



## Roma migration: escape or aspirations

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A life-story research of five Roma migrants from north-eastern Bulgaria to Belgium

### Leaving Bulgaria in waves

During the last decade, international migration left many Roma quarters in north-eastern Bulgaria almost deserted. This upsets many activists from Roma NGOs, because for the past seven years we have been working in this region, in an attempt to make the Roma aware of their citizens' role and to increase their capacity to demand their rights. As Roma, we think that we ourselves must take our lives in our own hands, to address the issues that are important for us as a community and to defend the vision that we have to participate in all spheres of society. Resulting from our efforts, hundreds of young Roma have become active at the grassroots level, which has started to influence their relationships with the local authorities. They increasingly begin to accept that Roma citizens should also be respected, defended and ensured of their rights.

Things changed, when January the 1<sup>st</sup> of 2007 came. At that day, Bulgaria became member of the European Union and its citizens gained the right to move around the European Union freely. One more immigrant wave supplemented the previous, because many Bulgarians, in their search for better opportunities to make a living, decided to follow relatives and friends who had left Bulgaria already after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Many Roma, among them our grassroots activists, did the same: they went to other European countries.

Why did they go in such great numbers? Going to another country, what happens to them? How do they behave, do they again fall in the periphery of society and should they carry the burden of their ethnic identity? We decided to follow our activists in one of the countries where they have migrated to – in the heart of the EU, Belgium. More than twenty activists from the Bulgarian Roma network GORD, activists and leaders with whom we have been working, have settled in the towns of Gent and Brussels.

### Akif from Brussels

My first meeting in Brussels was with Akif, who came to Brussels in early 2008. Akif, 38 years old, is married and has two daughters who go to school in Bulgaria. His mother takes care of them. His wife is also living in Brussels, but initially Akif arrived alone.

Akif is one of the activists with whom we have worked while he was still in Bulgaria. As a child, he dreamt of becoming a policeman. He applied to the police office immediately after he finished his secondary education, but, unlike one of his Bulgarian schoolmates, he was not hired, neither was he given an explanation why. "So my great dream did not materialize."

Instead of the police school, Akif accomplished his military service, and after he returned from the army, the times were already different. Communism had ended, and Akif had to face the severe reality of survival. "You can't imagine what poverty engulfed the Roma in my village. After 1991, I rented the village pub and was the only employed Roma. Nobody else had a job. The people began wandering around, looking for work in the towns. Some migrated to Germany and others went to former Yugoslavia where they did incidental farming work. But this ended soon, because of the war". According to Akif, the worst period was around 1996-1997, when hyperinflation, economic and political crisis raged in Bulgaria. Then starvation came and many Roma families began to ask assistance from the social services. At that time, many Bulgarians from the first migration wave were expelled from Germany, because Germany refused to give them political asylum with the explanation that Bulgaria

was already a democratic country. Many of these expelled Roma immediately headed for another West European country, while they still had some savings for travel. Thus, they found themselves in Belgium, The Netherlands, France and other EU-member countries. Akif however stayed in Bulgaria, because he had two small children and could not leave his old parents.

The 1997 crisis reached him too. He lost his job in the pub and was forced to turn to the social services, which at that time gave them one loaf of bread daily. Then he, together with several educated Roma from the village began to discuss the difficult situation of the community. They concluded that they had to enter into politics by joining the Turkish party, which is very strong in their region and manages the municipality. They became members of the MRF (Movement for rights and freedoms) and the first thing they succeeded to achieve were five jobs for Roma. Akif also began to work as an administrative assistant in the municipal town hall. He was also elected as Chairman of the community cultural club in their village of Jelyazkovets. He engaged actively with public activities. He contacted Integro and became a GORD Network activist. After the local elections in 2007, Akif lost his work in the municipal administration. Akif bitterly shared, that no matter how much efforts he gave away for party and social affairs, in return, he has not received any recognition or appreciation. On the contrary – he and the other Roma were always ignored by the Turkish party leadership. “I became a MRF member with the expectation that I would be able to help both myself and the Roma community. However, everything was a deception, an empty hope. Although I and other Roma from the village were MRF members, they, the Turkish, never had an equal attitude towards us, the Roma, neither did they allow us to advance in the party hierarchy.”

