

THE SITUATION OF THE ROMA IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE TODAY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Out of misconception or out of outright clichés, the general public view about Gypsies, or Rroma, is usually prejudiced from the onset: Travellers, beggars, thieves, dirty, living in squalor with numerous children, but often also beautiful, free, with high spirits and a wonderful music. To say the least, if the eight to twelve million Rroma living in Europe all conformed to these stereotypes, Rroma would fill newspaper headlines, roads, and cities all over Europe...

As this is obviously not the case, even in countries such as Bulgaria or Romania with a substantial Rroma minority, something about this standard view must be wrong. In fact, the standard view, especially in the Balkans, bears very little resemblance to the facts: Who thinks of a Rrom prosecutor, doctor, farmer, or professor? These and many other jobs are seldom associated with Rroma, although they do exist in numbers that are larger than one may think.

So, whenever writing about Rroma, one first has to go back to the basics. This is especially true of the Balkans, where none of the standard Western clichés actually applies.

II. A MORSEL OF HISTORY

But alien they are, alien, at least in the view of the general population. Are they really so? This misconception is deeply anchored in the minds of almost all Europeans. But Europeans they are. Yes, true Europeans.

Nowadays, it is rather commonly known that Rroma originally came from India and that their language, Rromanes, has its roots in Prakrit, the spoken version of Sanskrit. This fact, discovered in the eighteen's century is by now uncontested.

But European they are... How can that be? After all, they are migrants, travellers who, over centuries arrived and settled in Europe. This is not quite so. There was but one wave of emigration from India, and one alone. For unknown reasons, they left the Indian subcontinent early, travelling through Persia prior to the Arab invasions in the seventh century.

From there, one can follow the Rroma ancestors' to Armenia, whose territory stretched through a large part of Eastern Turkey up to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. They settled there, became Christian, and most probably adhered to the prevalent Armenian religious movement, the Paulicians, a manichaeist sect considered to be heretics in the western world. The Byzantine Empire, having destroyed the Paulicians' power, deported Armenians to Thrakia in the Balkans in the ninth and tenth century, to act as a buffer against the continuing incursions of the Bulgarians and Serbs.

Among these deportees were Rroma who arrived in Europe with an original tarnish of heretics and were given the name of Athinganoi, a name they were to carry for a long time, as it is the source of the Slavic Tsigan or the Romanian Țigani.

So Rroma have lived for quite a long time in Europe... In fact, they arrived a few centuries after the Bulgarians, four hundred years after the Slavs, but before the Hungarians. So although late arrivals in the general “Völkerwanderung” that occurred after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, they were by far not the last to settle in Europe. And settled they were. No travellers!

III. RROMA GROUPS AND CULTURE

From the Byzantine Empire, the three main directions into which Rroma spread formed the basis of three of the four main branches of all Rroma in Europe. The four branches, Balkan – the ones who remained; Carpathian centred in what is now Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and Austria; Vlax, in present day Romania and beyond due to further migrations; and Nordic, in Western and Northern Europe; further subdivided themselves into smaller entities, often called groups that are the core of the Rroma identity as well as a constant source of confusion.

One often hears of Rroma, Sinti, Kale, or, in the context of Kosovo, about Rroma, Ashkali, and Egyptians. For the non-initiated, it is often difficult to understand the subtleties of these appellations. On the other hand, if one knows that Sinti in Poland call themselves “Sasytke Rroma”, literally “German Gypsies”, or that in the Czech Republic, they call themselves Kale, very much like, spelling apart, the Spanish Gypsies or the Finnish Rroma (Kaale), one needs to ask oneself a few questions... Name can be confusing, politics even more. Sinti are one Rroma group, as are the Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo. In fact, should one ask, as we usually do, an Ashkali who speaks Romanes (yes, there are quite a lot) what he or at least what his father was, he will usually reply “Burgudži”. This is just a tip of an immense iceberg, as Rroma do tend to identify themselves first and foremost to their group and not necessarily to the common “Rroma” cause. This is exemplified by some use of the term Rroma among Rroma themselves. Rrom (plural Rroma) means both man and husband. But quite a few Vlax Rroma simply use the term “Rrom” to describe themselves, omitting any mention of group appurtenance, which, however, they use for others. It is thus not uncommon to hear a Kalderaš, Lovar, or Gurbet say that he is Rrom, whereas other Rroma in the region are Arlii, Poslka, or whatever group they belong to.

