

## Mechanisms of exclusion and coping strategies in the professional realization of young Roma in Bulgaria

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**Abstract.** This article examines the professional trajectories of young Roma with low to higher levels of education at the beginning of their professional career, working in construction, in the medical field and in public administration. Following an interactionist approach to understanding early-careers trajectories, we investigate peoples' experiences, with emphasis on individuals' narratives. The aim is to identify the mechanisms for coping with discrimination in professional life and in concrete situations, with a focus on how different actors manage to negotiate and sometimes overcome practices of exclusions. At the microsociological level of small group interaction, we show the complex dynamics and processes of exclusion/inclusion that remain invisible or ignored at the level of public discourse and in the context of prevailing discriminatory practices.

**Keywords:** Roma, labour, education, discrimination, interactionism

### Introduction

Sociological studies on the topic of education and career realization of the Roma in Bulgaria rarely give the floor to the social actors themselves, and the way in which they overcome (or not) various social, economic and political obstacles encountered over the course of their educational and professional life. In this article, we emphasize biographical narratives, and the way in which life stories reflect social interactions and relationships of inclusion/exclusion.

The individual cases of Roma belonging to different socio-professional categories outline the life trajectories of youths who are at the start of their professional career and who vary in their levels of education<sup>1</sup>. This is a snapshot

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of a theoretical and methodological discussion conducted between the two co-authors. To illustrate the problem, we use data collected by Katerina Katsarska in the framework of her doctoral thesis entitled: "Ethnic and educational inequalities among youth people on the labour market in Bulgaria", defended at ISSK, BAS, April 2019.

picture in the reconstruction of a continuous and lifelong process depicting how, in a given situation, individuals make choices and project themselves into the future with regards to their education and career development. We present five cases: two male construction industry workers with a low level of education (elementary or less); two women with higher education: a medical nurse, and woman administrator; and one university graduate, who is a male doctor specialized in ophthalmology. Each of these cases illustrates how education affects professional realization and can help reduce prejudicial attitudes resulting from the stigmas attached to Roma ethnicity.

The question is how, in a context of discrimination, the young Roma fabricate their own self-career development strategies. We intentionally confine ourselves to personal experience and the described situations of interaction between minority group members and members of the dominant group. In choosing to focus on the micro-sociological level, we aim to emphasize dynamics and processes of exclusion/inclusion that are difficult to capture at macro-level and are often absent from, or ignored in, public discourse.

We argue that in the current context, individual trajectories illustrate a social phenomenon that Rebecca Blank defines as “cumulative discrimination”. This concept measures discriminatory effects over time and across domains: “Rather than focusing on the impact of discrimination on a particular outcome (discrimination in wages, discrimination in medical treatment for heart disease, etc.), the study of cumulative discrimination looks at the cumulative effects of single or multiple incidents of discrimination across time and across social settings in another social domain”. Discrimination may have also cross-generational effects. For instance “educational discrimination in one generation may (through effects on wealth accumulation or lifetime earning opportunities) affect the educational and earning opportunities in the next generation” (Blank 2005: 99).

While the Roma are particularly disadvantaged, it is important to emphasize the general context of poverty in Bulgaria - the country with the highest levels of income inequality in the European Union (EU). According to Eurostat data for 2017, Bulgaria holds the top rank in the EU by the percentage of citizens at risk of poverty - 30% of the population live in conditions of severe material deprivation (Eurostat/Newsrelease 2018). In the EU as a whole, in 2017, 6.9% of the population was affected by severe material deprivation; the rate has decreased in comparison with 2016 (when it was 7.5%) and 2008 (8.5%). For Bulgaria, the National Statistical Institute data for 2017 shows that the rate of the working poor has increased by 3.8 percentage points, reaching 11.6% of all employed. The share of poor people in Bulgaria is far above the average European levels, with only 13.3% of the GDP allocated to social protection, while the average budget in EU is over 19%. The share of the informal economy in Bulgaria remains one of the highest in the world - between 28 and 31% in 2016-2017 (see Medina, Schneider 2018; Doklad 2017).