In 2007, Akif began to work as a technician in a building company, owned by two Roma businessmen. They paid him 1000 BGN (roughly 480 Euro) per month, which was rather good for Bulgaria, but he did not have an employment contract and did not know for how long he would be employed. Then his nephews from Belgium visited him. They told him how they did in Belgium, about the opportunities this country provides. “I was most impressed by the fact that they, although also working without an employment contract, collecting old electric appliances around the streets of the larger cities, felt much more secure than me in my country. Akif made his decision and left Bulgaria together with them.

After he arrived in Belgium in early 2008, he stayed with one of his brothers. According to Akif, it is very important to know somebody in the place where you arrive in an unknown country. “The people here live in small dwellings, rented mainly from the local Turks. The rents are high – 400-500 Euro for two rooms, but they have everything – kitchen, bathroom, running hot water. In the villages in Bulgaria, very few Roma have running hot water. Others don't even have running cold water inside their homes, only taps in the yards”. What impressed Akif in Belgium was the zealotness with which all Roma work here. Many Roma have several jobs, most of them do not rest during the weekends. Most men work in the construction and refurbishment business, and the women work as cleaners or in shops, bakeries and coffee bars of the local Turks, Lebanese and Moroccans. Some men, like his brothers, collect old electrical appliances on the streets and sell them as scrap. Most of the Roma Akif knows in Brussels work in the grey sector, without documents and work permits.

Akif began to collect scrap with his brothers. Within twenty days, he succeeded to save enough money to rent his own lodging. “Here, you cannot rely on people to help you for long. You receive assistance for a month or two, and if within that period you cannot find work, that means that you are not fit for here, and you will have to return to Bulgaria.” After one month, his wife arrived. She began work as a cleaner of the homes of several of the local Turks. Unfortunately, resulting from the crisis, in the beginning of 2009 the work of collecting old appliances on the streets diminished and his brothers told him that they could not any longer take him with their trucks. Akif realized that he had to manage alone. Unlike many other Roma, who prefer to work and live illegally in Brussels, he decided to ask for assistance at the town hall. Akif did not speak French and was afraid to be sent back to Bulgaria.

Nevertheless, he visited the town hall, where, happily for him, he met a clerk from Russian origin. Akif explained in Russian that thus far they both had earned their income and had also sent money to their children in Bulgaria, but they had problems now. They also explained that they wanted to learn the language and to find other work. The clerk arranged a social worker to see them. He included them in a social programme for immigrants. "You can't imagine how different it is here from Bulgaria. They paid attention to us, despite that we do not have Belgian documents. They really want to help you. They treat you as a human being."

Akif and his wife are currently taking part in a language-training and in an integration course, in which they become acquainted with Belgian culture, administrative structures, institutions and legislation. They now receive social welfare during the period of the course, and applied for Belgian documents. They hope that after the trainings, they will be able to find work more easily. Akif enthusiastically told me about something that deeply moved him. "During the class in French, we studied the word "thief". The teacher asked us to explain it with other words in French. If we would have been in Bulgaria, for sure the trainees would have associated this word with the Roma. Here, nobody made such an association. That made me realize that I have to stay in this country and that I have to bring my children here."

### **Mladen and Saliha Rashkov**

I headed to Gent, where Mladen Rashkov and his wife lived. When I entered their impressive two-storey house, I understood that Mladen was still at work. His wife Saliha, a 33-year-old beautiful woman was there. She had become the mother of a second son quite recently, who was born here, in Gent. Saliha left Bulgaria during the summer of 2007, because she was dismissed from the private company where she worked. They still had to repay the loan they took to buy a house in Bulgaria. The teacher's salary of her husband Mladen was not enough to cover the costs of the three-member family, and the loan had remained unpaid for months. Saliha chose Belgium, because her husband's cousins were there. They had told her that women could find work in Belgium easily because many families of Belgian Turks were looking for cleaners. She left with the clear idea that it would be a short journey – just to repay the loan and create a certain security for their son who was a sixth grade school pupil at that time. All her dreams and expectations were connected with Bulgaria. She could not imagine at all that she would want to leave the country where she was born.

