



“AMALIPE”

CENTER FOR INTERETHNIC DIALOGUE AND TOLERANCE

Mailing Address: Veliko Turnovo, p.o.box. 113

Tel: 0888/681-134; e-mail: deyan_kolev@yahoo.com, amalipe@mail.bg;

<http://www.geocities.com/amalipe2002>

“The rumors of our integration have been greatly exaggerated”

Deyan Kolev

One third of Roma in Bulgaria have no work experience, i.e. they have never worked on permanent contract. These are some of the results from a research carried out by Center Amalipe referring to surveys by the Agency for social analyses, UNDP, and the World Bank. 66.1% of the Roma who have never worked are women. The data sound shocking compared to all the reports for “successful” governmental initiatives for Roma integration and gender equality.

What do these figures mean? If we paraphrase Mark Twain, this means that the rumors for real Roma integration have been greatly exaggerated. These figures (cited with some mistakes) by different newspaper recently in Bulgaria can lead to controversial interpretations which necessitates several clarifications.

First, the bigger share of this one third of Roma who have not been employed want to have legal work! The same survey shows that 90 % of Roma prefer to have permanent work, and not to live on social benefits. So it is not serious to explain the high percentage of unemployed Roma with simply unwillingness to work, or “inborn laziness”. Such explanations are easy, they are well accepted by the broad audience but in no case reflect the real situation and the study clearly shows this. Roma want to work, in the patriarchal Roma culture diligence is a value as well as in the patriarchal Bulgarian culture: it could not have been different when Roma have earned living with the traditional crafts carrying out the hardest and dirtiest work for centuries.

Second, education is not the only factor for this striking percent of people with no work experience in the Roma community. There is no doubt that education is an important factor (it is not a coincidence that 64% of those who have never work have not finished even 8th grade!), but it is not the only relevant factor. Even more shocking is the second factor: age. More than 98 % of Roma without work experience are under the age of 39! This is the generation that has entered working age after the changes of 1989. The “socialist” Roma with no work experience are only 1.6 %. The striking fact is that the democratic Bulgarian society of the 21st century is even more excluding than the totalitarian society of the 20th century! Whatever the reasons for this might be...

Third, Roma unemployment is a clear symptom for the gap in the development of the regions and the different types of settlements in Bulgaria – a problem which is not ethnically based. Almost 80% of the unemployed Roma live in villages or small towns. The liquidation of the socialist agricultural cooperatives where many of the Roma used to work left them without the possibility to find another realization on the labor market. This is something valid also for Bulgarians in those regions (although not in this rate). The transition completed the deed started by the advanced Communism: threw the villages and the small towns outside the board of the real economic life.

And last but not least, we should pay attention to the serious gender discrepancy concerning Roma employment. Two thirds of the never-employed Roma are women. It is rather naïve to explain this only with the low level of education. Another reason for this is the conservatism of the Roma community and the traditional role the woman still occupies within it. This is a problem we should not keep silence about guided by false understanding about Roma patriotism with the simplified reasoning that this would put us against the traditions. Traditions should be kept, they are those which preserve the community, but they should be adapted to modernity and in no way stop the development of 56 % of the Roma community: the women.

One third of Roma who have never worked are not problem only of the Roma community. The number is shocking because it clearly shows that today Bulgaria is covered by the black holes of cosmic inequality between the different social, ethnic, and even age groups. Shutting eyes to this fact is a certain way for the whole society to fall into one of them.