

## **FROM PERSONAL CONVERSIONS TO SOCIAL CHANGE: ROMA CHRISTIANS IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE**

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**ABSTRACT:** Roma groups number an estimated 10-12 million in Europe—Europe’s largest minority. Although the Roma are spread over every sector of society and occupation, the majority face greater levels of poverty than the majority population as well as social marginalization and discrimination. At the same time, Christianity, largely in Pentecostal and evangelical forms, continues to expand in Roma communities throughout Europe. This article explores the question: Is the growth of Pentecostalism among the Roma sequestered in the private domains of home and church, or has this phenomenon impacted their communities and the wider society? After offering historical context and discussing intersecting issues around both the Roma in Europe and Pentecostalism, the article explores the question across selected contexts and Christian initiatives.  
**KEYWORDS:** Pentecostal, Roma, social engagement, conversion, holistic change.

### **DA CONVERSÃO PESSOAL À MUDANÇA SOCIAL: OS CIGANOS CRISTÃOS NO SUDESTE DA EUROPA**

**RESUMO:** Estima-se que haja aproximadamente de 10 a 12 milhões de ciganos na Europa – a maior população entre os povos minoritários. Embora os ciganos estejam espalhados por todos os setores da sociedade e ocupação, a maioria enfrenta níveis extremos de pobreza, bem como marginalização social e discriminação. Ao mesmo tempo, o cristianismo, principalmente nas formas pentecostal e evangélica, continua a se expandir nas comunidades ciganas por toda a Europa. Este artigo explora a questão: o crescimento do pentecostalismo entre os ciganos está isolado nos domínios privados do lar e da igreja, ou esse fenômeno impactou suas comunidades e a sociedade em geral? Depois de oferecer o contexto histórico e discutir questões que se cruzam entre os ciganos na Europa e o pentecostalismo, o artigo explora a questão em contextos selecionados e iniciativas cristãs.

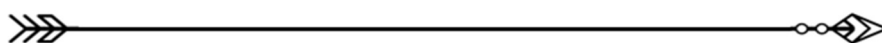
**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pentecostal, Roma, engajamento social, conversão, mudança holística.

### **INTRODUCTION**

George Sisco grew up without a father and his mother taught him to beg so they could put bread on the table. As a Roma child in Greece, he became skillful in feigning injuries to elicit compassion and, more importantly, money from people, by wearing a neck brace or walking with a cane. When his cousin came down with a serious illness, he felt responsible, as he and his aunt had been working together to trick people. He believed her illness was God’s judgement for his dishonesty. Stricken, he made a pilgrimage of penance

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to Tinos, and walked 800 meters on his knees to seek favor from the resident saint. Meanwhile, his aunt had encountered God and began to speak to him about God's love. When his cousin was healed after a surgery and miraculously came out of her coma, he agreed to go to church with her, where he converted and was eventually baptized as a Pentecostal in water and in the Spirit<sup>2</sup>. Twenty-five years later, motivated by love for his people and God, he wants everyone to experience God's love. In 2016, he and his family lived in one of Athens' most dangerous neighborhoods, filled with crime, drugs, and witchcraft. Two weekends a month, a group prays and fasts for the neighborhood, and they believe God will continue to change the community. Previously, there was a lot of violent house burglaries armed men entering houses to take what they wanted; now that kind of crime has decreased. Roma people approach him and tell him that "we would like to know and accept the Lord." His vision is to be a center of evangelism in the neighborhood, with services like a children's program and meals for the poor<sup>3</sup>.

The above vignette captures one story of thousands of similar accounts. Roma groups number an estimated 10-12 million in Europe—Europe's largest minority. Although the Roma are spread over every sector of society and occupation, the majority face greater levels of poverty than the majority population as well as social marginalization and discrimination. At the same time, Christianity, largely in Pentecostal and evangelical forms, continues to expand in Roma communities throughout Europe<sup>4</sup>. Pentecostalism is the fastest growing branch of Christianity worldwide, with an estimated 635 million Pentecostals in 2020<sup>5</sup>. Essentially, Pentecostalism describes Christians who believe and experience the Holy Spirit, including the gifts of the spirit and the miraculous, and experience supernatural experiences with God's power which contribute to a fervor for

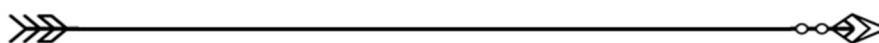
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<sup>2</sup> Baptism by water is an important Christian sacrament in all denominations and traditions; however, some Pentecostals and Charismatics view baptism in the Spirit—that is, the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit—as a separate but equally important occurrence in the life of a Christian. This experience imparts believers with the Holy Spirit's power, and certain Pentecostal and Charismatic groups believe that this experience is evidenced by speaking in tongues afterward.

