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**Politics of Multilingualism in Roma Education**

**between Two World Wars and its Current Projections**

The so-called Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917 and the subsequent Civil War (1918-1921) led to radical social changes. The former Russian Empire was replaced by a new, fundamentally different state, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (officially as of 1922), characterized by new economic relations, social structure and reality. The authorities started to pay more attention to the national and ethnic issues in this vast country populated by tens of different peoples. The dominant Government line towards these issues was the “Leninist” national policy, based on the principles of equal rights for the individual peoples of the USSR and comprehensive support for their national development, including the creation of a written language and literature for those people that lack it until then. These fundamental principles, however, were applied differently, depending on the specific interests of each Soviet state and depending of individual communities. A typical example in this regard is the national policy in the USSR regarding Gypsies.

At this point a terminological clarification is needed. In the Russian Empire, and later also in the USSR, the official name of the community is ‘Цыгане’ (Tsygane), usually translated into English as 'Gypsies' (in spite of some differences in the meaning of this word). The designation ‘Цыгане’ however, includes not only Roma communities (and small number of Sinti merging with Roma), but also the Lom and Dom communities in the Caucasus, as well as Mughat and other "Gypsy-like" communities (Mazang, Tavroktaros or Sogutaros, Agha, etc.) in Central Asia. The policy of the Soviet state, however, in practice was directed almost exclusively at Roma (and only to a lesser extent, to other communities), i.e. in this particular case the terms Roma and Gypsies can be regarded and used as synonyms.

According to the 1926 population census in the USSR, the total number of Gypsies at the time was 61,299, of whom 64.2% (40,900 people) identified Romani language (Romanes) as their mother tongue. A relatively small number of Gypsies, 20.9%, lived in towns and cities, more than two-thirds of them were still nomadic. The Gypsies, who were city dwellers, were in their vast majority members of the Gypsy musical and artistic elite established already in times of Russian empire and closely linked to the top social estates in the former Russian Empire. Palpable, those Gypsies who lived in the large cities were the first who start to be engaged with social and political activities in the new state. They were the first ones to go under the banner of the new communist, proletarian ideology. Under control and by practical guidance of the Communist Party and the Soviet state in 1920s (in 1924 or 1925 according different sources) was established All-Russian Union of Gypsies, an organisation which existed only for a relatively short period of time but nevertheless succeed to accomplish numerous tasks. It was dissolved by a Decree of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs from February 15, 1928, but most of the All-Russian Union’s members, including the bulk of its leadership, continued to be involved in Soviet policy in different ways. In fact, the dissolution of the Union did not influence the Government policy toward Roma, what is more, this policy became quite more active (and more efficient too).

An important component of the national policy of the Soviet state with regard to the Gypsies is the development of standard codified Romani language and literature and, on that basis, the comprehensive education of the Gypsies. Gypsy education is set to develop on the basis of own language, which until then existed only as oral one; thus the primary task became the issue of turning the Romani language into a literary writing language. On June 8th 1925, the daily broadsheet newspaper *Izvestia* [in translation ‘delivered messages’), a newspaper which expressed the official views of the Soviet government (as published by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR) issued an article devoted to the development of literature and international relations. This article expressly listed Gypsies among these peoples who are entitled to receive education in their own language. In 1926 a research section was set up at the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, which however failed to do any substantive work. Activities became more substantive when the Government stepped in. In 1926 again the Izvestia newspaper published an article “On Gypsy Letters”, which described the first version of Gypsy alphabet and literary language developed by Nikolai Pankov and Nina Dudarova on the basis of the dialect of the Ruska Roma. After Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, the head of the People’s Commissariat on Education (Narkompros) of the RSFSR, issued the Decree On Creating a Gypsy Alphabet on May 10, 1927, there was a meeting between representatives of Glavnauka (The Chief Directorate of Science at the Narkompros), Sovnatsmen (The Council on National Minorities) and the All-Russian Union of Gypsies. At the meeting, which was held in May 192, it was decided to develop a Gypsy alphabet on the basis of Russian alphabet and a Committee was establishes to work on the development of the Gypsy literary language. The committee consisted of Prof. Mihail Sergeevski from MGU (Moscow State University), his assistant, Tatyana Ventsel, N. Rogozhev, and Roma Union members Nikolai Pankov and Nina Dudarova. A Commission on Gypsy Studies was established in 1927. It was a division of the Institute for Teaching Methods and was responsible for coordinating teaching and publishing activities of works in Romani language.

