SUCCESSFUL ROMA: FROM HISTORICALLY INHERITED BIASES TO MODERN IDENTITY[1]

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*T*his is a presentation of a research project trying to explore the topic of successful Roma in Bulgaria. The subject of successful Roma did not constitute so far, the topic of dedicated research. While some partial studies might address the issue of Roma elites, most of the research concentrated on Roma as a social problem and the subsequent policies. The project described here looks at **the life courses of successful Roma**, researches the **mechanisms** (educational, family, professional, informal) which have been a part of the process of individual development and the formation of a national identity among the Roma, analyses the success of Roma in **concrete activities and fields** of social life and also aims to formulate **effective policies** for optimizing the participation of successful Roma in the process of the formation of national identity.

ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF RESEARCH IN BULGARIA, IN THE FIELD

The contemporary national identity in Bulgaria is an internalized feeling – reinforced by outward behaviour – of belonging and co-belonging, shared by the members of the various ethnic groups living on the territory of the country. The force and stability of national identity is also measured by the degree in which people of the dominant ethnos and of the ethnic minorities identify themselves by, equate themselves with, the values, norms, and symbols of the Bulgarian state.

The ways in which the Roma in Bulgaria are linked with and integrated into the Bulgarian national identity vary considerably. One of these ways, which has proven

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its viability, is **the consolidation of the national identity of the Roma through mechanisms of integration into the social structure** of society by **inclusion of members of the Roma ethnos** (as happens among the other ethnic groups) **into the various social groups and social relationships** in society. This, in brief, is the core idea of the project: by analyzing **the basic types of life courses** of the "successful Roma" in our country, to discover **the mechanisms of permanent strengthening of Roma identity by adding to it the values, norms, and strivings for development that are characteristic of modern Bulgarian society.** By taking part successfully in the social structure of the national society, the "successful Roma" become not only **a positive example, but also role models for other Roma.** By achieving success in their personal careers, they become considerably better integrated into society and come to play the role of **bearers and intermediaries of the prevalent values and norms of national society.** In our view, this is a particularly suitable mechanism for integration of the Roma, inasmuch as research has definitely shown that the Roma are far from adequately represented at the different levels and cross-sections of the social structures (Tilkidjiev 2003:149–158).

TOPICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH TOPIC

Who are the **"successful Roma**", those whose example may be expected to contribute to the development of a Bulgarian national identity among the other Roma in our country? It would be a serious error to view the Roma as a general, amorphous, undifferentiated mass of people. Research has confirmed that, apart from the state of closure, poverty, social isolation, segregation, which are the issues most often discussed, there are other processes observable among the Roma (especially since 1990), there are internal stratification trends, whereby **certain more affluent strata and with a higher position** are emerging in the community. Among these are: the heterogeneous stratum of **Roma businessmen, Roma politicians and government officials** (in central and local community government), influential **leaders and activists of Roma NGOs** (dealing with Roma projects, especially on "desegregation in education", and with practical projects, whereby they come into frequent and highly subordinating contact with the Roma population), representatives of the **Roma intelligentsia** (teachers, assistant teachers and other educational staff; journalists in Roma media and other media; artists: musicians, singers, musical instrumentalists, dancers, etc.).

There is something in common among all these. The "**successful Roma**" are those who have attained a **high position** (compared with the rest of the ethnos and even with the general population) at national and local level, **as a result of the possession and utilization of at least one of the following resources (capitals)**: economic (property and wealth), power (organizational capital – influence), and cultural resources (education, knowledge, qualification); this list corresponds to Max Weber's classical conception of the multi-dimensional social stratification.

Since we are talking about "**successful**" Roma, we must specify what we mean by "success". We take this term as referring to the assessment and/or self-assessment that a given individual has already achieved mobility from a previous to a present situation (wealth, status, position), a mobility considered by society, by the individual and/or by his reference groups, environment and community to be a positive, upward move that carries advantages, compared with the previous situation. Such is the self-assessment about the **positive mobility of the individual himself,** about his/her positive personal achievements toward a **better quality of life** today (by the time of the survey) than he/she had in the past (a past moment with reference to which the individual estimates he/she has achieved better material life conditions), as well as **subjective satisfaction** ("**success identity**", self-identification as a "successful person"). On the other hand, success includes the **relevance** of the subjective assessment to the public context, a reference, when making this assessment, to the general matrix of objective well-being (how good the situation, status, living conditions are in a concrete society) and to the recognized (legitimate) hierarchy of satisfaction within society.

