

## SPATIAL POLARIZATION AND URBAN GHETTOIZATION OF THE ROMA POPULATION IN BULGARIA

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***Abstract.** The current urban development in Europe faces many complex problems, mainly related to the deepening of socio-economic inequalities, spatial polarization and ghettoization, the increasing share of marginalized populations and those at risk of poverty, and school segregation. These issues are particularly acute in countries with a heterogeneous ethnic structure, and the Roma population has emerged as the most vulnerable group within Europe, particularly in Bulgaria. Roma ethnical group constituted 4.4% of the total Bulgarian population in 2021 and shows a high territorial concentration in several well-delineated areas, namely North-Western, North-Eastern, Maritsa, Trans-Balkan, and Burgas regions. In addition, more than half of them live in cities and possess the most favorable demographic features and the highest migration mobility compared to other ethnic groups. So far, despite the long-standing efforts of the Bulgarian state for Roma's successful integration, there are continuous and unfavorable trends of deepening processes of social exclusion, intolerance manifestations, spatial segregation, poor housing conditions, and lack of employment. The paper explores the current spatial polarization and urban ghettoization of the Roma population in Bulgaria. The spatial segregation of Roma urban communities is a significant issue in Bulgaria, and efforts to address their integration through national and regional strategies have not yet yielded substantial improvements. The extensive knowledge of the Roma population's cultural and other inherent peculiarities and the involvement of Roma stakeholders in policy discussions and implementations are crucial for achieving sustainable change in Bulgarian society.*

**Keywords:** *spatial segregation, ghetto, Roma population, Bulgaria*

**JEL:** *A14, P23, P25, P36, R23, Z10*

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**Introduction.** The current urban development in Europe faces many complex problems, mainly related to the deepening of socio-economic inequalities, spatial polarization, ghettoization, and the increasing share of marginalized populations. These issues are particularly acute in countries with a heterogeneous ethnic structure, and the Roma population has emerged as the most vulnerable group within Europe, particularly in Bulgaria. According to the results of the National Census of Population in Bulgaria conducted in 2021, the Roma ethnical group constituted 266 720 (or 4.4 % of the total inhabitants) and is the third-largest ethnic group. The observed tendency shows a decrease in their number by 0.5 % compared with the previous census in 2011 but during the period 1900-2021, the Roma people have expanded almost twice (in 1900 they were 2.4 %). After 1945 the Roma ethnicity changed their living conditions and occupation, and they migrated from villages to towns/cities. At the beginning of the XX century, only 20.5 % of them lived in cities while in 2021 the share of the urban Roma population has risen to 51.0 %. (Ethno-cultural characteristics of the population..., NSI, 2021).

Studying the current demographic characteristics of the Roma population, the following main features and facts can be referred:

- The share of the youngest people (0-14 years) is with the highest values among other ethnic groups – 26.6 %;
- The share of the population aged 65 and over is the lowest in the country – only 7.3 %;
- Although there is a positive trend in improvement of the educational level of the Roma population, they still have the highest rate of school dropout (8.0 % of Roma children between 7 and 15 years), and more than 11.8 % of the population age 9 and over are illiterate.
- Unemployment rates are the highest among the Roma population – more than 50.2 % of economically active people are unemployed.
- Religious denominations of the Roma people are very diverse – 29.1 % are Eastern Orthodox, 17.6 % are Muslims, 12.4 % are Protestants, and more than one-third - “don’t have a religion”, “don’t want to answer” and “cannot determine” (Ethno-cultural characteristics of the population..., NSI, 2021).

**Literature review and research methodology.** There are numerous studies on the Roma diaspora, its demographic and socio-economic characteristics, integration problems, and spatial segregation in Bulgaria (Bogdanov et al., 2012; Bardarov & Ilieva, 2020; Ilieva, 2013, 2014, 2019; Ilieva & Kazakov, 2019; Kolev et al., 2021a, 2021b; Pamporov, 2009a, 2009b; Petkova, 2023; Ravnachka et al., 2020; Tomova & Stoytchev, 2021).

The study area is the territory of Bulgarian, and the methodology comprises a literature review, short interviews with Roma representatives from different social layers, and other qualitative and quantitative methods. Due to the limited length of the article, it is necessary to point out the major contemporary trends and problems related to the spatial polarization and urban ghettoization of the Roma population in Bulgaria.

