

SICRIE PROJECT
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Evangelical Roma/Gypsies in Bulgaria
(paper version)
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In Bulgaria, as elsewhere, the Roma/Gypsies adhere to different religions and, depending on their religious affiliations, perform various customs and practices. The acceptance of a certain religion depends on the social environment in which the Gypsies live or used to live. Gypsies who receive baptism in the name of Jesus Christ and become his followers can be found in many countries in the world. In the twentieth century the Evangelical movement enjoyed remarkable success among that community. Protestant organizations and missionaries from various churches began working with the Gypsy population and appointed pastors from their milieus. Many houses of prayer were built, where the Gypsies attend services, and perform the sermons and hymns in their mother tongue. Bulgaria is an interesting example of the spread of Evangelical Christianity among Gypsy groups, much intensified since 1990.

In looking at the Gypsy population, we must bear in mind that we are talking about a heterogeneous ethnic community, comprising different subdivisions, some of which are in effect closed groups. These subdivisions are group communities which might practise different religions (Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam), speak different languages, lead different ways of life (settled or nomadic/semi-nomadic), have various forms of inter-group social organisation, and other features.

In Bulgaria, there are Christian Orthodox Gypsies, Muslims, Catholics and ‘new’ Christians (Evangelists). Orthodox Gypsies are called traditionally *Dasikane roma* („Bulgarian Gypsies”). Other groups that are traditionally Orthodox Christians are *Asparuhovi bălgari* (“Asparukh Bulgarians”, they define themselves like this after the name of the old Bulgarian Khan Asparukh, whom they consider to be their “king”); *Rudari* (Romanian speaking Gypsies, who are divided into two subgroups: *Ursari* – “beartrainers” and *Lingurari* – “spoonmakers”); *Burgudžii* (“gimletmakers”), *Košničari* (“basketmakers”), *Kardaraši*, *Thracian Kalajdžii* (“tinsmiths”), *Rešetari* (“sievemakers”), etc., and Muslims – *Millet*

(“people”), Gypsies with a preferred Turkish identity, Xoraxane roma (“Turkish Gypsies”), Muzikanti (“musicians”), Erlii (“locals”), Daalari (from Turkish dağ “mountain”, also called Bivolari: from Bulgarian bivol “buffalo”; Muslim, former nomads, speak both Turkish and Romani languages), etc. The Muslims inhabit Eastern Bulgaria, whereas the Orthodox Christians occupy Western Bulgaria. The Gypsies speak Romanes (Gypsy language), but to others the mother tongue is either Romanian, Turkish or Bulgarian. In the recent past some of the Gypsies led a mobile way of life (Rudari, Košničari, Kardaraši, Burgudžii, Thracian Kalajdžii, etc.), unlike those whose ancestors have long since settled (Erlii, Muzikanti, Xoraxane roma, Dasikane roma, Asparuhovi bâlgari etc.). The last of nomadic groups settled after the 1950s, when the N-258 decree of the Council of Ministers ordered compulsory sedentarization and settling at a given address of all nomads. In the majority of the Gypsies the endonym of the group originated from the kind of livelihood they practiced or had practiced – for example Košničari (they weave baskets, chairs, flower stands, etc.), Kalajdžii (because they tinned utensils), Muzikanti (they played music).

The better part of the Gypsies adopted the Evangelical baptism after 1989, when the social and economic crisis occurred due to the collapse of the socialist regime (1944-89). Against the backdrop of the crisis many of them lost their jobs and became very poor. In the early 1990s the Gospel had a powerful effect on the marginalized communities and individuals. Parallel to that ran another trend – that of the worldwide spread of Evangelism, and the Bulgarian Gypsies followed suit and converted in the name of Jesus Christ. The processes became stable in the second half of the 1990s, when a constant number of believers was set up. During that period it is no longer possible to talk of an immediate link between the processes of marginalization and Evangelization. The second stage is characterized by the ongoing dynamics and segmentation of the churches under the influence of individual Romani ministers, who seek an audience for the demonstration of their authority. Some of the Gypsy repented as early as in socialist times. Others have been Protestants for generations and bring up their own children in the spirit of the rules and regulations of behaviour adopted by the religious community.

