

## **Soft Social Infrastructure – An Instrument of Survival of Poor Populations in Urban Areas: A Case study of the Roma (Gypsies) in Bulgaria**

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### **Abstract.**

*The empirical results indicate that the informal relationships, which are the core of the soft social infrastructure, play a significant role for the survival of the poor communities. Under the conditions of rising globalization, many communities are formed in urban areas where the hard conditions of living are combined with various cultures. The paper tries to shed light on the mechanism of the formation social capital in multicultural settings and to outline the alternatives of soft social infrastructure in this setting. It is indicated that the efficiency of soft social infrastructure depends strongly on the quality of social capital generated by the individuals of community. This quality is defined by a series of complex reasons and transformed into social capital depending on the value system of individuals. Thus, the multicultural interactions are reduced to interactions of value systems. To facilitate analysis, the problem is restricted to the influence of these interactions on the survival of the community. As soft social infrastructure is one of the main feedbacks supporting survival, the harmonization of cultural interactions is of paramount importance for successful performance. Due to its implicit character this process is extremely difficult to study and manage.*

Key words.

*Social capital, feedback role, homeostatic mechanism, urban conditions, poverty.*

### **1. Introduction**

Despite the rise of income and dramatic progress in technology, poverty is still an indivisible part of development in many countries. In some areas, the economic and social disparity are even increasing. Especially adversely affected are minorities which have been consistently among the poor populations in all parts of the globe. Among the variety of problems related to explaining the nature of poverty, interesting aspects of survival can be revealed by analysing the role of the soft social infrastructure. The inclusion of this category in the 'poverty game' allows winning high scores. In the first place it appears to be the best instrument to survive when the community is neglected and even discriminated against.

The nature of soft social infrastructure in poor communities is extremely multifaceted. Poverty as a barrier for effective growth and development of social units are often misunderstood and second-rate factors are promoted to explain the failures of success. In a large degree, this is the result of the restricted approaches in which every branch of social sciences is trying to explain the problems in its own language, neglecting the opportunities of this intricate study. Meanwhile, it is the multidisciplinary methodology and complexity approach, which helps to shed light on the complicated nature of multicultural relations.

As a first step to such an approach, there is a need to distinguish between the two faces of the social structures: the first, a formal legally defined one, which ensures the functioning of the social units according to the legal structure; and the second, a hidden one, but sufficiently powerful with its feedback and thus important for realisation of any policy aim. The latter we define as soft social infrastructure, where social capital represents the main engine. This side of social interactions is not yet sufficiently studied and the importance of its role is still being investigated.

## **2. The complexity of social interactions.**

The formulation of the concept of soft social infrastructure is an attempt to open the curtain of the role of informal relations. The problem is that the decisions are normally based on some normative base, but their implementation depends on a complex array of factors. Good decisions often are facing bad implementation. To study the nature of this phenomenon, new categories and approaches are used. Soft social infrastructure is just one example. The discovery of its existence is often revealed when an experiment is produced in extreme conditions. It is expected that if a given assumption is proved in such conditions more over it would work in normal circumstances.

This is a serious motivation to investigate the role of the quality of social capital in minorities for their survival. The assumption that social capital plays the role of feedback to maintain sustainable development was formulated in the previous studies (Danchev, 2005). In this paper, it is tested in the conditions of extreme poverty. As a case study, gipsy or Roma minority is chosen as it accounts for the second largest, but the poorest minority in the Balkans. Naturally, the everyday problem of the members of this community is focused on the survival. It is expected that soft social infrastructure will play a defining role in this process.

The explanation of the behaviour of this community is a fascinating story. Living in extreme poverty, the prevalence of cheating and stealing from the majority population is well acknowledged. Nevertheless, they are honest among themselves and are willing to share their meagre possessions, such as food for those less fortunate within the community. The impression is that this unexplainable behaviour is commanded by simple rules in which the individual behaviour is different from the collective one. The advantages of using complexity theory to explain the survival of the poor minorities in urban conditions is it allows the use of simple elements to explain complex behaviour (Anderson, 1999). This minority has its rules of self-organisation within a soft social infrastructure while the core homeostatic mechanism in this self-organisation in which the hard legal rules are difficult if not impossible to apply. Representing a complex adaptive system the soft social infrastructure generates such rules of behaviour which helps the community as a whole to survive although some of its members may be negatively affected by these rules (Camorlinga, Barker, 2006).

