁰ No author, “Tsiganski kongres,” 3.

⁴¹ No author, “Tsiganski kongres,” 2.

⁴² No author, “Tsiganski kongres – Vtoro zasedanie,” *Vechna poshta* 6, no. 1564 (December 21, 1905): 3.

⁴³ No author, “No Title,” *Vechna poshta* 6, no. 1568 (December 25, 1905): 3; No author, “No Title,” *Zornitsa* 26, no. 2 (January 12, 1906): 2.

⁴⁴ No author, “Tsiganski sabor v grad Varna,” *Vechna poshta* 6, no. 1596-97 (January 28, 1906): 2.

Bourchier (the correspondent of the *Times*) and the American Albert Sonninxen.⁴⁵ Information about the first Gypsy congress in the world, as something unique in the entire world history of Gypsies, also independently drew the attention of the foreign press, though it was mentioned more as a curiosity.

The reaction of Bulgarian public opinion to the Gypsy Congress and the following public campaign confirmed once again the lack of any desire of Bulgarian society to accept Gypsies and their legitimate civic endeavours. In fact, the material published in the press of the day were a typical illustration of Bulgarian (and indeed of the Balkan) disparagement of the Gypsies. All media reports about the Roma congress were written with scorn and in best case with irony towards demands raised by Gypsies. The attitudes of public opinion in Bulgaria towards Dr. Marko Markov and his struggle for the defence of the constitutional rights of a considerable part of Bulgarian citizens was similar – he was subject to general irony and constant ridicule, or at best refined irony, and he was given the sobriquet ‘The Gypsy king’. The press expressed doubts about his mental state, which forced him in 1908 to call Krastyo Stanchev, the editor of the *Kambana* newspaper, to a duel (the duel did not take place).⁴⁶

Eventually Dr. Marko Markov could no longer endure this and left the capital Sofia and settled in Ruse. In 1915 Andreas Scott Macfie (Mui Shuko) met him there and described him in his famous book ‘With Gypsies in Bulgaria’.⁴⁷ After World War I, Dr. Marko Markov withdrew from active public affairs and died in Ruse in 1939.

As for the restoration of the full Roma’s voting rights in Bulgaria, on 2 December 1919, in aftermath of the First World War, at the suggestion of Prime Minister Alexander Stamboliyski from the Bulgarian Agrarian Union, the Bulgarian National Assembly passed a new electoral law by which compulsory voting for all Bulgarian citizens was introduced. In practice, according to this law, the full voting rights were restored to the Roma Muslims, who were the main driving force of the Roma movement in Bulgaria during this period. Outside the scope of this new electoral law remained the persons without permanent residence (i.e. predominantly the Roma nomads), which at that time were relatively few (about 10-15% of all Roma in Bulgaria in this time).⁴⁸ The problem with suffrage of the Roma nomads was finally resolved almost two decades later, in 1937, when the Council of Ministers prepared Decree-Law for the election of members of Parliament, which entered into force by the Decree of Bulgarian King Boris III. Under this new law, the limitation of voting rights to persons without permanent residence was lifted, and thus nomadic Roma received full voting rights.

First Organisation

In the first decade of the twentieth century, another phenomenon was ushered in among Roma in Bulgaria – the creation of public organisations that should defend their public positions as a particular ethnic community. The first historical source in this direction is a statute of officially registering a Roma public organisation, written in the town of Vidin in 1910 and published in the form of a small book that same year. This was, in all likelihood, the first legally registered Roma civic organisation in the world. The published registration document, entitled *Statute of the Egyptian Nation in the Town of Vidin*,⁴⁹ designates Roma as *Egiptyani* (“Egyptians” in

⁴⁵ No author, ‘Tsiganski kongres – Vtoro zasedanie’, 3.

⁴⁶ Georgi Kanazirski-Verin, *Sofia predi 50 godini* (Sofia: Balgarska kniga, 1947), 79.

⁴⁷ Mui Shuko (Robert Andreas Scott MacFie). *With Gypsies in Bulgaria*. Liverpool: Henry Young & Sons Ltd, 1916: 138.

⁴⁸ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*; Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies (Roma) in Bulgaria*.

⁴⁹ No Author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost v gr. Vidin* (Vidin: Bozhinov & Konev, 1910).

