

Engaging with the Margins: Patterns of Transformation in the Baptist Ministry to the Bulgarian Roma

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Abstract

The Baptist evangelical mission among the Bulgarian Roma traces its roots to the beginning of the twentieth century. Waves of persecution, discrimination, and a hate-speech narrative have continuously placed the Roma community at the fringes of society. Despite ineffectual state efforts and strategies, many churches manage to make a difference in the lives of the Roma in their surrounding communities. The church adopts a holistic approach — meeting spiritual needs, together with physical and social needs. This article provides an overview of the development of Baptist mission to the Roma people, its transformative outcomes, and its impact on both church life and the surrounding community.

Keywords

Baptist mission; Bulgaria; Roma

Introduction

The Roma¹ community in Bulgaria has existed at the margins of society for a long time. Throughout a history of discrimination and neglect, and in the midst of rather ineffective integration policies, the efforts of the Baptist church stand out — in their approach, as well as in their effectiveness. For over a century now, the Baptist church in Bulgaria has intentionally engaged with the marginalised Roma in its community, addressing and meeting both social and spiritual needs.

This article traces the history of engaging with the margins in the ministry to the Bulgarian Roma. The basis for the historical overview of the study is the archive of the *Baptist Herald* — a periodical published

¹ It is important to note that while some of the sources cited use the word ‘gipsy/gypsy’, this article will adhere to the use of the term ‘Roma’ to indicate Romani people due to the negative connotations of the word ‘gipsy’.

by the North American German Baptist Society, currently known as the North American Baptist Conference.² A book and an article by ethnographer Magdalena Slavkova will supplement this, providing an extensive study of the history and impact of Evangelicalism on the Bulgarian Roma. The origins, character, and significance of the ministry will be outlined. The time scope of this survey is limited to the years between 1905 and 1989; 1905 is considered the start of the Roma ministry and 1989 marks the end of the relationship with the North American German Baptist Society due to the strict political regime in Bulgaria at the time.

In considering the contemporary legacy of Baptist ministry among the Roma, a literacy project championed by the First Baptist Church in Sofia, Bulgaria will be brought into focus. Although no formal publications exist that can aid in this, several newsletters written by foreign missionaries are consulted in tracing the history and impact of the project.³ The development of the project is followed from its start in 2002 up to the present day, focusing on the character of the ministry, as well as its social impact.

In conclusion, patterns of transformation, evident throughout the church's engagement with the margins in these specific instances, are identified.

The Roma Community in Bulgaria

It is rather difficult to estimate the size of the Roma ethnic group as part of Bulgaria's population. While official statistics place it around 4.9 percent as of 2011,⁴ many speculate that the Roma population may be

² North American Baptist Conference, 'About Us' <<https://nabconference.org/us>> [accessed 13 November 2023].

³ I would like to extend my gratitude to Terry and Tom Myers, whose newsletters about their missionary work alongside the Baptist church in Sofia, Bulgaria, provided invaluable information for the purposes of this study.

⁴ Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, *2011 Population Census* (Sofia: Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, 2011) <https://www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/Census2011final_en.pdf> [accessed 23 October 2023].

anywhere between 4.9 percent and 20.9 percent.⁵ Due to widespread prejudice and racism, many Roma people self-identify as Bulgarians, Turks, or Romanians, or choose to refrain from indicating their ethnic background altogether.⁶

It is most commonly agreed that the first waves of Roma immigrants arrived in the Balkans from Asia Minor in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This was followed by several other migration waves, with groups arriving from the territory of Romania and Austria in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷ It is for this reason that the Roma people in Bulgaria are divided into different groups, with different dialects, traditions, and sub-groups.

The history of the Roma people in Europe, and specifically in the Balkans, is a turbulent one. Centuries of enslavement, continued discrimination, and racism culminated in the persecution and massacres of World War Two.⁸ Their primarily nomadic and semi-settled lifestyle was interrupted in 1958 by the Communist regime's campaign of forced assimilation, 'restricting traditional Roma religious and cultural customs and practices while compelling the Roma population to abandon its transient lifestyle and settle either in collective agricultural farms in the countryside or in drab, overcrowded housing projects in the cities'.⁹ This was followed by several name-changing campaigns and bans on the public use of the Romani language in an attempt to dissolve the Roma into the larger Bulgarian community. These events demonstrate the position of the Roma people as the most disadvantaged, maligned, and discriminated against ethnic minority in Bulgaria, seen as almost

⁵ Yuliya Shyrokonis, 'EU citizenship, But No Shoes: the Roma of Bulgaria', *Open Democracy*, 20 January 2020 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/eu-citizenship-no-shoes-roma-bulgaria>> [accessed 23 October 2023].