In this context, it is not surprising that the Roma minority holds the most unfavourable positions on the labour market. According to data of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria for 2016, only 22.5% of the Roma were employed, and 90% of them had elementary or lower education

degree (KNSB “Zaetost i bezrobotitsa” 2016). Only 0.5% of the employed Roma have secondary education, and only 0.1% has higher education. Of course, these data do not reflect employment in the informal sector and many working Roma are officially counted in the total number of the unemployed. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Bulgaria only 45% of the Roma are covered by the social security system, while in Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, Hungary and Czech Republic the corresponding categories are between 94 and 100%. Bulgaria and Romania continue to have the lowest shares of social insurance (Country Health Profiles 2017).

In 2016, the share of the Roma aged 20-64 years in paid work amounted to only 30% of the national total, which was significantly under the 70% EU average for 2015 (A Persisting Concern 2018). The situation for young people is considerably worse: on the average, 63% of the Roma aged 16-24 years did not work, study or attend any form of training at the time of the survey, while the EU average for the same age group was 12%. The study shows an encouraging decrease of Roma schoolchildren dropping out of basic education, from 87% in 2011 to 68% in 2016. School segregation, although prohibited by law, continues to be a problem in Bulgaria, Greece and Slovakia, the study concludes.

Various studies of social trends related to the Roma (Tilkidzhiev et al. 2011; Pamporov 2004; Tomova 2013) tend to emphasize cultural and other differences between this ethnic group and the others. Ethnicity-related moods, attitudes and stereotypes are constantly being reproduced and play a role in labour market exclusion. In a comprehensive economic study on “Roma and non-Roma in the Labour Market in Central and South Eastern Europe” (O’Higgins 2012) Niall O’Higgins points out the following paradox. On the one hand, the statistics register a positive trend of increasing inclusion of the Roma in education over the period 2004-2011, in particular, the rising level of inclusion in high school and specialized secondary education. On the other hand, however, this trend has a minimal impact on the employment level of the Roma. The author concludes that “educational differences cannot account for the substantial differences which remain in labour market opportunities between Roma and non-Roma and that a substantial part of this differential is explainable in terms of discrimination and other non-observable factors. Clearly, more work needs to be done in order to identify just where these barriers to effective Roma labour market integration lie.”

Barriers are observable at the level of everyday interactions when people make and remake what F. Barth calls “ethnic boundaries” (Barth 1969). At this level, we can observe connections and mutual dependencies that structure the relations between the two ethnic groups in terms of “social organization” of difference. A given individual and/or collective identity is defined not so much by markers such as culture, language, religion, ethnicity, as by “what” the social actors in a given situation “do” with those markers (Barth 1969, 15).

The described cases illustrate what is happening at this boundary, and the personal experience of the individual member of the minority, who, together with others, is negotiating the boundary. As we will see, some people succeed in crossing it, others, “move it”, still others reproduce it; in all cases, their actions have an impact on social representations on both sides. For instance, from the

viewpoint of the Roma respondents, the stigmatic characteristic “Gypsy” is a brand with which they must deal in order to overcome social exclusion. We are helped in our analysis by Erving Goffman’s concept of stigma (Goffman 1963). According to Goffman, society defines concepts and means in order to categorize individuals. These are the various social and ethnic markers that become a norm and acquire the status of completely natural attributes from the viewpoint of the wider society.

### **Construction workers**

In informal discussions, workers and employers have shared that, in recent years, the high demand for labour force has opened access to the construction sector for the otherwise undesirable Roma community. This fact indicates some dynamics taking place at the boundary between the dominant ethnic group and the minority that has recently entered this economic niche. For more than a century, this sector had been a traditional economic niche for citizens of Turkish origin and the so-called Pomaks (Muslim Bulgarians). Since 1989, with the boom in construction, these minority groups have become more visible, many of them having moved to the cities to work in their own firms or in firms run by ethnic Bulgarians. The people at the construction sites relate that in recent years, many Turkish and Pomak families have left Bulgaria to find better professional realization in Turkey and Western Europe. Migration provoked by the bad working conditions in Bulgaria, and stimulated by the higher pay received for the same labour in the other EU countries, has opened the possibility for the most segregated community, the Roma, to enter the labour market.

