

INTRODUCTION



Parties and celebrations in England [far from the Romani community] are a means to unclog (unplug), to get rid of the negative energy; while here in Bulgaria, in a Romani gathering, your heart ... is filled; your soul becomes one with the soul of the others. There is a circle of a love ... and re-filling with love [which is being passed around] to the other. It is being filled by the love of the [one next to you]; that makes one common circle; that is the good thing about the Gypsy gatherings – there is so much sharing of love, everything is very pure and genuine, and people celebrate with their hearts.

—Informant 5, male, age late 30s, Sofia¹

Preface and Positionality

The above quote epitomises the way I feel each time I am surrounded by my close and extended family. This sentiment perfectly encapsulates the reasons why I am always eager to be in their company. As a Romani migrant myself, I too have felt the differences between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ echoed here. My own experiences have made me passionate about the discussion of Romani migration from the Romani perspective, and the consequences of it.

If there must be a beginning, then I should say I owe this work to my father – the person who sent me abroad for the first time, albeit against my will (because that is ‘the way’ in our family). It was in November 2001, just after I had graduated from my English Language School in Sofia, the place where I was born and raised. At the time of my departure, there were tears and heavy sentimental feelings from both my family and myself, despite the fact

that only a short two-hour flight separated Sofia from Bremen, Germany – however, I have been ever thankful to my father for his foresight.

Since my early experiences of living abroad, I have encountered many different peoples, cultures and ideas. I always have the sense that, with each new one, I receive a new ‘taste of life’, and I discover and rediscover different aspects of my own identity, which has resulted in countless personal changes and transformations – both profound and trivial.

There has been one constant in my identity, however, which has been acting as a cornerstone, unable to be shifted – my Romani identity. My original ideas about the Roma centred entirely on those of my immediate and extended family. I was raised and nurtured as one who is a Roma and one who should never be shy to identify openly as a Roma, because one should not deny or hide who one is. This could be seen as a tool to counteract the generally negative perceptions about ‘the Tsigani’, along with their prevailing stereotypes, that can easily make Romani children (who study in mixed schools) unwilling to reveal their Romani heritage. The strategy that my family has successfully employed in order to prevent such a scenario has been simple – ‘prove to your peers that you are not that different as a Roma, and that you can excel’.

As a result, since my early years as a child, this idea that Roma are not different but even better than the rest has prevailed in my identity. Thus, no matter where I have been or whom I have met throughout my years, it has become natural for me to say I am a Roma, but I am not different. That probably explains why the Romani theme has been prevalent throughout my studies. I have been curious to learn what policies and institutions do about the Roma – what has been done and what can be done so that there are fewer discrepancies between the Roma and the societies they inhabit. Probably unsurprisingly, throughout my academic years I have eagerly taken on assignments that examine Romani topics. This has mainly been driven by my sense of obligation to myself as a Roma and the people I personally know as Roma. Through my research and writing I have felt I am not only learning but also developing abilities to raise awareness about the community that I feel the closest connection to.

This work was inspired by my personal experiences, as I like to say that I am a product of migration myself. Over the years, with each journey back to Sofia in order to reunite with my family and rekindle my (Romani) spirit, not only have I felt that I am rediscovering my old place, and thus looking at it with a different set of eyes, but also family and friends have seen a ‘different person’ to the one they knew from the previous return journey. That is really how the idea of this book naturally came to life – with its cultural and social emphasis.

Migration Is the 'Heart', Transformation Is the 'Part'

Migration can be necessary and vital for the survival of both animals and humans. Being essential, these journeys can thus be long, risky and perilous. There are many examples of animals of different species and habitats whose lives and survival depend on the change of the seasons and their abilities to travel. Thus, they travel great distances by land, water or air in order to reach more suitable climates and environments in their search for a mate (or to lay eggs), and for food and water. Grey whales, for example, are known to have the longest migration among mammals, as they cover between 16,000 and 20,000 km annually between their mating grounds in the warm waters of Mexico in the winter and their feeding grounds in the Arctic seas in the summer (Annenberg Learner 2015).

Besides being long, migratory journeys can be also dangerous. In the African Great Migration for example, over a million wildebeest, zebra and other grazing animals cover between 800 and 1,600 km together in their search for water and grazing lands in the dry season in eastern Africa. Even though some of them, such as the zebra, live in tightly knit family units, they have learnt that there are benefits in them travelling as part of a bigger unit, as they pursue common goals (to reach lands with water and food) and fear common enemies (predators such as lions, leopards, cheetahs and hyenas) (Stephens, n.d.).

