Post-communism, post wars: life worsens for Gypsies

Balkan Roma, people without a state

The fall of communism and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia have left the Roma people, long settled throughout the Balkans and forming a strong part of the region's identity, with few protectors. Many fled persecution and unemployment as refugees; others remain, underprivileged and under threat

by Laurent Geslin

The young man drove us carefully on the bumpy road from Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, to Fakulteta, where more than half the 30,000 Roma of Sofia live. It would be impossible to enter this area, where the socialist housing blocks give way to vegetation and rubbish heaps, without a guide, since it has been under guard since last autumn's violence. The driver said: "I'm taking these detours to avoid the police. I don't have a driving licence."

Baptiste Riot, a young French teacher who gives photography classes to the children of the Mahala, the Roma district, explained: "Groups of Bulgarian extremists regularly come to provoke us, and since the death of a Rom last September the inhabitants have had to organise themselves. The only place the two populations meet is in the market on the outskirts of the Roma quarter. People go there because prices are lower than in central Sofia."

But trade is not enough to provide a living for the population. Young people have to work at 15 or 16; they cannot afford to study, so they collect garbage from the streets of Sofia and sort it. "We're lucky, because I work in a primary school; and as my children are quite fair, they can work on building sites with the Bulgarians," a local housewife said. Others do odd jobs. According to Ilona Tomova from the Sofia Institute of Sociology, only 18% of the active Roma population in Bulgaria were registered as employed in 2001. The statistics have improved slightly since then, but the situation remains serious.

"They face constant discrimination in work, education and health. Every good Bulgarian citizen has a few Roma friends with whom he has the occasional coffee or a drink, but still sees Gypsies as incarnating all the world's vices," said Marcel Courthiades, a Romany teacher at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) in Paris.

In history

The first Gypsies (1) came from the north of India and arrived in Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries; in 1348 a group called Cingarije were observed in Prizren in Kosovo and from 1385, texts mention families living in slavery in

Valachia and Moldavia. The groups were spread out during the first half of the 15th century, sometimes with the blessing of the authorities. In 1417 the German emperor Sigismund gave a letter of recommendation and protection to a group of Roma from Bohemia (hence the word, bohemian) (2). In the Balkans, Roma joined the administrative, economic and military system under the Ottoman empire. Some accompanied the Ottoman armies as gunpowder manufacturers or armourers. Others settled and worked as artisans or sharecroppers in the countryside, and gradually constructed Mahala, Gypsy quarters, in many southeastern European towns, including Prizren and Mitrovice in Kosovo.

In peace and affluence, Gypsies were tolerated for their craft and livestock-raising skills, but any deterioration in the economic or political situation meant repression and persecution. Over the centuries, expulsions forced them to migrate. Many arrived in Bulgaria at the end of the 17th century, fleeing the war between Austria and the Ottoman empire. When slavery was abolished in the Romanian principalities in 1860, there was a new diaspora of Roma in Europe. The Nazi genocide in the second world war killed hundreds of thousands of Roma, but the Nuremberg tribunal overlooked their tragedy. We do not know how many died in the Staro Sajmiste concentration camp near Belgrade, and a list of Gypsy victims of the Jasenovac camp in Croatia was only drawn up in 2007 (3).

According to Council of Europe estimates, between seven and nine million Roma live in Europe from Britain to Russia, the largest cross-border minority. Balkan Roma, pushed out by war or poverty, have settled in the West in large numbers, joining the local Gypsies with whom they generally have little contact.

In the past 20 years, international institutions, especially the European Union and the Council of Europe, have become aware of this. But despite their efforts to provide schooling for Roma children, Roma continue to suffer discrimination and have become poorer. In 2005 the Decade of Roma Inclusion was launched under the auspices of the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and the EU to make it easier for Roma to access education, jobs, health care and housing in nine eastern European and Balkan countries (4). But three years into the project, experts find the results disappointing. While public opinion is becoming aware of the transnational nature of the problem, individual states delay measures to facilitate integration.

Break-up of former Yugoslavia

The Balkan Roma were the first to suffer from the break-up of former Yugoslavia and the fall of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s. The new governments overlooked them and they were the victims of economic

transition. As they grew poorer, they were targeted by the aggressive emergent nationalist movements and scapegoated in intra-community strife; and Roma communities were marginalised and subject to violence and even pogroms.

