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Roma/Gypsy population in Bulgaria as a challenge for the policy relevance

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Abstract: *This paper discuss two topical issues in the field of Roma/Gypsy studies in Bulgaria. Firstly, it focuses on the traditional marital patterns – “a bride price”, “a kidnapping” etc. - and uses their specifics to explain the early childbirths and early entering into union formation. Secondly, it argues against the overestimated size of the Roma population in Bulgaria and offers three alternative indicators. The size of Roma population is estimated between 634596 and 799797 people by the end of 2006. At the end of the paper some policy proposals have been made.*

The Roma/Gypsies are traditionally nomadic people currently living worldwide. Due to some historical circumstances, most of them live a settled or semi-settled life on the Balkan Peninsula as far as in all ex-socialist countries from Eastern Europe. Although there are many minority populations that need support all over the world, the Roma population in particular has become a major focus of the policy makers in Europe after the beginning of the enlargement of EU. Prime Ministers and Deputy Prime Ministers of eight countries from Central and South Eastern Europe signed a Decade of Roma Inclusion Declaration in Sofia. In the declaration, the participant countries declare the years 2005 – 2015 to be the Decade of Roma Inclusion. According to that, the governments will work toward eliminating discrimination and closing the unacceptable gaps between Roma and the other members of the society in each country. There are four main areas of concern for the Roma population: housing, education, employment and political participation.

Despite of the long term presence of the Gypsies in Europe and Bulgaria in particular, we could state that still they are an example for a quite unknown otherness. In fact, some of their cultural features bias the official population statistics and embarrass the demographical analyses and institutional decision making. In order to provide relevant policies toward Roma and to secure proper integration of the different subgroups, we have to know some knotty questions that stay academically and politically unsolved so far.

The present paper focuses on two separate problems that seem to be very topical issues at least in Bulgaria. Firstly, we are going to explain the specifics of the Romany marital pattern and family formation today. Secondly, we are going to present and discuss the differences in the population size between the expert estimations and the last two censuses in Bulgaria (1992, 2001). About the first issue we are going to use the qualitative data set of the PhD thesis "Structures of Romany every day life in Bulgaria", which contents more then 240 interviews. About the second issue we are going to rely on some statistical indicators from the census in year 2001.

According to a survey that attend the census, in 2001 there was a high rate of premarital and postmarital cohabitations among Roma – about 30.2% of male individuals between age 15 and 59, and about 30.5% of female individuals between age 15 and 49 were included in those phenomena (*Fertility...*). The rise of the age of the first marriage to the age of over 25 could also be observed (*Fertility...*). In fact, the

census data shows that Roma in Bulgaria have the lowest relative risk for transition to first marriage. It is about 24% lower than the Bulgarians and 35% lower than the Turks have risk of getting married.

Table 1. Relative risk of first marriage by ethnic group

<i>Ethnic group</i>	Relative risk	Sig.
Bulgarians (ref)	1	
Turks	1.11	*
Roma	0.76	***
Other	0.99	

Source: Koytcheva 2005

Nevertheless, behind the official statistics is hidden the fact that Roma actually live in traditional marriage regardless of the legal status of the partnership. Looking at Roma traditional marriage, researchers usually point out the practice of paying a ransom or a bride price – called “daro”, “kanababa” or “baba hak” (*Pamporov 2003*). Some authors state that when parents refuse to accept their child’s choice, one could observe cases of elopement or kidnapping as chance children to gain some level of authority (*Oprea 2005*) or as a strategy of avoiding the bride price (*Liegeois 1994; Marushiakova & Popov 1993; Tomova 1995*). With relation of that practice, one could observe two kinds of ethical arguing – ethnographical and legally speaking. The ethnographers dispute is that a fake (in case of elopement) or real kidnapping. The bar members dispute is there an agreement of the female individual or it is a rape.

