

## **Social Inclusion and Belonging to the Global Community of God's Chosen People of the Evangelical Roma in Bulgaria and Slovakia**

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### **Introduction**

Through fostering a conversation about the concept of *God's chosen people*, this paper examines how Romani studies scholars from Bulgaria and Slovakia respond to the empirical development of faith and how they analyze Romani belonging to the imagined community of God's chosen people.

### **Theoretical consideration and approaches**

Converted people believe that evangelicalism will transform the lives of the Roma everywhere, uniting them through religion as God's chosen people (Anderson, 1983). Jesus Christ enables the creation of bonds between the Roma and other evangelical Christians around the world, as interviewees from Bulgaria mentioned. Even though Jesus Christ is not a Roma and is white, He is the unique center of an imagined community. Each convert considers the benefits of relating to fellow believers in a productive way and is confident that they would relate similarly to him/her even though they are not mutually acquainted, for they all share the same standards of righteous behavior, solidarity, and fairness. The idea of imagined community is supported independently of all ethnic, social, economic, or racial identifications; its most important foundation is religious identity.

Consistent and uniform perception does not exist among different Romani circles whether God's chosen Roma are a constituent part of the global de-ethnicized community of God's people or represent a separate category. Indeed, some pastors tend to prioritize the concept of the Roma as God's chosen people, assigning to it specific tasks for the emancipation and improvement of the life of the Roma

worldwide without always showing the desire to categorically separate the Roma from the global community of God's chosen ones. This is because Romani religious organizations at local and national levels, and quite often supranationally, continue to generate similar (and even banal) self-identifications for their followers. The imagined community exists through the perceptions and identifications of converts and is embedded in institutionalized forms of social relations (Brubaker, 2004).

In this line of thought, authors from the field of Romani studies who put a slightly different analytical emphasis largely contribute to understanding the manner in which action - individual or collective - may be governed by religious organizational or institutionalized forms without the irretrievable loss of universal ethnic interests. Thomas Acton suggests that the Gypsy Evangelical Church influences the process of transition from a stage of group differentiation between different Gypsy ethnic groups to "a general Romani nationalism" (1979, p. 15). At the same time, Jean-Pierre Liégeois and Patrick Williams argue that, after conversion to evangelical Pentecostalism, the Roma become part of the community of Christian people (1999, pp. 87–88; 2002, pp. 98–109).

Paloma Gay y Blasco was the first to analyze the Spanish Gitanos as an imagined community or imagined diaspora, in her ethnographic research in the early 1990s in Madrid (1999, p. 49; 2001; 2002). The author assumes that Pentecostalism makes the representation Gitanos have of themselves into an idea of a new kind of imagined community, in which their status, roles and interrelations change (2000; 2001; 2004). Like what I observed among the Bulgarian Roma, her informants also believed that faith changed the life of Gitanos everywhere throughout the world and would make God's chosen people of them (Gay y Blasco, 2004, p. 257).

I agree with Gay y Blasco that the Pentecostal Roma are an imagined community. However, the non-evangelical Roma are a different kind of imagined community according to Bulgarian scholars Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov. They assert that such a notion is held not by the Roma themselves but by the surrounding population, which sees them as united based on their shared Gypsy/Roma ethnic origin (2007, p. 12).

Various Romani groups live in Bulgaria, such as *Dasikane Roma*, *Xoraxane Roma*, *Erlii*, *Millet* and others, who are Orthodox Christians or Muslims, but some of them become new Christians (Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.). They live scattered all over the country unlike the Slovak

Roma such as *Slovačike Roma*, *Ungriike Roma*, *Vlaxike Roma*, who live mainly in Eastern Slovakia. The predominant part of the Slovak Roma identify as Catholic, but others include Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and followers of Charismatic churches, Adventists, Methodists, and followers of the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession (Lutherans).

The topic of the evangelical conversion of the Roma has long been the subject of increased scientific interest in both countries. Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov stress that evangelicalism promotes an ethnic discourse of *miracalization* addressed specifically to the Roma because satisfy their followers' yearning for miracles (1993; 1999). According to Milan Kováč and Arne Mann in many traditional churches in Slovakia the Roma are segregated, they can stand only on in the back behind the pews or even outside the church building and because of this they become more and more open to various new religious movements (2003: 9–14).

Several original dissertations and first monographs of young scholars appeared between 2006 and 2009 in both countries and in European research area as a whole, signaling that this research topic will be particularly relevant in the coming years (Mena Cabezas, 2006; Hrustič, 2007; Slavkova, 2007; Ries, 2007; Atanasov, 2008; Llera Blanes, 2008; Fosztó, 2009). Evangelicalism is analyzed as a faith of middle-class Romani converts and also of those who live on the margins of society but would like to improve their status (Slavkova, 2007b; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010; Hrustič, 2012; Slavkova, 2012; Thurfjell, 2013; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2014; Thurfjell & March, 2014; Marushiakova & Popov, 2015; Erolova, 2017; Marushiakova & Popov, 2021; Cantón Delgado & al., 2020; Podolinská, 2021; Slavkova, 2021; Zachar Podolinská & Majo, 2022; Roht-Yilmaz, 2023; Wachsmuth, 2023; ). Despite the prevailing trend of research focused on Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, we can find detailed research on how the Roma react to the encounter of traditional Catholic confessions and evangelical Christianity, when have to choose between remains loyal to the tradition or to their new faith in Jesus Christ through the evangelical prism (Zachar Podolinská, 2021). A special issue of *Romani Studies* (2021, vol. 31, no. 2) focusing on religiosity among the Roma was published in 2021 (Zachar Podolinská & Hrustič, 2021). It initiated the Bulgarian-Slovak conversation about non-traditional, and post-traditional forms of religiousness and spirituality of the Roma in Europe. This special issue is one of the outcomes of the work of the platform PAN-ROM created at the Slovak institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, which is a