There are about forty to fifty groups overall, some small, like the Lotfitke (Latvian) Rroma, with about fifteen thousand individuals, while others, such as the Arlii, found all over the western Balkans probably number around a million if not more. These groups should not be assimilated to tribes, for tribes they are not. They are much more socio-economic groups bound by a common traditional activity (coppersmiths, blacksmith, horse dealer, etc.), by a common historical heritage or, sometimes, to a cultural region, such as the Sinti in Germany.

Rroma always speak several languages: Usually the local one in addition to Romanes, and often a third or even fourth one, as is in the Balkans. This second language is not a late acquisition in life, a language never used at home, but is very much a second mother tongue spoken at home since early childhood. In Kosovo, it is not rare to hear conversations among Rroma starting in

Rromanes, continuing almost mid-sentence into Turkish, switching to Albanian and Serbo-Croatian and reverting into Rromanes.

When moving to a third country, this second mother tongue did blend itself into Rromanes, and although those words are easily identifiable in Rromanes, they become mainstream. This should not obscure the fact that over seventy percent of Rromanes is shared and identical among all groups. But often, Rromanes is no longer really spoken and has become a real pidgin, making it nearly impossible for others to understand it.

Rroma in the Balkans are overwhelmingly Moslems. This was not always the case, as originally, all were orthodox. During the Ottoman rule, a fair number of Rroma converted, resulting in about two third of all Rroma in those countries being Moslems. Rroma in all countries generally took the prevalent religion. This somewhat cavalier attitude towards official religion should not obscure the fact that most Rroma are strong believers, and that God traditionally occupies a large place in Rroma life. However, whenever religion clashes with traditions, traditions tend to have the upper hand. These traditions, ranging from traditional tribunals to various rituals, are an integral part of everyday Rroma life but their detailed description would go far beyond such a short introduction to a photo book.

IV. RROMA IN THE BALKANS

The Balkans is the cradle of the Rroma presence in Europe. As such, it is not astonishing that it has historically also been the home of a large proportion of all Rroma in Europe. Of the eight to twelve million Rroma living in Europe, a good five to seven millions lives in the Balkan. Numbers are usually hard to come by, were it not for the fact that under the Ottoman rule, Rroma were subjected to a special tax. As early as the fifteenth century, the Ottomans produced detailed tax registers, a gold mine of information on the numbers and occupations of Rroma in the region. From those registers and from later ones, one sees that the Rroma population remained remarkably stable, oscillating between ca. 15-20% in regions such as Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria to 10% in other places. Nowadays, one finds ca. 100,000 Rroma in Albania, 150,000 in Bosnia, 900,000 in Bulgaria, 30,000 in Croatia, 250,000 in Greece, 250,000 in Kosovo prior to the war, nowadays only 30'000, 40'000 in Montenegro, and ca 300,000 in Serbia. In all those countries, especially in the South and West, the majority of Rroma are from the Balkan groups, with the Arlii/Jerlides and Burgudži (also known as Kovači) dominating the landscape. Bulgaria has a plethora of other Balkan groups, such as Jerlii (Arlii), Kalajdži, Drindari, etc., and in Southern Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro, one also finds Gurbeti, a Vlax group that fled Romania in the eighteenth century. Further north, Mačvaja, Dirzara and other Vlax groups are the most prevalent. Vlax Rroma can also be found in Greece and to a lesser extent in European Turkey.

Romania stands apart in the Balkan. As early as the fifteenth century, Rroma became slaves of the church, state, or local nobility. This slavery was to last until the 1860's and the extrapolation of the number of freed slaves in the 1860's hints that ca. 2.5 to 3 million Rroma live in that country nowadays.

In the Southern Balkans, Vlax Rroma were and are generally less integrated in society, remaining more on the fringes, and a such perhaps more visible and more conforming to the standard prejudices commonly heard about Rroma.