The Commission was quite active. In 1927 Prof. Mihail Sergeevski prepared a paper on “Targeting the Language of Russian Gypsies” which was published in 1929, followed on 1931 by a Gypsy Grammar by Mihail Sergeegskiy, the Gypsy-Russian Dictionary of 1938 compiled by Mihail Sergeevskiy and Aleksei Barannikov under the editorship of Nikolai Pankov. The *Romany Zoria* (Gypsy Dawn) journal came out in 1927, with a total of four issues (published at irregular intervals). In 1930 this magazine was replaced by the Nevo Drom (New Way) which had about 20 issues by 1932. In 1932 was published also the first (and last) issue of the Butiaritko Rom (The Working Gypsy) journal. The journals were written mainly in the Romani language and contained all sorts and all literature genres including Gypsy folklore and literary works.

Publishing literature in the Romany language was a quite impressive activity. A Gypsy department was set up at the Tsentrizdat (The Central Publishing House) in 1930. It published the following main types of literature: socio-political; Marxist and Leninist; kolkhoz; industrial and technical; popular science; fiction (by Gypsy authors or Gypsy translations of classics). By 1932 there were already Gypsy departments in four other publishing houses: Selkolkhozgiz (publishing books and brochures about kolkhoz-related and agricultural issues); Molodaya Gvardia (publications about students and young people, who are members of the Comsomol); GIHLO (State Publishing House for Fiction); Uchpedgiz (text books and teaching aids for Gypsy schools and for adult training). In 1936 a total of 8 publishing houses had published books in the Romani language.

The total number of books issued in Romani language between 1931 and 1938 was 292. These publications were quite diverse. Quite a few of them were Soviet-era propaganda with quite revealing titles – for example *Amaro Zname – Lenino* (Our Flag - the Lenin’s), *Palo Vlast Soveten* (About the Soviets’ Rule), *Koli Vrago Na Zdelape Les Haskirna* (translation of the famous article by Maxim Gorky, *If the Enemy Does Not Surrender, He is Destroyed*), *Butiarni, Kolkhoznitsa, Krestyanka, Siklev Voennona Rendoske* (Woman-Worker, Woman Kolkhoz Member, Woman Peasant, Learn the Military Skills), *Maribe Pale Sotsializmo I Religia* (War for Socialism and the Religion), *Palo Bidevlitkone Chavorende* (On Godless Children), *Butiaritsa, Iav Bidevlitkonasa* (Woman Worker, Be Godless), *So Diya Sovetsko Vlast Romanechiake* (What Did the Soviet Government for Gypsy Girls), etc.

There were many literary works which aimed at educating Gypsies about kolkhozes, agriculture, different aspects of factory work and different occupations. A number of publications were dedicated to practical problems in the life of a Gypsy family – *Pervo Pomosh Dro Nabahtalo Sluchiai* (First Aid in Case of an Accident), *Sir Te Borisospe E Linaskire Chiavoritkone Ponososa* (How to Fight Children’s Indigestion), *Dzhiuvliakiri Gigiena* (Women’s Hygiene), *Maribe Nasekomentsa Dro Khera* (Fighting Domestic Insects) … There were, however, some educational publications which could hardly be expected to be of any interest to Gypsy readers, such as *Pal Mamontoste* (About the Mammoth), *Dre Tundra* (In the Tundra), *Vash Obeziankake* (On Monkeys), *Dre Rozredibe Palo Timinitka Minerali Te Rudi* (On the Extraction of Ores and Minerals), etc.

