Segregation and the Roma

The most important reason why the Roma lag behind is their isolation from the larger world and culture.

(Gospodin Kolev, The Bulgarian Communist Party and the Gypsies in the period 1944–1989)

I. Introduction

In this article, I discuss the policies of the Bulgarian state toward the Roma in the modern history of Bulgaria after its independence from Ottoman rule in 1878. I analyse the roots of segregation and its impact on the Roma, the attitude of Roma toward segregation, and the role of the state in this process. I use the term segregation both as a term from international human rights law and as a broader concept describing the condition of Roma in society. In the first sense, I use segregation to describe practices of separation of Roma on the basis of ethnic origins without any reasonable or objective justification which arise on the initiative or with the direct involvement of public authorities or as an unintended by-product of the actions of...
private persons. In both instances, international human rights law binds the state with targeted action to eradicate segregation. In the second sense, I use segregation to describe the exclusion of Roma from various spheres of social life.

The manifestations of this problem are traced in three periods in the modern history of Bulgaria: from the independence of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the Communist rule (1878-1944), during the socialist period (1944-1989), and in the period after the political transformation in 1989 to today. The minority policy of the Bulgarian state before 1989 was aimed at the social homogenisation of the Bulgarian nation and at the assimilation of ethnic and religious minorities as a strategic future goal. The main target of this policy had been the Turkish minority, which was identified as a potential threat for the unity of the Bulgarian nation and at times, for the territorial unity of the state. Consequently, the implementation of the strategic goal of the state with respect to the ethnic Turks involved more aggressive and consistent attempts for assimilation, combined with campaigns for their expulsion from the territory of the state.

In contrast, the Roma, who were the second largest ethnic minority group, and were also unwanted as an alien group, were not perceived as a threat and enjoyed less attention by the authorities. With respect to the Roma, homogenisation and future assimilation was also the intended outcome of state policies, however, their presence in the territory was not perceived as a threat and it was sufficient to isolate and segregate them. The segregation of Roma manifested in actions by public authorities to physically separate Roma from the majority and the process of marginalisation of Roma in social life began in the years after Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire and continued during the time of the socialist period. While in the period before 1944, the segregation of Roma was mostly the result of lack of state policy for the inclusion of Roma in society, in the socialist period, the segregation of Roma was the outcome of ill-conceived policy and failure to sustain integration measures. The Communist authorities had declared intentions to eliminate patterns of segregation of the Roma as part of the overall policy for inclusion of this group within the Bulgarian socialist nation. However, despite the political will to realise this goal, the efforts of the state institutions were inconsistent and the outcomes were controversial: some Roma children were integrated into mainstream schools but the efforts to eliminate the segregated schools in the Roma neighbourhoods were mostly unsuccessful; Roma families were integrated among non-Roma in the villages and towns, but


3 See the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, in force for Bulgaria since 8 August 1966.