network for scholars spreading academic knowledge on all forms of religion. Here, however, it is not only a question of institutional attraction of the Roma to Protestant congregations and organizations, but also of experience of the faith by themselves on an individual level and on the level of a group that is imagined community. Ultimately, it is also about the reproduction of boundaries, namely the boundaries between the blessed Roma and those who are not blessed, which boundaries are maintained by the acceptance of the idea of morality and its implementation in practice. As Garapich shows in his article, in which he examines the religiosity of Polish Roma who become followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses, in understanding interlocutors religiosity is not a clearly defined matter of institutions, beliefs and practices, but a "history that constantly negotiates boundaries (ethnic, gender, family) and the pursuit of agency and the recognition of existence part of a larger whole while at the same time meeting the needs of experiencing transcendence" (2023). Despite the accumulation of abundant information about evangelical Roma and their religiosity in both countries, the topic of the imagined community of evangelical Roma remains a neglected area of study which needs further and focused research.

The new spiritual songs of the Roma in Slovakia and Bulgaria are quite an attractive phenomenon for analysis, but this topic remains on the sidelines of Bulgarian science, as there are only separate studies on it (Slavkova, 2007a; Slavkova, 2012; Slavkova, 2015). Authors believe a new style must be distinguished in Romani music – the so-called "Rom-pop" (Mináč, 2003), while other researchers argue that in the Romani environment the new spiritual songs which have become a part of the repertoire of the average day can be classified as non-liturgical music (Belišova & Mojžišova, 2014).

The creation of gospel hymns is an important task for every religious community, which are performed by a church choir of men and women, and often the pastors themselves have the gift of performing spiritual hymns in Bulgarian, Slovak and Romani languages, as is the case of pastor I. Panov, from the Prophetic House Church in Sofia or pastor M. Gazik from Milost' Podolinec Christian Church, and those pastors also perform concerts along with their bands. As a follower of pastor Gazik said, "every Christian knows the voice of his praise" (August 2024, Facebook). The creation and distribution of spiritual songs on a daily level supports the consciousness of evangelical Roma for belonging to a global Christian community. Pastors are leading figures in nurturing the Roma's self-confidence that they are God's

chosen, as they create songs to praise Jesus Christ, and access to this practice is available to anyone who has the gift of singing and praising God.

The belonging to God's chosen community is something desired rather than fixed or constant and is closely related to one's moral commitment. This means practices of solidarity exist between believers beyond their ethnic attachments and those supreme moments when they unite around a cause (Slavkova, 2025). Similarly to my discussion, Tatiana Podolinská argues that the concept of "New Roma", introduced by the Pentecostal pastors, functions as a de-ethnicized category, even though the Roma remain ethnically and socially sensitive. According to her observations, ethnicity for the converted Slovak Roma is constructed as an ahistorical category of practice that is empty of ethnicity and filled with specific content in line with morality at individual and community level (2017a; 2017b).

I believe that evangelical Roma in Bulgaria see the global community as "God's chosen people" imagined in the singular. The concept of God's chosen people, in this interpretation, proclaims equality between members in the name of Jesus Christ, like that of God's nation, but not necessarily all members choose to view the global category as God's nation (Slavkova, 2025). Unlike me, Podolinská describes the global community as God's nation, considering, of course, her own empirical results (2017b, p. 154).

The imagined community of the evangelical Roma consists of multiple local religious societies, each with its own church, pastor, membership, with its own, separate affiliation to Bulgarian, Slovakian (or Romani) denominations in the country and to European or non-European umbrella organizations; this feature confirms the statement that it is a heterogeneous and unfixed membership rather than a group. Each society or church may be called the "family of God", which includes all full members (brothers and sisters), who are united in a spiritual kinship while preserving their individuality.

The pastors help maintain the vitality of God's chosen by mobilizing, energizing, and emancipating the Romani believers. The interactions, contradictions and estrangements between individual pastors at the national and transnational levels, in fact, sustain the reality of the imagined community. Most importantly, every converted man or woman can also become a collaborator in the construction of the prestigious past and moral present for the Roma, at an everyday level, by attaining a certain degree of divine consecration and personal improvement (Slavkova, 2025).