The fiction that was published contained many translations in Romani of classics, such as books by Alexander Pushkin (short novels, fairy tales, the famous Poem “Gypsies”), Lev Tolstoy, Prosper Merimee (Carmen), Maxim Gorky (including Makar Chudra), Mikhail Sholokhov …There were also 47 published books by Gypsy authors (mainly poetry, but also prose), such as Maxim Bezliudsko, Alexandr German, Ivan Rom-Lebedev, Nikolai Pankov, and others.

There is no doubt that the literature published in the Romani language influenced the development of the Gypsy community. It touched however only a relatively limited layer of the community, concentrated mainly in Moscow. It was hardly any surprise that part of the literature in Romani is still kept unopened in some funds of Moscow libraries and never reached its intended readers (the Gypsy community). It’s obvious that illiterate then members of the Gypsy communities did not feel need for such literature and Gypsy activists were unable to distribute the books widely.

A great number of publications is devoted to issues of Gypsy education, and quite a few textbooks and teaching aids appeared in Romani, such as Nina Dudarova’s *Bukvar Dlia Tsiganskih Shkol* (Primer for Gypsy schools) and Nikolai Pankov’s *Bukvar Dlia Malogramotnih* (Primer for the Illiterates). Both Primers were published in 1929 and these are the first-ever such publications for Gypsies in the world. By 1938 a total of 13 textbooks on Romany were published, the last one being *Lilvari Piro Romani Chib* (Textbook on Romany) by Alexandr Germano.

Gypsy schools used textbooks and teaching aids written in the dialect of Ruska Roma. Sometimes, however, the members of other Gypsy groups found it more or less difficult to understand this dialect and this is why sporadically attempts were made to teach students by using a dialect they understood. Especially known is work of P. Kravchenko, a teacher who worked in the boarding school at the Krasniy Put (The red road) Kolkhoz near the town of Sumi, the Ukraine in 1931 and who taught his students in the dialect of Roma group of Servi.

The second half of the 1920s witnessed a strong drive to bring literacy and education to adult Gypsies and to open Gypsy schools, nurseries and kindergardens. Adult training was delivered in different ways: through the so-called likbez (i.e. eliminating illiteracy) actions (when through individual tutoring by members of Comsomol (Communist youth organisation) the adults were thought to read and write) and through opening evening classes. Gypsy schools and nurseries however weren’t separate educational establishments. They were a distinct part of already existing schools. In Moscow functioned four such Gypsy schools. According information published in journal Nevo Drom in 1932 there were three – in the Proletarskiy, Marina Roshsha and Zamoskvorechye districts). The number of Gypsy schools was unstable because new schools were constantly opened at many places, for instance in Gypsy kolkhozes, but some schools were soon after closed down because of different reasons such as poor facilities, lack of skilled teachers, Gypsy children were not sufficiently interested. The total number of Gypsy schools (or smaller units called Groups of Gypsy children having the same status as schools) which existed for some time in the USSR between 1926-1938 was 86. In 1938 there was one elementary school (up to 7th grade) and 25 primary Gypsy schools (up to 4th grade), as well as 12 separate groups of Gypsy pupils in some primary schools. In addition to them, there was a Gypsy boarding school (in the village of Serebrianka, near the town of Smolensk). Groups of Gypsy children existed in two more boarding schools and four children’s homes.

The instruction in Gypsy schools was supposed to be provided only in the Romanes and this raised the issue of teacher training. The first Gypsy teachers were trained through Gypsy educational courses introduced in 1927 and were conducted by the first Roma teacher-trainers, Nina Dudarova and Nikolai Pankov. The Qualification Enhancement Institute in Moscow introduced Gypsy pedagogical courses in 1931. The first class consisted of 30 people who had been selected out of 80 candidates on the basis of a competitive examination. These courses were furthered by the so-called off-site accelerated summer courses in Toropets (Kalinin Region), Nevel (Pskov Region), Serebrianka (near Smolensk), Harkov, Ivanovo, Saratov, Sverdlovsk, Leningrad, Orel … During the same year, a Gypsy Department was founded in the Pedagogical School in the town of Dorogobuzh (Smolensk Region). The department had two sections (training of educators and training of teachers) and total of 28 people had been trained.