WHO ARE SUCCESSFUL ROMA PEOPLE AND EXPECTED RESULTS

More concretely, we differentiate six categories of "successful Roma" (the list may be supplemented in the course of the project): **Roma businesspersons, Roma politicians and government officials, Roma leaders and NGO activists, Roma teachers and other educational cadres, Roma journalists, Roma musicians, Roma students.**

We assume that the "successful Roma" are essentially the "Roma that have risen" in society, in other words, the representatives of the **"Roma elite"**, tentatively speaking, or of the "upper middle class" among the Roma (Tilkidjiev, 2002). Despite the similarity, the terms "intelligentsia" and "elite" can be applied to the Roma only provisionally: these are not the most adequate terms for the case. Moreover, "successful Roma" may not be representatives of the elite in the exact sense of the word, they may be situated at lower social-structural levels of society, as regards to wealth, power, and knowledge, yet be evaluated highly enough as "successful" people by the Roma community; and this makes them important for researchers and politicians.

The successful Roma are an important structural component; they can **play a significant role in the formation of national identity among the Roma.** They are some of the most important participants in this complex and complicated process of formation, a process that depends on multiple factors (Smith, 2000). While the economic and political elite tends to create an economically and politically monolithic society, the intellectual elite determines the cultural project for cultural development of the whole, sets the values, behaviour models, normative system, and life strategies. Every minority community can become part of the nation and be

recognized by the latter only if it shows it has assimilated the national matrices. The opening of a minority to a concrete society is a precondition for social prosperity and access to resources, for overcoming capsulation and marginalization. Only under these conditions is it possible for the minority to construct common networks with others, to join in shared spaces, in places of actual encounters.

There is undoubtedly some dependency between successful personalities in a community and the building of a new identity. First of all, **successful people** provoke problematization of the ethnic identity. Due to inherited attitudes, it is assumed, in the Roma community, that belonging to their ethnos is a primal cause of lack of social success. An even more widely held and deeply ingrained view is that being a Roma definitely entails a "life of misery", and is a cause of criminal behaviour. A **successful Roma** is, actually, an untypical phenomenon, and one that seems to contradict the notion that the Roma community and Roma identity are "foredoomed" to misery. The presence of **elites in this community** is the start of a change in the prevailing identification schemas regarding the clan and the community. Successful people serve as proof that **success is connected with good integration, with the assimilation of certain stereotypes, norms, and forms of communication shared by the majority and serving as one of the conditions of prosperity.** In this case one reasons thus: "If so-and-so is succeeding, why shouldn't I succeed?" In this case, the successful are a **model for emulation**. They serve to catalyze the **change of the "foredoomed" ethnic identity and the formation of a generally positive national identity**, because **the latter helps facilitate the process of adaptation and inclusion into the social environment** where success can be achieved. This probably holds true mostly for the younger people, those with a more open and flexible identity, who live in an urban environment and have multiple and various social contacts with people outside their ethnos. The successful people serve as factors stimulating the decrease of ethnocentrism; they contribute to shortening ethnic distances.

However, the successful may also provoke a different and extreme response among the community: they might be rejected, labeled as people who have "betrayed" their ethnic definition, who have changed their ethnic self-perception and adopted a different identity. We may assume this response will occur among the more conservative members, those with a harder ethnic identity, the elderly, the less educated, people in villages and marginal regions. But the validity of such an assumption must be tested in the field.