Bulgarian). This directly correlates with *Kiptu* (i.e. Copts, as in Ottoman empire) and with Congress in 1901.

The creation and the main aims of the first Roma organisation in Bulgaria can be understood in the context of the country's history. Part of the Ottoman Empire for five centuries, Bulgaria became an independent country in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, first as the Bulgarian Principality, and from 5 October 1908 as the Kingdom of Bulgaria. Independence changed the inter-ethnic relations of the country; whereas the position of ethnic Turks was established by peace treaties, the Roma were left out. In the Ottoman Empire, the Roma had citizenship status, were classified according to their ethnicity and had their own economic niches and position in the society.⁵⁰ Therefore, the foundation of the Roma organisation stemmed from the need to negotiate the new citizens' situation in the independent Bulgarian state. The Roma needed to secure the rightful status of their communities in the new independent state and to introduce legal parameters to the relationship between Roma and the state and local authorities, as well as to relations within their own community.

Article 1 of the statute describes the main tasks of the organisation: 'Under the old custom of the aforesaid nation in Vidin, this statute establishes procedures for their right-relations in the society and among themselves'.⁵¹

The statute determined the terms of office and methods of election of the head of the organisation as well as his responsibilities:

Article 3: For compliance and enforcement of the regulations is to be responsible a chief, called *mukhtar*, who is elected indefinitely by lot from among nine people of the neighbourhoods' elders – these leaders (*tseri-bashi*) are to be determined by secret ballot among those who have civil and political rights. Even better, those who are inscribed in the municipal election lists should be eligible to become voters and to be elected.⁵²

Article 10: [A *mukhtar* is elected] to represent the group before the authorities of the state and all public institutions, [...] to protect the general moral and material interests of his compatriots, [...] to evoke civic awareness among his own people and to assist measures and introduce decrees needed for decent and respectable human life, [...] to take care of finding work for the poor, [...] ensuring proper mental, health and social education of adults, [...] to seek to ensure strict compliance with all lawful orders, [...] to give accurate information to all state and public institutions on issues concerning people of his own nationality.⁵³

From the text of the statute, it is not clear who was the first head (*mukhtar*) of the new organisation, but most likely it was the chairman of the founding committee (comprising a total of 21 people), Gyullish Mustafa, who, as explicitly noted in the statute, was a member of the Bulgarian army in the position of reserve sergeant.⁵⁴

All the designations used in these articles of the statute are taken from the old Ottoman Empire terminology, in which *mukhtar* meant the mayor of a village, elected by the population and representing the village before the authorities, and the *cheri-bashi* were the heads of the Gypsy *dzhemaat* (Tax Unit), responsible for collecting taxes.⁵⁵ These designations were

⁵⁰ See: Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*; Faika Çelik, 'Exploring Marginality in the Ottoman Empire: Gypsies or People of Malice (Ehl-i Fesad) as viewed by the Ottomans', *EUI Working Paper RSCAS*, no. 39 (2004): 1-21; Faika Çelik, "'Civilizing Mission" in the Late Ottoman Discourse: The Case of Gypsies', *Oriente Moderno*, no. 93 (2013): 577-97.

⁵¹ No Author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 3.

⁵² No author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 4.

⁵³ No author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 6.

⁵⁴ No Author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 15.

⁵⁵ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*, 39-41.

transferred to the new realities of the independent Bulgarian state: the *mukhtar* became the chief of the ‘Egyptians’ in Vidin and its district, and the *tsari-bashi* became heads of the separate Gypsy *mahalla*.⁵⁶

The statute of the organisation reflects an effort to transfer and legalise existing social relations inherited from the time of the Ottoman Empire, where the Gypsies, although without official status as an ethnic community, they were de facto treated as such.⁵⁷ The statute explicitly mentions that only those who are ‘inscribed in the municipal election lists’ may take part in the election of the organisation’s head – that is, those who have civil and political rights. This indicates that the organisation was established not only out of a desire to recognise the Roma as a distinct ethnic group, but also because of their aspirations to be publicly acknowledged as an equal part of the overall social structure of the new Bulgarian nation-state.