The training of teachers for Gypsy schools and the integration of Gypsy children into the educational system increased pace after the Decree of the Narcompros from April 18, 1932 On the Measures to Boost Training and Education of Gypsy Children and Training Teachers for Gypsy Schools. As a result of this Decree, the Gypsy pedagogical courses in Moscow were reorganized into a Pedagogical Vocational School with a Gypsy department. By 1938 the new vocational school had trained between 120 and 140 (different sources give different figures) Gypsy teachers.

Having been trained, the teachers went to work in the countryside where they were supposed to develop the Gypsy schools. Important source of information about their work and also everyday task and problems encountered could be found in the letters exchanged between Nikolay Pankov (one of the trainers at the Pedagogical Vocational School), and his students. The common problem was connected to local authorities who because of urgent need of trained teachers also for general ethnically mixed (mostly village) schools preferred to use the teachers there and not to open new Gypsy schools. Thus, most of the trained Gypsy teachers did not in fact do what they had been trained to (educate Gypsy children).

The Government policy towards Gypsies changed radically in 1938. The National Commissariat for Education was reorganized and the responsibility for the peoples living outside own Federal Republics or Autonomous regions or for people without own ethnic authorities and administrative units was delegated to the authorities of their place of living. On January 24th 1938 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) issued a Memorandum On the Closing Down of Ethnic Schools and the Ethnic Sections in the Schools. This Memorandum ordered local authorities to close down 18 ethnic sections in the educational system and the existing schools of 16 different nationalities. The nationalities included in the list were selected according to different criteria and ranged from Armenians living outside the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, Poles and Germans to Kurds, Assyrians and Gypsies. At the end, all Gypsy schools were closed and the Gypsy children were transferred to the mainstream education system.

Along with this, the state supported publication of books in the Romany language ceased and only sporadically Folklore texts in academic publications continue to be published. Even the famous Romen Theatre began to use Russian during its performances with only some fragments and songs in Romanes. The new Soviet Gypsy “elite” accepted only unwillingly this radical change in the state policy. In 1938 the famous Gypsy educator Nikolai Pankov wrote a personal letter to Stalin trying to convince him about the need to continue the “Gypsy cultural revolution”, and to develop further the Romany language and literature, to involve the Gypsies in “socially useful work”, etc. The graduates of the Gypsy pedagogical courses wrote similar letters too. There was no reply to these letters and there was no change in the state policy towards Gypsies, until the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Both in the past and even nowadays, the assessment of USSR's policies towards the Gypsies, including in the education system, remain highly politicized, often in the spirit of the Cold War, and is pointed as another crime of Stalinism against fundamental human rights (in this case human rights of the Gypsies). In context of our topic we are not discussing the issue from Human rights point of view, but as, an unique historical experiment for creation of a new codified written language for an internally heterogeneous community speaking different dialects and to establish a comprehensive education system for the education of Gypsy children in their Romani language.

Under conditions of USSR, this experiment turned out to be unsuccessful, and it was relatively quickly abandoned. Explanations of this failure of Soviet policy have to be sought in different directions. On the first place it is because the ‘Gypsy issue’ itself (i.e. the issue of the overall social integration of Gypsies in Soviet society) is too circumferential for Soviet national politics. After the 1930s, the Soviet state returned to it only in 1956, when a special Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR ‘For the inclusion to work of vagrant Gypsies’ was passed. By virtue of this Decree, the Gypsy nomads (majority of the Gypsies in the USSR at that time) were forced to settle and their speeded social integration (including in the field of education) was realised in a short period of time. The circumstance that Gypsy children were included in the education system without any use of teaching aids in their mother tongue appeared not to be a serious problem, and quickly a relatively small circle of Gypsy intelligentsia with good (including university) education come into being. The most famous among them was Professor Georgiy Demeter, Doctor of pedagogical sciences, author of the book “Lenin on the Protection of Workers' Health and Physical Culture”, which underwent five reprints during the Soviet era and was translated into several languages ​​within the former Soviet bloc (including even two translation into Vietnamese!).