The communities observed during the study revealed some common tendencies of behaviour, which allows formulating representative community expressive of the all important features of the system (Axelrod, 1997). This community can be regarded as an adaptive system existing on the edge of chaos that is between two extreme states – one of extreme everyday perturbations of various kinds and the other of incessant internal ordering to survive (Macal, North, 2005). The

aim is to capture the link between the informal structure expressed by soft social infrastructure (SSI) and its dynamic adaptation. The problem is that minority community in urban area normally is part of a larger system which often is hostile to it. For this reason, the majority is defined as an external system imposing perturbation on minority for many reasons (Cojocaru, 2008). The retaliation by both the majority and minority populations is part of this problem, but outside the scope of this present study.

To reveal the role of SSI in the subsistence survival or “making ends meet” mode of the poor minority, there is a need first to disclose its structure. The advantage of using a poor community as a case study is the validity and accuracy of the findings are minimized as the members of the community have little to lose. In other words, they truthfully answer the questions and do not give alternative answers to please the interviewer or reflect other views which are expected. They, as the observations indicate, behave and respond in a very open-minded and sincere manner. This aids in reducing the bias of observations otherwise difficult to avoid in wealthier communities (Agarwal, 2001).

SSI can be defined as a hierarchical network, which nodes are represented by the members of the community and links are concentrated within the families – this conclusion coming from the empirical observations. The hierarchy in this network is informal and can be distinctly outlined. Obviously, this hierarchy expressing the vertical integration within the community is a part of SSI to turn it into instrument of survival.

Many approaches can be applied to study this process. As such a study is based on collecting information by interviewing most of the answer are dichotomous variables. For this, reason one can transform the Ising model into a social Ising model, in which the spins (variables having yes or no answers) interact in pairs having various values depending on the equality among the spins (Kohring, 1996). Defining aligned and anti-aligned spins in the model one can outline the structure of SSI in horizontal and vertical dimension and to define how powerful it is to support the survival of the community (Gotts, et al, 2003).

### **3. Roma as real economic and social problem.**

The Balkan area gives a very good milieu to test the role of social capital of minorities in realizing the aims of sustainable development. During its historic development, this area brought together many nations part of which were transformed into minorities. This created a unique cultural diversity in the Balkans.

The poverty of the Roma is compounded by some of the highest birth rates in Bulgaria. According to Kertikov, the number of children in the gypsy families in Bulgaria is as follows: 1 child – 11.5%, 23,8% with two children, 26.8% with three children, 13% with 4 children, 6.8% with 5 children and 3-4% with more than 6 children. (Kertikov, 2006).

The social status of Roma deteriorated during the transition of the country from a totalitarian to democratic society. During the Communist era in Bulgaria, there were attempts to integrate them with the rest of society. However, such aims were futile as those under the poverty line and criminal activity is increasing. The increasing share of minorities in the total population resulting in further rise of poverty and drop of cultural and human capital is of increasing economic and

social concern are impeding the country from reaching sustainable development. The rising discrepancy between the social status of minorities with the rest of population is a source of serious social tension, which gives birth to various nationalist reactions.

The living conditions of gypsy population is similar to other poor populations in Bulgaria and is different from than the traditional gypsy way of moving from one place to another. A predominant part of the Roma has a settled way of life living in small houses with minimal hygiene conditions. In contradiction to this image, is the number of rich and prosperous gypsy found in this population. However, such families remained outside our study.

#### **4. Empirical observations.**

The considerations presented above were tested by a study based on interviewing gypsy population in various parts of Bulgaria populated by Roma. These areas were accepted as representative communities. To outline the role of SSI capital for the survival of this community interviewing of Roma was organised in various places of Bulgaria. Most of the interviews occurred in the suburban area of Burgas in villages of Pobeda (victory) and Gorno Ezerovo, and in the suburban area of Sofia in the village of Svoge, a village near the Serbian border. The interviews were composed of 145 Roma, which willingly participated in the interviewing process. The questionnaire and the training of the enumerators were conducted by the author. The results are not statistically representative and thus should not be generalized to the entire Roma population. Nevertheless, they provide some interesting and valuable observations which may be useful in further investigation of these issues.