As a result of a bottom-up coding of our qualitative data set, we can state that kidnapping is not just a practice of

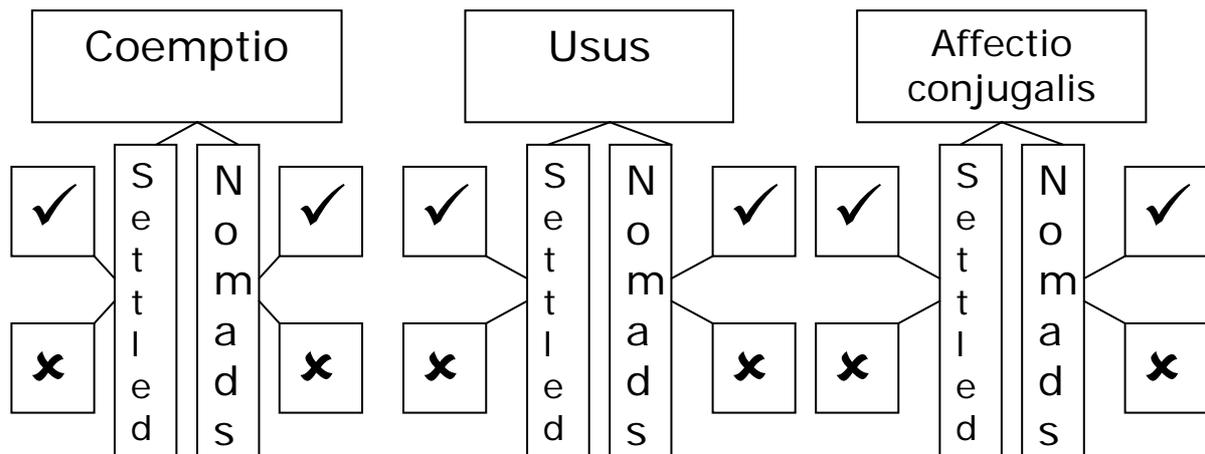
emancipation or avoiding the bride price, but it is an independent marital strategy about some of the Romany subgroups in Bulgaria. In those cases, the kidnapping replaces the asking for the maiden's hand. Namely the asking for the girl's hand – which as a custom is typical and same in all Balkan cultures – could be pointed out as a third kind of traditional marriage among Roma in Bulgaria.

The family code in Bulgaria does not recognize the listed traditional Romany marital patterns. During the ages of totalitarian regime such practices was labeled as "illegal cohabitation". Today it is considered as "an extramarital cohabitation" but the officials still count the partners in such union as singles and woman is treated as a single mother if there is a child. A household with children based on cohabitation is presented as a single parent family in the official registers.

Nevertheless, the Romany marital practices are not a novelty or an exception in the human history. We could find their parities in the Roman law. The ransom or bride price seems to be similar to the marital pattern named "coemptio" and the asking for the hand is close to the "affectio conjugalis". I would like to stress the fact that the elopement or kidnapping could be considered like a very short-term kind or modified type of "usus". Namely that point is very important for solving the ethical debates, presented above. The label "usus" put an accent on the fact that the marital legitimization comes only

through the sexual intercourse and not because of the kidnapping itself.

On the basis of these three patterns, one could observe twelve different types of traditional family among Roma, if we take under consideration the level of sedentary life and the female participation in the male occupation.



Graph 1. Classification of the traditional types Romany families according to traditional legitimization of the marriage, the sedentary level of the group and the participation of women in man's craft
 ✓ Female participation x Female doesn't participate

When we use the classification shown on the graph 1, we could point out one problem for policy making, coming out from the usual research focuses. If we look into western publications, sooner or later we will realize that they study only very particular kind of Romany marriage – coemptio among the nomadic groups. On the second hand, the Bulgarian authors also pay attention on very particular case, but another one – affectio conjugalis among the settled groups. Thus, we have a double bias – first there are incomparable outcomes and

second, there are four big types of families, lying out of the research scope.