The overwhelming majority of Rroma were and always have been sedentary. In the first Ottoman census, listing ca. 22'000 Rroma families, only eleven were deemed to be travellers. It is only later, in the eighteenth century, with the influx of Rroma from Romania fleeing slavery that the first travellers, the ancestors of nowadays Gurbeti, are being mentioned. Rroma had all sorts of activities. These ranged from police officers, servants, farmers, bakers, and so on, to the more traditional steel smith, mostly actually producing weapons and cannons for the Ottoman Empire or, in the Carpathian basin, for the local rulers in defence of the Turks.

Perhaps one of the most enduring consequences of the Turkish occupation of the Balkan is the creation of so-called "mahala". Mahala were originally segregated town quarters or streets, where different ethnic groups or religions were strongly encouraged to live. During Ottoman rule, there were thus orthodox (i.e. Bulgarian or Serbian), Armenian, Turkish, Greek, and Rroma mahala. The latter ones are still to be found all over the Balkan.

V. NOWADAYS

One of the most pervasive, and I should say pernicious, views of Rroma is that they only are a social problem. Who has not seen pictures of what can only be described as "favelas", with semi-naked children running around and even scavenging garbage, who has not heard that "they" do not work, want to work, that "they" do not send their children to school, that "they" live only on social care and so on?

Is it really so or are the roots of this situation lying deeper than is just convenient or comfortable to look at? To take one archetypal example, Slovakia, one is confronted with these cardboard huts, ghettos, and nearly universal unemployment. But turning the clock, one finds more complex roots to this social issue. Starting the Austrian Empire, Rroma in that region, who were traditionally well integrated in the villages they lived in, were forced to re-settle into segregated settlements called osada. They were forbidden to intermarry, forbidden to talk Romanes (something that succeeded in Hungary but failed in Slovakia) and only allowed limited jobs and liberties. This situation perdured until the communist regime, which decided to regroup these small osada into a smaller number of larger settlements. This is the root of these very large ghettos that are the result of misconceived State policies.

During communist times, many Rroma were used as unskilled labour in factories and state farms, which, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, were promptly shut down in most countries. As a result, many Rroma found themselves without a job. Last but not least, the break-up of many of those countries often left Rroma in limbo, without even a citizenship in their own country. Maybe what proved to be one of the longest enduring legacies of the communist regime is the fact that in many Eastern European countries, Rroma children were sent to "special" schools, usually schools for disabled or mentally retarded children. This was common in most countries and only recently did one see a trend against this obvious discrimination. Alas, in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia, this is still very common. When sent to regular school, they were - and

unfortunately are still - told to quit at an early age, subjected to outright racism from their non-Rroma peers and teachers. Add to this mix a rampant racism in many countries, but especially so in the Czech and Slovak Republics, in Hungary, and one has all the root causes of the “social” problem.

Rroma in the region have been increasingly confronted with a new and worrying problem: obtaining official documents ranging from property deeds to simply identity cards. The reasons may vary but the trend is definitively there. In Serbia proper, this is due to the fact that many of the settlements are deemed to be illegal, regardless of the fact that many Rroma have lived there for nearly centuries. In other places, such as in Kosovo, southern Serbia, and to a lesser extent western Macedonia, there has been a real push to cleanse the official documents from any traces of an official Rroma presence. It is not uncommon nowadays to see Rroma who have a birth certificate from a given town or village being told that they never lived in the region. Property deeds, as a result of the communist regime are another extremely difficult problem. While some Rroma can trace their families through the Ottoman Empire, obtaining paper proving one owns land or a house is very difficult and in some regions such as Kosovo, impossible. In the latter region, even when such documents are available, the neighbours actually swear that the Rroma family never ever lived there. And if one insists, things rapidly get ugly, with threats and worse. This often leaves Rroma at the mercy of unscrupulous developers who “buy” the land on which they live for other purposes. In such cases, recourse to justice is nearly impossible.

This later point can be imputed to rampant corruption and criminality, fuelled in parts by the embargo on goods imposed as a result of the conflicts in the region, but criminality is increasingly a problem for Rroma in the region. They are easy prey to various gangs, and we know of several cases of young Rroma girls that were forcefully sent into prostitution. Unscrupulous gangs use the utter poverty of some Rroma to various purposes and schemes, like the recently unveiled one of an adoption ring in Greece buying children of Rroma women from Bulgaria (who never got paid). These press headlines, in addition with the fact that Rroma themselves are also often engaged in illegal if not outright criminal activities has in turn fuelled racism against the Rroma in the region.