When she arrived in Belgium, initially she became strongly disappointed. It turned out that the cousins who had invited her, lived in a very small flat. There was no room for her to stay. As she had nowhere else to go and she still did not have a job, she nevertheless stayed at their place, sharing a bed with another family member. "It was like a nightmare", according to Saliha. "I slept in someone else's bed for more than a month until finally I found several families to clean their houses. This was illegal work, and I would not be able to save much, but I did not have any other choice." In order to hire her, some other cleaning women had to recommend Saliha. The Roma women from Bulgaria work mainly as cleaners in the homes of Belgian Turks. Once they have proven their integrity, the Belgian Turks prefer them to clean their homes because the women speak Turkish and present themselves as Bulgarian Turks. When the Belgian Turks' families get a 'Bulgarian Turk', as a cleaner, they share this with their friends and relatives, who in their turn want to get such a house help. They only trust them after a reliable recommendation of the already hired women. Saliha was included into this cleaning network and immediately decided to look for lodging together with her younger brother who had also arrived in Belgium in the meantime.

I asked how Saliha has felt as a cleaner, since she had worked as a civil servant in Bulgaria. "You forget that you have a university degree and the only thing you think about is how to find more work and earn more to be able to send more to Bulgaria. You console yourself that there is no shameful work, if honest". After she made enough acquaintances, Saliha found a new job as a hygienist of a toilet in a restaurant on the highway between Brussels and Gent. Again she was hired without a contract, but the work paid well and the other workers in the

restaurant were friendly. She began to ask how she could get Belgian documents. She questioned mainly women - local Turks, with whom she easily communicated in Turkish. She was interested in how the Turkish migrants who had come earlier had integrated in society. She understood two things: first you have to find your employment niche in a way that is not contradictory to the country's rules and regulations. Second, you should invest in your children's education. Saliha was impressed by the Belgian educational system and enthusiastically shared that everyone who is studying knows why he or she is doing that. In Belgium, secondary education offers a rich variety of specialties which meet the interests of every child. While at school, the pupils become acquainted with their future employer, because secondary schools in Belgium are strongly connected with companies. They offer internships for the pupils. "I realized that if my son finishes school here instead in Bulgaria, he will have many opportunities", shares Saliha. "I also realized that sooner or later, if he would first stay in Bulgaria, after some time he would have to seek employment abroad, like us. Even with higher education, employers prefer Bulgarian applicants without investigating your qualities. When they understand that you are a Roma, they stop to trust you. Here, people are interested in your individual qualities and knowledge". In Bulgaria, although with higher education, Saliha always felt an undermining attitude by the Bulgarians, the Turkish and the civil servants when she communicated with them. "They did not undermine me because of me personally, but because I was a Roma. When I proved my qualities, they said: You are not a Roma; you are an exception".

When she became convinced that opportunities for her and her family were greater in Belgium, she began to persuade her husband to leave his teaching job and to join her. In the beginning, he was sceptical, but finally she convinced him with the argument that their son would receive a much better education in Belgium than in Bulgaria. Mladen entered the room while we were discussing this. He immediately joined the discussion saying that in Bulgaria, although he has always been a teacher, many people always had a prejudiced attitude towards him, only because he was a Roma. "Don't misunderstand me", he said. "I love Bulgaria, but I did not feel respected there. Here, we clean toilets, but nevertheless we feel more confident, because we rely on ourselves and people highly appreciate this here." I asked them whether they tell that they are Roma to the people with whom they work, in their son's school, to their neighbours. "In the school they know that we are Roma", shared Saliha, but nevertheless the teachers do not show at all any prejudices. The teachers assess the potential of our child and make us feel proud of him, because he is a good pupil. In Bulgaria, although my husband was a teacher, our son's teachers did not show commitment neither to us as parents, nor to the child". In the municipality, they also know that they are Roma but this does not bother them. However, they are concerned to tell their employers that they are Roma, because they have heard that other Roma who have shared their origin with the Turks, have lost their work.

I asked them what their plans were for the future. I understood that they have many goals and plans. Both of them are studying French now. Mladen intends to start his own small business. He wants to open a small restaurant on the first floor beneath their home and to offer Bulgarian dishes to the numerous Bulgarian Roma who live in Gent. Saliha also has plans. She has graduated biotechnology in Bulgaria and intends to look for a job as laboratory assistant in the food or chemical industry. She has bought a computer and uses her time while on maternity leave to search for job announcements and to refresh her knowledge. Both of them never doubt that they will materialize their plans, because, "Here it is enough to have the willing to work and to have to right ideas. Everything else is settled by the state".