From the *Statute of the Egyptian Nation in the Town of Vidin*, it is clear that the organisation was self-financing. Its revenue was generated through: ‘[...] voluntary donations and bequests [...] fines for divorce and unlawful cohabitation [...] interest from money-lending [...] and] rents for the common property’.⁵⁸ The organisation’s leaders (the *mukhtar* together with his deputy and treasurer) received annual remuneration for their ‘work’ – a sum collected from all families ‘according to their property status’, of which ‘it is envisaged for the mukhtar to take half of the total amount and for half to be divided between his two assistants’.⁵⁹

The statute also attempts to establish the Roma as a ‘nation’, equal to all other nations in the country, through symbols, signs and holidays. The organisation’s public symbols are described in detail – an example of the stamp of the organisation. It is a circular stamp with the inscription ‘Coptic town hall in city of Vidin’. The stamp depicts St George on horseback with a spear in his hand, point stuck in a crocodile, and behind him a king’s daughter. As pointed out in the statute, the picture on the stamp illustrates ‘a girl who was doomed to be sacrificed to an animal, deified in Egypt, and who was rescued by St George in the same way as the people were saved from paganism’.⁶⁰

The *mukhtar* wore an oval metal emblem on his chest with the inscriptions ‘Coptic mukhtar’ and ‘City of Vidin’. Between these two phrases was a graven image of ‘an eye with sun rays’.⁶¹ This is a direct reference to the Eye of Horus, considered to be one of the major Ancient Egyptian symbols of protection, royal power and good health. These references in the symbols and the names of community, used to define the community (‘Egyptians’ and ‘Copts’) in the organisation’s statute, reflected the perception of that time that the Roma originated from Ancient Egypt. This perception prevailing in the Ottoman Empire and later in an independent Bulgaria at that time, was accepted by the Roma themselves, and it was the basis for the appearance of numerous etiological legends, widespread among Roma in the Balkans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These legends illustrate the community’s efforts to

⁵⁶ During the Ottoman Empire, *mahalla* referred to a detached residential ethnic neighbourhood. For more information about Ottoman urban structure, see: Nicolay Todorov, *Balkanskiyat grad 15-19 vek: Sotsialno-ikonomicheskoto i demografskoto razvitiye* (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1972).

⁵⁷ For more detail on the functioning of the Ottoman system in regard to religious and ethnic communities (including the Gypsies), see: *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982); Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*; Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ No author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 10 (Article 16).

⁵⁹ No author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 13 (Article 23).

⁶⁰ No author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 11-12 (Article 23).

⁶¹ No author, *Ustav na Egiptyanskata narodnost*, 12 (Article 23).

discover their land of origin, ‘proof’ of which they claimed to find in the Old Testament.⁶² The links made to Ancient Egypt are a clear reflection of the Roma’s intention to express their equality with other nations that, unlike them, had their own countries of origin.

The statute designates St George’s Day, ‘which remained from the old times’, as the annual holy patron day.⁶³ The honouring of St George as patron of the Roma and the celebration of his day (*Gergyovden* in Bulgarian, *Ђurđevdan* in Serbian, etc.) are reflected in both the stamp and the statute of the organisation: indeed, there was a widespread cult of St George among Roma in the Balkans.⁶⁴ Along with Roma Christians, the Muslim Roma also honoured this day under the name *Hidirlez* (*Hederlesi*, *Herdelez*, *Ederlezi*, etc. in the Roma languages), replacing the Christian saint with the Islamic prophets Hızır and İlyas.⁶⁵

The prime mover of the Roma organisation in Vidin, as seen by the Statute of the Egyptian Nation in the Town of Vidin, was the Founding Committee, whose chairman was Gyulish Mustafa (designated as ‘reserve sergeant’); his deputy was marked with two names, Ahmed Neyazimov and Tako Munov. There was a total of 19 members of the Commission.⁶⁶ It is noteworthy that among the members of the founding committee listed in the statute, those with Muslim names are more numerous than those with Christian names. Some of them (as is the case with the aforementioned Ahmed Neyazimov) even have two names: one Muslim and one Christian. Such inter-religious names among the Roma are documented from Ottoman times, e.g. in the tax register of 1522-1523.⁶⁷ At that time (1910), the majority of Roma living in Vidin were Muslims: the fact that a Christian saint is on the organisation’s stamp shows that conversion to the new official religion (Orthodox Christianity) in the independent Bulgarian state had not only begun, but was already advanced. Nowadays, this conversion has been completed: all Roma in Vidin are Christians; the memory of their previous religion is faint, and for many it has already disappeared.