Racism and Nationalism are nowadays one of the most stringent problem faced by Rroma all over Europe. One may at least argue that racism pre-dates our recent times, but that would not be fully true. In many countries or regions, such as Bulgaria or Kosovo, outright racism was not the norm. Rroma were integrated, and there was no ostracism or racism against them. There, the problem is more recent, while in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, racism proved to be an enduring feature and legacy. In many former communist countries, racist statements were tolerated under the banner of free speech, as in the Czech Republic where until recently signs such as “dogs and Gypsies forbidden” commonly hung in front of restaurants.

So what are the roots of this racism? This can be traced to populism and nationalism on one side and to economic difficulties on the other. With the post-communist changes, countries either embraced reforms or engaged in extreme nationalism or even war. In either case, the overall situation of the population proved to be difficult. Pensions, and this all over the former East European countries no longer were sufficient to lead a decent life, prices rose, unemployment was and in some cases still is latent, people had to adapt to a life without the socialist sheltering

umbrella. This, as is unfortunately nearly always the case, led to a search for scapegoats. And in such situations Roma are totally exposed. In addition, the fact that in many countries they found themselves at the bottom of the social pyramid left them totally exposed to being used by populist propaganda. Many politicians, for example Meciar in Slovakia, but also in Romania and other countries stated openly that Roma were genetically predisposed towards criminality, drunkenness, were of lower intelligence and so on. Unluckily, many politicians went further and suggested that they should be killed, thrown out of the country (even sent back to India), sterilised, a practice that was common in communist times.

It would not be fair to those countries to state that such comments could only be heard there. In fact, the Western press was only marginally better. Clearly, suggesting that a minority be killed or sterilised is no longer in fashion, but many a newspaper would have not dared to publish their articles had it not been for the fact that it is still tolerated to make such statements about Roma.

Nationalism proves to be the greatest current problem, especially in the Balkans. It may seem paradoxical that only now this proves to be so, while nationalism in that region has been present ever since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent Balkan wars in the beginning of the twentieth century. Clearly, from the independence onward, many countries tried to re-engineer their social fabric. The Serbs forced many Roma to change their family names, to make them more Serb like while the Bulgarians simply denied the existence of a Roma minority, and this up to the 1980's (although Bulgaria is home to nearly one million Roma). But apart from that, no real nationalistic thoughts or actions occurred in those countries, even in Bulgaria, an ally of Germany in World War Two. Nationalism was quite prevalent in Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and in Croatia. Croatians actually killed nearly all Roma during World War Two, while in Hungary and the Czech Republic, a large number were deported to German concentration camps. In Romania, Roma were deported in large numbers during that period, with many deaths resulting from deprivations.

But with the end of the Second World War and the instauration of authoritarian communist regime, nationalism was a forbidden thought. All were meant to be equal, all were meant to be brothers. Many authors have pondered as to whether the situation of Roma was better under socialism than afterwards. This question is warranted, especially if one considers the fate of Roma in regions such as Bosnia and in Kosovo. Clearly, all had work, or rather, an official job. Under these somewhat idyllic premises, the situation of Roma should have been much better. But better than what? Where they more integrated, more accepted? This was far from the case under socialism. We have seen that several policies such as the regrouping of settlements, or the fact that Roma were sent to special schools actually worsened the problem. In some countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Roma who managed to complete their educations could only go to the university when de facto hiding their true identity. In addition and in good Stalinist fashion, several communist governments re-settled Roma: Slovak Roma to the Czech part of the country, Serbian Roma to Croatia, and so on. With the break-up of those countries, the situation of Roma was to become extremely difficult. In addition, and this especially so in Yugoslavia, the Soviet Russian tradition of mentioning nationality in official papers was fairly strictly enforced. Many Roma found themselves with a nationality "Gypsy", alongside "Jews", "Moslem", and even some more exotic ones. It is actually quite astonishing to think that while

officially prohibiting any form of nationalism, socialist regimes laid the roots for the problems to come.

This prohibition of nationalism effectively remained in place until the fall of the Iron curtain. With the rise of Meciar in Slovakia, Milosevic in Serbia, Tudjman in Croatia, all conditions were in place for a murderous rise in nationalism. The violent break-up of Yugoslavia led to a wave of ethnic cleansing in the region. As usual, and even more so than the other ethnic or religious groups, Rroma found themselves victimised. In countries or in regions aspiring at being ethnically homogenous, there is no place for Rroma.