## **Labor activity**

Labor activity is a sphere of everyday life in which evangelicals really test the presence of social solidarity between the members of God's family. The idea of exchange of solidarity between evangelicals pointed my attention to the original idea of Tatiana Podolinská and Tomáš Hrustić, who assert that the Romani religious society is a hybrid type of network, whose existence and effectiveness is determined by religion, not ethnicity. The two authors conducted research among the Slovak Roma participating in various Christian churches; and found that the Pentecostal groups had the highest potential to produce bridging social capital, as had also those groups in which an inclusive pastoral discourse had been established (2010). In addition, Podolinská argues that being an evangelical enhances one's potential to enter not only family and religion-based networks but also professional networks within the mainstream society, thereby increasing one's feeling of social security (2017a).

Sufficient number of cases exist in which businesspersons of Romani or Bulgarian origin prefer to hire Romani evangelicals only because the latter confess the same faith with them and want to keep alive the idea of God's chosen people. I do not mean to say that evangelicals receive higher pay for the same work than other workers, or that the employers are lenient with them when they do not cope well with their tasks, but only that they have the advantage of being hired before non-evangelicals and have the chance to get a job only because they are converts (Slavkova, 2025).

At times, employers hire youths so they may learn a craft and gain additional money for their family. Such is the case of a Millet youth (some of the Muslim Gypsies in Bulgaria, who are Turkish-speaking, use the term "millet" (nation), as name of an individual group whose representatives distinguish themselves both from other Roma and Turks) from Asparuhovo neighborhood, Varna, who lost some of his relatives in the disastrous flood of 2014 and, under the experienced stress, promised God and his preacher he would become a more enlightened believer than he was before the disaster (Slavkova, 2023). What impressed him was not that it had been "arranged" for him – through religious connections – to work as a construction worker, and acquire the skills of the profession and gain money for his family, but that during the disaster, his employers had come voluntarily to help, shovel in hand,

clean and restore the neighbourhood; for him, this proved that the idea of spiritual brotherhood was true (Slavkova, 2023).

In view of the results of my own fieldwork in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain and Portugal among Bulgarian citizens of various ethnicities seeking work, I believe that social ties and religious ties are interlinked among evangelicals, including Romani evangelicals, who all follow the same logic of mutual assistance. This gives them a special social advantage, which I define as *religious and social commitment*, and which is especially valuable in the context of labor migration, when newly arrived Roma need help and support, and in this respect evangelical networks are most active. (Slavkova, 2018; Slavkova, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Believers easily imagine God's chosen people as a legitimate community in Bulgaria, but do not always imagine them as God's nation due to the large diversity of Roma groups and because challenging the spiritual and moral authority of Romani pastors is a widespread phenomenon and no universally recognized leaders of the church exist. Also, two different opinions circulate in Romani circles as to whether Romani converts belong to a God's chosen Romani community or to the universal community of God's chosen, in which people become members regardless of their ethnicity, social status, educational profile, gender or professional qualifications. In the case of the evangelical Roma in Slovakia, they easily imagine that they belong to God's chosen nation. There are various explanations for this, but among them are the fact that the Romani group diversity in Bulgaria is greater than in Slovakia and historically the Roma have been integrated into Slovak society as a social community. Contrary to that in Bulgaria, the Roma are perceived by majority population as an ethnic community. The Roma themselves perceive the non-Roma also as people of a different ethnicity.

Through religious practices, preachers in Bulgaria manage the converts' inner confidence that the Roma are God's chosen people. The identity of God's chosen Roma is supported by pastors by virtue of their religious and social commitment, which represents a highly developed sense of solidarity with other spiritual brothers and sisters. For the Roma, evangelicalism is a way to find their rightful place in society and be able to justify their own vision of the development of the community (-ies). At the same time, it enables them to participate, through the voices of their

spiritual leaders, in decision-making processes that improve the life of the whole society (Slavkova, 2025).

A significant body of knowledge has been accumulated in Bulgarian and Slovak scholarship, based on a well-elaborated theoretical approach and field studies among various groups of Roma converted to evangelicalism. It should be noted that Bulgarian and Slovak research on Romani evangelical religiosity, with some exceptions (Slavkova, 2007a; Slavkova, 2025), are still represented by individual case studies that focus almost exclusively on neo-Protestant and charismatic movements as is actually the general trend in Romani Studies. In both cases, however, the Roma are not perceived as passive followers who embrace the new religion only formally, but as active young and old people who consciously and energetically make the decision to convert and become evangelists. The study of religious conversion and the social change associated with it among Roma communities is topical in current academic research in both countries. In Bulgarian science, it is studied in detail the historical religious mobilization based on evangelical religion and forms of male and female leadership among the Roma, which is less studied focus in Romani Studies as a whole. In Slovakia, the social integration of Roma is negotiated constantly with the majority population and they are in daily contact with different types of religiosity but it seems that it is the evangelicalism that offers them positive social change and various opportunities for professional mobility (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010). In this context, conversion to evangelicalism empowers both men and women as social actors who can use their power to maintain not only their own well-being, but also to provide a minimum decent existence for their followers by controlling the search for work and the performance of work, thus providing examples of how conversion to evangelicalism contributes to increasing the chances of social integration of the Roma and their political power at the local, and why not at the national level.

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