To date, the statute is the only known historical evidence for the existence of this first Roma organisation. It can be assumed that the organisation existed for only a relatively short period of time; soon after its establishment, a period of hostilities and conflicts began on the Balkans, which included two Balkan wars (1912-1913) and World War I, with the result that many Roma men were mobilised as part of the Bulgarian army and its military operations,⁶⁸ and the organisation likely ceased to exist (in any case, no other historical evidences of its activities are preserved).

⁶² For examples and texts of numerous etiological legends, see: *Studii Romani* 1, ed. Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov (Sofia: Club’90, 1994), 16-47; *Studii Romani* 2, ed. Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov (Sofia: Club’90, 1995), 22-45; Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, ‘Myth as Process’, in *Scholarship and the Gypsy Struggle: Commitment in Romani Studies*, ed. Thomas Acton (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000), 81-93.

⁶³ No author, *Ustav na Egiptjanskata narodnost*, 11 (Article 18).

⁶⁴ For more on the cult of St George and its spread among Roma in the Balkans, see: Tatomir Vukanović, *Romi (Cigani) u Jugoslaviji* (Vranje: Nova Jugoslavija, 1983), 276-79; Trajko Petrovski, *Kalendarskite običaji kaj Romite vo Skopje i okolinata* (Skopje: Feniks, 1993), 142-47; Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies (Roma) in Bulgaria*, 136-37; Elsie Ivančić Dunin, *Gypsy St George’s Day – Coming of Summer. Skopje, Macedonia 1967-1997* (Skopje: Zduženje na ljubitelji na romska folklorna umetnost ‘Romano ilo’, 1998).

⁶⁵ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, ‘The Vanished Kurban: Modern Dimensions of the Celebration of Kakava/Hidrellez Among the Gypsies in Eastern Thrace (Turkey)’, in *Kurban on the Balkans*, ed. Bilijana Sikimić and Petko Hristov (Belgrade: Institute of Balkan Studies, 2007), 33-50.

⁶⁶ No author, *Ustav na Egiptjanskata narodnost*, 15 (Article 18).

⁶⁷ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*, 30-31.

⁶⁸ For the scale of Roma participation in the Bulgarian army, see: Velcho Krastev and Evgenia Ivanova, *Ciganite po patishtata na voynata* (Stara Zagora: Litera Print, 2014).

Roma Organisations between the two World Wars

In the period between the two world wars, Roma in South Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe were placed in a new, quite different, social and political situation compared to the previous historical period, which predetermined the main directions in the development of the Roma movement. The most impressive illustration of these processes – in the context of the global social changes that occurred after World War I – is that given by Bernard Gilliat-Smith, who, as a British diplomat in Bulgaria during those years, offers an outsider's perspective on the development of the Roma. It is worth quoting his explanation of the changes in the community that he observed:

[... it] was due, I think, to the effects of the First Great War. Paši Suljoff's [Bernard Gilliat-Smith's main informants – authors' note] generation represented a different "culture", a culture which had been stabilized for a long time. The Sofia Gypsy "hammal" ['porter'] was – a Sofia Gypsy "hammal". He did not aspire to be anything else. He was therefore psychologically, spiritually at peace with himself. [...] Not so the post-war generation, who could be reckoned as belonging to the proletarians of the Bulgarian metropolis. The younger members of the colony were therefore already inoculated with a class hatred which was quite foreign to Paši Suljoff's generation. [...] To feel "a class apart", despised by the Bulgarians who were, *de facto*, their "Herrenfolk", was pain and grief to them.⁶⁹

In the new social and political conditions between the two world wars in the countries of South Eastern Europe, the Roma movement acquires new, organised forms. All over the region, a number of Roma civic organisations were created. These developments deserve a separate study; here it will be only briefly illustrated by the following list of data:

In 1919 in Sofia a Roma organisation was created named the *Sofia Common Moslem Educational and Cultural Mutual Aid Organisation 'Istikbal – Future'*; the chair of the organisation was Yusein Mekhmedov, and secretary Shakir Pashov.⁷⁰ After the military coup d'état of June 9, 1923, this organisation *de facto* ceased its existence, and was restored on 7 May 1929 by Shakir Pashov. Till 1930 it was joined by several Roma organisations of different kinds, e.g. mutual-aids, cultural, educational and sport. In 1931 Shakir Pashov himself headed the new association, named *Mohammedan National Enlightening Cultural Organisation*, and on behalf of the organisation started publishing a newspaper *Terbie* (Upbringing). On 7 May 1932 in the city of Mezdra a conference was held where it was decided to form the organisation for all Roma living in Bulgaria.⁷¹ After a military coup on 19 May 1934, the new government suspended the Tarnovo Constitution, prohibited all minority organisations and closed all their media and publications. In the archives are preserved only the Statute of the *Mohammedan-Gypsy National Cultural and Educational and Mutual Aid Union in Bulgaria*, headed by Shakir Pashov, and a letter from 10 July 1934 with which the Ministry of the Interior and Public Health rejected the request for registration.⁷²

In Romania, the organisation *Infrateria Neorustica* was established in 1926 in Făgăraş county. In 1933 the foundation of the *Asociația Generală a Țiganilor din România* [General Association of the Gypsies in Romania], headed by Archimandrite Calinik I. Popp-Șerboianu, and the alternative *Uniunea Generală a Romilor din România* [General Union of the Roma in

⁶⁹ Bernard Gilliat-Smith, 'Two Erlides Fairy-Tales', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 24, no. 1 (1945): 18-19.

⁷⁰ *Ustav na Sofijskata obshto myusyulmanska prosvetno-kulturna vzimospomagatelna organizatsiya "Istikbal – Badeshte."* Centralen darzhaven archive, f. 1B, op. 8, a.e. 596, l. 69 (1919).

⁷¹ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov. "The First Gypsy/Roma Organizations, Churches and Newspapers," in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, ed. Maja Kominko (Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 258-293.

⁷² *Ustav na Obsht mohamedansko-tsiganski natsionalen kulturno-prosveten i vzaimospomagatelen sayuz v Balgaria.* Centralen darzhaven archive, f. 264, op. 2, a.e. 8413, l. 7-12, 14, 28-29 (1934).

Romania], headed by Gheorghe A. Lăzăreanu-Lăzurică, a journalist, was elected Executive President and proclaimed himself as *Voivode* [chieftain] of the Roma in Romania, with an honorary president, Grigoraș Ionică Dinicu, who was a famous violinist and composer. In 1934, Gheorghe Niculescu, Bucharest Flower Dealer, headed the Union, and Gheorghe A. Lăzăreanu-Lăzurică left the organisation. Other Roma organisations were also set up: *Cercul Oltenia al Asociației Generale a Țiganilor* [Oltenia Circle of the General Association of Gypsies] was established in Craiova, in 1934, and led by Marin I. Simion; *Organizția Cetățenească a Romilor din România* [Civic Organisation of the Roma in Romania] appeared in 1935, with president Gheorghe A. Lăzăreanu-Lăzurică; the association *Redeșteptarea Romilor i Romnițelor din Romania* [Revival of the Roma Men and Women in Romania], was founded in 1936, etc. In the 1930s, the newspapers *O Rom* [The Roma], *Glasul Romilor* [Voice of the Roma], *Neamul Țiganesc* [Gypsy People] and *Timpul* [Times] were published.⁷³

In Yugoslavia, *Prva srpsko-ciganska zadruga za uzajmno pomaganje u bolesti i smrti* (The First Serbian-Gypsy Association for Mutual Assistance in Sickness and Death), headed by Svetozar Simić, was inaugurated in 1927. In 1935, the *Udruženja Beogradskih cigana slavara Tetkice Bibije* (Association of Belgrade Gypsies for the Celebration of Aunt Bibia) was established. In 1930, the newspaper *Romano lil / Ciganske novine* (Roma Newspaper / Gypsy Newspaper) was published, while *Prosvetni klub Jugoslavanske ciganske omladine* (The Educational Club of Yugoslavian Gypsy Youth), which grew into *Omladina Jugoslavociganska* (Yugoslavian-Gypsy Youth), also took shape.⁷⁴