⁶ Council of Europe, *Thematic Report of The Group of Experts on Roma Health Mediators* (Strasbourg: CAHROM, 2016) <<http://coe-romed.org/sites/default/files/articles/files/CAHROM%20%282016%297%20EN%20Thematic%20report%20on%20Roma%20health%20mediators.pdf>> [accessed 23 October 2023] (p. 6).

⁷ Council of Europe, *Thematic Report*, p. 6.

⁸ Shyrokonis, 'EU citizenship, But No Shoes'.

⁹ Rossen Vassilev, 'The Roma of Bulgaria: A Pariah Minority', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 3 (2014), 40–51 (p. 43).

subhuman and pushed to the fringes of society in a socio-economic and cultural sense.¹⁰

Currently, the majority of Roma people in Bulgaria live in segregated communities and neighbourhoods with poor living conditions, often without access to clean water or electricity. Along with extreme poverty and unemployment, many Roma lack access to proper education or are forced to leave the school system in order to work or beg in the streets. The widespread racism and prejudice prevent them from receiving proper medical attention, and children are often put in institutions for intellectually and developmentally disabled students due to their ‘challenging’ background.¹¹ As a result, many resort to crime as a way of survival, while others fall victim to human trafficking.

Early Baptist Ministry Among the Roma

Baptist mission among the Bulgarian Roma traces its roots to the beginning of the twentieth century. Several sources will be considered in outlining its history.

History of the Baptist Mission Among the Bulgarian Roma (1905–1989)

The earliest evidence of evangelical mission among the Bulgarian Roma is found in the accounts of a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Baptist World Alliance that took place in London in 1920.¹² At this meeting, the work among the Bulgarian Roma is assigned to the German Baptist Missionary Society in North America.

However, the first recorded story of Roma converts is not the result of outside influence. As this story has been turned into somewhat of a legend and has been retold over and over again, elements of it differ from version to version. Yet, the core of it remains unchanged: in 1905 a Roma worker at a farm in the village of Golintsi (in the north-west of Bulgaria) steals a Bible, attracted by its gilded edges.¹³ Bringing it to a

¹⁰ Vassilev, ‘The Roma of Bulgaria’, p. 43.

¹¹ Shyrokonis, ‘EU citizenship, But No Shoes’.

¹² ‘Our Gypsies in Bulgaria’, *The Baptist Herald*, 1 February 1935, p. 48.

¹³ Magdalena Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria* [Evangelical Gypsies in Bulgaria] (Sofia: Paradigma, 2007), p. 78.

friend who could read a little, the two start to read it and gradually come to recognise themselves as sinners and Jesus as their Saviour. One of these first converts is Peter Puntcheff, who later becomes a colporteur (a travelling bookseller) and the first Bulgarian Roma evangelist.¹⁴ A Bible study group forms around the two men, with Puntcheff reading the texts and people discussing their meaning. In 1924, Puntcheff became the first ordained Roma minister and was supported by the German Missionary Society.¹⁵ He died in the autumn of 1924 due to an illness. His wife, ‘once a thief and a beggar’, continued to live a life as a ‘missionary and benefactress’. One of the German society’s missionaries recalls receiving help from her when he was ill and starving.¹⁶

At the time of Puntcheff’s death, the Roma Baptist community in Golintsi had over forty members. The Roma gathering was connected to the nearby Bulgarian church in Lom and to the German-American missionaries, both providing support for its ministries and growth.¹⁷ Soon, the Christian Roma community found itself in need of a building in which to hold its meetings. This was sponsored by the German Missionary Society, which went on to support Bulgarian, Roma, and foreign missionaries throughout the following decades. In 1930, the first Roma church building in the world opened doors in Golintsi.¹⁸ This happened with the strong involvement of the local Roma community. Brickmakers by trade, they actively participated in making the bricks for the construction of the church building.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Roma groups had started gathering in different parts of the country. In the early 1930s, the first Roma hymn book was published — one of the very few books published in the Roma language.²⁰ In 1938 a building was purchased in the town of Lom for the needs of the Roma ministry.²¹ It was used by the two missionary deaconesses of the German society as their living

¹⁴ Carl Fuellbrandt, ‘How a Stolen New Testament Saved the Gypsies’, *The Baptist Herald*, 15 March 1926, p. 7.