### **Alzek from Shoumen**

The next person I met was 26-years old Alzek from Shoumen. He arrived in Belgium in 2001, shortly after he had turned eighteen. I had heard that "he arranges Belgian documents for Roma and has a solid mushroom business". The first thing that impressed me about him was that he did not talk in Turkish, but in Bulgarian. I was surprised to hear that like most others,

he is from the muslim Horohane Roma. "In Belgium, especially in Brussels and Gent, we are mainly Muslim Roma from the Shoumen, Razgrad and Turgovishte districts, from north-eastern Bulgaria", he clarified. There are about 5 000 of us in Gent, who are registered and work legally. Nobody can tell how many there are in Brussels – maybe tens of thousands". I asked him why he came to Belgium. "My father was here. I did not want to come, I went to a secondary school in Sofia, but when my father told me to come, I came". I asked Alzek about the secret of success in business. According to him, there are no secrets. "If you work hard to reach your goals, you will succeed". During his first years in Belgium, Alzek worked on construction sites together with his uncle. After a couple of months, he managed to save some money, bought a car and returned to Bulgaria. He stayed for a month or two, but returned to Belgium when he saw that there was nothing for him to do. This time he started to work very hard. Two years passed. During this time, he got to know many people; not only Roma, but also many Flemish people. He communicated with them mainly in English. Unlike the other Roma, he refrained from communicating with the Belgian Turks. He considered them jealous of the newcomer immigrants, especially of the Bulgarian Roma who speak Turkish "because they use us for cheap labour and do not share anything with them, so they can take advantage from their ignorance about the Belgian state".

From his Flemish friends, Alzek learned much about the country's legislation, especially the laws on business and on immigrants' status. In the meantime, he learned to talk French. "Speaking the language of the country where you to live and knowing its major laws are the two most important conditions in order to succeed abroad", Alzek said. "The first thing that burdens gypsies in Bulgaria is the fact that they are gypsies. That makes us fear, not believing in ourselves, and to be passive. Here in Belgium, many Roma forget their fear, because they manage to hide that they are Roma. Here, everyone can succeed. But the fear not to be discovered as a Roma remains", he concluded. According to Alzek, the Roma-immigrants from Bulgaria experience the same difficulties that every other immigrant faces without legal work. The additional burden for the Roka comes from the fact that the vast majority of them, as illegal immigrants, has to work while hiding their Roma identity for the Belgian Turks who do not accept the Roma and have a very negative attitude towards them.

To a certain extent, it is clear why the Belgian Turks have a stereotypic attitude towards the Roma. Certain Turkish laws contain discriminative texts concerning the Roma, treating them as a criminogenic element. However, Alzek could not know this because he was young. He said: "I do not know much about the Roma history. I would however like to know more about our origin". After that, he told me that, according to him, the Belgian Roma are "real Roma compared to us". His explanation is simple: he considers real Roma those who speak their Romanes language easily, live in caravans, and are mobile, live in a solidarity family group, do not cheat each other, and have a specific way of clothing. He explained that the local Belgian Roma do not like the "newcomers" and "do not want to be treated as one and the same group with them".

I asked Alzek for his opinion about the Roma who were concealing their ethnic identity. He did not like it, but tried to explain why the people do it. "If people understand that they are Roma, they expel them from work" and gave an example that supported his words. A man from the Razgrad region worked as a truck driver for a Turkish businessman for a year. He was a perfect worker; his employer was satisfied with him. When the man thought that he had gained trust, he told him that he was a Roma. After that, the attitude towards him changed. The Turkish businessman stopped paying him, and finally he had to leave his job after he hadn't received any salary for four months.

I asked Alzek whether he felt integrated in Belgium. "Not really", he said, "Although I have work and I know the Belgian society and the laws here rather well". I asked him whether he thinks that the other Roma in Belgium will succeed to integrate. "The difference between Belgium and Bulgaria is that even if we have money, in Bulgaria the Roma are always in the class of the poor. My uncle for example returned to Bulgaria. He made a lot of money here,

because he worked very hard on construction sites. He has a nice house, a university degree, but in Bulgaria again he is in the poor class – because he is a Roma”. Indeed it seems that the middle class in Bulgaria does not accept Roma. They seem to be destined to be among the poor. If someone succeeds to break this rule, people regard him or her as an exception or prefer not to associate him or her with the Roma.