Petko and Asen are temporary workers (in the professional jargon, construction workers are divided into heads of construction brigades and general labourers). Both of them are young, and at the start of their career development.

Petko is one of the many undeclared and unregistered day labourers. He has no specific skills: “*Carrying stuff is all I can do*”

He is 20 years old, and since childhood, he has worked as a carrier at construction sites. He lives with his wife and children in Sofia in a house in Nadezhda neighbourhood. His mother works as a cleaner and his father is a driver. The family lives in poverty. Petko had to leave school to “make some money” for his family. He got information about jobs at a construction site from his neighbour. For his work, he received small sums of money, just enough to buy food. Later he married and continued to work at the sites “for as much as they will give me”. His story depicts how the family is struggling to survive, relying mainly on the income Petko brings. He knows he would need a better level of education in order to hope for more, but says he has no choice in the matter.

*I have no time to study. I have to bring money to my wife. We have a baby. I have to feed them.*

It is hard for Petko to imagine the future and he does not hope for a better life, even though he is only 20 years old. Asked in what profession he would like to work later on, and whether he would go back to school, he answers:

*This is what I am able to do, I am not able to do any other work. I am a general labourer. I carry the materials to the builders. They say to me, "bring bricks!" - I take the wheelbarrow and I bring some. They say, "bring whitewash!" - I bring it. They can do construction work. I can't...*

As many other casual workers of Roma origin, Petko was not declared by his employer, therefore confined to the low-paid and insecure informal sector.

*They pay me for the day. They give me cash. I don't go every day. They call me when there is work, and I come here. When I have to help my wife take care of the baby, I don't come. When I have to look after the children, I can't come to work.*

In this context of social insecurity, he can rely only on his brother, who works at the site together with him, likewise as a general labourer, but who is more experienced in this work.

*My brother works here at the site too. He came long before I did. He carries like me too. We are constantly together. If there is some problem, he says, "Don't worry!". He is older than me, he takes care of me.*

Asen, worker and manager of a family firm: *"They think we're lazy"*

Asen is 23 years old and lives with his wife and two children in a house in the Roma neighbourhood at the outskirts of Plovdiv. He works with his father in the family construction company founded by his uncle and now headed by his cousin Krasi. He has been working since he was a child, earning money for his family - he used to return used paper and metal to the secondary raw materials market. He started work in construction at the age of 17 and he now has five years of working experience. In the beginning he was a manual worker, and for the last year and a half he has been coordinating the work of others. The workers of the firm are all Roma. Krasi's firm is a sub-contractor in the least profitable and least stable construction sector: building completion at "abandoned or delayed construction sites", restoring old houses or sites and restoring residential building facades.

Although it is a family firm, his cousin Krasi is often unable to pay on time relatives that work for him. Krasi himself depends on payment from other contractors along the line of sub-contracting. The workers feel they have no options to get work contracts and they are paid by the day. The cousin's small family firm cannot offer more. Despite this, the fact that they are relatives makes him more trustful.

*I have no contract - I am paid cash. We had this agreement from the start - we are kinfolk - he won't cheat me - he will pay what he promised...*

Asked what his work as manager consists in, Asen answers:

*I did not want to be a manager - Krasi tells me what to do and I do it. He and I make the plan and we discuss when to finish the project and I distribute the tasks among the workers. Depending on the schedule, I distribute the work to each worker and oversee whether they are carrying out the work properly...*

The main factor of a small firm's survival is finding an entry into the market. Krasi's firm suffers from lack of contacts in Bulgarian circles - contacts that might provide orders. In answer to the question as to what his relations are with Bulgarian firms, Asen says:

*They think we're lazy, that we are below their level. They won't want to work with us...*

As described, the firm seems isolated from the wider construction market. Asen's narrative makes it clear they dare not even consider such a possibility. He sees no point in trying. In his case, the burden of prejudice appears to be insurmountable, and despite the rational choice of developing economic activity in a sphere where workers are in demand, up to now, the mechanisms of exclusion do not permit the family firm to enter the market.