This was the case in Bosnia, where all parties, Croats, Bosnian Moslems and Serbs all took the opportunity to destroy, kill and displace Rroma. Most of these Rroma fled the country and cannot return. While one usually reads that the country is divided along ethnical lines, one needs to be rather more careful when looking closely at the situation. After all, all Moslem Bosnians and Croats are actually Slavs, the only ethnic minorities in those countries being Rroma, Turks, and Jews. As such, the state of Bosnia is now partitioned along religious rather than ethnical lines and one could think that Rroma, being Moslems, are welcome in the Moslem part of that country. This is far from being the case. First, traditionally, Moslem Rroma are not quite considered to be Moslems. This was already the case under the Ottoman and has perdured to this day. In addition to this, this religious split is actually nowadays considered to be an ethnic one. And is such a society based on homogeneity of the population and religion, Rroma have no place.

The Rroma who return find their houses destroyed, the property deeds vanished, or the houses occupied by other resettled people or even governmental agencies, as seen in the case of the Republika Srpska, home to a large number of Rroma prior to the war. In spite of the promises of the Dayton agreement, guaranteeing the return of all refugees to their original homes, in practice, this has not taken place. Rroma usually end up in no man's land, between the various factions, not being Serbs, Croats or not even Moslem enough.

In Kosovo, the Serbian authorities under Milosevic actually found themselves in a quandary. Serbs were not the largest minority in that region. The largest minority in Kosovo was actually Rroma. As such, the government devised a new approach. They basically created three main Rroma parties, Rroma, Ashkali, and Egyptians. While the latter ones were known since the early 60's, and trace their name to the old Greek name of Giftoi (Egyptians) for Rroma, Ashkali are a new breed. While many have lost their original language, quite a few still speak or at least understand Rromanes. In addition, a large number of Rroma, mostly the well-integrated Arlii were neither represented nor even acknowledged.

In the last census taken under Milosevic, the large majority of Rroma declared themselves as ethnic Albanians, either having been coerced or pressured to do so by the Albanian nationalists or on their own free will. This census, while contested by the Albanians due to a rather large Serbian minority, is ironically currently used by these very same people to demonstrate that the actual number of Rroma in the region was much smaller than the ones cited here. In fact, the Turkish statistics prove to be much more reliable. They constantly showed that the overall

Rroma population was above 15%, which based on an overall population of 2 million gives roughly 300'000 Rroma in that region.

Rroma, with perhaps the exception of a fringe of Gurbeti, at first sided with ethnic Albanians, supported their aspiration towards independence, and actually even supported the UCK against the Serbian authorities. This proved to be a wrong bet, for soon after the NATO intervention, they were forced, often alongside with Serbs, to flee the country. Of the originally nearly 300'000 Rroma in that region, a mere 30'000 remain nowadays. They are parked in their Rroma quarters or live in refugee camps such as in Plementina or others near Mitrovica, and when living amongst Albanians, as a large number of them did, are subjected to daily pressure, threats, or even physical violence. It is difficult to imagine the level of daily pressure the remaining Rroma are subjected to in that region, and the recent uncertainty as to the actual final status of Kosovo is increasing the pressure. One can seriously fear that the few remaining Rroma from Kosovo will be forced to leave soon, ending more than one thousand years of continuous Rroma presence in that region.

The Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts had repercussions on Rroma living in Serbia itself. First, a large influx of Serbian refugees prompted a backlash against Moslems in general (and many of the ca. 250'000 Rroma living there are Moslems); a backlash that culminated in riots in 2004, even in ethnically mixed cities such as Niš. The refugee issue also resulted in forced eviction of Rroma from various places to make room for ethnic Serbian refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo, this mostly in the southern part of the country. In addition, in Serbia, many Rroma lived or live in illegal settlements. There has been a drive from the authorities to actually clean these out, this without even proposing some decent alternatives. If one knows that, should one live without an official address, in a country that has remained socialist in its administration, one cannot easily get an identity card, even less so social or health care, and needless to say, certainly no work, one can easily imagine the situation that has been illustrated in numerous films by Emir Kusturica.