At that point, we would like to go back to the official statistical data from the Bulgarian census in 2001. If we take a look at the relative risk for first birth, opposite to the first marriage calculations, the Roma have highest relative risk for transition to first birth. It is higher more than two times in comparison with the Bulgarians, Turks and other ethnical groups. Moreover, Roma start at earliest ages with the reproductive behaviour and they have the highest intensity at all ages (*Koytcheva 2005*).

Table 2. Relative risk of first birth by ethnic group

<i>Ethnic group</i>	Relative risk	Sig.
Bulgarians (ref)	1	
Turks	0.96	
Roma	2.15	***
Other	0.85	*

Source: Koytcheva 2005

If we draw a conclusion now, we could state that Roma have very modern social behaviour, close to one of the Nordic countries. But it is going to be a wrong statement. The modern social behaviour has a breaking of the biographical unity as one of its main features. If we take a look at the current Bulgarian pattern of female live cycle, we could see several clear separated events: beginning of sexual life, living parental home, getting married. At the same time those three events coincide in the Romany biographies or in other words, Roma

follow a traditional pattern of social behaviour in that respect. We could assume if the official statistics takes the traditional marriages under consideration, then the rate of the relative risk of first marriage about Roma will increase parallel to the risk of first birth.

At the end of the section devoted to the marital pattern, we would like to propose an explanatory model, which could be a good starting point of a policy aimed discussion. Our statement is follow: Romany women enter early into traditional from of marriage and give early first births due to the traditional gender roles and model of socialization in Romany communities. There are three general role sets, in which one female individual could be situated. At the lowest position is "chshay"/"shey" (a girl); At the middle level is "djuvli" (a wife without child); and at the highest level is "romni" – a wife with a child but also "a Gypsy woman". In the first role set, the female individual is subordinate of all other family members. In the second role set, the woman is subordinate to her husband and his parents and some of the elder relatives; while in the last role set, the woman gains authority and right of imposing her opinion and wishes, at least in her own household. In other words, the woman gains complete role set only through the first birth given in actual marriage (*Pamporov 2004*).

We would like to move now to the second issue raised by the present paper – namely the estimations of the Roma population size. The census takes count of 333 396 Roma (3.69% of the country population) in 1992 and of 370 908 in

2001 (4.68%). The numbers raised a certain level of contest among several Bulgarian and European Roma experts. They claim this numbers to be serious underestimated. Right after the publishing of the first preliminary census data, in 1993 Marushiakova and Popov stated the real size of Roma population in Bulgaria is about 800 000 (*Marushiakova & Popov 1993: 94*). Their estimation is based on "a sequence of observations and considerations" without explicit methodology and we can not accept it without stint. Unfortunately, their opinion is taken into account by some of the leading western scholars in the field of Roma studies (*Liegeois 1994, Kenrick 1998*) and thus legitimated for the policy making purposes of the national and international human right and other non government organizations. Accepted both by the Roma activists and by some xenophobic Bulgarian academicians; overexposed by the press and electronic mass media – the estimated size of the Roma population jumps to 1.1 million after the publishing of the preliminary data of the census in 2001. In fact, the experts' hypotheses stand on some population forecasts made in the early eighties that expect the size of the Gypsy population in 2000 to reach "not less then 700 000" (*Kubadinski 1982*) and on the data base of the Ministry of internal affairs [MIA] that points out 576 927 Roma in Bulgaria about 1989.

However, by clear reasons the population forecasts from the early eighties do not take into account the transition period in the early nineties and the attendant demographic processes – the fertility drop, the increase of the infant mortality and the

emigration waves and therefore it is irrelevant. The MIA data base is also problematic as far as it relay on information "by neighbours' opinion" and in fact includes all groups and individuals that macro society distinguish as Gypsies, regardless their own identity. Thus, the total number subsumes also the blended families as well as some social groups and subgroups, which emphatically reject belonging to the Roma ethnical group. From a legal point of view the use of MIA data base is in a contradiction with the Human rights declaration as well as with the National Frame Convention for Protection of the National Minorities, according to which "Any person, that belongs to a national minority, has right of free choice to be treated as such or not". From sociological point of view, the use of MIA data base is also incorrect. The direct observations during my fieldworks as well as the in-depth interviews indicate that the preferred "other" (i.e. non-Roma) identity has to be taken into account. After the change of the ethnical referent group, the person is changing his/her life style and demographic behaviour.