At the end of our conversation, Alzek finally revealed what he was doing. He has a company with various activities: construction and repairs, second hand car dealership, and breeding cultivated champignons. I asked him what he was thinking about those Roma who are active in the criminal sector and who were the majority – those who work, although illegally, or those engaged with begging, trafficking, pimping, drugs etc. “I know such people among the Roma; you cannot hide this. However, they are not the majority. They are maybe 10%, maximum 20%.”

### **Fikret and Sevinch in Gent**

The next persons I spoke to were Fikret (42 years old) and his wife Sevinch (40 years old), both living in Gent. Unlike most other Roma, they had bought a house in a Flemish neighbourhood and did not live in an immigrants’ quarter. They had their own retail shop and construction company. They were regarded as very successful migrants.

We sat down in a back room of their retail shop and started to talk immediately. Because the father was busy in the construction company and the mother was serving clients, their 23-year old son Hyussein told me that he had finished his secondary education in Belgium, and that this had created many opportunities for him. “I was eleven when I came to Belgium, but I was only six when we left Bulgaria and went to Germany. We stayed there until 1994, and then we returned to Bulgaria.” After their return, Fikret and Sevinch began to work in the antibiotics factory in Razgrad. However, a misfortune happened: a homeless suicidal man threw himself under their car. The court ordered them to pay a lot of money to the relatives of the man. To do this, they had to sell everything, including their house and car. They were laid off from work, too. The crisis of 1996-1997 made them face the threat of starvation. Then they decided to leave Bulgaria for good and headed towards France. They did not reach France. They found themselves in an immigration camp in the Czech Republic. Both of them already spoke German and a little English. In the Czech Republic, they used their Russian. Thanks to that, they found work and saved travel money. In the autumn, when they left the camp, instead of returning to Bulgaria, they continued for Belgium. When they arrived in Belgium, another Roma from their village who has been living in Belgium since 1992 helped them.

I continued my conversation with Fikret’s wife Sevinch, who found some time to leave her shop. I asked her whether she considered her family successful. “Well, we succeeded”, said she, “but I do not think that we are rich, as other Roma think we are. The people think that as we have our own home here and our own retail shop, we must be very rich. But we have loans to repay. We work very hard”. I asked her whether their hard work was the secret for success abroad. “It is not only the hard work”, said Sevinch. “I know people who have been here for ten years, work hard, do heavy work, clean homes, or work on construction sites. However, these people will not be able to change their status, because they do not make efforts to learn the language, to learn the rules and regulations here, in Belgium. They communicate only in Turkish with the local Turks for whom they predominantly work, and that keeps them away from the state”.

After that, she told me how they have succeeded: “When we arrived, I started to work for Turkish women, to clean for them and to serve them. My husband began work on construction sites. We both began to gain the trust of the people for whom we worked. Luckily one of the Turkish women, for whom I worked, found a job for me in a flower greenhouse. After five years, we received Belgian passports, but we continued to do the same job. However, we enrolled in language courses, because you can do nothing if you do

not speak the language. Later I finished a business course where I learned how to set up my own company, how to manage the retail shop, and what documents were needed. That helped me a lot". According to Sevinch, there are many laws and regulations in Belgium which are clear to the citizens. "However, many of the Roma who arrived here, do not know these rules, because they do not speak the language and do not communicate with the right people. Those who succeed to receive documents, are fine. They will get a legal job, because they know that in this way they will pay taxes which they will need later, if they become ill, and will receive a pension when they retire". When I asked her how many Roma were according to her breaching the law and engaged in activities that hamper the community's image, she answered without any hesitation: "Maybe 15 to 20% beg, there are pickpocketers, pimps, prostitutes, and several youths are drug dealers. But those who work illegally are not included into this percentage".

I asked her whether she felt part of the Belgian society and she answered affirmatively, especially now, since they live among the other Belgians. The people from the quarter visit her shop. Among them there are lawyers, doctors, and all of them enter her shop, greet her on the street, and if she needs an advice, she can turn to any one of them as a member of their community. "In fact one judge from the quarter helped us many times by telling us where to go and what to do."