¹⁵ Frida Telkamp, ‘What’s Happening’, *The Baptist Herald*, 1 February 1924, p. 2.

¹⁶ Fuellbrandt, ‘How a Stolen New Testament Saved the Gypsies’, p. 7.

¹⁷ Fuellbrandt, ‘How a Stolen New Testament Saved the Gypsies’.

¹⁸ ‘The Only Gypsy Church in the World’, *The Baptist Herald*, 1 September 1930, p. 7.

¹⁹ ‘The Only Gypsy Church in the World’.

²⁰ August F. Runtz, ‘The First Gypsy Hymn Book’, *The Baptist Herald*, 1 March 1933, p. 15.

²¹ ‘A Gypsy Missionary Center: The Story of God’s Wondrous Guidance in Our Danubian Enterprise’, *The Baptist Herald*, 1 April 1938, p. 126.

space. Children's classes, Bible study groups, and medical help were soon offered at the centre.²² With the beginning of World War Two, the connection between the German society and the Baptist mission among the Bulgarian Roma was interrupted.

As a German ally, Bulgaria introduced restrictive laws against the Roma. 'They were denied access to the central parts of Sofia, forbidden to use public transportation and were given smaller food rations than the rest of the population.' Some were forcibly converted to Christianity, and Bulgarian-Roma marriages were outlawed in 1942.²³ It is difficult to establish the full scope of the fate of the Bulgarian Roma throughout the Second World War. The lack of clarity on the matter is partly due to the post-war politics regarding the Roma, with the Bulgarian socialist government denying altogether 'the existence of Roma while it simultaneously implemented assimilationist policies'.²⁴

The Communist regime which followed the war completely broke Bulgaria's ties to any Western partners. Nevertheless, the Roma churches survived. While the government restricted religious gatherings, they continued meeting in private under the pretext that it was a family gathering or a special celebration.²⁵ The fall of the Communist regime was followed by a strong wave of evangelical influence, especially among the marginalised and socially ostracised groups and individuals.²⁶ Through educational and charitable initiatives, the evangelical mission reached many areas where access was denied to other institutions. Furthermore, the building of prayer houses and churches completely changed the layout and the lifestyle of the Roma ghettos.²⁷

²² Martin L. Leuschner, 'Adventures in Our Gypsy Mission Field', *The Baptist Herald*, 15 November 1938, pp. 424–425.

²³ Council of Europe, 'Factsheet on the Roma Genocide in Bulgaria' <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-genocide/bulgaria>> [accessed 29 February 2024].

²⁴ Carol Silverman, 'Persecution and Politicization: Roma (Gypsies) of Eastern Europe', *Culturalsurvival.org*, 2010 <<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/persecution-and-politicization-roma-gypsies-eastern-europe>> [accessed 29 February 2024].

²⁵ Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria*, p. 91.

²⁶ Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria*, p. 96.

²⁷ Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria*, p. 97.

The Character of the Early Work among the Roma (1905–1989)

Throughout the *Baptist Herald's* articles on the work among the Roma, the Roma are portrayed as outcasts, despised, and neglected by society, 'looked down upon as the scum of the earth, [...] despised and hated by the entire world'.²⁸ They are 'considered by all the world as a worthless and hopeless people'.²⁹ They live in huts in segregated communities with poor living conditions in almost every town or city. Their clothes are torn and dirty, many of the children run around naked or wrapped in rags.³⁰ The name 'Gypsy' is often synonymous with 'thief' and 'beggar' and the Roma often make ends meet by engaging in begging, stealing, and fortune-telling.³¹ An article among the records of World War Two states that the Roma were then treated as the 'most despised and inferior of all races', 'the poorest of all mankind', struggling to find employment due to the fact that they were not full-blooded Bulgarians.³² In the face of discrimination and persecution, the Roma often responded with hate and 'frightening fury'.³³