In Athens, the *Panhellenios Syllogos Ellinon Athinganon* (Panhellenic Cultural Association of the Greek Gypsies) was founded in 1939; its main goal was to obtain Greek citizenship and passports for Roma immigrants to Greece from Asia Minor in the 1920s.⁷⁵

During the same inter-war period, other, new forms of the Roma movement can be observed in Central and Eastern Europe, which find their development also in the next historical periods. In the USSR a new phenomenon appeared, namely, the creation of Roma organisations at the initiative of and under the control of the 'Party and State'. This creation was part of the then launched active state policy for the social integration of Roma within the broader state-wide framework of Soviet policy on nationalities. So, in 1925 an *All Russian Union of Gypsies* was created, headed by Andrei Taranov as its chairman and Ivan Rom-Lebedev as the organisation's secretary.⁷⁶ During the 1920s and 1930s the Romani language journals *Romany Zoria* (Gypsy Dawn), *Nevo Drom* (New Way), and *Butiaritko Rom* (The Working Gypsy)⁷⁷ were published, as well as local newspapers *Stalintso* [Stalin's comrade-in-arms] and *Palo Bolshevistsko kolkhozo* [About Bolshevik kolkhozes] in city of Mineralnye vody (in Northern Caucasus).

In the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1929, a civic, non-Roma organisation was created by Czech physicians from the city of Košice (in Slovakia): the *League for cultural uplift of Gypsies*. In 1930, it was transformed to a *Society for the Study and Solving the Gypsy Question*, which engaged in numerous activities aiming at Roma social integration and established further

⁷³ Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2004), 127-32; Viorel Achim, 'The Roma Organizations and their Relations with the Romanian Politics in the 1930s', *Nouvelles Études d'Histoire*, no. 12 (2010): 85-102.

⁷⁴ Dragoljub Acković, *Nacija smo a ne cigani* (Belgrade: Rrominterpress, 2001), 43-59.

⁷⁵ Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *Gypsies, Travellers*, 251-52.

⁷⁶ David Crowe, *A History*, 176-79; Brigid O'Keeffe, *New Soviet Gypsies: Nationality, Performance, and Selfhood in the Early Soviet Union*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 56-64.

⁷⁷ Valdemar Kalinin, *Zagadka baltiyskikh tsigan: Ocherki istorii i kulturi* (Minsk: Logvinov, 2005): 82-84.

Roma organisations, such as the *Sport club of Slovak Gypsies 'Roma-Košice'* and the *'Lavutarisz' Cultural and Social Society of Gypsies in Slovakia*.⁷⁸

In Poland a new idea appeared to create a separate state for the Roma, including attempts to impose its institutionalisation by the public proclamation of the so-called 'Gypsy Kings' from the family Kwiek (Dimiter Kwiek, Gregor Kwiek, Michal I Kwiek, Michal II Kwiek, Jozef Kwiek, Bazil Kwiek, Janusz Kwiek, Rudolf Kwiek, etc.). These kings tried to find a place for a new Gypsy State (Romanestan) using different political paths and considering different regions across the world.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The logical question is why it is precisely in Southeast Europe where the ideas of civic emancipation of the Roma are born and why these ideas are realised in different forms in the countries of South Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe in the period between the two world wars.

The answer is in the general historical context under which the processes of civil emancipation of the Roma in these regions develop.

The Gypsies are full-fledged subjects (or citizens) of the Ottoman Empire from the end of the 15th century, of the Russian Empire from the beginning of the 18th century and the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the end of the 18th century (following the policies of Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II). Of course, this civic equality does not mean the complete protection from different forms of everyday and in some cases even institutional discrimination, but at least formally, in legislation their equality is granted. In this respect, there is a visible difference when compared with the situation in Western Europe, where the civic equality of local Gypsies and the traveling population is insensible, achieved only the 19th-20th century, and in some cases, no matter how shocking it sounds, only in the last couple of years – e.g. in France, in June 2015, arrangements are made for cancelling special travel permits for 'Tsiganes et Gens du Voyage' (Gypsies and Travellers), called 'livret de circulation', that worked as their identity cards, and which limited their citizens rights and especially their suffrage.⁸⁰

The civil status of the Gypsies in South Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe largely depended on their way of life (nomadic or settled) in the countries where they lived. From the very first historical evidence about Gypsies in the European part of the Ottoman Empire in 1430 until its collapse, the data clearly shows that the majority are sedentary, and that the proportion between the nomadic and settled Gypsies changed over the years (in favor of the sedentary ones). In the Austro-Hungarian Empire one can observe the same from the late 18th century, and after the collapse of the Empire the sedentary Gypsies became prevalent. In the Russian Empire, just in opposite, the Gypsies with the nomadic lifestyle predominated, and only a small number of them (mostly those who were part of the musical elite) were settled (about 10%), mainly in the two metropolises (Saint Petersburg and Moscow) but also in other major cities of the Empire.