The distribution of the respondents in the sample used for quota control was 37% male and 63% female. Only 22% of all respondents answering the question have permanent employment, the other 78% are unemployed. The age distribution of the respondents is 6% of age between 16 and 19, 29% of 20 and 29, 34% of age between 30 and 39, 12% of age between 40 and 45, 6% of age between 46 and 49, and 3% of age between 50 and 59. The respondents of age above 59 account for 10% of the sample. 8% are from Svoge, About half of the respondents (49%) are from the small village Gorno Ezerovo, a remote suburb of the city of Burgas, 31% of the suburb Pobeda of Burgas, 8% of the Svogue town and the other 12% are from various places occasionally found in the place of interviewing.

Taking into account the objective of the study, the questionnaire was constructed by the author and tested several times until it began to perform well. As previously mentioned, the training of the enumerators was personally supervised by the author to ensure the quality of the responses. The interviewees participated actively in the collection of data understanding its importance but, also not believing that it can contribute somehow to solving their problems.

The analysis of the results demonstrates that the majority of the Roma are open-minded and sincere people, who despite the poverty enjoy life, which a necessary precondition to achieve a good quality of social capital. Living traditionally in poor conditions, they have been accustomed to be beyond the material things of the rich and try to enjoy the non-material part of life and putting high value on time related to entertainment and social activities. Overall, they do not feel

hatred toward other groups as indicated by one of the questions that were directly focused on this issue.

Several characteristics of SSI have been studied to reveal various aspects of generating social capital and factors influencing this generation. First, the foundations of value system were analysed by various questions. The most general attitude to the value system was presented in the answers of three relatively polar situations:

(a) I do not want to be OK. Many of these respondents stated that they wanted 'Vute's affairs (a popular folk hero) to go badly.' This popular saying is used sometimes to characterize the worst side of the Bulgarians' character. This attitude is supported only by 4% of the respondents.

(b) Less extreme, but sufficiently negative is also the statements that "Everybody tries to do dirty things against you". This is alarmingly supported by 44% of the respondents.

(c) The altruistic alternative "Everybody helps those in need" is supported by 52%.

The results are impressive but it is difficult to discern if they are representative. What could be certain is that they reflect truly real life, in which good and bad are perceived as being balanced equally. It could also be concluded that the answers are sincere and the not supportive of stereotype of the "lying Roma."

Although many factors form the value system of the individuals, the focus of this study was the effect of the moral and cultural capital. The sources of positive moral capital are considered to originate from the family, school and religion, while those that are negative originate from social contacts outside these realms, such as peers, interaction with members from the majority population, perceived stereotypes, etc.

Not all respondents gave answers to this issue; while some indicated more than one source. Summarizing the results, the traditional sources of values such as family, school and religion were ranked the lowest as contributing to the formation of the value system of the Roma, respectively 3.7%, 7.44 and 11.1%; while the 'street' and 'real life' were considered slightly higher (14.8%). Surprisingly, the most influential in formation of Roma values was related to the media – TV and radio - 22,2%. The quality of media in the present transitional society is something very debatable, but it is unlikely to be accepted as a good source of values. To avoid any ethnic prejudice, we could say that such a distribution of the sources of value seems reasonable given the situation. A minority deprived of normal conditions of living and access to quality education cannot be expected to have other sources of values. It does not mean at all that the system of values is not good as these preconditions do not necessarily mean they turn into real negative effects.

An important characteristic of the adaptive quality of SSI is the perception of discrimination and the level of protection. Almost all of the interviewees indicated that there is no one who protects them. Among the institutions mentioned in the questionnaire were: the parliament, the government, the president, the mayor of the town, NGOs (i.e., EuroRoma). Ninety-nine percent (99% ) of the interviewees stated that no one protects them. What is worse is that most of the respondents do not indicate any interest in participating in an NGO, which could protect their interest pointing out as a main reason – "a lot is said but nothing is done"

The level of protection of Roma should be regarded in the context of the protection of the whole Bulgarian population, which as a whole is poorly protected against theft, robbery and other crimes. We do not comment here on the problem of so called “gypsy terror” as it is a result of the same conditions as the other crimes. The Roma are not an exception; they are object of the same crimes as the rest of population. About half of the respondents declared they were robbed, mainly by the other Roma. One third states they have been beaten for various reasons.

