

Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov

Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences

**The Romani Kris and Social Media in Postmodern Society:
The Case of the Post-Soviet Space and Bulgaria**

Some time ago, we published a study that brought together our findings on the nature, forms, and functions of the phenomenon of Roma court, known as Romani Kris, also referred to as Syndo/Sendo, Mešare/Mešarjava, Džudikate, Davija, and by other names (Marushiakova & Popov, 2007: 67-101). But the world is constantly changing. In the roughly two decades since that study was published, much has changed, both globally and within Romani communities in Central, Southeastern, and Eastern Europe. Ultimately, the phenomenon of Romani Kris itself has also changed.

The most important change affecting Roma is the almost complete disappearance of borders between European countries within the common European space. Under these new conditions, cross-border labour mobility and migration from East to West have created a new overall picture of Roma presence across Europe. According to the Roma civic elite, as well as European policymakers and bureaucrats, this means that Roma are becoming a transnational European minority – whatever exactly that may mean. But, as is often the case, reality is much more complex and much less clear-cut. Romani identities are complex, hierarchical, and multi-layered. Within this structure, belonging to a particular national community, something that is often overlooked, remains extremely important. Even in the context of migration, it can be a decisive factor, together with group or wider meta-group identity, in determining whether Romani Kris will function within a particular Roma community. This is why, overall, Romani Kris has continued to operate mainly within particular groups or meta-group communities originating from the same country, even though members of these communities may now live in different countries. “Mixed” cases of Romani Kris, that is, cases involving members of Roma communities from different countries, are still relatively rare. Examples can be found among some Roma groups from the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, as well as among a diaspora group such as the Lovara, which has managed to maintain its group identity despite being dispersed across different countries.

The main factor having the strongest impact on the contemporary development of Romani Kris is, in fact, the emergence and rapid growth of social media. Of course, within a single presentation, it is impossible to cover all the contemporary dimensions of these processes. So, rather than trying to be

exhaustive, I will focus briefly on what we consider to be the most important trends – and the ones most likely to shape the future.

From this perspective, two opposite directions are particularly interesting. Metaphorically speaking, we could describe them as the age-old struggle between matter and spirit. More specifically, they represent two possible paths for Romani Kris: one focusing primarily on financial and economic issues, and the other on moral and ethical concerns.

The first path of development is most clearly seen in **Bulgaria**.

Here, Romani Kris (called Mešare or Mešarjava) exists only within the meta-group community known as the Kalderaš. They refer to themselves as *Rrom Ciganiak*, meaning “Gypsy Roma” — in the sense of “true Roma.” This is a relatively small, endogamous and socially closed community that speaks a New-Vlax dialect of the Romani language. It numbers only around 5,000 to 6,000 people, and at most perhaps 10,000. Although the Kalderaš are scattered across different parts of Bulgaria, they maintain close and regular connections with one another. One important way they maintain these connections is through the institution of Mešare.

Before the political changes of 1989–90, Mešare among the Bulgarian Kalderaš dealt mainly with family-related disputes and the financial issues associated with them. This was particularly important because marriages in the community were traditionally arranged. Financial or commercial disputes within the community were much less common. At the same time, cases concerning moral and ethical issues, for example, violations of the traditional rules of sacred purity, had, in practice, largely become a thing of the past. However, this does not mean that they have disappeared completely; on the contrary, with the emergence of social media, new collective moral and ethical issues arose that the Roma court had to resolve. Therefore, about a year ago, at a large mešare (whole community council), it was decided that anyone who uses the Internet for sexual or financial gain involving women from the community would have to pay a fine in gold coins (from 5 to 20 big golden coins).

After the fall of the communist regime and the removal of restrictions on private economic activity, the Kalderaš gained access to many new legal, and sometimes semi-legal, opportunities for entrepreneurship and trade. As a result, there was a sharp increase in the number of Mešare cases arising from economic and financial disputes, such as unfair competition, unpaid loans, and similar. At the same time, family and domestic disputes became less prominent, although they remained important. This trend continued after Bulgaria joined the European Union and its borders opened. Many Kalderaš began moving their business activities abroad, at least for certain periods, while maintaining their connections with Bulgaria.