In this case, one may agree with Hans Christian Andersen, who wrote in his autobiography *The Fairy Tale of my Life* (2000):

To move, to breathe, to fly, to float,
To gain all while you give,
To roam the roads of lands remote,
To travel is to live.

As we see, travelling may be needed and natural, but settling down is also an integral part of the process. The search for a 'home', for example, may give a true meaning and purpose of the migratory choices to humans, just as animals may traverse the globe for thousands of kilometres in order to find mates or to give birth. Both migrating and settling down work hand in hand and enhance each other, and as such, one should not be seen as an antithesis of the other. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain space as being both 'smooth' and 'striated'. This analogy could be compared to the distinction between moving migrants (or nomads) and the sedentary. According to the authors, the smooth and the striated spaces

are fundamentally different in nature, however they are in a constant state of communication: they enhance each other, give birth to one another and are inherently mixed. Similarly, there is a mutual interplay between migration and settling down, or the search to find 'home', where both influence each other in intricate ways.

Migration, besides being necessary and vital, can be unavoidably *transformational*. George Zipf sees each person as 'a unit', which is the result of a 'set of paths' they take (Zipf 1949, cited in Adey 2010). Thus, a person is to be considered as the unique combination of their decisions and choices, or their 'paths'. This becomes even further complemented when these 'paths' change, evolve and are involved in movement themselves (Adey 2010). Writing in relation to Zipf's point, Lyotard has conveyed that individuals cannot and should not be seen as isolated and self-sufficient selves, but a result of relations that are mobile and floating (Lyotard 1984, cited in Adey 2010).

Perhaps we should ask ourselves the question of how the different 'paths' taken by migrants impact, influence and shape their individual and social group identities, rather than looking at the factor of migration as a process. This work is concerned not only with portraying the essential necessity of people to migrate in order to '*live*' (as Hans Christian Anderson put it) but also the consequences and impacts on their journeys – which could lead to further discoveries or beginnings.

Contemporary Debate on Migration

The issue of migration of people has been historically significant, and even though not unique to today's age, it has hardly been more momentous; it has dominated the public discourse of national and international figures and citizens alike, influencing policies and politics while figuring in headlines of mass media internationally. There is a link therefore between the incessant migration of people – so vital, natural and necessary as a means to 'life' – and the forms of *transformation* that result from their travels. The types of metamorphosis or shifts can be observed in the public consciousness about refugees and asylum seekers, creating or breaking down policies, new forms of governance and dynamics between states.

Today, there are more people on the move than at any other time in human history. In 2011, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs reported that 3 per cent of the world population, around 214 million people, live outside their countries of origin (UN DESA 2011). According to the UN Population Fund, by 2013 that number had increased to 3.2 per cent, around 232 million people (UNFPA, n.d.), while there is good reason

to believe that this number has been increasing steadily since, especially with the failure to secure a safe place for the citizens of conflict zones. Such instabilities have been causing migrants to flee their homes and move either internationally or within the boundaries of their own states. Examples can be seen across the globe, with thousands of migrants trying to reach the United States from South and Central America and Mexico, while there have also been record numbers of attempts to reach Europe via the Mediterranean (Adams 2015). While the highest number of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean was recorded at 214,000 for 2014, this number had already been surpassed by late August 2015 – about 300,000 migrants (UN News 2015). This unprecedented situation was highlighted by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad, during the late summit in Geneva on 14 September 2015. He 'implore[d] decision makers in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific – as well as Europe – to take swift actions to establish effective and principled migration governance' (OHCHR 2015a).

Europe, or (wealthier) countries of the European Union (EU), is the desired destination for thousands of migrants – refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants alike. This increased influx of people has provided unprecedented challenges for nation-states and their leaders to think of ways to grapple with this reality, which in turn has put the EU as an organisation to yet another test. In the last decade, there have been rises in nationalist sentiment across EU member states, instances of human rights violations and failures of coordination of EU legislature, policy coordination and action (Williams 2004; Almeida 2010; Rosato 2011). The urge of new policies towards migration and migrants was sparked by the photo of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi washed ashore on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey in September 2015. The spread of similar disturbing images sparked international protests and pressure for alternative policies and consciousness about migrants and migration to be created.