Concerning the level of discrimination it is high and most of them feel they are discriminated against in many aspects. Roma were among the first to be fired when the economy started to deteriorate during the transition period. Among the basic reasons for this discrimination is the lack of qualification and necessary skill to find any job. What is worse is that according to the study of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy carried out in January 2003 called “From Social Aid to Employment”, the main part of Roma are not professionally oriented and have not clear idea of the profession they would like to work in and usually choose jobs which require low or no qualification and are connected to the gypsy’s traditions. Nevertheless, about 30% of the interviewees declare the acquisition of a profession as the most important condition to find a job (MOL, 2006).

The social impact of this is interesting to comment as in our survey about 60% of the respondents think that despite the discrimination in time of need everybody helps. A high level of alienation and discrimination is indicated by 14% of the respondents, the same is the share of those declaring that we all are linked and should help each other.

We report this to illustrate how complicated and the same time interrelated are the problems of employment, discrimination and social adjustment. At first glance, Roma are the most discriminated part of the population, on the other hand, much is being done to integrate them with the rest of population. This success of such efforts affects the quality of social capital.

The quality of social capital is regarded in the model as an important precondition for social adjustment. The moral and cultural capital in society directly and indirectly affect social capital creating such a personality in the individuals, which can facilitate or impede the social capital generation.

The collected information about the quality of social capital is very controversial which indicates that the Roma’ social capital provides various preconditions for its generation. As was indicated in our previous work (Danchev, 2006) we assume as basic characteristics of social capital two qualities of the individuals: the marginal propensity to help each other and the marginal propensity to recognize the leader. Several questions were formulated to the respondents to pin down the various aspects of these characteristics. The situation reflecting these qualities is rather picturesque.

The discussion began with understanding how the respondents are prone to ask for help, when they are in a difficult situation (which they sincerely did not want to happen). Not all the respondents answered this question. The prevailing opinion is that probably somebody will help (39,1%), while 17.4% hope friends will help and 13.0% believe that their friends would help if

they could. The extreme answers (nobody will help or everybody will help) were supported by few respondents. This expression of social trust is a good precondition for horizontal association in the community although according to Samers, “trust is not generalized throughout informal economies” (Samers, 2005)

The propensity to social engagements is another reflection of the preconditions to generate social capital. Another way to test the marginal propensity to social integration was to ask the respondents if they have some common problem as for example, if there was fallen tree on the street how they expected to remove it. With all respondents answering this question, only 3.5% declare they do not care about what would happen, 34.5% stated that they do not react as they think they cannot do anything, 34.5% consider what should they do and 13.8% consult first with their family and friends and if no one moves it then they attempt to do it together with others.

Complement to this question is the query of whom problems are discussed. Accordingly, the respondents indicated that they are discussing their problems in the following way: 20.7% with friends, 71.4% with their husband/wife and 7.1% with anybody.

The general indicator of social capital is the level of trust. The marginal propensity of trust reflects normal reaction to the expectations from the others and the obligations coming from it. Only 3.4% of the respondents do not believe in anybody, 34.5% have doubts in everybody, 10.3% are prone to believe sometimes, 37.9% believe in people in most of the cases and none of the respondents believes in everybody.

Marginal propensity to associate with the others is reflected by the willingness of the respondents to participate in civil society for protection of their interests. Civil society is a new phenomenon for Bulgarians. Added to this, there have been number cases of corruption and misuse of funds by various NGOs resulting in strong scepticism in society toward them, often regarding NGOs as related to mafia and ‘money laundering.’ This could be the reason why only 17.2% of the respondents definitely do not want to participate in any NGO, while 13,8% would participate if they find any sense in it. On the other hand 20.7% of the respondents would participate from time to time and 31.0% would participate definitely.

There are several reasons why the respondents would participate or not in NGOs. As a rule, few respondents specify the reasons for their reaction to NGOs. Among those who would participate in civil society two third think that they could protect each other together and one third trust that NGOs will protect them well. The scepticism in NGOs is reflected by the several reasons. The preference to protect themselves alone is expressed by one fourth of the respondents, while three fourth think that too much is spoken and nothing is done.