According to the census carried out in Bulgaria in 2001, the Roma population was 370,908, e.g. 4,7 % of the country’s population. 42,308 people have declared themselves as Protestants. According to some pastors, there were over 800 Romani churches in Bulgaria and the number of Romani Pentecostal preachers, ordained elders, and deacons, is over 600. Besides, the leadership of the “Association of Romani Pastors” estimates approximately 50,000 Romani Pentecostal believers in Bulgaria, which most likely refers to the regular

Gypsy churchgoers. But their actual number is much higher and probably nearly a third or a fourth of the country's Evangelical Christians are Gypsies. There are few Gypsy families in Bulgaria, who are not Evangelical or have no relatives who have not been converted. Currently, each Gypsy neighbourhood has its own Protestant church.

The baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit is a symbolic act, which marks the end of the old life and celebrates the beginning of the new one. Converting means believing in the power of Jesus Christ, but it also requires the observance of rules and moral regulations introduced by the Church. Being an Evangelist is not only a matter of personal choice, but an opportunity presented to the entire community to believe in and accept Jesus Christ as savior. "Worldly" life remains outside the world of the righteous. The fewer the contacts of the Gypsy worshippers with the "people of the world", the lesser their "dirtying". These perceptions serve to create boundaries between Evangelists and non-Evangelists ("people of the world"). Evangelists accept a type of religion, Protestantism, different from the traditional ones and start a 'new life', reborn in the name of Jesus Christ. They are a heterogeneous community and are Methodists, Congregationalists (also called simply 'Evangelists'), Baptists, Adventists (or Sabbatarians), Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other groups. The majority of the Gypsies are Pentecostals or adherents of the Churches of God.

Under the influence of Evangelism, tendencies have appeared signaling the formation of a new Gypsy community. Distancing themselves from the traditional religion, representatives of different Gypsy groups accept a different faith and a different way of life. The community of the Gypsy Evangelists imagines itself as a 'new' community, mainly due to the form of Protestantism adopted. All converts feel that they belong to 'God's chosen people'—those who will gain salvation through their belief in Jesus Christ—and on this basis they define themselves as believers. The acceptance of Evangelism changes their religious identity, and along with this consolidates in a new way the identity of the separate Gypsy groups. The converts continue to be 'Gypsies', 'Turks', 'Bulgarians', or 'Rudari', but now a person converted is 'better' than a non-believer, and in a sense 'born again'. The creation of a new community of Evangelical Gypsies does not exclude the preservation of group boundaries between the separate Gypsy communities, or the boundaries between the Gypsies as a whole and the Gadže (the non-Gypsies). Evangelism is spread successfully among all Gypsy groups, including the Orthodox Christians and the Muslims. The least affected remain the groups of the Kaldaraši, the Thracian Kalajdzii, and the Daalari, who have preserved to the greatest extent their inter-community way of life and the inter-group self-governance structures. The Rešetari from the region of Lom in Northwestern Bulgaria also used to be

nomads, but settled down in the 1920-30s. They however became the first Gypsy group in Bulgaria to accept the Gospel. The first Romani church in Bulgaria opened doors in 1930 in a small village in Northwestern Bulgaria. The church was built with the financial support of Austrian Baptists. The Gypsies used to gather for services in their homes ever since the beginning of the century led by the Gypsy preacher Petar Punchev. In 1923 he was officially ordained as pastor by the Union of Bulgarian Evangelical Baptist Churches. During that period some of the gospels were translated into Romanes - “E Isus-Xristoskoro Džiipe thai Meribe e Sfjatone Lukestar” by Bernard Gilliat-Smith into the Erlii dialect (Gilliat-Smith 1912), “Somnal evangelie (lil) Matejatar” into the Kalajdžii’ dialect (Atanasakiev 1932), etc.

In present days the role of the Evangelical churches in the community life and social organization of the Bulgarian Gypsies is essential. They are not just religious structures, but play the role of a new kind of inter-community organization. By means of its rules and regulations the Romani church led by the pastor moulds in various ways the lifestyle of its members. The new ideology has an impact on the most important categories of beliefs, world perceptions and the reasoning of the Gypsies.