<sup>3</sup> George Sisco, interview in Larisa, Greece, July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Evangelicalism implies a commitment to the "gospel" or "good news" that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ; therefore, this a movement that transcends Christian denominations and was historically characteristic of Christians who emphasize the authority of the Bible, sin of humanity, evangelism, and the return of Jesus. Thus, this article refers to evangelicals in the theological sense, rather than political. Some Christians may simply call themselves "evangelicals" as opposed to a specific denomination. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Ebook Central (London; Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989),

<sup>5</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *Encyclopedia of World Christianity*, 3rd Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).



mission and evangelism<sup>6</sup>. It is not a uniform movement but an interrelated phenomenon that spans different movements and Christian traditions, and Allen Anderson uses words such as “polycentric and transnational” and “variegated” to describe it<sup>7</sup>. Thus, as a phenomenon, Pentecostalism impacts the larger society in divergent and non-uniform ways. This article explores the question: Is the growth of Pentecostalism among the Roma sequestered in the private domains of home and church, or has this phenomenon impacted their communities and the wider society?

This question has been addressed, although far from conclusively or exhaustively, by sociological, anthropological, and missiological research. Throughout my research undertaken over the last decade, I found that this question is not merely sociological or anthropological, but also theological. A person’s Christian conversion is a moment in time which has the potential to shift a life trajectory, affecting a person’s emotional, behavioral, familial, and social spheres. In evangelical understanding, conversion demands a “complete break” with the past and the temptations of the world, a turning from sins, or those deeds in opposition to Christian teachings<sup>8</sup>. This inward transformative moment has the potential to be a socially transformative moment depending on a person’s theology of engagement with the world and culture. On the other side, however, one’s theology can also encourage a retreat from the world after conversion. For example, after many years of working with Romani Pentecostal migrants from Romania in England, retired vicar Martin Burrell observes that some Roma Pentecostals tend to retreat from the world. As Burrell says: “The world is seen as a dangerous place in which Satan rules over a land of sinners – and that attitude doesn’t help integration as members tend to retreat into piety”<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, critical for studying the influence of evangelical Roma upon society is not just looking at what they are doing, but also understanding the underlying theology that motivates the action. In fact, studies in the anthropology of Christianity have begun to recognize the importance of understanding theological categories and interpretations as

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<sup>6</sup> Wonsuk Ma, “‘When the Poor Are Fired Up’: The Role of Pneumatology in Pentecostal/Charismatic Mission,” in *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*, ed. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Cambridge: William BEerdmans, 2009), 41

<sup>7</sup> Allan Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth : Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013),147.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *To the Ends*,1,48.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Hughes, “How Tyson Fury’s Words Shine a Light on Traveller Faith,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2015, sec. sport, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2015/dec/13/tyson-fury-traveller-faith>.



they pertain to an individual's self-concept, to access "insider discourse" as it pertains to the Christian life<sup>10</sup>. In this perspective, theology refers to understanding how people are attributing meaning to their faith—making sense of the Christian life in their everyday life<sup>11</sup>.

This article will thus address the question of the influence of Pentecostal and evangelical Roma on their surrounding societies, considering their theological and social motivations. This is not intended as a comprehensive analysis, rather it illustrates the potent possibilities in selected contexts when Roma Christians, inspired by their own transformative experience with God, turn their attention to the challenges in their families, communities, and the wider society. This inward-to-outward movement can only be understood as revolutionary when placed in the historical and current context of the European Roma. Thus, I will first introduce the Roma in Europe, briefly summarizing the history of relationships between majority societies and Roma communities. Next, I will introduce the spread of Pentecostal Christianity among the Roma in Europe. Following, I will highlight selected Southeastern Europe context and Roma leaders' work, perspective, and vision for their people and societies.