The Baptist work among the Roma was driven by God's love and the example of Jesus's ministry. Just as the people on the edge of society had access to salvation and complete restoration through Jesus, so the Bulgarian Roma entered into a new community.³⁴ The words of John 3:16 guided the mission and also shone like a ray of hope for the marginalised and cast-out Roma — though hated by the world, they were loved by God.³⁵ Through the mission, new communities were formed, often gathering and inviting others for table fellowship, sharing even the little they had. The missionaries among the Roma were often challenged to leave behind the prejudice of the surrounding society and share in the hospitality of the outsiders they ministered to. The

²⁸ Leuschner, 'Adventures in Our Gypsy Mission Field', p. 424.

²⁹ Emma Herrmann, 'On a Bicycle to a Gypsy Baptismal Service', *The Baptist Herald*, 1 November 1937, p. 325.

³⁰ C. E. Petrick, 'Our Gypsy Mission in Bulgaria', *The Baptist Herald*, August 1923, p. 12.

³¹ 'Our Gypsies in Bulgaria'.

³² Georgi Stefanoff, 'The Gypsies Need a New Hymnal', *The Baptist Herald*, 15 January 1941, p. 27.

³³ Carl Fuellbrandt, 'Remember the Gypsies in Prayer', *The Baptist Herald*, 12 July 1956, p. 10.

³⁴ 'Our Gypsies in Bulgaria'.

³⁵ Fuellbrandt, 'Remember the Gypsies in Prayer'.

evangelistic focus of the mission was matched by a concern for the Roma's general wellbeing.

Throughout the twentieth century, the evangelical mission offered educational classes to both adults and children, teaching them on moral matters, as well as on things concerning their everyday life, such as maintaining good hygiene and establishing better living standards. Foreign, Bulgarian, and Roma missionaries visited the people in the community, praying for the sick and often providing for their immediate physical needs — bringing food, wood, repairing and building huts. Medical care was also offered. The missionaries working among the Roma fulfilled the roles of ‘nurses, story-tellers, hygienic teachers, doctors, cooks, wash-women and ambassadors of Jesus Christ’.³⁶ Many utilised their professional skills and gifts in response to the needs of the community. Some Roma brickmakers aided the building of the church.³⁷ A Roma pastor built huts for the people of the community.³⁸ Other missionaries helped clean the huts and provided clothes to those who needed them.³⁹

Magdalena Slavkova also highlights the multifaceted approach of the evangelical mission across evangelical denominations to the Bulgarian Roma. It was — and still is — driven by a concern for spiritual, cultural, social, and educational development.⁴⁰ The early evangelical missionary work ranged from worship services, prayer meetings, and Bible studies, to organising schools, different classes and workshops, and offering help to orphans and to the elderly.⁴¹ Most women were taught handiwork, knitting, and homemaking skills. Men often attended courses in German, and some were sent abroad to study theology and become pastors and missionaries.⁴²

³⁶ ‘Our Danubian Missionaries’, *The Baptist Herald*, 15 November 1937, p. 352.

³⁷ ‘The Only Gipsy Church in the World’.

³⁸ Stefanoff, ‘The Gypsies Need a New Hymnal’.

³⁹ Leuschner, ‘Adventures in Our Gypsy Mission Field’.

⁴⁰ Magdalena Slavkova, ‘Personalizing the Romani Evangelical Faith’, in *Languages of Resistance: Ian Hancock’s Contribution to Romani Studies*, ed. by H. Kyuchukov and W. New (München: Lincom, 2017), 318–325 (p. 319).

⁴¹ Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria*, p. 86.

⁴² Slavkova, ‘Personalizing the Romani Evangelical Faith’, p. 319.