⁷⁸ Anna Jurová, 'Cigánska otázka v 1. Československej republike', in *Prístupy k riešeniu národnostnej otázky v medzivojnovom Československu*, ed. Soňa Gabzdilová and Attila Simon (Komárno: Univerzita J. Selyeho, 2014), 53-62.

⁷⁹ Jerzy Ficowski, *Cyganie na polskich drogach* (Kraków-Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985), 46-59; Donald Kenrick, *The Romani World*, 147-148.

⁸⁰ No Author, 'L'Assemblée vote la suppression du livret de circulation pour les gens du voyage', *Le Monde*, June 10, 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/06/10/l-assemblee-vote-la-suppression-du-livret-de-circulation-pour-les-gens-du-voyage_4650732_3224.html.

Another important factor was the urban patterns of the Roma settlements. In the Ottoman Empire, Roma lived, similarly to the entire population of the empire, in ethnically distinct neighbourhoods (called *mahalla*), placed most often at the periphery of towns and villages, but in any case within their borders. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Roma settled mainly in rural areas, in detached Roma settlements (called *kolonia*, *ciganytelep*, *osada*, *figania*), often miles away from the main village or small town. In the Russian Empire, the Roma lived scattered among the surrounding population in different neighbourhoods occupying several neighbouring houses.

A common social life, particularly in urban settings, had a significant impact on the social activities of settled Roma and on their civic consciousness. In such spaces they were interacting daily with the majority population, and especially when they had the opportunity to receive some (even minimal) education they were able to develop and defend active positions in regards to their place in the society. Therefore, it is perfectly logical that all Roma visionaries and leaders of Roma organisations mentioned above originated from urban Roma neighbourhoods, including in the USSR, where the settled Roma were a minority.

The only exception from this are the so-called ‘Gypsy kings’ in Poland, who belong to the group of nomadic Kelderera from Wallachia and Moldova (today Romania), who were recent immigrants in the country and were not fully embodied into Polish society; this circumstance explains in large extent their eccentric visions about the future of Roma which they see not in their home or host country, but following the pattern of the Zionist movement in establishing their own state.

Indeed, the Roma in South Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe exist in ‘two dimensions’, expressed in ‘community – society’ distinction – both as a separate ethnic community, and as an ethnically-based integral part of the society within the respective nation-states in which they are living from generation to generation and are full-fledged citizens.⁸¹ Therefore, the whole history of the movement for civic emancipation of the Roma (starting from the inter-war period and the new social realities of the ethno-national states) presents attempts to achieve a balance between these two dimensions of their existence. Only such a balance can enable them to be in fact (and not only de jure) equal members of the respective civil nation and society to which they belong, without reaching their ethnic assimilation (i.e. to eliminate the community dimension and in this way to cease to exist as a separate ethnic community).

A majority of the Roma organisations South Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe during the inter-war period were established independently of the ruling powers in the respective countries without any state support, and their main goals often contradicted the existing state policy. They strived to introduce new legal parameters to the relationship between the Roma and the state authorities. Exceptions to this were the cases of the USSR and Czechoslovakia, where Roma organisations were established under the auspices of the state and/or the non-governmental sector – trends that are actively developing in the following historical periods and continue to exist now.

The question of what was the grassroots support of the civic emancipation movement of the Roma up until World War II is entirely justified. Some of the Roma organisations under review present impressive figures in this regard, e.g. according to statistics of *General Union of the Roma in Romania*, in 1939 the Union had 40 branches in separate districts, 454 in separate towns, with a total membership of 784,793 people (!), while according to a police

⁸¹ Marushiakova, Elena and Veselin Popov, ‘Who are Roma?’, 15.

report, its members were 480,000.⁸² These figures are undoubtedly unrealistic as in Romania at that time the total number of Roma was much smaller⁸³.