## HISTORY AND IDENTITY

Roma groups have long been part of Europe's history and peoples, originating over a thousand years ago from northwest India. By the fourteenth century, Roma groups settled on the Balkan Peninsula; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, large numbers were in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)<sup>12</sup>. There is not one "story" of Roma history in Europe, but like any other history, Roma groups have divergent experiences across different historical eras and contexts. Because of scant documents and few accounts written by Roma themselves, Kenneth Lee argues that in historical accounts, the Roma:

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<sup>10</sup> Joel Robbins, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* (Oxford: University Press, 2020), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas, *Faith in African Lived Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, Volume 35 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2019), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Kenrick, *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)*, 2nd ed., vol. 7, (Historical Dictionaries of Peoples and Cultures) (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), xix; David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996).



“...exist primarily as representations, as essentialized exotics that have been actively constituted through discursive formations”<sup>13</sup>.

It is important to keep this historical epistemology in mind even while briefly summarizing the relationships between Roma and majority societies. Early encounters were not referenced as negative, and societies often capitalized on various skills and abilities the Roma offered<sup>14</sup>. By as early as 1450, however, Romani migrants from Eastern Europe to Western Europe attracted the suspicion and hostility of the state, church, and the guilds because of their dark skin color which distinguished them from surrounding groups, and the fear that they may be “Turkish spies” since they came from the Balkans. For various reasons, Roma groups were often grouped with people who were deemed to possess objectionable social conditions, including “vagabonds, vagrants, errants, nomads, those of no fixed abode, travelling people...”<sup>15</sup>.

In more recent centuries, sometimes government and state strategies were implemented, although non-uniformly across Europe, to force the Roma into mainstream society<sup>16</sup>. For example, in the seventeenth century, certain decrees allowed the death penalty or banishment for Roma found within boundaries of a certain kingdom, whilst in the eighteenth century, decrees were made which intended to separate children from parents to encourage assimilation<sup>17</sup>. From the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, enslavement of the Roma by monasteries and landowners existed in the Romanian principalities<sup>18</sup>. Brutal policies eventually led to a genocide in the twentieth century during World War II.

The divergence of experience and contexts regarding the Roma is also critical to keep in mind when framing and understanding Roma identity. Various organizations

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth William Lee, “Constructing Romani Strangerhood” (Doctoral thesis, Newcastle, U.K., University of Newcastle, 2001), 4.

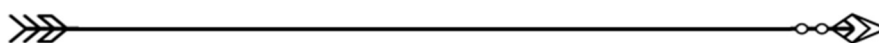
<sup>14</sup> Angus M Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1995), 62-67.

<sup>15</sup> Becky Taylor, *Another Darkness, Another Dawn: A History of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers*, Ebook Central (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2014), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Marsh, “Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity,” *Roma Rights Quarterly*, no. 3 (2007): 17–30; Thomas A. Acton, “New Religious Movements among Roma, Gypsies and Travellers: Placing Romani Pentecostalism in an Historical and Social Context,” in *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity*, ed. David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2014), 23–30.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Another Darkness*, 65, 87, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 94-96.



identify Roma in disparate ways. For example, the Council of Europe defines Roma as “Roma, Sinti, Kale, and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as ‘Gypsies’”<sup>19</sup>. The European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) defines Roma in their Charter as someone who: “avows oneself to the common historical Indo-Greek origin, who avows oneself to the common language of Romanes, who avows oneself to the common cultural heritage of the Romanipe”<sup>20</sup>. In fact, the Roma are scattered minority communities who live within a wide range of different societies and cultures, diverse in terms of cultural practices and language<sup>21</sup>. Since they may identify themselves differently than the majority society around them, as a researcher I adopt the term they themselves use, and use “Roma” as an umbrella term for various groups, unless they reject the term<sup>22</sup>.