As far as the very idea of offering to the Gypsies a full-fledged education in their native language – it was completely forgotten soon and not only in the USSR but worldwide. After the Second World War in then so-called Socialist camp in Eastern Europe, various special educational policies towards Roma were conducted, but none of them involves the use of their mother tongue in education. Similarly, several projects related to the education of local Gypsies were implemented in then Western Europe but also without making use of the mother tongue in teaching. The first vague attempt at international level to raise attention to the need of Romani language in schooling was made in 1971 at the meeting of organsiation which became later known as International Romani Union. Among decision adopted by the meeting was: “It was agreed that all Gypsy children should receive education in Gypsy culture and (where it was still spoken) in the Romani language. Gypsy teachers should be appointed in schools with large numbers of Gypsy children, where the local population wanted this. Further research should be conducted into the value of caravan schools for nomadic groups.”

The issue of mother tongue teaching became popular again after the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989. To date, many NGO projects and various government policies have been implemented in the countries of the region with aim to improve education of Roma children. Some of them include also the use of different types of teaching materials, parts of them entirely in Romani, other bilingual. Subsequently, this practice (Roma children’s education supported by specific projects) entered also Western Europe (predominantly Austria and Sweden) and targeted are local Roma and nowadays also Roma migrants. In all these cases the Romani language however is used only as a supporting tool in education and not as the first and/or only one language of instruction, and the all teaching is conducted in respective state languages. Even in Romania, where the state policy on introduction of Romani in education is most complete as a comprehensive system in no one place the use of Romani goes behind allocation of separate study hours for mother tongue teaching.

Moreover, in the public sphere, the very idea of comprehensive education of Roma children entirely in their mother tongue is almost completely absent. It is not envisaged in the numerous national and European programs and strategies, nor in the NGO sector projects. We are aware only about two cases when this idea has been raised at all. The first one was in 1990 in Bulgaria when a non-Roma NGO (closely connected to renowned international organisation the Minority Rights Group) put this issue as a requirement for the Bulgarian state. The second case is from the beginning of the 21st century, when a group of international Roma activists announced the upcoming opening of the International Roma University in the city of Kosice, Slovakia with full instruction in Romani. In the latter case, it is obviously about a publicly expressed desire, which is expected to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Naturally nothing happened, as it has not become clear at all whether somebody really intended to establish such a university, and there was no any serious public debate about the issue neither in Romani circles, nor in media.

The first case, however, is more interesting because, immediately after the proposal was made, really a heated discussion among the Roma activists in Bulgaria started whether it is necessary to move towards a comprehensive education of Romani children in the Romani language or not. In the end, however, it turned out that almost all (with only one exception - the famous Roma leader Manush Romanov) Roma activists in Bulgaria categorically rejected this idea. Their arguments were mainly pragmatically: it will be not only a very expensive, difficult and lengthy process, but it will not help the overall social integration of the Roma, on the contrary, it will even make it harder for them (because the pupils of this type of schools with Romani language teaching will be uncompetitive to their peers who have completed “regular” schools). In this way it turned out that the very idea of comprehensive Romani language school instruction did not meet the support of the Roma community itself and its leaders (and even less of the authorities, who does not bother to discuss it at all), and it sank into oblivion.

Whether the time will come when this idea will be reborn again at this point is unknown, but in any case the significance of this social historical experiment remains part of Roma history as well as part of history of education.