An example of a form of 'transformation' was the decision of Germany to terminate (at least temporarily up until April 2019) the Schengen Agreement and to impose controls on its borders with Austria and Denmark in order to better control the movement of migrants. This was a result of the inability of the German state to cope with the unexpectedly high number of migrants (BBC News 2015), as hundreds of thousands arrived in the Bavarian capital Munich. It was decided that not only could member states opt to terminate policy agreements (such as the Schengen Agreement) but also that they could disagree on how or what would be the appropriate way to cope with the continuing influx of migrants;² and yet there is no guarantee that things will change with time. In the same vein, there has been great uncertainty since the decision of the British Referendum on 23 June 2016 to withdraw

from the EU – or ‘Brexit’. As of March 2019, there is still great uncertainty what the future relationship between UK and the EU will be, and what that will actually mean for British citizens, businesses and trade. Not only is the British nation divided on their visions for the future (51.9 per cent voted to leave the EU), but also their Members of Parliament have been split on what they wish their future to look like.

It is also impossible to ignore the coming to power of the 45th US President in January 2017, Donald Trump. With his very forthright policies and visions for a better, stronger and greater America, he has also managed to divide the American nation. Not only was the validity of his very election contested, but also some of his key policies such as his insistence on the building of a wall along the Mexico border, which caused the partial shutdown of the Federal Government for the longest period in US history.

So far, migration has been presented largely through the lens of the political and economic implications for societies. Reviews find international migration as desirable and healthy for the labour markets, the economies and the societies that receive immigrants (Ruhs and Vargas-Silva 2015; Vargas-Silva 2015). This whole discussion, however, seems to lack a debate on the participants of migration – those agents of migration who do the evaluation and credit the effects, or *transformations*, because of their travels.

The Book’s Focus

The struggles and stories we come across today of the refugees and asylum seekers, largely through the use of media, are touching and heartbreaking indeed. But what about those Europeans who experience forms of exclusion, discrimination, stereotyping and plights similar to Third World nationals? The Roma, are those ‘unwanted’ Europeans who have been on the receiving end of targeted policies of exclusion (in the past and at present), and inclusion and integration (at present), along with their prevailing stereotypes and forms of discrimination, exploitation, deportation, slavery and Holocaust (Clements 2007). Besides the previously mentioned concerns about the imminent issue of migration, on 11 September 2015 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein, expressed deep worries about the forced evictions of Roma in France, Bulgaria and several other European states. The expulsion of Roma in August 2015 from France is reported as ‘simply the latest’ of a series of ‘collective forced evictions of Roma migrants ... since 2012’, while Europe has witnessed a number of similar examples in countries such as the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania and the United Kingdom (OHCHR 2015b).

Romani migrants deserve special consideration. On the one hand, discourse could be centred on opposition to immigrants who arguably drive wages down, take jobs and benefits, and bring crime and illegality. On the other hand, it could be a discussion about predominant and deep-rooted anti-Romani sentiments, despite Roma not being immigrants but full citizens of Europe's nation-states. The Roma are recognised as an 'integral part of European civilization' and the 'biggest ethnic minority in Europe' (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, n.d.) and yet, they have been historically perceived as 'other' and different - probably because of their essentially non-European origins and language, their secluded communities, their apparent physical and cultural characteristics, as well as their images of being 'travellers' or 'nomads'.

The Roma of Europe today find themselves at large facing extreme forms of social exclusion, discrimination and aggression, similar to those of refugees and immigrants from Africa and countries of the Middle East, and even those who are stateless (Fagan, Urwin and Melling 2006). As Collins et al. noted: 'Roma belong to "first world" societies but live in pockets of poverty that have "third world" characteristics' (Collins et al. 2006: 46). As a result, migration of Roma could be seen not only as a search for labour and an exercise of their right to freedom of movement (in the EU), but also as a way to flee persecution, discrimination and marginalisation, and as a search for a better life.

The first unconventional aspect of this work comes from the specific study of Bulgarian Roma. Thus far, Roma people have been perceived on the whole as a singular entity, and in most cases are referred to as 'the Roma people', as one collective. In many publications the term 'Roma' curiously comes with an explanatory 'footnote definition' (Council of Europe 2012: 3). Notably, one can see a definition that shrinks and expands over time. In 1969, the Council of Europe (CoE) defined them as 'Gypsies and other travellers', 'Nomads' (1975 and 1983), 'populations of nomadic origin' (1981), and 'Gypsies' (1993); and in 2012 the CoE gave the most recent definition of Roma. All this may be perceived as ironic, because there is a great deal of confusion and vagueness in our understanding of who these people actually are. It should be borne in mind that the Romanies are a diverse community that differs according to the place they occupy, the use of language, dialect, tradition and self-appellation. Thus, to speak of the Roma as a single homogeneous and unified unit would be unjust, and would miss valuable intricacies.