I asked her whether their neighbours knew that they are Roma. They did not need to tell this to their employers. However, she thought that even if they knew, that would not change the attitude towards them. Once again, I asked them: "What makes you Roma then, do you consider yourselves Roma and are you a part of the Roma community?" "Yes, we are Roma", said Sevinch. "Our son married according to the Roma tradition. His wife comes from a Roma quarter in Bulgaria. They go to Roma weddings and baptizing. They try to help other Roma. They advise them where to go and how to get Belgian documents. Many do not appreciate this, because they think that help means to give them money or give them work. We have also given money to the most desperate ones, but we have never heard good words, rather envy", said Sevinch with bitterness.

She knows that her family has taken over parts of the Belgian culture, but still they have many things in common with the Roma. They have tried to initiate a self-help fund together with other Roma-immigrants, to cover health care costs of Roma without social and health insurance, and to cover transport costs to Bulgaria in case of death. The self-help fund however did not work. Only few persons invested money in it. The others were not ready for such an initiative. I was interested why they wanted to transport the dead back to Bulgaria. "We want to be buried in our motherland. Bulgaria will always be our motherland, despite the fact that here we understood what it means to succeed by relying on your own skills and strengths", said Sevinch. "For the children, Belgium is their motherland. They accept Bulgaria as a close country, but their world is here".

### **Assen Ananiev Djambaza**

The last person I spoke was Assen Ananiev Djambaza, a 58-year old man, who came to Belgium in 1992. He was one of the first Bulgarians who arrived in Belgium. Assen lives in the so-called "the Roma quarter" Skarbeck. People rumour that most of the Roma here deal with prostitution. The Roma from the other quarters in Brussels and in Gent were very negative about the Roma who live in Skarbeck.

I asked Assen whether he liked his quarter. He laughed and said: "So you heard that here we are the "gypsy quarter". The other Roma are rather critical towards us, because here there are many Roma who do improper things". I asked him to assess how many Roma "do improper things". Assen made a clear estimate: "Maybe about 20% of all the Roma who are here. Too many, as you can see", he said with a heavy sigh. "Unfortunately, in the eyes of the others these 20% are as may as 100%. This is our image: when one of us breaks the law, we are all to blame". I asked Assen whether the policemen knew about the begging, pick

pocketing, pimping and prostitution among the Roma. "Perhaps they know", he said. "From time to time they arrest a pimp. But I don't know whether they do anything to stop children begging or something about the young girls". He told me that he suffered most about the youths and the children involved in criminality.

Assen told me why he left Bulgaria. He graduated the automobile technical school in Bulgaria. In his younger days, he dreamt to drive a bus, but he was never allowed to become a bus driver. "They did not trust me; they gave this job to my other schoolmates – Bulgarians and Turkish, and sent me to work as a taxi driver. I applied many times at the automobile park until finally they told me outright that there were no chances to appoint me. I asked them why not, but they did not say it outright. I explained to myself that maybe the reason was that I was a Roma and there was no one to support me."

When democracy came, he and his wife had already been working on construction sites and used to make a lot of money. They did not immigrate because of poverty, they used to earn as much as 1 000 BGN back in 1990. "We departed, because we heard from the Turkish with whom we worked that opportunities in the West were unlimited. At that time, nobody believed that Bulgaria would become a democratic country or even become an EU member. People thought that borders would close again and we would not be able to go outside Bulgaria." Thus, in 1991, Assen, his wife and their three sons found themselves in a refugee camp in Germany. When a year later they were refused political asylum, they came to Belgium in another camp. They did not know anyone, but had some savings and decided this time not to seek political asylum but instead to look for work and to settle their lives here. The fact that they knew Turkish and were Muslims helped them – they found themselves in the Turkish community in Belgium from whom they learned how to cope in the foreign country. As they had experience in construction, soon they succeeded to find work, but for a long time they were paid much less and they had great difficulty to gain the trust of the Turkish community among which they settled. However, as Assen said, "With much work and persistence they succeeded day after day to struggle for our survival in Belgium".

