

The Economic Crisis Closes in on Bulgarian Roma

*Kamelia Dimitrova*¹

AS the economic recession tightens its grip around Europe, human rights activists have warned that the crisis can fuel support for far right groups and radical political parties in Central and Eastern Europe.² The recent murders of Roma in Hungary and the Czech Republic, the neo-Nazi marches in Bohemia and the success of far right political parties in Hungary are just a few examples that show that such concerns are well founded. Bulgaria's track record of extensive discrimination towards Roma, its regular flirtations with populist and right wing parties and the continued decline of the economy at the time of the European Parliament and national elections gave reasons for concern that it could be the next case in point to prove the hypotheses.

However, a brief look at the campaigns for the European Parliament elections in Bulgaria shows that radical rhetoric and Roma scapegoating were not the main technique to rally voter support. No significant change in the media portrayal of Roma or increase in racist rhetoric can be evidenced with the closing in of the crisis. Optimism about the situation of Roma will end as the article considers the economic impact of the crisis on this community. Now, as in the early nineties, Roma will be likely to suffer a disproportionate impact from the downturn of the economy. Without

adequate interventions to stop the winnowing of Roma representation in the labour market, rising unemployment is likely to set off the vicious cycle of poverty in a community that already stands at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy.

European Parliament elections campaigns

On the eve of elections for the European Parliament the high level of support towards the radical nationalist party "Ataka", the lead of the populist party GERB³ and the ambitions of a newly formed nationalists "Law, Order and Justice" to steal votes from the previous two signaled that at least three parties could rally voter support by capitalising on negative public attitudes towards Roma. GERB, the political party of Sofia's Mayor, Boyko Borisov, known for his radical housing approach towards Roma, entered the competition with a 58% positive approval rate and around 24% voter support.⁴ "Ataka", headed by the nationalist leader Volen Siderov infamous for his regular threats of the "gypsification of the Bulgarian society", was the third strongest political actor with 8-10% of the potential electorate.⁵ "Law, Order and Justice" had only between 2-3% of the potential electorate but rode a high wave of public support, with

¹ Kamelia Dimitrova is an independent journalist and a research fellow at the centre for the Study of Democracy – a Sofia-based think tank organisation.

² Pavol Strakanski, "Europe: The Right Rises", *ISP News*, 5 May 2009, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46722> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

³ GERB stands for the Bulgarian equivalent of "Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria", though the party is best known by its acronym.

⁴ National Center for Surveying Public Opinion, "Socio-Political Public Attitudes", *Market Links*, February-March 2009, <http://www.vot2009.com/Актуална-информация/Социологически-проучвания/НЦИОМ-Данни> (accessed: 14 June 2009).

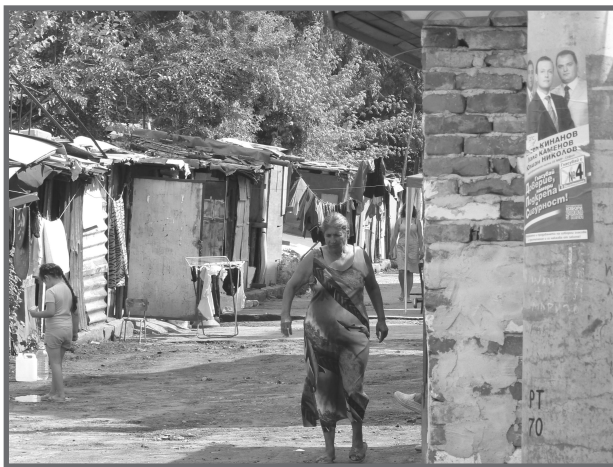
⁵ *Ibid.*

popular support reaching 34% in April after the leader Yane Yanev attempted to prove growing fundamentalism in a village populated by the Muslim minority.⁶

Roma issues, however, were sidetracked in the campaigns of all parties by corruption talk and negative public relations aiming to discredit the ruling coalition as well as its strongest opponents. Nationalistic rhetoric was present, though mostly targeting the Turkish state and minority group, as well as the Turkish party and coalition partner the “Movement for Rights and Freedoms.” The nationalist party “Ataka” chose as its core campaign message “No EU Accession for Turkey” and signaled in its print material that it would stop the “Turkification of Bulgaria.” While “Ataka” leaders delivered anti-Romani messages in interviews and rallies,⁷ the rhetoric was not radicalised by promises of exclusion measures.

Minority scapegoating was not focal to the election campaign of “Law, Order and Justice”. Instead of taking up ethnic or religious issues at the centre of its campaign, the party focused on anti-corruption rhetoric. Their campaign relied on images of the popular party leader, while the vast majority of campaign advertisements signaled the frauds committed by the coalition in power. Bearing in mind that corruption is considered the number one problem by the largest number of Bulgarians, going after the bribing and profiteering of the political elite was a safe bet for “Law, Order and Justice.”⁸

GERB’s rather limited campaign revolved around the increased public presence of its informal leader Boyko Borisov. The media presence of



In a Romani neighbourhood in Sofia on 7 June 2009, the street remained unmoved by the empty political promises and the economic crisis.