In spite of its geographical situation between Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo, Montenegro has by and large managed to stay out of any of the conflicts in the region. Even its independence proceeded peacefully. However, being so close to conflict zones meant that the region saw a large influx of refugees from both Bosnia and from Kosovo. Originally home to a rather small original Rroma population of 20 to 40'000 of mostly Gurbeti Rroma, the overall number increased due to refugees. As in other places, most notably in Macedonia, this created rather large issues for this small country. Refugee camps, some of which only Rroma sprouted near cities and rapidly became ghettos in all but name, generating an angry response from the general population. In recent times, the Montenegro government has tried to evict those refugees and send them back to their countries of origin. This is not yet quite successful, as neither Bosnia nor Kosovo are prepared to take a population that they actually ethnically cleansed away from their country, but has made the overall Rroma situation in Montenegro much more precarious.

In Albania, until recently, the situation of Rroma was neither worse nor better than that of the overall Albanian population. The iron dictatorship of Enver Hoxha and the near total isolation of the country meant that the ca. 100,000 Rroma in that country were relatively sheltered. After the fall of the dictatorship and the subsequent upheavals in that country, but mostly due to the Kosovo conflict and its stringent Albanian nationalism, the situation has begun to deteriorate.

Rampant discrimination, eviction of Rroma settlements, especially to make room for economic developments, an unemployment rate above the abysmal national average etc. have taken their toll on Rroma. While not as acute as in Kosovo, these recent developments, and the increasing nationalism and racism in that country are preoccupying developments that bode ill for the future of this minority.

While Macedonia managed to avoid being embroiled in the war that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia, its ethnic composition make that country a powder keg in the region. A large number of Rroma, at around ca. 200'000, a large Albanian minority, the Slavs themselves, as well as other smaller minorities compose this new country. Nationalism unfortunately proved to be on the rise. On the one hand, the Albanian minority, sometimes violently, fought for its recognition, provoking at times a backlash from the Slavic majority. As in Kosovo, Rroma, especially in the western part of the country proved to be pawns to this political game. The Albanians encouraged many of them, for example in the Tetovo region, to declare themselves as ethnic Albanians, a pattern already seen in Kosovo itself. During the conflict between the Macedonian Army and the Albanians, Rroma houses, especially in Tetovo were deliberately used by the insurgents, drawing the army fire on them and thus destroying quite a few houses. Intimidation of Rroma in that western part of the country is still common, although this has somewhat abated, and a large number of Rroma refugees from Kosovo, especially around Orhid complicate the situation in the western part of this country.

Within the borders of the municipality of Skopje, Macedonia's capital, one finds the so-called Shutka, a Rroma quarter, with nearly 100,000 inhabitants and a de facto city within the city, with a large degree of autonomy. The situation there has improved, with some of the basic infrastructure and services slowly being put in place. While some parts of the Shutka are still squalid, some other parts, while still overall poor, are being improved. However, the actual tensions with some strident nationalists on all side make these improvements very much dependent on the overall situation of the country. On the positive side, one needs to say that racism against Rroma is not yet the norm, and that the general population's stereotypes are not by and large as negative as in some surrounding countries. Education level of the Rroma population is quite high, as is often the case among Arlii, and there is quite a degree of integration of the Rroma minority, this is spite of the fact that it is overwhelmingly Moslem in an Orthodox country.

Bulgaria, with its nearly 900,000 Rroma, a good ten percent of the overall population, is paradoxically one of the countries with the least problems with Rroma. Clearly, as a look in some of the mahala will show, poverty is often the norm. Some of these mahala can be very large, such as in Sofia (Fakulteta) or in Plovdiv (Stolipinovo) where in both cases, around 40,000 Rroma live in often squalid conditions. Under communism, the ire of the regime concentrated itself against the Turkish minority, forcing them to change names, and even, in the last days of the regime, to flee the country. For those Rroma who have lost Rromanes, and there are a few in Bulgaria, and whose mother tongue is often Turkish, these times were not easy as they were assimilated to the Turks. The others were targets of neither racism nor nationalism and integrated themselves rather well in the society. Perhaps one of the points that distinguish Bulgaria from its neighbours was its education policies. Contrary to most other communist countries, there were schools in German, English, and French, not restricted to the children of the nomenklatura but

open for all gifted students. An astonishing number of Rroma were amongst them. Nevertheless, Bulgaria officially denied having a Rroma minority and this until the 1980's. Only after the fall of Zhivkov's regime did new statistics become available, revealing the true extent of this falsification.