Despite the relatively small number of observations, the collected information gives sufficient background to formulate a hypothesis of the social capital quality of gypsy population. It is thought that there is sufficient good quality in the Roma’s social capital that creates a sufficient predisposition for social adjustment.

The findings support socio-economic data collected from other studies. Evidence of the level of poverty in the gypsy minority is that they spend on food in average 129 BGN per week. If assumption that the average number of households in the Roma population is 4 persons per household, this realises that only 4.6 BGN or equivalent to 2.4€. (exchange rate 1.95BGN = 1€ by 28.07.2006, Source: UBB) is allocated per each person. For comparison, the price of ticket in the city transport in Bulgaria is about 36 cents, the price of one kg of bread is in average about 50 cents and one kg of meat about 4€. This shows that the many Roma live near or below the poverty level.

Their monthly income is also very low. Most of them are unemployed and the social aid is the only source of their income. Others are working in some temporary jobs and have irregular source of income. The average income is the range of 100 to 200 BGN (50 – 100€).

This sketch defines a very difficult life for the Roma. They were the first to be fired with the start of the transition to the market economy. When asked how their life was progressing 62,1% thought that 'life is going badly', 17.2% think the 'life is not as good as it was', 3.5% think that there is no change in the quality of life . The same percent think life is getting better.

The basic reason for the drop of the standard of living of gypsy minority is explained by many Bulgarian researchers as related to the lack of the necessary level of education which would allow them to find a suitable job. The average level of education of the respondents was also low – the years of schooling are in average 7 – 8 years, which means that they have achieved the required primary and secondary school level mandated by Bulgarian legislation. Bulgarian researcher Vladislav Georgiev (Georgiev, 2006) indicates that only 0.2 % of the Roma graduate with higher education, 4.6 % from secondary schools, 32 % from primary schools and the remainder are illiterate. “The inability of socially excluded families to access crucial social goods such as education on the same terms as others” (Warrington, 2005) is a phenomenon observed even in the industrial countries. The problem with Roma minority is that due to rising poverty they are losing even access to such public goods as education, which was quite accessible for them in the past.

This creates preconditions of change in the number of children in the households – a problem so broadly discussed in Bulgaria recently in connection with so called “disappearance” of the Bulgarian nation due to the strong drop of natural growth rate of Bulgarian population. Our survey indicated that the number of children in the gypsy households was not as big as before. The average number of household is 4 -5 people with no more than 3 children. The Roma state that the number of children is going down due to the difficulties of life. Approximately sixty-one ( 61.1%) of the respondents state that economic difficulties are not affecting them and they have as many children as they want, while 16.7% of the respondents think they will have no addition children due to the difficulties of life. Only 5.6% think that the difficulties are stimulating them to have more children to help the family to survive. At a cursory glance, it is apparent that there is a drop in the numbers of children per Roman household.

On the question how would you prefer to plan your future life few answers were provided. Most the respondents prefer to find a good job, to work a lot and to live normally “as a white man” –



popular saying in Bulgaria. Only 10% prefer to stay as they are and the same is the share of those, who prefer to receive social benefits and to live with them as at present - just to make ends meet.

## 5. Conclusions.

The analysis of social adjustment of the Roma minority in the urban areas in Bulgaria indicates that it is a process strongly dependent on the standard of living. Many reasons are impeding this process at present. Among them we can single out discrimination, the need to overcome the prejudices existing in society toward Roma and naturally their education level. Creating new jobs and proper investment in the areas and regions populated by Roma would facilitate not only their social adjustment, but also the integration of the other minorities as the first step in this process at the national level.

The study indicates that SSI as an adaptive mechanism plays a very important role in the survival of Roma. Assuming that social capital is the feedback supporting the informal sides of the social adjustment, it can be concluded that together with the official decisions stimulating this process, it is also supported by the soft social infrastructure of the Roma minority. Its study is of a paramount importance to reveal the mechanism of integration of minorities with the other social groups.

The results of this social capital study in Roma community indicates that they understand their social state and are ready to contribute as they can to find adequate solutions. Such important elements of social capital as the propensity to associate among them and with other communities are evidences of a good precondition for social communication. The study shows that these communities have very specific social capital, which as a whole is favorable for integration and, provided economic conditions change, it would facilitate minorities to overcome the negative elements in their behaviour and allow them to be an integral part of the rest of population in building democratic and sustainable society.

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