The procedure of Mešare itself has also become highly commercialised. This is linked to the practice of paying members of the Mešare (the judges, called *Mešarjavadžii*) a special fee for the time they spend taking part in the proceedings (called *den-guba*). Over time, the amounts being charged have increased significantly. This practice appears to be either unique to Bulgaria or, at the very least, extremely rare among Roma communities in other countries. In fact, when we asked whether such a practice existed elsewhere, the answer was most often that it was unthinkable and fundamentally undermined the very idea of Romani Kris. Only reimbursement of travel expenses is considered to be reasonable, but even in these cases some objections are made. The reason is that payment can create an imbalance between the parties and, as a result, can also raise questions about the impartiality and objectivity of the court's decisions.

Another major problem for the Romani court in Bulgaria has been the possibility of repeatedly appealing its decisions. In practice, either party, if dissatisfied with a decision, can request that a new Romani court be convened. This creates a situation in which court members can receive additional fees, while the underlying disputes remain unresolved. In the longer term, money that was once circulated and redistributed within the wider community increasingly becomes concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of people.

In recent years, social media, especially TikTok, has made the problems facing the Romani court in Bulgaria much more visible to the wider community. Mešare proceedings or at least the decisions taken are now sometimes livestreamed or shared as recordings, allowing community members to see what happens during these sessions. As a result, these issues have started to be discussed openly within the community. The discussion has also moved online, where it has expanded to include Roma living abroad as well.

During these discussions, two main camps emerged. One was known as the “Just” (*Справедливие*), who called for radical changes. The other was known as the “Jackals” (*Чакани*), who defended the traditional forms and established norms. Discussions were often lengthy, and all community members could take part, including women. The process followed the same principle traditionally used by Mešare when making decisions: consensus. In other words, a proposal would be discussed as long as needed, until no one had further objections. Only then would the community as a whole consider it accepted.

Some of the proposals did not lead to any separate or prolonged debate. One such decision concerned the composition of the Mešare convened to deal with a specific case: the two parties would not be allowed to nominate their close relatives as members of the court, because relatives could not be expected to remain fully objective. Another proposal that was accepted was to create a list of community members who had failed to comply with a court decision or had not paid the financial

obligations imposed on them. Until they settled these outstanding amounts, they would not be allowed to convene a new Meshare — either in relation to the original dispute or for any other matter.

The most heated debates concerned the right to appeal Mešare decisions. This was understandable, because the so-called “Jackals” wanted to preserve the possibility of holding multiple Mešare sessions over the same case — a practice that provided them with a significant and continuing source of income. To put an end to this practice, which was creating tensions and ongoing conflicts, the so-called “Just”, made up mainly of younger members of the community, came forward with a series of new proposals. One proposal in particular was discussed at length: the introduction of what was called a “записна заповед” [promissory note]. The idea was that, before the Mešare began, both parties would sign a blank sheet of paper. After the court reached its decision, the chairman of the Mešare would write the decision on the same sheet, including a commitment by both parties never to appeal that decision again. All members of the Mešare would then sign the document as witnesses. This proposal from the “Just” did not receive broad support — not only from the so-called “Jackals,” but also from wider circles within the community. The “Just” then came forward with a new proposal: to introduce a cap on the fees paid to members of the Mešare, and ultimately even to eliminate these payments altogether. They went a step further and held several Mešare sessions under these new rules, putting their proposal into practice.

The proposals for reforming the Romani court do not stop there. More recently, there has been a proposal to replace the ad hoc selection of Mešare members for each individual case with a system in which permanent judges would be elected in advance for a fixed term, using candidate lists, ballots, and so on. In other words, the proposal would move Romani Kris toward a modern judicial model similar to that used in wider society. However, these more radical proposals did not receive broad support within the community. Quite the opposite: the dominant view in the discussions was that such changes could cause the Romani court to lose its significance for the community and, in practice, make it replaceable by the existing state judicial system. And this is something on which members of the Kalderaš community are quite unanimous: without their own Romani court, they believe their community is ultimately destined to disappear.

The second, and most extreme, direction in the development of Romani Kris is evident today in the **post-Soviet space**.