Interviews with Roma workers clearly show that they are expected to save expenses for the ordering firm through their low-paid and unregulated labour. A Roma is not in a position to set conditions, but neither does he make plans to acquire additional qualification and seek a higher-skilled job. Petko and Asen come from poor families, but do not have the same kind of social capital: the former copes by himself following his brother's example, while the latter has at his disposal the network of the family firm. But for both of them, the network capital comes entirely from Roma people. In order to negotiate a more comfortable position and move the boundary (in Barth's sense), the Roma would need the intervention of other social and institutional actors that might help them overcome the processes of exclusion.

### **Women with a higher education**

Nurse Ani: *"I have made it! No matter that I'm a Gypsy"*

Ani is 27 years old, from the city of Sliven, Komluka neighbourhood<sup>2</sup>, and lives in an apartment with her husband and child. At the time of the interview, she was working as a medical nurse under a temporary, one-year contract. She dreams of finding time to continue her education and graduating as a doctor, although she doubts she will have the possibility. She has a bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Medicine, Trakia University in Stara Zagora. She married at the age of 17, had a child, and completed her high school education after a two-year interruption. There are three generations living in the apartment: a grandmother and grandfather, parents, a sister and her two brothers. She completed secondary education with good grades in a mixed general education school. Her mother has a basic education and works as a cleaner in a school; her father has secondary education and works as a guard. The main role for her rearing was played by her grandfather, who helped with school lessons. He has a basic education and works as a warehouse attendant in a bread factory in Sliven. He is known in the neighbourhood for his love of books, a quality he has passed on to his granddaughter.

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<sup>2</sup> For information on the socio-professional trajectories of the various Roma sub-groups in Sliven and the Komluka neighbourhood, see Tomova 2011.

*My grandfather would test me and he helped me a great deal to understand the school lessons, Ani relates. To this day, I can recall how he would joke about the way the biology textbook explains the amoeba.*

For Ani, the social prestige of the medical profession is very important. Despite the low salaries nurses are paid, in the eyes of other people, she has managed to rise in society. This achievement is largely due to her personal choice:

*Ever since I was little, I wanted to be a nurse. I am asthmatic and beside I was a very sickly child - so my grandmother often had to take me to the doctor's office. As early as that time, I decided that was the work I wanted to do. If some neighbour gets sick, has a wound, has high temperature, they often call me to consult me.*

Getting out of poverty is an important goal, but the leading factor is social prestige and the ambition for personal realization. The way in which Roma community lives is not the “normal” life for her:

*I am from a poor family, we have always had money problems. I wanted to work at a job by which I could lead a normal life, not like the life of my parents...*

Starting from school age, she had to combine her ambition for high grades with her family duties as a wife and daughter and with care for her older sister, who has physical disabilities. But at an early age, she made a family of her own as well.

*That is how it is with us, when your first menstrual cycle comes, you are fit to be a wife and mother, and it is time for you to make a home. They marry even earlier in the neighbourhood. At the age of 16, they have children. I knew since I was little whom I would marry - I was pure and I married for love. Later, at the age of 21, I managed to complete secondary education. I already had a child.*

The topic of “purity”, or virginity, before marriage refers to the traditional norms among Roma. Early marriages are meant to prevent risky situations or to legalize the situation when the rule has been violated. That is why young mothers often have to interrupt their education. We see how different layers of dependency build up, which could be described as a case of “multiple exclusion” related to the status of women: “For women of the Roma ethnic group, the unequal division of power between men and women in the family and in society proves to be a harder to surmount obstacle, inasmuch as they can rely on very little support in their expectation for equal standing with men” (Stoilova 2014, 123).

When she went to study in Stara Zagora, Ani lived with her uncle, who helped her settle down and deal with some administrative tasks. During her studies, she worked as a shop assistant in a neighbourhood store in order to support her family and pay her tuition fees. After graduating, she spent about half a year applying for jobs in hospitals, mainly in Sliven. Regarding her uncle, she says, “if it weren't for him, I wouldn't have grown up to this person - he gave me shelter, helped me with administrative matters - he got attestations for me, signatures, grades...”