The image of the successful Roma may be said to have both a destructive and a constructive side to it. **The destructive aspect** is connected with the above-mentioned conservative forms of ethnic identity and closure. **The constructive aspect** is related not only to accelerating the process of formation of national identity but also to the elimination or minimizing of all the secondary phenomena that result from hard ethnic identification. In other words, the ambivalent image of the "successful" and of the Roma elites in general not only tend to break down certain archaic forms of ethnic identity, but they **contribute to its modernization and inclusion in the national**

identity. Here the self-consciousness that elites bring into a given community plays a double role: it **renews certain values, norms, rules, moral codes** according to the requirements of the social environment, whose coordinates are set by the predominant community. In the Roma community, however, these processes are of a far more complex nature, due to the specific structure of Roma identity, which is more dynamic, agile, specified according to sub-groups.

The successful Roma are models of achievement to be imitated and followed by the other community members; they are people in a position perceived as higher, valued and respected by the other members of the ethnic community. Hence their double role as **mediators, go-betweens**: on the one hand, being included in the social structure of society and holding better positions in it, they "pull" towards the ethnic community certain national elements, traits, characteristics of the nation, of national identity; on the other hand, the members of the ethnic community who have risen to a higher position serve as a natural bridge from the parceled and "foredoomed" ethnic identity, negatively perceived as "living in poverty and misery", to the general national identity. The successful Roma not only transmit the essential part of the "cultural heritage" but additionally develop it (in their own image, of course). It is precisely in **this "heritage" that the many "historical layers" lie**, the labeling, the stigmatization of the Roma ethnos; the successful Roma have **succeeded** in pulling away from these layers toward a different, **more modern identity.** Their better education, higher power position, greater popularity in public, political and cultural life, provides them with resources for strong influence over the ethnos, for assuming the role of "representatives of their community" before society.

The relative share of "successful Roma" is certainly not large. Considering, for instance, the Roma intelligentsia, meaning people with higher education and whose actual work requires the qualification of university graduates, we see that it amounts to far less than one percent of the population of Bulgaria[2]. The share of other categories of "successful Roma" is no bigger. But the project is concerned not with the quantity but with the **quality of their actual influence** and the possibility they will have an impact on the rest of the Roma. We will remind the skeptics – those who believe such a small category can hardly change things – that at times of parliamentary and local elections, politicians of various parties seek the favours of the Roma, and the election of various politicians and mayors sometimes depends on this small group.

For us it is important that these are precisely the **social actors through whom the integration of the Roma may be accelerated to a great degree**, through whom the ethnos may be included more adequately in economic, political, cultural, and social life.

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[2] According to data of the World Bank, the Roma in Bulgaria have the following educational profile: with no education: 13.3%; with primary education: 76.4%; secondary education: 10%; university education: 0.2%. By way of comparison, the levels among Bulgarians are as follows: 6.4% are without education; 28.1% have primary education; 45.4% have secondary; 20.1% have a university education (*Stigmata*, 2004).

Of course, the focus of research interest should be aimed at more than a detailed dissection of the successful Roma alone, of their personal characteristics and potential. The question is how their specific characteristics and perspectives can work more strongly for positive developments in society. And this aim entails seeing the successful Roma as part of a whole social structure; we should not simply applaud their growing number, but look to a deeper sense of their integration: that they may compete successfully with other successful people in society. In brief, we should think about a transition **from "successful Roma" to "successful citizens" of Bulgaria**. This emphasis would not damage their cultural specificity in the framework of multiculturalism; it is by being more integrated socially that they can be more "noticed" and valued by the rest of society.

That is why the in-depth study of "successful Roma" is a **scientific and practical issue**, a research that will trace and analyze the transition from a firmly assimilated cultural-historical heritage to the created and on-going formation of a national identity. The search for, and formulation of, concrete policies involving relevant institutions, can contribute to the national consolidation of contemporary Bulgarian society.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY GROUNDS, PROPOSALS AND TASKS

The proposed project include:

● a study of the stages, **the life courses through which individual success passes;**

● research on the **existing mechanisms** – educational, the family, professional, informal – which have been a part of the process of individual development and the formation of a national identity among the Roma;

● analysis of the success of Roma in **concrete activities and fields** of social life: business, culture, the mass-media, state and municipal administration, art;

● formulation of **effective policies** for optimizing the participation of successful Roma in the process of the formation of a national identity.