**Main results.** The Roma population showed a relatively even distribution in all districts of Bulgaria till the end of the communist regime (1990). Until then, they lived in small and non-compact areas, constantly changing their location and

it was not easy to delineate well-defined regions. The territorial concentration process of this ethnic group is a result mainly of the Roma population increase after 1990 and their more favorable demographic features compared with Bulgarians and Turks (Ilieva, 2014).

As Ilieva (2013) pointed out, the continuous process of spatial polarization in the last three decades led to the establishment of several compact areas with a substantial number of Roma population, namely North-Western, North-Eastern, Maritsa, Trans-Balkan, and Burgas regions. These regions show a continuous territorial expansion, and they cover 20.2% of the area of Bulgaria. In these five areas, more than half of the Bulgarian Roma is concentrated, and this process has been intensifying over the last decade. The North-Eastern region is one of the biggest and extends over the territory of districts Shumen, Dobrich, Varna, and Targovishte. It occupies 5.5 % of the state territory and accounts for 11.0 % of the entire Roma population in Bulgaria. The North-Eastern region has the highest number and relative share of settlements with more than 30% Roma inhabitants. The Maritsa region is in second place according to territorial scope – it comprises 5.0 % of the territory and 12.7% of the Roma population but the Roma people are more dispersed in small settlements and with evident spatial segregation in the big cities. It includes the territory around Plovdiv and stretches to Harmanli and Svilengrad cities (mainly in the foothills of the Eastern Rhodope). The Trans-Balkan (including the Kazanlak and Sliven valleys, and eastern parts of Balkan Mountain) and North-Western (located in the western part of the Danube plain) regions are almost the same size (about 4.1% - 4.2 % of territory), with substantial demographic potential of Roma people (respectively 12.9 % and 8.9%) and show different trends in accumulation of Roma population in the settlements. Trans-Maritsa region experiences a continuous process of steadily increasing Roma share in settlements with more than 30% Roma residents. The North-Western region is distinguished by a more even dispersion of Roma diaspora over the territory and the concentration of Roma in the settlements is mostly up to 30%. The Burgas region is “the youngest” and the smallest one. It encompasses only 1.4 % of the territory - mainly the municipalities Karnobat, Aytos, Kameno, Ruen, Pomorie, Sredets, and Sozopol. Roma population here is 3.4 % of the whole but shows similarities in its development with the North-Eastern region due to specific local ethnic structure (Ilieva, 2013; Bardarov & Ilieva, 2020).

On a smaller scale, in 2021, the districts with the highest rates of Roma inhabitants are Sliven (15.3 %), Montana (11.3 %), Shumen (8.0 %), Dobrich (7.2 %), Yambol (7.1%), Vidin (6.8%), Vratza (6.7%), Pazardzhik (6.7%), Haskovo (6.4%), Targovishte (6.5%), Stara Zagora (6.1%) and Kyustendil (6.0%), (Ethno-cultural characteristics of the population..., NSI, 2021).

So far, despite the series of scientific studies from international, national, and local organizations and researchers, the data on the composition, size, territorial distribution, and other features of Roma urban ghettoized structures are fragmented and incomplete. Such settlements in Bulgaria are not subject to detailed and comprehensive mapping with a unified methodology, so this is a substantial obstacle to their in-depth understanding and addressing their needs properly (Tomova & Stoytchev, 2021; Ileva et al., 2020).

Spatial urban segregation of the Roma population in Bulgaria is a multidimensional process shaped by internal and external factors. Most commonly, the outcome is a territory with a high concentration of Roma people who live in poor living and economic conditions and are socially and culturally isolated from the other neighborhoods (often labeled as a slum, “mahala” or “ghetto”). Mionel and Negut (2011) admit that the process of ghettoization is composed of 6 mutually correlated and reinforcing stages: labor market discrimination, deprivation of economic activity, housing discrimination, limited access to public services, degradation of the urban environment, and isolation and self-isolation from the “others”.