Also, since Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU together in 2007, they have brought in a considerable number of Romanies. Romanian Roma are estimated to number around 673,626 (Index Mundi, n.d.a) in 2014, while in Bulgaria they were about 280,979 according to the official census data in

2011 (Natsionalen statisticheski institut 2011) and around 304,687 according to estimates for 2014 (Index Mundi, n.d.b). Other authors, however, cite larger numbers of Roma for Romania – Rughiniş (2010) cited that between 730,000 and 1.5 million Roma could actually be living in Romania. Similarly, another number given for Roma in Bulgaria is 700,000–800,000 (Liegeois 2007: 31). Paradoxically, we should not be too fixated with these numbers or the ‘actual’ number of Roma, because it may never be known. Especially on the topic of Romani migration and contested and unwanted Romani identity, where Roma might not figure in statistical data, either because they are abroad or because they may simply decide not to reveal their true (Romani) identities. In fact, in the cases of Romania and Bulgaria, their number has varied from between zero and millions.³ Also, by virtue of the fact that Bulgaria and Romania were the poorest regions in the EU, both countries would be put and figure together as part of more general discussions about potential ‘migration threats’, as their citizens would seek to migrate to the wealthier EU counties – as was proved with the lifting of work restrictions for Bulgarians and Romanians in January 2014. The UK mass media presented general stories about the situation of Bulgarian and Romanian migrants, and complement them with further examples or stories about the troubled situation of Roma in these countries. As a similar research has been conducted studying Romanian Roma migrants in the UK (Matras and Leggio 2018), this book will distinguish itself from that, and from general narratives about Bulgarian and Romanian nationals or the Roma taken as a whole, by instead aiming to present a better understanding of the experiences of Bulgarian Roma exclusively.

The second ‘unconventional’ aspect is the insider perspective which this work brings. At large, similar to the stories of international migrants striving to enter the EU, most of the stories and general knowledge about Roma is generated and presented through the lens of the media (which could be pro- or anti-immigration, Roma, or both). This work, instead, is generated through the stories of Bulgarian Romani migrants themselves, and presented by one of them.

The issue of migration within the boundaries of the European Union is very relevant as it seems to be the choice of Romanies, especially at times of uncertainty and crises. As Bauman (2007: 26) put it, we are living in a globalised world, or ‘open society’, that is uncertain and insecure. This insecurity can be witnessed through the changes that can happen at any time in the affairs of nation-states (e.g. the conflicts in the Middle East) and internationally (e.g. during times of economic and financial volatility), which influence the life choices of people across the world. A ‘borderless’ EU can thus be challenged where borders, both mental and physical, still have important role to play, as they influence migrants’ decisions.

Aims and Objectives

It is against this general backdrop that this book should be studied. It will present a conventional reading of Bulgarian Romani migration, and complement it with an insider perspective which will give this work an alternative angle. The research questions include not only the reasons for the migrations of Bulgarian Roma, which touch on the political, economic and legal aspects of their migrations, but also the effects and *transformation* that are a consequence of their travels. It will therefore address the often missing implied consequences of migration, such as the subjective feelings, emotions and experiences of the Romani migrants. Thus, it is interested in 'processes', such as the *evolution* of Romani identities and *becoming*, rather than just static (end) results.

This book has three main overlapping and interrelated aims. Firstly, it aims to contribute to the field of Migration Studies by studying the under-researched group of Bulgarian Roma migrants at times of insecurity and uncertainty. Secondly, it aims to understand the transformation of identity and hybrid identities. It aims to offer a better understanding of the effects of migration on the individual Roma migrant, and more precisely how they shape his/her identity, feelings (of belonging), customs and practices. And thirdly, it aims to find out how 'Romanipe' is mobilised, or how it is challenged by processes of migration. It will thus contribute to the field of Romani studies by examining interpretations of the concept of 'Romanipe' – a concept that has been used by scholars in the field, despite not having an agreed and definite (or certain) definition attached to it.