After the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, Roma who had previously lived within a single country suddenly became citizens of different independent states. Despite this political division, however, they managed to preserve their unity as a community, including their tradition of marrying within the group. This situation differs from that in other parts of Europe. There, Romani Kris generally

exists only among a relatively limited number of specific Roma groups and meta-group communities within the highly diverse Roma population. In the post-Soviet space, by contrast, the mosaic of Roma groups is much more diverse. It includes Ruska Roma, Servi, Vlaxi, Kalderaš, Lovara, Kišinevci, Krimuria, and others. Yet the institution of the Romani court exists among almost all of these groups, under names such as *Sendo* or *Syndo*, as well as *Kris*, *Žudikate* and *Davija*. Only a few exceptions exist, most notably Roma in Transcarpathia and some groups in Moldova. However, even there, some groups have Roma courts (such as Čokonarja, Katunarja, Ursari in Moldova, Lovara and Le Rom le čače in Transcarpathia); among others, at least an awareness of their existence exists, but for many communities it is absolutely unknown (such as Hungarian-speaking Rumungre, Slovakicka Roma, and others in Transcarpathia and Vlaxija in Moldova). Cases of Romani Kris involving members of different Roma groups are relatively rare. In most cases, the Romani courts operate within a particular group or region. Only in some cases — particularly in the Republic of Moldova and, to some extent, Ukraine — are they limited by the borders of the new states. When members of different groups are involved, the cases usually concern commercial and/or financial disputes. Within a single group, by contrast, family and domestic issues remain the main focus. In addition, especially during the 1990s, Romani Kris was sometimes used to address broader issues of importance to the community. One example was the introduction of rules prohibiting the distribution of drugs within Roma communities.

In 2017, an initiative was launched that had a major impact on the development of Romani Kris in the post-Soviet space. Sergey Glushkov, a non-Roma man who became part of the large Buzlyov clan through marriage — a clan known for its musicians, singers, and dancers — announced the creation of the “Talented Roma” Foundation and launched a channel under the same name, broadcast via YouTube and Telegram. The channel initially focused on music and dance performances. Its format was open: any registered follower could freely upload their own material. The channel quickly gained popularity. Over time, however, its content expanded considerably. It began to include recordings of Romani court proceedings, witness statements, public oaths, announcements of court decisions, and other types of material. As a result, the YouTube channel gradually took on a completely different role and significance. Moreover, similar channels appeared on other online platforms, along with alternative channels such as the YouTube channel *Romane Novosti*.

The extraordinary popularity of the “Talented Roma” project is also reflected in the numbers. When we last checked, on 15 August this year, the *Talented Roma* YouTube channel had 89,300 subscribers, 3,875 videos, and a total of 39,245,250 views — an really impressive figure. For comparison, the YouTube channel of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC), which was launched in 2018, had, on the same date, 3,210 subscribers, 258 videos, and 652,216 views.

The contrast is quite striking: the “Talented Roma” channel has reached an audience many times larger than that of a major European Roma cultural institution.

The possibility of making conflicts between individuals and families widely known across the entire community through the “Talented Roma” network had a profound impact on Roma community life. Problems and disputes that had previously been dealt with through traditional mechanisms, including Romani Kris, could now be brought into the public sphere, and many Roma began to make use of this new opportunity. The online space soon filled with accusations of unfair court decisions, bribery, attempts to influence judges, false testimony, and accusations that someone was a *здимарь* – literally “a traitor,” meaning someone accused of cooperating with the authorities – and much more. In this way, social media created a new public arena for dealing with internal conflicts, fundamentally changing how disputes within the community could be exposed, discussed, and contested.

The situation became even more complicated when Roma women also began to participate actively in the “Talented Roma” network. In the post-Soviet space, the position of Roma women remains much closer to what are generally considered traditional norms. Women are expected to follow certain rules about clothing and hairstyles, even if these rules have changed over time. At celebrations and family events, they may sit at separate tables and are generally expected not to intervene in men’s conversations or disputes. At the same time, this subordinate position comes with its own rights and opportunities, which women often use. For example, when speaking publicly, Roma men are expected to behave with dignity and protect their reputation and authority. Women, on the other hand, can often speak much more freely. As a result, in conflicts played out on the “Talented Roma” network, men sometimes step back and let women take the lead. Women are generally freer to use much stronger language, including insults and even profanity, when addressing their opponents. The most powerful tool available to Roma women, however, is the right to publicly shame someone, either through words or actions. When a Roma woman publicly shames a person, that person automatically becomes *magerdo*, meaning “defiled” or “polluted,” and is effectively considered excluded from the community. No one, not even close relatives, is allowed to sit at the same table with that person, or eat and drink together with them. Anyone who violates this prohibition is, in turn, considered excluded from the community. Such cases can be brought before a Romani court, but the court cannot simply overturn the punishment. At most, it can mitigate it to some extent. In practice, therefore, public shaming can amount to a kind of “civil death” for the person who has been shamed.