PHOTO CREDIT: KAMELIA DIMITROVA

the charismatic leader was marred by a political slip made during his speech in front of Bulgarian immigrants in the United States in February this year. In an attempt to stimulate voter turnout from Bulgarians living in Chicago, Mr Borisov stated the “human material” in Bulgaria comprised “one million of gypsies, 700-800,000 Turks, and two and a half million pensioners.”⁹ The notorious speech was quoted 27 times by seven leading newspapers and two weekly editions in Bulgaria. While media discourse was dominated by public outrage, some analysts considered Mr Borisov’s comment as aiming to seduce “Ataka” voters. GERB, however, did not delve into further rhetoric of minority exclusion. Instead, Mr Borisov turned to the Romani electorate by signing a memorandum for collaboration with 12 Romani NGOs and promising a ministerial seat to a Romani representative in an eventual GERB cabinet.¹⁰

⁶ National Center for Surveying Public Opinion n. 4 above, April 2009.

⁷ “Волен Сидеров в Бургас: 17 май да стане ден в памет на изкланите в Батак българи (17 May Should Celebrate the Memories of the Victims of the Batak Killings)”, *Ataka Newspaper*, 27 May 2009, http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3955&Itemid=61 (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁸ National Center for Surveying Public Opinion n. 4 above, March 2009.

⁹ “Бойко Борисов: В България остана лош човешки материал (Boyko Borisov: Bulgaria is Left with Nothing but Bad Human Material)”, *Standart Newspaper*, 5 February 2009, <http://www.standartnews.com/news/details/id/22568/Бойко-Борисов:-В-България-остана-лош-човешки-материал-> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁰ Luben Obretenov, “Борисов намекна, че някой от министрите му ще е ром (Borisov Hints that one of his Ministers will be Roma)”, *Sega Newspaper*, 3 March 2009.

Media discourse

As political parties refrained from radicalising their speech in the European Parliament election campaign, the media seemed to follow course. This, however, does not mean that discrimination against Roma was absent from the media discourse. Rather, there are no significant signs that point to an increasing trend of racist talk or scapegoating influenced by the decline of the economic situation in the country.

Although most media outlets are signatories of the Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media, which denounces the publishing of material which can incite hatred or discrimination,¹¹ the use of the derogative term “Gypsy” is commonplace in the public discourse. On average, 11 articles each month referred to Roma as “Gypsies” in the first half of 2008. This trend remained the same in the second half of the year when the economic crisis was already discussed in the public space. For the first five months of 2009, Roma were referred to as “Gypsies” about 13 times per month in the press. The increase in the average was due to 27 references to the opposition leader’s speech of “1 million Gypsies” published in February.¹²

A more careful look at the main topics related to Roma in the media reveals that there is no significant change in treatment of this minority group with the decline in the economy. Although the Ethical Code of the Bulgaria Media limits the mention of a perpetrator’s ethnic background,¹³ journalists do not refrain from proclaiming the Romani identity of alleged offenders. Of 44 articles focusing on or mentioning Roma in the press in April 2008, 22 were related to crime or

illicit activities. For the same month in 2009, out of 27 Roma-related articles 14 dealt with crime and illicit activities, keeping the same 50% rate.

The lack of obvious rise in radical or discriminatory rhetoric towards Roma in Bulgaria with the worsening of the economic situation does not necessarily testify to the lack of increase in discrimination towards this minority group. However, no representative surveys measuring subjective discrimination since the beginning of the crisis have been published to date. Hence, it is not possible to pursue a linkage between the economic situation and the occurrence of discrimination. Looking at the number of complaints filed would not be indicative of the levels of discrimination, as 92% of Roma respondents in a recent survey said they did not report discrimination to relevant authorities.¹⁴

Economic hardship

While there are no signs that the economic downturn has fueled more radical rhetoric or racist attacks on Roma in Bulgaria, this minority group is likely to suffer disproportionate economic hardship as a result of the crisis. As Roma are overrepresented in the sectors most affected by the worsening economy, unemployment levels in the community are likely to rise faster than those among other ethnic groups.

The construction sector, which shrunk by 30% since the beginning of 2009,¹⁵ accounts for the largest share of employed Roma. In June 2007, 22.4% of Romani respondents in a World Bank Housing Survey said that they were working in

¹¹ *Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media, Article 2.5.1*, <http://www.mediaethics-bg.org/index.php?do=17=bg> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹² *Database search in 17 major daily and weekly newspaper editions from 1 January 2009 – 31 May 2009.*