Significance of the Early Work Among the Roma (1905–1989)

The impact of the evangelical Baptist mission in Bulgaria on the lives of the Roma people is recognised. The church is an important institution for the Roma evangelical community. A special space exists around each prayer house or church building within a Roma ghetto, where stricter moral rules are kept, according to the church's teaching and values.⁴³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, one of Bulgaria's national poets even said that Protestantism played a 'notably civilising role', with Protestants looking and behaving like citizens among 'peasants'.⁴⁴ It is important to note the effect that this work had on the Roma community, especially evident in the new converts. Stories of converted murderers, drunks, and violent men who upon receiving Christ started behaving in a different way bear evidence to this. A significant witness to the impact of the evangelical mission among the Roma was the transformed life of those members of the community who then became ministers themselves.

Contemporary Mission Among the Roma

As of 2024, the Roma church in Golintsi (now a neighbourhood of the town of Lom) is still active. Multiple evangelical Roma churches have been established across Bulgaria. In looking at the continuing story, this section will focus on the work of a Baptist church in the capital of Bulgaria, its engagement with the surrounding Roma community, as well as the overall impact of the evangelical engagement with the Roma as recognised by the secular society. Due to the lack of published resources by the church about its social work and ministry, the main sources that inform this part of the study are several newsletters written by foreign missionaries who have worked alongside the church for the past years. In addition to that, a couple of articles and news reports provide information on the observations of wider society regarding the impact of the church's work among the Roma.

⁴³ Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria*, p. 109.

⁴⁴ Paul L. Mishkoff, 'Bulgaria Today: A Rare Opportunity', *The Baptist Herald*, 15 December 1932, p. 15.

Ministry among the Roma in Sofia (2002–2024)

First Baptist Church in Sofia, Bulgaria, was established in 1888.⁴⁵ From the beginning, it was very involved in the life of its immediate community, living out its concern for the community's social and spiritual wellbeing through various outreach initiatives. With a Roma ghetto situated in close proximity to it, the church has run different projects throughout its history, responding to the immediate needs around it, offering social help, medical care, classes, and school help for the children.⁴⁶

The church's current ongoing programme among the Roma began in 2002 as an after-school homework help class.⁴⁷ Within the first few meetings, it became clear that the most prominent need was not for homework help. As hardly any of the dozen children who showed up attended school at the time, it became apparent that the programme should seek to develop their literacy and mathematical skills and encourage them to go to school.⁴⁸ Therefore, the classes' primary focus became the building of literacy skills in children and youth aged 5–21 years old. In addition to that, each meeting includes a snack time, when the hungry children can receive a nutritious light meal, and a Bible story and craft time. As most of the participants live in the nearby ghetto with no access to running water, many choose to take a shower and launder their clothes at the church. The programme fits into a wider vision for human trafficking prevention. The goal is to equip young girls, children, and teenagers at risk by providing hygiene and literacy classes, by supporting their education, and assisting them in acquiring job skills and finding decent employment.⁴⁹ The beneficiaries of the programme are not just children. Often, parents also attend and seek help in continuing their own education, passing tests to gain school diplomas and so

⁴⁵ SEBC, 'About us' <<https://www.sebc.bg/about-us>> [accessed 13 November 2023].

⁴⁶ Slavkova, *Tsiganite evangelisti v Bulgaria*, pp. 95–102.

⁴⁷ Terry Myers, 'What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?', *Bulletin from Bulgaria: News from Tom and Terry Myers: International Ministries Missionaries to Bulgaria*, February 2016, unpublished.

⁴⁸ Terry Myers, 'Literacy Program of Sofia Baptist Church', *Serving with International Ministries in Bulgaria*, unpublished newsletter.

⁴⁹ Myers, 'Literacy Program of Sofia Baptist Church'.

forth.⁵⁰ As of 2024, the programme continues to welcome both children and parents, and has seen significant growth in the percentage of children who attend — and stay in — school.

The literacy programme runs annually for the duration of the school year. As it has developed through the years, more children and volunteers have become involved. An elementary school teacher, responsible for the church's Sunday school programme, joined the literacy project soon after its start, bringing her expertise and teaching skills.⁵¹ Another volunteer, educated in the field of social work, assists as a counsellor. Coming from dysfunctional homes, the majority of the children lack any role models for healthy relationships and are in need of support in processing the issues they face and in finding sound, Christian advice.⁵² Other volunteers help with the preparation of food for the children, finding them clean clothes, doing laundry, allowing them to take a shower, and offering regular lice shampoo treatments. American missionaries and volunteers help with English language lessons. Church workers and ministry leaders teach the children songs, lead music classes, and help prepare the children for the church's Christmas and Easter celebrations where the literacy group participates in various sketches and plays alongside the children from the Sunday school. Each volunteer participates according to their talents and skills, teaching the children literacy and mathematics, together with practical life skills.