The concept 'Romanipe' occupies a central place here, and it will be discussed in greater detail later in the book. For greater clarity to be achieved for the purpose of this section, it should be noted that 'Romanipe' is a word that exists in the Romani language. It can be also found, depending on the dialect used, as Romaniya, Romaipe, Romanipen, Romanimos, Tsigania and others, but the main notion it carries is the same. It is believed to refer to the cosmos of being a Roma, 'their interpretations of the world' and 'common cultural practices' (Vermeersch 2007: 15), and everything that defines a person as Roma. Romani identity is an atemporal identity based not on historical but cultural practices and observations of norms of behaviour of both the Roma and the non-Roma populations (Mirga and Mroz 1994, cited in Tebbutt and Saul 2004). Arguably, a person would be considered (or accepted) as a Roma if they behave in accordance with the rules and norms of behaviour expected and accepted by the respective Romani community. Conversely, a Roma would no longer be considered as one should they fail to retain their Romanipe (Tebbutt and Saul 2004). In other words, Romanipe is the way of life of a Roma, which is based on cultural practices

rather than on historical memories of the past as these practices are not based on national rhetoric, group leaders, or nationalistic movements.

The book will seek to:

- Explore the underlying reasons for Bulgarian Roma's decisions to migrate, and the character of their migrations
- Understand the relationship between Romani identities, migrations and performance of identity
- Examine the attitudes to belonging, and the perceptions of 'home' and 'abroad' developed by Bulgarian Roma migrants
- Understand better the Romani identity and the interaction between (different) Romanies abroad
- Study the relationship between migration and migrants' accounts and interpretations of 'Romanipe'
- Understand the effects of migration on the emergence of new Romani consciousness and ways of belonging in the EU

These questions will be addressed in four empirical chapters, which will follow after Chapter 1 *Perceptions, Interpretations and Identities*, which examines the relevant literature on Roma migration, image and identity; and Chapter 2 *Research Design and Methodology*, where greater details will be given about this study, its research design and methods.

In Chapter 3 *Migration: The Types, Reasons and Effects*, we will examine the reasons for the migrations of Bulgarian Roma. We see that these could be individual, economic or structural, as well as to escape from undesired environments. In Chapter 4 *Belonging, Attachment and Space* we will present the factors and feelings that are able to influence their perceptions of belonging. Here, we also examine how Romani migrants create their spaces abroad, the factors that make them feel 'at home', as well as the concept of 'simultaneity'. Chapter 5 *Romani Identity as Part of Migration and 'Romanipe'* will build on the already covered discussion and explore the notions of Romani transnationalism, identity construction and Romanipe. The chapter presents an understanding of the Romani identity as a reaction and in relation to the external 'gaze', including the role of stereotypes in informing Romani identities. Also, the concepts, 'art of living' and 'selective multiculturalism' are introduced in order to better understand Romani identity and Romanipe. The final empirical chapter, Chapter 6 *Eye-Opening Processes: The Culture of Migration*, presents the ways individual migrants become affected by their travels and experiences from abroad. Notions of 'third culture' and hybridity are introduced to show the ways Bulgarian Romani migrants become deeply affected because of their travels, which may be 'liberating' but at the same 'unsettling' in many ways. All their gained experiences, when taken together, lead to greater realisations and

(personal) discoveries to the agents of migration themselves. Finally, this work culminates with a chapter that will provide a general discussion and conclusions.

Notes

1. The numerous informants of this work were allocated a number for anonymity.
2. While Germany believes a quota must be introduced in order for member states to share the burden of accommodating migrants, the current British government has largely been of the opinion that funds should be invested to provide education, training, and the building of camps in neighbouring countries, thus trying to deter them from trying to reach Europe.
3. According to the political narrative or regime in the histories of both Bulgaria and Romania, Roma did not figure in the official statistics of either country. Therefore, they claimed there were no Tsigani in Bulgaria, nor Țigani in Romania, while there were only the citizens of one nation, i.e. Romanians or Bulgarians (Liegeois 2007). For instance, since the actual origins of 'Tsigani' during the Socialist regime in Bulgaria were unknown or not proven, Roma did not have their own territory, nor did they have a uniform culture; their history was unknown, and they had difficulties being recognised as a 'national minority'. Absent from censuses after the 1950s, the 1971 Bulgarian Constitution made no references to ethnic minorities, and after 1974 'Tsigani' were rarely mentioned in official statistical data (Marushiakova and Popov 1997, 2012a; Barany 2002). Thus, Roma simply ceased to exist.