The figurative expression “achieve growth” [*izklyasya*], used by the respondent, refers to the effort to break through and climb up social strata. Being the

first-generation university graduate in her family, she has created her own social networks and “connections” with colleagues, who at key moments would help her fight against stereotypes. For instance, the respondent went to her first job interview in a hospital thanks to the contacts of a Bulgarian female fellow student from the University, who informally supported her application.

But she has also waged a daily struggle to overcome the ethnic boundary and reach a position of equality with the “others”. Going to a job interview at the hospital, Ani was aware of possible discriminatory practices; she avoided giving information beforehand that would have indicated her ethnic origin, and did not attach a photograph to her CV. But the colour of her skin activated spontaneous racist attitudes. It suddenly turned out there was no opening for a job under a work contract and they offered her work as a volunteer. Thus, she started by doing unpaid work that she could have done even without a diploma, as an unskilled worker. The respondent gradually built an image of her own and won over some colleagues to her side. For instance, the doctor for whom she worked as an assistant gradually changed his attitude towards her, eventually ultimately serving as guarantor when she shifted from a volunteer contract to a work contract. On the fifth month of her apprenticeship, she signed a one-year contract, with the provision that the contract could be prolonged if she displayed good results and people were satisfied with her work.

Ani shared that at the beginning she was only allowed to observe the work of her colleagues. She gradually began to perform services and, partially, administrative duties. She shared that, though she has worked nearly a year at the hospital, her colleagues still do not trust her to go into the storage for medical materials and consumables.

*They don't treat us [the Roma] as equal colleagues. They think they are something more than us. It was exceptionally difficult for me - I had to prove myself each and every day.*

Ethnic discrimination is displayed not only by the employees at the hospital but also by the patients and the medical staff. On the one hand, the patients of Bulgarian ethnicity refuse to be assisted by a Roma nurse; on the other hand, the patients of Roma origin turn repeatedly to Ani, hoping to get a free examination from her. She is the only employee who wears gloves at work; she does so to hide her “black” hands, trying thus to neutralize her physical marks of difference and avoid excluding reactions. In order to overcome negative attitudes, she constantly volunteers to do additional services, such as taking her colleagues' shifts or assuming their administrative duties. Despite this, she shares that so far, she is not accepted as equal and does not see her Bulgarian colleagues outside of work.

This situation typically shows the daily struggle against the stigma of ethnicity. We may define Ani's strategy as situational. Following Goffman's model, the rules and norms are negotiated in the interaction with the employer, the doctors, and the staff, who all belong to the dominant ethnic group. At work, she relies on displaying her personal qualities, which are a factor of deconstructing the stigma and creating conditions for “passing over” to a different status despite the resistance she meets. We should stress her secondary education in a

mixed school as an important factor that certainly gives her an advantage over Petko and Asen, who have not grown up in contact with the majority group.

Milena, an administrative employee: *“I will never be like them”*

Milena T. is 28 years old. She was born in Blagoevgrad and has been working in Sofia for many years. She lives with her husband and child in a home in neighbourhood Hristo Botev. Before marrying, she lived with her parents and sister in a prefabricated panel apartment at the outskirts of her native city. In Blagoevgrad, she graduated in Public Administration at Southwest University. Like Ani, she went to a mixed school. She recalls attending school with great eagerness. She describes herself as having been a diligent and hard-working student who particularly liked the school subjects related to the humanities. Her mother has an elementary education and has no permanent job (most often, she collects paper for the second hand raw materials market), and her father graduated from a vocational school and works as a plumber. Her father has played the main role in her personal story: he helped her in school and in finding work after graduating from university. At the age of 17, she married and had a child, which is why she had to interrupt her secondary education. She completed it after two and a half years.

During her studies, she worked as a newspaper seller, as a cleaner in offices, and other temporary occupations. She was hired for a few months, without work contract, and was paid in cash. When she reached the age of 23, her father went to work in the Sofiyska Voda AD (Sofia Water services). Also during her studies, she worked as a street vendor of boiled corn during the summers in order to help her family financially. After graduating, with the help of her father, she started a 3-month apprenticeship in the administration of Sofiyska Voda AD. She shared that the apprenticeship contract provided the possibility of a permanent contract if she worked well. Milena invested much effort during her apprenticeship in order to keep her job and establish good working relations with her colleagues. After the end of the apprenticeship, she was offered a permanent contract with a 6-month probation period. She was set the minimum wage for her position.