Clearly, the very same problems as in other former socialist countries are to be found. As an example, in Sliven, home to a large textile industry since the nineteenth century, an industry that employed a large number of Rroma from the beginning, the closure of the factories resulted in a still difficult situation for the Rroma of that city. In addition, with a few exceptions, the redistribution of the land after the fall of communism left many Rroma out in the blue. Luckily, the country and to a large extent Rroma themselves took measure to correct these problems much earlier than other countries, for example modifying the property law to insure that Rroma would have access to property. In fact, Bulgaria's situation is different than the one of its neighbours. Rroma grassroots organisations are active since several years and have been extremely efficient. Perhaps due to the fact that the country is ethnically mixed, that the Rroma minority is so large, contrary to many other countries where "Rroma parties", alibis in all but name, are promoted, Rroma found a voice in politics in Bulgaria. Several parties from all sides courted their vote and this means that Rroma have a say in the overall policies of this country. The hope and now accession to the European Union also proved to be beneficial for Rroma at large, forcing the government into policies that it might under other circumstances have simply ignored. This is a stark contrast to the countries of the western Balkan.

This influence of the European Union has been a real force for change in many of the countries that are now part of the Union or aspiring to become members. The European Union pushed countries to change their laws, to prosecute obvious discrimination, to discontinue some of the most vicious policies. The EU action centred itself in combating discrimination and racism, pushing countries to discontinue their educational policies against Rroma, and to grant them regular citizen rights. While moral standards certainly played a large role in pushing governments to change, one cannot deny that Europe in general was getting worried that the large minorities in some of those countries might use their EU passports to go and seek a better life, prompting a potential migration on scales not seen since the War.

Romania, besides Bulgaria, and one of the newest members of the Union was also pushed towards more lenient policies and towards making efforts at integrating its large Rroma minority. With its very large Rroma population of around 2.5 million if not more, Romania stands apart in the region. First, because of its history, being somehow outside of the Ottoman Empire, second, due to its particular institution of slavery that survived until the late nineteenth century. As a result of this slavery, a large part of the Rroma population in that country has been thoroughly assimilated, lost its language, speaking only Romanian. This, as in Hungary where different policies led to the same result, has in fact created a large alienated minority, a minority that, although it has lost its culture is still regarded by the general population as "Gypsies". This is actually a strong example of the fact that outright assimilation is not a solution for Rroma, as it resolves nothing, and actually sharpens the issues. But Romania is also home to some of the most traditional groups of Rroma, some of them travellers to these days, such as the Kalderaša. It is these traditional Rroma who actually have proven better at adapting to the changing situation in that country.

Communist times in Romania were bleak. The extremely authoritarian regime of Ceausescu did not tolerate divergences of opinion, but did not really persecute Rroma. Clearly, quite a few children were taken away from their parents, another traditional approach also tried in Switzerland and other Western countries, and put in “orphanages” in the hope of making them better citizens. As elsewhere, these policies did not resolve anything. The sheer numbers and the fact that Rroma were spread all over the country, mostly in the countryside, rendered any assimilation policies nearly impossible.

Nowadays, the Rroma situation in Romania is more than contrasted. On the one hand, and perhaps surprisingly to many, some of the most traditional groups of Rroma managed to reach a very high standard of living: There have been hundreds of pictures throughout the world showing these mansions built, sometimes in the middle of nowhere by Rroma “barons”. These Rroma often started successful businesses, bought and run factories, or are simply importing goods that are in high demand.