In the twenty-first century, the majority of the ten to twelve million Roma and Gypsy communities in Europe have higher rates of illiteracy, unemployment, and health problems than the majority populations, as well as facing severe social exclusion, discrimination, and racism<sup>23</sup>. In fact, discrimination and anti-Gypsyism perpetuate the images that contribute to the “legitimization of their eviction, expulsion, substandard housing, education, and healthcare”<sup>24</sup>. One 2012 report called the human rights abuses

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<sup>19</sup> Council of Europe, “Descriptive Glossary of Terms Relating to Roma Issues” (Brussels, Belgium, 2012), [https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary\\_Roma\\_18May2012\\_CoE.pdf](https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary_Roma_18May2012_CoE.pdf), Accessed August 11, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> European Roma and Travellers Forum, “Charter on the Rights of the Roma” (Strasbourg: European Roma and Travellers Forum, 2009). For a thorough discussion on identity, including the ERTF, see: Yaron Matras, “Scholarship and the Politics of Romani Identity: Strategic and Conceptual Issues,” *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 10, 1 (2013): 209-247.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Kovats, “Problems of Intellectual and Political Accountability in Respect of Emerging European Roma Policy,” *JEMIE - Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2001, 7.

<sup>22</sup> “Roma” simply means “the Romani people” in the Romani language. It became a preferred inclusive political term after the first 1971 World Romani Congress in London, in order to assert distance from terms such as Gypsies and *Zigeuner*, which had pejorative connotations and were often the terms used by non-Roma. However, in some contexts, groups identify as Gypsy. Will Guy, “Romani Identity and Post-Communist Policy,” in *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>23</sup> FRA, “Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey-Main Results” (Luxemburg: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017), [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2017-eu-midis-ii-main-results\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-midis-ii-main-results_en.pdf), Accessed December 13, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Huub van Baar, “Europe’s Romaphobia: Problematization, Securitization, Nomadization,” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 29, no. 2 (2011b): 205.



against Roma and Travellers in the Council of Europe member states “severe” and noted that anti-Gypsyism is “deeply-rooted in Europe”<sup>25</sup>.

Correspondingly in the twenty-first century, transnational and national frameworks have increasingly taken the situation of the Roma into account, and there is a constantly burgeoning volume of reports, research, funding, and measures intended to address the situation, particularly as it has been recognized that the Roma, as the largest minority in Europe, is intricately connected to the idea of a free, democratic society. Roma-led activism, NGOs, and political movements also continue to grow. Despite the increase in positive policies and measures, there exists a large gap between policies and the situation at the grass roots level, and sometimes local policy makers portray the Roma as a burden rather than a group of citizens deserving of equal rights and support<sup>26</sup>. Various explanations account for this lack of progress: finances, corruption and accountability, prejudice, anti-Gypsyism, and discrimination, the weakness of Roma politics, and the failure of state and local actors<sup>27</sup>. In conclusion, the progress reports from the last decade regarding policies intended to uplift the situation of the Roma have been marginal, particularly in the Western Balkans. A significant percentage of Roma in the Western Balkans live in deep poverty, facing lack of education, social protection, lack of good healthcare, substandard and housing, and minimal employment<sup>28</sup>.

## RISE OF PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE ROMA

Existing in parallel reality to this picture is the story of the growth of Christianity among the Roma in Europe. The remarkable rise of Pentecostalism in Romani communities began in France in the 1950s, Spain in the 1960s, and England in the 1970s<sup>29</sup>. After the healing and subsequent conversion of a Manouche man and his family, Clément

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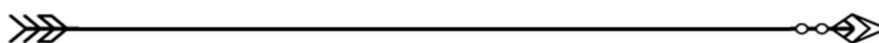
<sup>25</sup> Council of Europe, “Human Rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe” (Council of Europe, 2012b), [http://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/source/prems/prems79611\\_GBR\\_CouvHumanRightsOfRoma\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/source/prems/prems79611_GBR_CouvHumanRightsOfRoma_WEB.pdf), 11, Accessed September 26, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> The idea that project-based endeavors alone can change the social exclusion is now questioned by the European Council, in 2011 actors called for more a more “integrated and flexible manner”. Peter Vermeersch, “The European Union and the Roma: An Analysis of Recent Institutional and Policy Developments,” *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 10, no. 1 (2013): 345, 356.

<sup>27</sup> Kovats, “Problems of Intellectual”, 6,8.

<sup>28</sup> Different bodies conduct these reports. For example, the Roma Inclusion Index 2015, Human Rights Watch, Council of Europe, and European Commission.

<sup>29</sup> David Thurffjell and Adrian Marsh, eds., *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2014).