Social Impact of the Mission among the Roma (2002–2024)

Throughout the course of the programme, it has been possible to track the progress in the lives of individual participants as well as the overall impact on the surrounding community. Several reports tell the story of a girl, V, who had been coming to the church ever since she could walk on her own.⁵³ Together with her friends, she would often come to the

⁵⁰ Terry Myers, 'Rejoice with Us', *Bulletin from Bulgaria: News from Tom and Terry Myers: International Ministries Missionaries to Bulgaria*, April 2016, unpublished.

⁵¹ Terry Myers, 'Back to School', *News from Tom and Terry Myers: International Ministries Missionaries to Bulgaria*, October 2010, unpublished.

⁵² Myers, 'Back to School'.

⁵³ James Caldwell, 'Literacy Classes = Lives Changed', *Bulgarian Partners*, 12 April 2009 <<http://www.bulgarianpartners.org/news/literacy-classes-lives-changed>> [accessed 13 November 2023].

church to get water and would carry the bottles back home. These visits soon grew longer, and the girls started attending Bible studies and teaching. Although V never went to school, she learned basic literacy skills through the church's programme.⁵⁴ She would attend the Sunday worship service regularly and got baptised as a teenager. Despite her family's attempts to marry her off early (as young as the age of twelve, as was the custom), she managed to avoid being sold into marriage for several years. A resilient young woman, she has been trying to maintain higher standards of living, even with the lack of education and parental support.⁵⁵ Now, having children of her own, she has brought them to be dedicated and blessed in the church.

The impact of the mission is evident in the life of another girl, K, and her children.⁵⁶ As a young girl herself, K did not enjoy going to school, as she suffered discrimination and bullying from both teachers and children. She did, however, attend the church's literacy classes, where she acquired basic skills and although she never finished her formal education, she was able to find a job to support herself. K had her first child in her early teenage years, and since both her and her husband were at work after school hours, her son, R, joined the literacy programme together with his little sister. In second grade, R won a 'Best in Class' award for his reading in his state school. His mother was — and is — an inspiration to the children in the literacy programme, some of whom do not attend school.

Several articles have been published by non-Christian media, recognising the impact of the evangelical mission among the Roma communities in Bulgaria. Though they do not differentiate between different denominations and instead speak of the Protestant church in general, the published material includes the Baptist evangelical mission among the others discussed. One article describes the church as pivotal

⁵⁴ Terry Myers tells the story in an unpublished newsletter, *Bulletin from Bulgaria: News from Tom and Terry Myers: International Ministries Missionaries to Bulgaria*, September 2016.

⁵⁵ Caldwell, 'Literacy Classes = Lives Changed'.

⁵⁶ Bulgarian Partners, 'Achievements to Be Proud of', *Bulgarian Partners*, 22 March 2016 <<http://www.bulgarianpartners.org/news/achievements-to-be-proud-of>> [accessed 13 November 2023].

to life in the Roma neighbourhoods in the town of Vidin.⁵⁷ Several of the churches were started by people who attended the first Roma church near Lom and are still active. Many non-believers hold their Christian neighbours in high regard. The believers have decent jobs and do not complain in the face of hardship, so others respect them and seek their counsel. During the services, the Bible message is accompanied by practical advice such as, ‘though you are poor, God has not abandoned you’, ‘do not spend more money than you have’, ‘it is good to feed the poor, yet do not support their laziness’.⁵⁸

Another article describes the changes that faith brings about in the life of the Roma.⁵⁹ A contrast is drawn between the ‘helplessness’ of the state on the one hand and the evangelical churches on the other hand, which manage to change the life of many Bulgarian Roma. According to the article, it is in the churches that the state’s integration strategies are truly fulfilled, offering education, teaching life skills, advocating against child marriages, and providing support in finding employment. The main reason for the success of the church in its work among the Roma is found in its agenda. It does not approach the Roma with integration in mind, but rather with a mission to change people’s lives through Christ’s love. The results are evident in the everyday behaviour of the Roma — improving their hygiene habits, becoming more responsible, drinking and stealing less, encouraging their children to stay in school. Another achievement of the church is that of bringing people together despite their differences — amidst nationalistic hate speech and spread of negative stereotypes, ethnic Bulgarians and Roma are witnesses to the destruction of the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14). They coexist and sit side by side in the church.