The phenomenon of Roma ghettoization in urban territories in Bulgaria has a complex nature. It is a consequence of a long and ongoing process of interaction of political, demographic, economic, social, and psychological factors. Despite the peculiarities that can be observed in the urban ghettoized structures with predominantly Roma populations, the following main contemporary features are identified:

- The demographic and socio-psychological situation is quite controversial – on the one hand, the Roma people have the highest birth rates and the most favorable age structure in Bulgaria. In addition, they have large households with multiple generations living under one roof, and strong family bonds and solidarity. On the other hand, these communities have the highest child mortality rates, higher morbidity rates due to poor living conditions and lack of income and insurance, high levels of crime and employment in the shadow economy, marginalization, and social exclusion. In the last decades, the Roma ethnic group actively migrated to developed countries in Western Europe. Consequently, it results in the transformation of their way of thinking and way of living, even when they come back home. As Cherkezova (2018) indicates, Roma emigrants gradually appreciate the benefits of education, and due to certain circumstances, consider it an instrument for achieving a better life. Among many Roma peculiarities is the lack of attachment to their homeland, and the different religious and linguistic subgroups don't develop a common spirit of solidarity and, as a rule, they live in segregated “islands” from each other in the Roma quarters (Pamporov, 2009b).
- The Roma population is locked in a persistent vicious cycle – the poor educational levels, lack of secure incomes, marginalization, discrimination, and negative attitudes (violence, harassment, and insults) lead to social exclusion and recurrent multidimensional poverty over generations. And child poverty and hunger are in sync with the overall poverty in Roma quarters. And it is alarming that 90.5% of children living in the Roma neighborhoods are at risk of poverty and about 28.6% of households are struggling with the lack of sufficient food amount for everyone (Tomova & Stoytchev, 2021; National strategy..., 2020; Pamporov, 2009a).
- Housing conditions and urban environment are characterized by high building density, obsolete and overcrowded housing stock, lack of sanitation and other important public facilities, poor living conditions, and a significant proportion of illegal buildings. All this implies a lack of green and open spaces which also has a negative impact on the quality of the city environment. Thus, the Roma

ghettoized urban structures become isolated “patches” in the common urban fabric and interactions (Ilieva et al., 2020; Petkova, 2023)

**Discussion and conclusions.** The spatial segregation of Roma urban communities is a significant issue in Bulgaria, and efforts to address their integration through national and regional strategies have not yet yielded substantial improvements. The extensive knowledge of the Roma population's cultural and other inherent peculiarities and the involvement of Roma stakeholders in policy discussions and implementations are crucial for achieving sustainable change in Bulgarian society.

The main priorities for overcoming spatial segregation and urban ghettoized structures of the Roma population in Bulgaria can be identified as follows:

- Demographic transition - it is necessary to encourage the positive trends in the demographic transformation of the Roma reproductive and marital behavior to improve their economic well-being and raise children in better conditions. The most urgent goals are to reduce child mortality, enhance reliable healthcare for children under 5 years, and increase life expectancy (Ilieva, 2014; Kolev et al., 2021a; Tomova & Stoytchev, 2021).
- Intercultural education, access to quality early childcare, and further education – nowadays, it is vital to understand and respect different cultures and “others” in Bulgaria. The ethnic identity of Roma children should be protected with a focus on child interests and future educational and labor integration. It is especially crucial to combat educational segregation, “learned helplessness” and the “culture of poverty” related to this ethnic group at all levels of society and state. (Kolev et al., 2021a; Kolev et al., 2021b; Tomova & Stoytchev, 2021).
- Employment, adequate housing policy, and social inclusion - the main objectives are reducing the level of poverty and severe material deprivation among the Roma population compared to national values, increasing the number of people engaged in paid employment and self-employment (with a particular focus on Roma women), provision of alternative housing and rehabilitation of social one, improvement of quality of life, providing possibilities for small businesses, and better access to health, social, and transport infrastructure and services (Kolev et al., 2021a; Kolev et al., 2021b; Tomova & Stoytchev, 2021).
- Promoting best practices in the country - there are good examples of how Roma ghettoized structures can contribute to strengthening the city's social, economic, spatial, and cultural integrity. It already happens with an adequate urban and social policy in some of the municipalities in Bulgaria – for example, in Kavarna and Straldzha. The local authority in Kavarna supports Roma citizens to build legally, implements measures to stop illegal construction, organizes effective waste management, and ensures easy and free access to health and educational services for Roma people and neighborhoods (Petkova, 2023). In Straldzha, broader involvement of the Roma community in economic activity and promoting the “Icelandic Model” (Project Self-Discovery: Artistic Alternatives for At-Risk Youth) in schools enhance their integration and help to overcome prejudices and social distance (Bardarov & Ilieva, 2020)

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