The large number of public shaming cases carried out by Roma women on the Internet has also created a whole new set of problems. For example, if an accusation is made online, how can all Roma be expected to know about it and observe the resulting shaming? And what happens when the incident used as the basis for the shaming took place years ago, but the accusation is only made public now?

What should happen to people who have continued to associate with the person in the meantime, only to learn later that they have been declared *magerdo*? There is another serious problem as well. In many cases, the accused person denies the allegations and publicly declares the accuser *magerdo* in return. And when both sides make opposing accusations, there is currently no mechanism for reaching a final decision, unless the two parties agree to convene a Romani court. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, drawing on traditional and established practices and invoking the authority of the Orthodox religion, to which the majority of Roma groups in the region belong, religious authority is incorporated into these practices. Curses and oaths are pronounced before icons, outside churches, and sometimes even inside the church itself. Church candles are lit both during the process of declaring someone *magerdo* and in the process of removing the “shaming”.

The situation has been further aggravated by numerous accusations against the moderator of the “Talented Roma” YouTube channel. He has been accused of using the platform for personal financial gain – for example, by demanding payment to publish certain videos, to remove others, or to refuse to remove them. He has also been accused of deliberately provoking conflicts in order to generate attention. Many Roma have come to realise that the scandals surrounding the “Talented Roma” network are doing more than simply undermining the authority of Romani courts. They are also eroding the unity of the Roma community and, ultimately, posing a serious threat to its continued existence.

In 2020, Yuri Ivanenko, leader of the *Union of Roma of Ukraine*, publicly announced on behalf of the so-called All-Ukrainian Romano Syndo that 100 of the “most respected Roma in Ukraine” had decided that any Roma person in Ukraine who posted material online that was considered damaging to Roma would be declared *mahrime/magerdo* — that is, excluded or defiled. Then, in 2023, in Moscow, around 200 people described as the “most respected Roma,” led by Ivan Bariev and Yan Sokol, activists from the *Federal National-Cultural Autonomy of Russian Roma* (an official institution within the Russian Federation), announced a unanimous decision declaring Sergey Glushkov *magerdo*. They also declared that anyone who continued to associate with him or submit material to the “Talented Roma” network would likewise be considered *magerdo*. Glushkov himself responded publicly online, arguing that he is a citizen of Russia and is therefore subject only to the laws of the Russian state. He stated that such decisions did not apply to him and that he would continue his activities, which, in his view, were intended to benefit Roma. At present, the situation surrounding the “Talented Roma” network appears to be at a stalemate. Some Roma have distanced themselves from the network — or at least no longer participate actively — but new participants continue to join.

The Romani court can serve as an effective mechanism for maintaining the unity of the community only when the community as a whole respects and follows its decisions. However, the court has no effective means of forcing those who disagree with its decisions to accept or comply.

Conclusion

The two paths of development presented here are not unique. To varying degrees and in different forms, similar trends can be observed in many other parts of the world. The cases we have discussed show that Romani Kris is not simply adapting to new technological conditions. It is actively being reshaped through the everyday practices of Roma communities, in both local and transnational contexts. Despite the significant differences between these forms of development, one common feature remains: the desire to keep conflict resolution within the community's own moral, social and even religious framework, even when those conflicts unfold in a highly public and digitally mediated environment.

In this sense, Kris remains a key arena for building community solidarity and maintaining a collective Roma identity, even as the social realities surrounding Roma communities continue to change rapidly.

References:

Marushiakova, Elena and Vesselin Popov. 2007. The Gypsy Court in Eastern Europe. *Romani Studies* 17 (1): 67-101.

Acknowledgement:

The paper is output of the project *Identity of Roma in Transcarpathian Ukraine: past and present* (VEGA, Project No. 2/0057/24) and the project *Research of Religiosity, Spirituality and Non-Religiosity among the Roma in Slovakia* (APVV-22-0389, RELIROMA).