The effectiveness of this project must be looked for in the following directions: an emphasis on the **positive** aspects of the formation and development of the Roma community and on the shared experience of certain of its representatives; highlighting a positive image of the Roma would promote the transition from ethnic to national identity and the smoother transition to interethnic tolerance among the population, from negative to more positive attitudes towards the Roma ethnos. Of course, we do not expect a fully positive image of the "successful Roma" to emerge – positive as regards public interests – just as there can be no entirely positive image of the Bulgarian, of the Bulgarian Turk, of the Bulgarian Muslim, etc. But the positive emphasis of the research topic is a favorable research condition and a practical framework, as well as a message to the public. The project starts with a study of topics that have **not yet been investigated**, and aims thereby to activate the scientific

community and the representatives of the state and local administration, decision makers, and public opinion makers.

In the framework of the goal formulated above, we envisage implementing the following **project tasks:**

● Studying the **life course and current life situation** of successful Roma, including the **forms and mechanisms of their assimilation of the cultural-historical heritage**, the accumulated historical heritage in their ethnic and national identity.

● Study of the **international, especially East European experience** regarding such members of the Roma minority or of other minorities.

● Study of the **types of life courses, of the specific processes of social mobility** that are linked with their success.

● Study of the planned and realized **policies applied in the past**, specifically from 1944 until the present, for creating conditions for the success of ethnic minorities, including the Roma.

● Analysis of the opinions, stands and **assessments of various stakeholders** regarding the existant policies (at state, local and NGO level) for promoting the process of transition from an ethnic to a national identity of the Roma.

● Formulating concrete recommendations and proposals for optimizing the existing policies, for generating and systematizing new ideas.

Scientific value: this project is based on three basic theoretical and methodological foundations, for which there are rich classical and modern traditions of use in interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research in the social and humane sciences:

● **The theories of social mobility**, which analyze upward mobility and career development (Miller 1956; Kahl 1957; Blau and Duncan 1967; Halsey 1977; Treiman and Ganzeboom 2000).

● **Life course theories** applied in the study of individual and group development, a methodology that includes the biographic and other qualitative methods in the social sciences (Bertaux, 1981; Silverman, 1985).

● **Ethnic and national identity theories** – about possible transitions from ethnic to national identity (Blau 1974; Tajfel 1984; Turner 1984; Smith 2000; Huntington 2005).

Multidisciplinary approach: the proposed project will engage researchers working in theoretical fields of sociology and in public administration. Thus, apart from the theoretical knowledge that they contain, the results will include practical recommendations for concrete public policies, addressed to institutions engaged in Roma problems and national identity.

INNOVATION

The proposed project is entirely original in its idea and intentions; in previous research project (2005–2008) (See in the Bibliography: Tilkidjiev, N. *et al.*, 2009,

***Roma Dropouts*)** the emphasis has almost exclusively been on poverty, social exclusion and segregation of the Roma from society; here, the stressout will be on a different, **rather unfamiliar, positive image or aspect of the Roma community**, and on the possibility of exerting influence through it on the whole ethnic group. Another innovative element will be the use of the rich experience of colleagues in our country and abroad in the study of and work with Roma.

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*A*ceasta este o prezentare a unui proiect de cercetare ce încearcă să exploreze subiectul (cetăţenilor) romi(lor) de succes, din Bulgaria. Acest subiect nu a mai constituit, până acum, obiectul vreunei cercetări. În vreme ce unele studii parţiale au abordat chestiunea elitelor rome, majoritatea cercetărilor s-au concentrate pe populaţia romă ca problemă socială şi pe politici în domeniu. Proiectul descris aici priveşte cursul vieţii acestor romi de succes, cercetează mecanismele (educaţionale, familiale, profesionale, informaţionale) ce constituie parte din procesul dezvoltării individuale şi din formarea identităţii naţionale în rândul romilor, analizează succesul acestora în activităţi şi domenii concrete ale vieţii sociale şi, de asemenea, au ca scop formularea de politici eficiente pentru optimizarea participării romilor de succes în procesul de formare a identităţii naţionale.