Finally, throughout the years, they succeeded to gain the trust and respect of the others. Then their work began to be better appreciated and better paid – not very much, but enough for his family to afford a better standard. After six years, Assen and his wife received Belgian documents and work permits. "According to a new law, illegal immigrants who could prove that they have lived on the country's territory for more than five years and who had not used social welfare during that time, but had earned an income to sustain themselves, were allowed to apply for Belgium documents. Recommendations were needed, stating that we were reliable citizens. We succeeded to submit the necessary documents and to obtain documents." I asked him whether the people who gave them the recommendations knew that they were Roma. As expected, they had concealed this. "We did not dare tell that we were Roma. They would not have rented lodging to us, it did not matter that we could afford to pay. Nobody likes gypsies", said Assen.

At present, Assen is a bus driver. He brings children with disabilities to a day-care centre and is very happy with his work. I asked him whether he felt satisfied that he was a Belgian citizen and did he think that he and his family were integrated. "Oh, yes", he said. "We are already watching Belgian TV because we are interested in what's going on in this country". Initially, when they arrived, they watched only Turkish TV, and later, when Bulgarian satellite channels were installed, they began to watch Bulgarian television. Assen thinks that by now he is part of Belgian society, because he is working here, paying taxes, expects to receive a retirement pension, his children have their own companies and his grandchildren, who were born in Belgium, study and grow up in this country.

I asked him whether his grandchildren knew that they were Roma. He told me that they knew but hardly understood what that was. The family has decided not to struggle to explain it for the time being and that at present it was better that their schoolmates would not know that

they were gypsies, because, as Assen said, “They would start calling them gitanes and other people did not like gypsies”.

“When you arrive to an unknown country and you do not have a penny in your pocket, it is very easy to fall within those 20% who become involved in criminality. It is important for people to get assistance, to receive information what to do, so you can cope with your new country. Do you know how many people I helped to find work or a house? It has never been hard for me to help, because I did not want to be alone here. We are all connected. If someone becomes ill, the Belgian neighbour will not come to ask how we feel, so our people will drop by. Do you know how many people came to my son’s wedding? Five hundred – all whom I have invited here paid their respect”.

I asked Assen about his opinion of the future of the Roma-immigrants in Belgium. “Many will find their way: They will have to work hard on non-prestigious jobs, but if the parents do this work today, tomorrow their children, who are studying and complete local schools, will have more opportunities. That’s how it was with the Turkish, and that will happen with us too. Only the Belgian state, instead of being afraid from the Roma, is better to give them a chance to legalize their stay here. During the first ten years of my stay here, I was constantly thinking how I would return to Bulgaria. That is why we bought property in Bulgaria. Today however I think that I will not return to Bulgaria. I even asked my children to bury me here when I die. Here, there will be somebody to come to my grave – my children and my grandchildren. They are Belgians.”

### **Mixed feelings**

I left Belgium impressed, concerned, optimistic, and sad.

I was impressed with the large number of hard working Roma, who were completely refuting the stereotypical image that they were lazy. Often they do the heaviest and unattractive work and work without rest to be able to make money both for their survival in Belgium as well as to support their relatives in Bulgaria. I realized that the vast majority of the Roma who remain in Bulgaria survive thanks to the money that their immigrant relatives are sending them.

My concerns come from the fact that in also Belgium, the majority of the Roma live on the edge of the society. They occupy niches, unwanted by the others. Even if they hide their Roma origin, the only opportunities for them are usually as cleaners, servants, apprentices, serving Belgian immigrants who have come earlier. Although often illegal, their work is obviously needed because there is demand for it. It would be unacceptable if the vast majority of the Roma would fall again in inferior social strata, if the present model that exists now in Bulgaria would repeat itself: the Roma are in the social strata of poor people.

My optimism comes from the fact that in Belgium, unlike in Bulgaria, the Roma do not experience institutional stigmatization and receive professional support from the public services, which they appreciate as support, respect, and consideration for their dignity. This is a powerful stimulus for the Roma to undertake steps to legalize their stay, to invest in their individual capacity and to plan individual steps for development and the materialization of these strategies.

I am sad, because I have realized that Bulgaria loses the most entrepreneurial Roma, who are seeking not only survival, but rather progress and prosperity for themselves and for their families. I would be happy if they could achieve this in Belgium as well as anywhere in the world without having to hide their ethnic identity, to succeed without hiding even from their children that they are Roma. In general, the big issue facing the Roma and their social inclusion is to receive the opportunity to develop their citizenship and national identity but not for the sake of losing their own ethnic identity.

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