

ТИЛКИДЖИЕВ, Николай (ред.): Успелите роми

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TILKIDJIEV, Nikolai (ed.): Successful Roma

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This book offers an informative and absorbing analysis of the most disadvantaged social group in Bulgaria, as well as in many other East European countries – the Roma. Unlike the numerous reports about the low educational achievement, high poverty rate, poor health status, appalling housing conditions and other aspects of the social exclusion of this group, the volume edited by one of the most profound and well established social scholars in Bulgaria Nikolai Tilkidjiev, focuses on the achievements in the Roma population, which are socially recognized as ‘success’. Based on an elaborate three-year research project funded by the National Science Fund of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science in Bulgaria, it tackles the challenging question: How could some individuals among this highly stigmatized and socially excluded ethnic group in Bulgarian society manage to achieve high quality social integration? And the book provides a remarkable answer: “*Success has no ethnic origin*”, in the words of a respondent in the study.

The book builds upon a previous successful publication entitled *Roma Dropout* (2009) based on a previous joint project of the team led by Nikolai Tilkidjiev and co-authored by Valentina Milenkova, Kamelia Petkova, Natasha Mileva. The first study focused on the other pole of the social situation of the Roma in Bulgaria – those who leave school early and fill in the ranks of the marginalized and impoverished group unable to get access to the labour market and getting by on social benefits. In contrast to the previous desperate stories many of which could qualify for the so called ‘learned helplessness’, the new research looks into the positive trends among the Roma ethnic community – the development of a culture of social innovation and the formation of a new identity arising from the social recognition in their own ethnic group and the successful social integration into the wider society. Taken together, the two books represent a profound penetration into the life world of the Roma in a post-communist country with the dramatic accumulation of disadvantages and no less dramatic breakout solutions.

One of the accomplishments of the book is the sound theoretical basis of the approach to the study of the Roma and the “mystery” of the success of some representatives of this ethnic community. The authors’ perspective is as far away from the negative stereotypisation of the group as it is from its positive ideologisation. Starting from the acknowledgement of a rigid ethnostratifica-

tion in present day Bulgarian society in which the Roma are concentrated in underprivileged social positions (Tilkidjiev, 2003), the analysis digs deeply into the processes of social differentiation and internal stratification underway inside this ethnic group. Such an approach has enabled the authors to go beyond the Roma elite studies of scholars who have problems defining theoretically the target category of their research. Unlike many Bulgarian and Romanian researchers who limit their understanding to the vague, indistinct and provisional term of “Roma elite”, often substituting it with “the Roma intelligentsia”, the authors of the book under review situate their understanding of success in the thorough and elaborate social stratification theory. Following the multidimensional concept of Max Weber (1922 – 1971) about the three main social resources in the formation of the middle class (wealth, power and prestige), Tilkidjiev and his team have directed their research attention to a wider and better defined social layer among the Roma than the thin and vague ‘elite’ tier. Their research subjects are those representatives of the Roma ethnicity who have reached high positions in the economic, political and cultural hierarchy of their community and wider society, a Roma middle class in a process of formation. From this perspective the researchers offer an understanding of success as a generalised evaluation and self-evaluation of an accomplished life path in retrospection about the upward social mobility of the individual, accepted as such by the individuals themselves and their peer group, community and society (p. 20).

Remarkable is also the methodological framework applied for studying the successful representatives of the Roma ethnic minority. The research has made use of a broad range of qualitative and quantitative methods of study thus overcoming the limitations of the more common surveys. Nearly 200 in-depth interviews with Roma living and working in 62 different settlements in various municipalities and regions have been conducted and these have been matched with focus groups, expert interviews and a quantitative study with subsamples among various ethnic minorities. The impressive list of reviewed academic publications and research reports deserves a special mention. The book presents a wide range of profiles of successful Roma: people working in local administration and local party and NGO leaders, Roma intellectuals, Roma politicians and administrators in central government, Roma journalists in local and national media, Roma musicians, and Roma entrepreneurs. The authors have attempted to understand the values and forms of behavior of the upwardly mobile Roma through their own biographic interpretation of their life trajectories focusing on the premises and conditions, the incentives and obstacles that they had met and how success became possible amidst discrimination and amounting economic difficulties. The book is an intimate confession of many Roma who shared their concerns, hopes and dreams, their

hidden excitement and disappointments, the affronts and the encouragements they had received.

In the book the personal biographical stories are counterpoised to the attitudes of the ethnic community towards the successful Roma: their acceptance, as well as distancing and alienation. For the sake of comparison, the same questions have been asked of Bulgarian Turks, Bulgarian Muslims, and Bulgarian Christians. The opinions of experts (Bulgarian and Rumanian) regarding the reasons for the success of the Roma have turned out to be ridden with contradictions but have also proven useful in many aspects. A big advantage of the book and a strong merit of the authors is the supplement containing the full set of methodological tools, ready for repeated use, as well as a large amount of empirical data about the condition and development of the Roma in Bulgaria, drawn from various national sociological and statistical studies.

The analysis of this rich empirical material allows the authors to outline the major life trajectories of the upwardly mobile Roma representatives, the factors and mechanisms of their personal growth and successful inclusion in the contemporary social structure. On this basis the researchers have established eleven basic social-professional categories of successful Roma, among which a special mention for the quality of the analysis deserve the local administrators (analysed by Tilkidjiev); the intellectuals (Milenkova); the politicians (Nedelcheva), the businessmen (Petkova) and the journalists (Hristova). Behind the uniqueness of each individual trajectory the book reveals the significance of the work career as a basic determining factor for the social position of individuals in modern (and postmodern) societies, and a basic road for social integration. An accomplishment of the book is that the analysis does not remain on this level only but continues to complement and enrich it with the perspective of the quality of life. Thus successful Roma are those who have not only achieved a high social status (linked to their work and career) but have also managed to create a better quality of life (for themselves and their family). The two analytical lines interact to explain the interchange between occupational success and subjective wellbeing, between the status in the societal structure and the social recognition in the ethnic group and local community.

What we have as a result is a new, concrete proof of the presence of positive trends among the Roma ethnic minority, of the participation of successful Roma in the social, political, economic, and cultural life of Bulgarian society – a participation that has already become considerable in quantity and significant in quality. The book ends up with a discussion of the policy implications of the outcomes from the research and makes several policy recommendations. While some of them might be debatable, the main conclusion of this reflective and

insightful study is theoretically and empirically sound – the road to the Roma integration lies in securing of the link between the “ethnic” and the “social”, in the sustainable overcoming of the closure, segregation and self-isolation of this ethnic minority. This publication, however, gives a rather skeptical diagnosis of the current state. Most often the successful Roma are perceived by the Roma community as ‘exceptions’, ‘outsiders’ ‘people apart from us’, ‘no longer belonging together’ (pp. 138-142) and in so many cases the successful economic integration in the social stratification of society turns into a social exclusion from the ethnic community – an observation shared by Romanian experts as well (pp. 424-445). The authors do not give a definitive answer to the question how the successful Roma presented in the book can become mediators between the community and the wider society and catalysts of the social integration of the ethnic minority as whole but this can become a new research question for the team and a challenge for writing a new book.

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