⁵⁷ Tatyana Vaxberg, ‘V Tsarkvata na Romite’ [In the Church of the Roma], *Deutsche Welle*, 11 April 2015 <<https://p.dw.com/p/1F6H0>> [accessed 13 November 2023].

⁵⁸ Vaxberg, ‘V Tsarkvata na Romite’.

⁵⁹ Emiliya Milcheva, ‘Kak Vyarata Promenya Zhivota na Balgarskite Romi’ [How Faith Changes the Lives of the Bulgarian Roma], *Deutsche Welle*, 10 January 2019 <<https://p.dw.com/p/3BivO>> [accessed 13 November 2023].

Conclusion

The Roma's history of living in the Balkans is long and turbulent. Facing waves of persecution and discrimination, the Bulgarian Roma people are often treated with suspicion, as subhuman and untrustworthy. This furthers the issues of segregation, lack of education, unemployment, and low economic and social status, often leading to heightened levels of criminal activity, drug abuse, and human trafficking, amongst others. This also means that a vicious circle is created with uneducated, criminally active parents, raising children who do not learn the values of education and are sent to beg or work in the streets at an early age. As the children grow up, some are sold into marriage in their early teenage years, and they start families of their own, replicating the same values and destructive practices.⁶⁰ While the state's efforts for integration seem ineffectual,⁶¹ many churches manage to make a difference in the lives of the Roma in their surrounding community.

The Baptist evangelical mission among the Roma began at the dawn of the twentieth century. Through its early history, the mission witnessed great transformation in the lives of the converts, as well as in the general wellbeing of the wider Roma community. Throughout, the church adopted a holistic approach: meeting the spiritual needs of the Roma, together with their physical and social needs. Often, the evangelical focus seemed to remain in the background as missionaries focused on bettering the levels of education, health, and hygiene in the Roma ghetto. Yet, through showing the love of Christ as the motivation of all their initiatives, Christian workers brought the values of God's kingdom into the lives of those they served.

The same patterns of interaction continue to be evident in the church's contemporary engagement with the Roma. Throughout the century of ministering to the needs of the community, the church has brought about countless instances of positive transformation. Reports from the century-long mission bear witness to the change that faith

⁶⁰ Minority Rights Group, 'Roma in Bulgaria', last updated 2018 <<https://minorityrights.org/communities/roma-2/>> [accessed 29 February 2024].

⁶¹ Integro Association, 'Why Does Roma Integration Fail in Bulgaria?', Ergo Network, 2017 <https://ergonetWORK.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Why-does-Roma-integration-fail-in-Bulgaria_2017.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2024].

brings in the life of a convert, the new values being adopted and lived out by the individual and the community around them. The importance of good education is emphasised throughout, and its benefits have become evident through the lives of generations of Roma.

The evangelical mission among the Roma is consistently built around the following patterns of transformative engagement:

- approaching the outsiders of society, recognising their value, restoring their humanity and dignity
- responding to their immediate needs with love and acceptance
- providing opportunities for them to find purpose and a place of re-entry into society
- creating new communities of fellowship, acceptance, and hospitality
- bringing healing in a bio-medical sense, as well as in a social and spiritual sense
- advocating for righteousness and justice and working to prevent injustices such as criminal involvement, child marriages, and human trafficking
- creating an environment where God's love can be known and experienced and the Holy Spirit can bring spiritual transformation into each individual's life.

The transformative effect of the Baptist evangelical ministry among the Bulgarian Roma is consistently evident on several levels. Spiritually, it is evident in the transformed individual lives of converts. Physically and socially, it is apparent in the quality-of-life improvements within the Roma community in terms of health, education, and social engagement. This transformation is also recognised by members of the general public and highlighted in its effectiveness against the backdrop of the state's efforts for integration.