¹³ *Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media, Article 2.5.2*, <http://www.mediaethics-bg.org/index.php?do=17=bg> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁴ *Fundamental Rights Agency, “Data in Focus: The Roma”, European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*, http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/EU-MIDIS_ROMA_EN.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁵ *Bulgarian Chamber of Construction, “Data on the Registered Unemployed in the Construction Sector in the First Trimester of 2009”, http://www.ksb.bg/images/stories/Novini/bezrabotni_I_trim_2009.xls (accessed: 20 July 2009), quoted in Radostina Markova, “2009 ще е годината на замразените проекти (2009 will be the Year of Unfinished Projects)”, *Pari Newspaper*, 8 May 2009.*

the construction sector, as compared to 10.2% of Bulgarians and 16.4% of ethnic Turks.¹⁶ The decrease in turnover in the sector due to frozen projects and lack of investment is likely to lead to significant downsizing of the workforce. Official statistics show that for the first three months of the year, 2,268 persons registered as unemployed construction workers.¹⁷ For the previous year, the National Statistics Institute registered a decline of about 9,000 employees, from 204,000 in 2007 to 195,000 in 2008.¹⁸ According to experts, however, unemployment in the field is well beyond the registered levels as many construction workers do not have formal labour agreements with their employers. Roma are likely to be overrepresented in this number, as surveys show that 23.6% of Roma work without formal arrangements.¹⁹ Seasonal employees, which account for 40% of the construction workforce, are likely to be redundant in 2009; therefore many Romani workers relying on seasonal work will be unemployed this year.²⁰

The decline of other sectors of the economy will also negatively affect employment levels among Roma. The significant decline of the metallurgy sector will affect the 5.7% of Roma employed in this field.²¹ The shutting down of metallurgy giant Kremikovtzi was slated to 1,300 people on the streets by the end of June 2009.²² Other industries such as mining, food and textiles are likely to follow course

with increasing layoffs. This would contribute to rising unemployment levels which could reach 11% by the end of the year, according to a labour union leader.²³ As the lower level of education among Roma leads to their overrepresentation in the unskilled workforce, Romani employees are likely to be the most vulnerable to the upcoming layoffs.

Estimating the exact effect of the economic crisis is a precarious task, as unemployment in Romani communities is especially difficult to measure. For one, labour bureaus do not keep ethnically disaggregated statistics on unemployment. Even if disaggregated data were in place, it would not account for unregistered unemployment. Household and other representative surveys have given a relevant estimate of Romani unemployment, although the divergence of definitions of unemployment and questions asked does not always allow for comparisons. The limited sample of Romani respondents in some surveys allows for a large degree of statistical error.

If data from recent surveys is considered with a degree of caution, the first signs of the impact of the economic crisis on the employment rates among Roma are quite evident. A survey carried out in June 2008 by one of the leading polling agencies in Bulgaria revealed 40% unemployment among Romani respondents.²⁴ One year later, the same

¹⁶ *Data from the World Bank Household Survey, quoted in Open Society Institute Sofia, "Ромите в България. Информационен справочник (Roma in Bulgaria: Guidebook)", 2009, 37, <http://www.osf.bg/downloads/File/RomaGuide2.pdf> (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

¹⁷ *Bulgarian Chamber of Construction, "Data on the Registered Unemployed in the Construction Sector in the First Trimester of 2009", http://www.ksb.bg/images/stories/Novini/bezrabotni_1_trim_2009.xls (accessed: 20 July 2009), quoted in Radostina Markova, "2009 ще е годината на замразените проекти (2009 will be the Year of Unfinished Projects)", *Pari Newspaper*, 8 May 2009.*

¹⁸ *Data from the National Statistics Institute, quoted in В сянката на строежа (In the Shadow of Construction)", *Capital Newspaper*, 6 March 2009.*

¹⁹ *World Bank Household Survey n. 16 above.*

²⁰ *Ivan Boykov (Executive Director of the Bulgarian Construction Chamber), "Строителството у нас все още не е изпаднало в рецесия (The Construction Sector is Still Not in Recession)", *Klassa Newspaper*, 21 May 2005, <http://www.class.bg/news/Read/article/363115> (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

²¹ *World Bank Household Survey n. 16 above.*

²² *Dina Hristova, "6000 души остават без работа след третата вълна съкращения (6,000 people will lose their jobs in the third wave of layoffs)", *Sega Newspaper*, 16 June 2006.*

²³ *"65% от българите живеят в бедност, смята Подкрепа (65% Bulgarians Live Below the Poverty Line, according to Podkrepa Trade Union)", *Trud Newspaper*, 6 March 2009.*

²⁴ *Alpha Research Surveys, June 2008. Unpublished data provided to the author.*

agency's opinion polls registered 60.9% unemployed Roma and the trend in unemployment among Roma began increasing rapidly from February this year.²⁵ The opinion polls revealed that unemployment among ethnic Bulgarians increased by less than 1%, from 6% to 6.9% over one year.²⁶

The vulnerability of the Romani workforce to the effects of the economic crisis is likely to lead to other negative socio-economic effects for the community. For one, declines in employment are likely to lead to dropping out of the system of health insurance and social security. Roma

are overrepresented in the numbers of uninsured citizens and a further increase in this share will negatively affect the health status of the community. Access to health impacts the level of education, and deterioration of one factor can easily trigger a cycle of poverty. As economic deprivation increases the abject living conditions of segregated Romani neighbourhoods, the goal of integration becomes ever more challenging. To prevent this from happening, the government needs to put in place sound and sustainable public policies that consider the vulnerability of Roma in the current economic situation.

²⁵ *Alpha Research Surveys, January-June 2009. Unpublished data provided to the author.*

²⁶ *Alpha Research Surveys, June 2008 and June 2009. Unpublished data provided to the author.*