According to Ilona Tomova: "In 1989 83% of the adult population was employed and the Roma had the highest employment rate in Bulgaria; but in 1993 that figure went down to just 30%. Some Roma haven't had access to the labour market since the early 1990s. And now we've got a second generation without stable jobs." This is worse in the urban ghettos which sprang up in the late 1970s and grew after the fall of the communist regime.

"Before that, you couldn't distinguish the Gypsy lifestyle," said Antonina Zelyazkova, from the International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (Imir). "They worked, put their children into school, had access to health care. The marginalisation began at the same time as the transition. Those who lived in small towns did not benefit from the redistribution of land and had to migrate to the larger cities."

In the north Macedonian city of Kumanovo, 5,000 Roma live in a shantytown in a flood zone between the Lipkovska and Kojnasrka rivers. Their houses are made of bricks and recycled materials. There are a few shops, a couple of handcarts of watermelons, and groups of young people at a loose end. Milan Demirovskim who runs an NGO called Khan (sun in Romany) which teaches people to read, says: "Some 95% live on minimum welfare. Their only way out is to set up their own trades, because companies will hire on a community basis and there's never room for the Roma."

Despite the decentralisation that began in 2001, little has changed. The Ohrid accords signed on 13 August 2001 after clashes between armed Albanian militia from the National Liberation Army (UCK-M) and the Macedonian army, granted political and social rights to all the minorities. Erduan Iseni, mayor of Suto Orizari (Sutka), a majority Roma area of Skopje, is optimistic. "The Roma are better off here than in most other countries in the region. Macedonia is one of the most advanced states in Europe from that point of view." His municipality of 40,000 inhabitants does seem quite prosperous with its colourful workshops, shopkeepers and customers. But even here the Roma face the same discrimination, prejudices and political brick walls. "We have a smaller budget under the decentralisation law than Macedonians municipalities do," complained the mayor. "We don't have enough money to continue repairing the roads and modernising our infrastructure. We were better off under Tito."

Although the Republic of Macedonia has the only constitution in the world to include the Roma, that does not translate into reality. “Roma are excluded from political life,” confirmed Marcel Courthiades. The Ohrid accord stipulated that minority languages should be used in the administration of any commune where that minority is 20% of the population. But this has served the Albanians (who are 25% of population in Macedonia) better than the other communities (Roma, Serbs, Torbesh, Aromanians, Turks, etc).

In Kosovo

Just 30,000 Roma remain of the 120,000 who lived in Kosovo before 1999. They are scattered over the Serbian area in the north of the country and some enclaves in the Albanian sector south of the Ibar. The scale of the destruction in Mitrovice and Pristina makes evident the violence of the ethnic cleansing there. Extremists from the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) claimed that the Roma worked for the Serbian army to justify their expulsion after the Nato bombings and the retreat of the Serbian army.

In Orahovac/Rahovec in southwest Kosovo, barbed wire is stretched across the roofs of homes and everything is ready to blockade the streets at the first alert. One family has protected its house on the heights above, in the middle of the no-man’s land that marks the border between the Albanian city and the Serbian ghetto. (None of this prevented Albanian extremists from burning down several houses in the Serbian quarter during the March 2004 riots.) “We are rejected by both communities. My son stopped going to school because his Albanian classmates were so violent,” a Rom told us. “I pray every day that nothing happens to him and that he will join his cousins in Germany.” But in fleeing these attacks, the Kosovo Roma still end up in misery, as the thousands squatting in the shantytowns of Seine-Saint-Denis near Paris will confirm.

Prizren is an old market town in southern Kosovo in which Albanians, Serbs, Roma, Bosnians and Turks co-habited before the war. Today some 6,000 Roma are trying to survive a crippling economic situation. “Before 1999 we used to have good relations with the other communities,” one entrepreneur told us. “As a child I spoke Romany with my Bulgarian neighbours, and Serb and Turkish with my classmates. I built my house with my own hands and I’ll stay in Kosovo. This is my land.”

In socialist Yugoslavia, the Roma (and especially those in Kosovo)

benefited from social and cultural advancement. The first radio and TV programmes in Romany were broadcast in Prizren and Pristina. Roma did their military service, were integrated into the political system and had representatives in the governments of the republics. One Rom public prosecutor still remains in Kosovo. He was trained in the Tito era and works in Prizren. A journalist, Kujtim Pacaku, fears for the future: "I don't know what independence will bring. All we want is to live in peace. We want our children to work on the land on which they were born. And for Roma to cease being the butt of blind nationalism."