The social origin and the environment in which Milena grew up are similar to those of the nurse Ani. Her personal choice of profession similarly aims at vertical social mobility and moving up the social class. We can see her struggling to overcome the poverty that accompanied her at every stage of education and professional growth. In order to finance her studies, unlike most of her colleagues, she worked at jobs involving exhausting physical labour in the sphere of the grey economy.

*I come from a poor family - I have always had to work, during both my secondary and my higher education. In the summers, I would regularly sell corn. My mother collected paper for second hand raw materials - I went with her to help her, together with my sister. In order to help my family, so they wouldn't worry about me.*

Personal ambition and determination are the basic factors of the successful development of her professional career. Similarly to Ani's case, her father played a key role in Milena's schooling: he raised her to aspire to emancipation

through education. Her father also set a personal example, and the results show in her good grades at school and her love of learning, which she displayed from an early age:

*I was one of the good students. I went to school with eagerness. Literature, philosophy, geography, history were my favourite subjects, and I was very good at them. I wasn't good at math. I have an inclination to the humanities...*

Like Ani, Milena managed to combine study and work with heavy domestic responsibilities towards her family. Her early marriage and maternity did not put an end to her education but only postponed its completion. Milena is aware of the discrepancy between the traditional model and the norms of modern society, but traditions are not in contradiction with her personal value system.

*As a general rule, what a woman should do in life is to have a child - that is the most important thing. There will always be work, but you cannot always have a child. I married at 16 and became pregnant almost immediately, but that was never an obstacle for me - I have always wanted to complete secondary education and continue upward.*

During her studies, Milena became even more motivated to “rescue herself” from the humiliating work typical for a “Gypsy woman”.

*I have wanted to do deskwork ever since I was little - that is why I chose to study this specialty. Employees will always be in demand - since I was little, I was very diligent, orderly, and organized, and I have everything it takes for that. Because I come from a poor family, I wasn't able to study in Sofia. This is the most stable profession.*

Unlike Ani, Milena found a job comparatively soon after completing her higher education. After graduating, she started work as an intern under conditions similar to those of other graduates. As in many other cases, her father's personal contacts played an important role. Milena has the necessary social and cultural capital. She was appointed at the company where her father works because he had made a good reputation for himself there.

Just like Ani, the duties Milena performed at the start were beneath her level of education. The work was mechanical and monotonous, not involving responsibility and decision-making. She received the lowest salary in the whole department. In the course of the interview, Milena became increasingly frank, and her feeling of satisfaction gave place to the awareness she is undervalued and that her situation is predetermined. Responding to the question whether she feels she will be able to grow in the hierarchy, she sounded discouraged. She feels her ethnic origin will always be an obstacle.

*I am of Roma origin - they have always considered us second-rate people. It is normal that I do the simplest work. I will never be like them. You have to work a long time before they accept you as one of them. And given that I am a Gypsy - it will be a very difficult thing. Even what I have attained so far is a lot...*

## Man with a higher education

Ivan, a doctor: *“I knew at once this was the thing for me”*

Ivan is 26 years old. Born and raised in Sofia, he lives with his mother in the medical dormitory on the Student Campus. His mother is a nurse. Unlike Ani, who is a first-generation university graduate, Ivan already has a parent who is a university graduate with medical education. His mother was the one to make the breakthrough in the family. She has worked in her specialty not only in Bulgaria but also abroad. His father died when he was a child. He completed his secondary education in a Vocational School in public catering. He believes his choice of vocation in high school was a rational one:

*I realized that if I did not succeed in enrolling in medicine, I would have to have a profession I could exercise as a contingency plan. But my initial plan, medicine, worked out.*

According to his narrative, the choice of a doctor’s profession came “by a conjunction of circumstances” and was understandable in relation to his environment and his mother’s profession. He has grown outside the Roma neighbourhood, in a mixed environment:

*Some time ago, my mother and I lived in the dormitory - surrounded by graduate students, doctors, all sorts of medical specialists - there, that’s all you see and at one point, it becomes your wish.*

Thanks to his mother, Ivan learned about the Open Society Foundation program. He started training and graduated. The respondent used an interesting term - “I was launched” into being a medical student. While Ani “achieved growth”, Ivan “was launched” thanks to an institution that invested in him. Here is what he related:

*My mother said to be - look here, it says something about Roma integration. I found information in the Internet - at first, I thought it was a sheer deception and that somebody wanted to draw some money. It sounded too good to be true. If it hadn’t been for Open Society, it wouldn’t have happened, I simply wouldn’t have succeeded. That is what launched me into Medical University.*

Ivan does not emphasize having any feeling of being different; the Open Society program served as a means for him to achieve his aim. As in Ani’s story, a female teacher played a crucial role, offering support and personal guidance that contributed to his devotion to the medical profession. He compares that teacher to “a mother and a professional and spiritual mentor”.

*My first mentor was the head of the Kinetics Department, whose help was exceptionally great - she saw my desire and zeal to succeed. She helped me a great deal - professionally, like a mother, and in every way.*

From here on, the various stages of career growth do not differ from those of other medical students, who gradually choose their field of specialization:

*I wanted to be a gynecologist, later - a plastic surgeon, but when I reached fourth year, a module on ocular diseases began and I fell in love with this profession. It was like love at first sight. The teacher was explaining something complicated to the group - and I was the only one who understood it. And I said to myself "This is my specialty".*

Unlike Ani, and similar to Milena, Ivan did not go through a period of unemployment. After graduating, he worked as a volunteer for only three months. It was not difficult for him to find a job, because "doctors are always in demand". He works in three different medical institutions. While looking for a job, and in his relations with colleagues, he does not feel excluded or a victim of negative stereotypes and prejudice:

*I went to see my mentor and said to him, "Professor Dimitrov, I want to be an ophthalmologist." In the sixth year, I started working as a volunteer in the clinic in order to show I wanted it. I gave my all during those three months. Besides working in the hospital, I now have a second job in optics and a third in the emergency centre of a hospital in Sofia.*

Ivan constantly stresses his personal qualities. He has higher self-esteem than Ani or Milena, who have more or less interiorized the social stigma of their Roma ethnicity. There is an important objective factor in his subjective experience, a factor of which he is clearly aware: the colour of his skin. He says his light complexion protects him and nobody would recognize his origin at first glance. His colleagues did not know at first, and his employer learned about it after he had already been appointed. In this respect, he differs from Ani, who is immediately recognizable and classified as a "Gypsy", with all the consequences this has in the context of racial and even racist categories of thought.

## **Conclusion**

This study presents a micro-sociological perspective on modes of action of Roma people of various social backgrounds and different levels of education, but sharing one important characteristic: their project to achieve professional realization in economic niches that are new to this ethnic group - construction, healthcare and administration. In the context of common everyday practices of discrimination, these young people have built plans for their future step by step. Following this logic, they have pragmatically transformed the dimensions of interaction with other people. This demonstrates a personal desire for rising in the social hierarchy. A Roma is not in a position to set conditions and can hardly make plans to acquire additional qualification. His/her strategy is day-to-day survival. This mechanism contributes to reproducing poverty, and young workers do not take advantage of the prestige of the labour they invest and of the salary they earn.

In relation to building a new social identity, the respondents testify to the burden of "ethnicity" as the sum of markers preceding social interaction and often defining the initial conditions of contact. This unfavourable situation restricts the process of achieving a new social status but does not stop it. The re-

search shows that the professional development strategies of the social actors of Roma origin are related to building and using networks of contacts, which might help them start their first full-time job. In itself, this factor is not specific to the Roma group. What stands out in their case is the limited size of these networks, and what predominates in their narratives is rather the feeling of loneliness in the struggle to overcome exclusion. The ophthalmologist Ivan is the only one who was supported by an institutional structure, although a non-governmental one. In order to achieve a more comprehensive picture, it is important to continue the analysis of state institution policies aimed at overcoming exclusion, and how specific policies and practices meet the needs of people along the path from education to work.

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