Even if we assume the use of MIA data base is relevant and acceptable, the number of 800 000 Roma in 1993 based on it is yet preposterous. It means the Roma natural increase should be about 9.5-9.7% per year, which is serious overestimation of the fertile contingent and intensity of the childbirth. If we use the number 576 927 as a base of the estimation, there are three possible criteria for building up a correct estimation of the Roma population. Even if we accept

the census is not an exhaustive survey, it is at least a representative one as far as the persons with strong Roma identity are taken in concern. Therefore we can build our increase indicators on it.

The first possible rate is the increase of the number of people with Roma identity declared about the period 1992-2001: 11.25% in 10 years. The second possibility is the growth of the people with Romany as a mother tongue declared for the same period: 5.26% in 10 years. The third possibility is the annual increase of the people with Roma identity in the period 2001-2003: 19.4‰.

Table 3. Estimations of the size of Roma population in Bulgaria about the period 1989-2004

	Increase by Roma identity	Increase by Romany	Annual increase
1989	576927	576927	576927
1990	580169	583417	588119
1991	583430	589981	599529
1992	586709	596618	611160
1993	590006	603330	623016
1994	593322	610118	635103
1995	596656	616981	647424
1996	600010	623922	659984
1997	603382	630942	672787
1998	606773	638040	685840
1999	610183	645218	699145
2000	613612	652476	712708
2001	617060	667240	726535
2002	620528	674746	740630
2003	624016	682337	754998
2004	627523	690013	769645
2005	631049	697776	784576
2006	634596	705626	799797

According to the applied indicators (table 3), the total number of Roma in Bulgaria by the end of 2006 will vary between 634 596 and 799797. The claimed number of 800 000 in 1993 will be caught up as late as at some point in 2007 and for all that we have to forget the emigrant stream, the drop of the second and higher order births with about 40%, and the decreasing mean number of children in the cohorts with completed fertility. If we take into account also the presence of people with preferred other ethnic identity then the catch up of 800 000 will be even on some later stage.

As far as this paper belongs to the field of political relevant demography and aims on the policy making and policy relevance, instead of summarizing conclusion, we would like to make some practical proposals:

1. There is a need of recognition of the alternative forms of marriage (or comparable relationships)

Recently only the civil wedlock is a legal one. The religious and traditional marriages serve just like a supplement. The government could bring the alternative marriages into line by authorizing certain officials to do so – synod, ombudsman, some kind of minority representative. The individuals in both kinds of unions should have similar rights, benefits and obligations. It could be done by building a register of cohabitants and re-introducing of the address registration.

2. An emancipation right could be established

The right of early marriage could be introduced through the child emancipation. Such emancipation has to be possible only in case of certain conditions: secured employment completed certain degree of education, and independent living conditions. In such way we could stop some criminal practices of human traffic and so called "white slavery" by using relatives and the traditional marital practice of "bride price".

3. The National statistical institute and local statistical offices have to pay more attention on minority features

- Some ethnical groups and subgroups are invisible but that bias the statistical outcome and disturb the relevance of the analysis and interpretation.
- the traditional forms of marriages are out of scope

4. The human right organizations and minority oriented organizations have to pay more attention on the right of subgroup and personal identity.

It seems to me that there is a serious overestimating of the number of Roma based on the old totalitarian forecasts. Choosing another identity usually is related with some processes of integration and respectively changes of the social, economical and cultural practices, as well as with change of the demographic behaviour.

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