Resentment spreads

The ultranationalist movement that emerged in the region in the early 1990s has no trouble mobilising resentment among those left behind during the economic transition. "When so many Bulgarians below the poverty line find out that the EU has set up special aid programmes for the Gypsies like free medical care, when they can't afford to buy medicines or heat their homes in the winter because of fuel costs, then they are ready to listen to an extremist party like Ataka," said François Frison-Roche, a Bulgarian specialist and researcher at the research institute, CNRS.

In the eyes of poor Bulgarians, the poorest Roma without work or resources are looters, who steal electricity by linking up to the grid illegally. The media are happy to focus on the trafficking and crimes attributed to the Roma community. During the 2006 presidential elections, the Ataka coalition and its leader Volen Siderov won nearly a quarter of the Bulgarian vote. During the campaign they called for Gypsies to be "turned into soap". Now they want a "government programme to fight Gypsy crime".

Ataka's aggressive campaign is attracting many, convinced that all problems are due to the Roma and disappointed that the traditional parties are not dealing with the problem. In Serbia, a few Roma intellectuals are trying hard to contain the rise of the nationalists. "We are the Radical Party's fiercest opponents," said Rajko Djuric, chairman of the International Romany Union, who maintains that 28 members of his family were killed by the Chetniks (the Royalist Yugoslav army) during the second world war.

The Serbian Radical Party (SRS), led by Tomislav Nikolic since

Vojislav Sesel was put on trial in The Hague for crimes against humanity in the 1991-1995 Croatian war, still claims to represent the Chetnik ideological heritage. They were loyal to King Peter II of Yugoslavia, and opposed both the Axis forces and Tito's partisans between 1941 and 1945. They were also responsible for massacres of Croatians, Muslims and Roma.

Ardent defenders of a "greater Serbia", the extremist nationalists of the SRS want to unite all the Balkan Serbs into a single state and deny political and cultural rights to minorities. Their platform is unacceptable to the Romany Union. "We intend to become a major party in the Serb parliament, a democratic citizen's group, open to all the communities," said their president. "We won a seat and 18,000 votes in the 22 January 2007 legislative elections, 33% from non-Roma voters."

That seems a disappointing result. Serbia has more than 200,000 Roma voters but there are divisions in the community. "The parties in power have always bought votes with fraudulent promises or just a few bottles of akija (a fruit brandy),"said Djuric. Now Marija Serifovic, the 2007 Eurovision song contest winner, has cast her lot with the SRS and won many Roma votes, despite the party's racism. In Vranje to the south, the Roma always vote massively for the late Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).

A close stranger

In Serbia, the Roma still take part in politics, despite discrimination. They are courted during elections, used to win European subsidies or stigmatised to galvanise public opinion. Gypsies represent otherness, the close stranger. What Belgrade family would celebrate its slava (the family's patron saint) without Roma musicians? One of the Serbian nationalists' most important events is the annual Guca festival, which brings together the best Gypsy orchestras in Serbia. The nationalists come wearing T-shirts with pictures of Milosevic and General Ratko Mladic (who was the military leader of the Bosnia-Herzegovena Serbs between 1992 and 1995), and party to music that nobody could identify with certainty as being Serb or Roma.

Like the other landless minorities, the Aromanians (5) or the Torbesh (6), the Balkan Roma are an essential part of the Balkan identity, with its community, linguistic and territorial differences. A Roma from Novi Pazar in southern Serbia could be a Serbian citizen, feel culturally related to the region of Sandjak (across Serbia and Montenegro), be a Muslim and speak Albanian because his family will have had longstanding trading relations with Kosovo. The Roma from Prizren may be Sunni Muslims or belong to the Rifai Sufi Dervish order.

Unlike the French nation-state model followed by certain countries in the region after the Ottoman empire, there is no single identity. Identities fluctuate within linguistic, territorial, religious and socio-professional frameworks. They shift according to economic constraints. The Bulgarian Roma were Muslim under the Ottomans, but today they are mostly Orthodox. And those who still speak Turkish often pretend to be Turkish so that they can emigrate easily to Istanbul.

The break-up of Yugoslavia and the population movements after the 1990 wars have accelerated identity simplification and cultural standardisation. Croatia and Kosovo no longer have Serbian communities.

Two similar groups now share Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Hungarians are leaving Voivodine in Serbia. Will the Roma and other minorities, who have no base territory to hold on to, be able to keep their place in these constantly mutating Balkan states? Nothing is less certain, unless Roma organisations acquire sufficient clout to make their voice heard regionally, nationally and internationally.

Translations >>

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