According to the Miroslav Hroch's famous concept, the construction of the modern nation follows three main stages: Phase A, when a small elite of activists lay the foundation for a national identity and proclaim its rights to existence; in Phase B the activists use agitation and propaganda to distribute their project among as many of their ethnic group as possible; and in Phase C, the majority of the population forms a mass national movement, and a full social movement comes into being with branches, each of them belonging to different political wings with their own programs.⁸⁴

In the case of the Roma movement for civil emancipation in the countries of South Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe during the inter-war period, the direct and straightforward parallels with the processes of creation of the new nations as described by Hroch are not fully justified. The Roma activists at that time were a very small elite who did not aspire to lay the foundation for an all-encompassing national identity for Roma wherever they live. They aimed first to reach a successful social embodiment of the Roma, equal legal status, prospects for social and economic well-being and preservation and development of their ethnicity in the countries where they live. The only exception from this is the case of Gypsy kings in Poland with their idea to create their own Gypsy state (Romanestan).

What is almost completely absent in this historical period is the desire for interaction and uniting with the Roma from abroad. As seen from some sporadic mentions in the sources, the awareness of the existence of Roma in other countries is evident, but no direct interactions were sought. There is also only one exception – the announcement of the expected presence of Roma from other countries at the founding congress of the General Union of the Roma in Romania, which, however, is just an advertising trick to attract public attention and to raise the importance of the event.

Despite all said above, there is still a correlation between the processes of creating modern nations and the movement for civil emancipation of the Roma, and it is becoming particularly visible nowadays, when among new Roma elite concepts of 'a nation without a state' or of 'European national minority' are introduced.⁸⁵ From this point of view, the Roma movement during the inter-war period developed on a local level and was at the stage between Phase A and Phase B, according to the terminology of Miroslav Hroch. Now, almost a century later (in spite of support received from different supranational institution and a diverse cohort of donors) the Roma movement is still on the same stage.

The modern Roma movement is now much more international than closed in the national framework of the individual countries. The majority of Roma activists are tied to several major centres specifically dedicated to the Roma issues – Budapest (the headquarters of the Open Society Network of Foundations of the famous billionaire George Soros), Strasbourg (the seat of the Council of Europe), Brussels (the European Commission headquarters), Warsaw (the headquarters of the ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), Berlin (the seat of the newly established European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture and Digital Archive of the Roma), etc. In all of these centres, the vision about the Roma as a 'community' (defined as

⁸² Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, 148; Ilona Klímová-Alexander, *The Romani Voice in World Politics*, 173.

⁸³ Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, 117-18; Viorel Achim, "The Roma Organizations," 85-86.

⁸⁴ Miroslav Hroch, *Národy nejsou dílem náhody. Příčiny a předpoklady utváření moderních evropských národů* (Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství – SLON, 2009).

⁸⁵ Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, 'The Roma', 433-55.

‘nation without state’, ‘transnational minority’, ‘European minority’, etc.) is dominant, while the second dimension of their existence as a ‘society’ i.e. as an integral part of the respective nations in the countries where they live remains behind.

In the view of what has been said so far, the reasons for setting out the emergence and early stages of the Roma emancipation movement can be understood. For many contemporary researchers (and for many Roma activists too), the First World Romani Congress and following that, the International Roma Union, is a starting point that shifted the Romani movement to a new level and introduced a paradigm change. The International Roma Union itself has become a mythological symbol of this key change. The irony here is that this symbol actually continues to exist, albeit in three variants (three Unions, each claiming the name International Roma Union and the right to represent the Roma from all over the world), but generally occupies very peripheral positions in the contemporary Romani movement, with almost no possibility to influence national nor European policies towards Roma.

A significant part of contemporary approaches to the Roma movement are part of the above-mentioned paradigm of Roma as a ‘community’, and only this segment of history of Roma movement is considered which has an international dimension. In this way, unfortunately, not only is the history of the Roma movement incomplete, but also the possibility to understand the character, the real dimensions and the challenges faced by the Roma movement for civil emancipation, (which have been laid down since its inception and are manifested already in the early stages of its development), is missed.

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