On the other hand, one is confronted with utmost poverty.hovels are still the norm, and poverty common. So, perhaps more than in other countries (though in Bulgaria, one finds quiet a few very rich Kalderaša), extreme contrasts are common. Romania as such otherwise suffers unfortunately from the very same problems as other former communist countries. Many Rroma lost their jobs after the changes, racism is rampant, and nationalism is on the rise. But the sheer mass of Rroma in the country means that the government was prompted to action and that the population, albeit not necessarily willing, had to participate. Negative publicity, and there has been a lot of it – stealing Romanian Rroma children, pseudo refugees etc. – with its subsequent threats to limit the right of Romanians overall to move freely through Europe proved to be a wake-up call. While the situation is not pleasant if you are darker skinned, the excesses of other countries have been somewhat avoided, and the integration of the Rroma minority is proceeding. In the context of poverty and alienation that is still to be found in this region, this may appear to be a somewhat rosy view of the situation, but when contrasted to the situation in ex-Yugoslavia, the prospects are indeed much brighter.

Greece, having swapped a large part of its original Rroma together with ethnic Turks against Greeks from Asia Minor in the 1920’s, has only a small Rroma population. These nowadays live on the fringes of society, often in ghettos, and only now and then does one hear about their fate and life. This was the case prior to the Athens Olympic Games where an entire Rroma neighbourhood was relocated as it was too near a new Olympic stadium. In that respect, Greece is much more occidental in its policies, tolerating Rroma, not actively discriminating against them but certainly not actively engaged in helping their overall integration.

VI. PROSPECTS

The overall situation of Rroma in the Balkans is still very much preoccupying. Ethnic cleansing is still ongoing in some regions, as for example in Kosovo, and could very well occur in other places such as Macedonia should the situation deteriorate further. The only positive movements actually were the result of the EU integration of both Romania and Bulgaria, resulting in nearly four million new Rroma EU citizens. In Former Yugoslavia, the prognostic is much bleaker.

Kosovo, one of the really oldest Rroma settlements in Europe is now nearly “Zigeunerfrei” and its denizen have fled to various other countries, mostly to Western Europe. How the situation evolves is difficult to predict in other places, and will to a large extent depend on the policies of the EU towards that region. Should the economic prospects continue to deteriorate, the situation of the remaining Rroma might become intolerable and will result in refugees seeking a better life further west.

We are now in the second year of the Rroma Decade. Officially, this is a political commitment by governments in Central and South-eastern Europe to combat Roma poverty, exclusion, and discrimination within a regional framework. This international initiative, bringing together governments, NGOs, and Rroma is supposed to kick start the process of inclusion of Rroma in their countries of origin. It is still too early to say whether these lofty goals can be achieved in such a timeframe. When going against centuries of stereotypes, decades of nationalism and an ever more difficult economical situation, one cannot but think that this might prove to be a Sisyphus work. Perhaps the most promising aspect of the Rroma Decade is the focus of some very large NGOs on education. While education is undoubtedly the key, one should still bear in mind that one of the most difficult endeavours of such an ambitious project will be measured in the overall acceptance of Rroma in all levels of society. And there is a long way to go. After all, one often ask educated Rroma whether they can read and write, most people in all true conscience would probably balk at going to a Rrom doctor or place their money with a Rroma banker...

So hope there is, but it will nevertheless take a long time to change people, to have them accept that Rroma are there to stay and are part of their countries and cultures.

VII. THE EXHIBITION

Bourgeois life, except the one of bygone ages, is seldom the subject of a photo book. In this sense, this book is no exception. Books on or about Rroma generally show either the very traditional or even folkloric aspects or concentrate on the more eye-catching poverty and exclusion of Rroma at large. Granted, it is difficult if not impossible to show the everyday life of a teacher, a farmer, with an interior that bears no difference to the ones found in most of the world.

But therein lies the difficulty of such work, for if one doesn't want to reinforce stereotypes and generate misconceptions about this European minority, one needs to make it ever present to the public that such pictures do not cover all aspects of Rroma life or of the minority, but show some restricted and focused views on that subject. Yves Leresche has in previous books as well as in this one, found a fine balance that enables the viewer, should he be so inclined, to see beyond the folklore and misery. Life, joy, family are ever present in these pictures, and, should one remember that by far not all Rroma live in those conditions or in traditional ways, they offer a window on what Rroma are.

In this exhibition, one is also confronted to contrasting pictures: From traditions, I should say traditions in the picturesque sense; one easily passes to pictures not usually associated with Gypsies such as learning children, computers, and other activities that are, in most minds seldom

associated with this minority. As such, this provocation is meant to challenge the usual views. Rroma are not what you think they are! They are simply Rroma, a part of Europe and a part of our common culture.