Le Cossec, a non-Roma pastor, began a ministry to Roma and Gypsy communities called the Gypsy Evangelical Mission, eventually Vie et Lumière (Life and Light). As Roma were trained as pastors and evangelists, the movement eventually spread across different Roma groups and regions, fifty countries in fifty years<sup>30</sup>. Other movements began to grow rapidly in Central and Eastern Europe in places such as Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, particularly after 1989<sup>31</sup>. In the area of former Yugoslavia, particularly in Serbia, a revival occurred in Leskovac in the early 1990s, after a few healing miracles took place. This eventually led to around 1,000 people (out of the 8-10,000 in three Roma communities) converted to Christianity. Key to the church's expansion in Serbia, however, was the theological training of a small group of seven men who were then sent out into Serbia as church planters<sup>32</sup>.

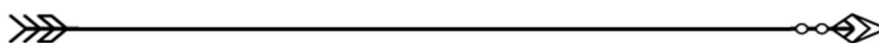
My research beginning in 2011 in Southeastern Europe began by collecting conversion stories of Roma Christians and the perspectives of Roma Christian leaders regarding their churches and their communities. Two themes have emerged over the years. First, Roma leaders in Southeastern Europe have a strong vision for the transformation of their communities. They think that governmental policies are inadequate to elicit change. Rather, they believe that only the power of the gospel can change lives. To “be saved” in evangelical understanding references being saved from sin and ultimately death, and restored to a good relationship with God, others, and the world in general. In anthropological perspective, a Christian conversion, precipitated by an encounter with God, acts as an “interruption” in one’s life, resulting in a shift in how one understands oneself, past and future. Something becomes new, and this is deepened and fostered through the Christian process of discipleship. From a theological perspective, this discipleship process is an ongoing movement towards the way of Christ, which shapes

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas A. Acton, “The Gypsy Evangelical Church,” ed. Stephen Cranford, *The Ecumenical Review (Journal of the World Council of Churches)* 31, no. 3 (1979): 289–95. Régis Laurent, “On the Genesis of Gypsy Pentecostalism in Brittany,” in *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity*, ed. David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2014), 31–40.

<sup>31</sup> Miroslav Atanasov, “Gypsy Pentecostals: The Growth of the Pentecostal Movement among the Roma in Bulgaria and Its Revitalization of Their Communities” (Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008); László Fosztó, “Roma and the ‘New Religions’ in Europe,” Factsheets on Romani Culture (Council of Europe, March 2019) <https://rm.coe.int/factsheets-on-romani-culture-2-4-roma-and-the-new-religions-in-europe/1680aac374>, Accessed August 11, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Melody J. Wachsmuth, “The Good Life: Descriptors of Change in Roma Pentecostal Communities in Serbia and Croatia,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (2017): 99–118; Melody J. Wachsmuth, “Between Global and Local: Roma Pentecostal Church Identity in Serbia,” *Romani Studies* 31, no. 2 (2021): 189–209.





one's thoughts, attitudes, behaviour through the power of the Holy Spirit. This process is deeply rooted in church identity, which requires a local theologizing of the church to address the questions of the context, encourage the discipleship process, and mitigate and interpret the church community's relationship with the outside world<sup>33</sup>. Thus, for these Roma leaders, personal salvation, a fundamental theological tenet of evangelicalism, has social implications and spiritual authorities such as the church are key for helping the Roma on a global level.

This corresponds with a few studies in other specific geographical contexts that have shown Pentecostalism's impact on Roma communities: it is linked to social change including a rise in levels of education and literacy, a decrease in crime, and better relationships with the majority culture and state authorities. Pentecostalism is also instrumental in fostering a "trans-national" identity and revitalization of ethnic identity<sup>34</sup>.

The vision of community transformation motivates Roma leaders regarding what areas to focus on in terms of serving their communities. In a 2021 meeting which considered regional perspectives of leaders from Central and Eastern Europe, Roma leaders specified several areas of focus: developing leaders and mentors, children's ministry and education, holistic family ministry, which includes health, job creation, women's ministry, theological training, and youth ministry. By virtue of these goals, one can conclude that the theological undergirding of the pastors is a holistic understanding of the social implications of the gospel.

A study conducted in 2017 among ten Roma church leaders in Croatia and Serbia investigated their ideas of human flourishing in Roma communities. All agreed that the change must begin with a deep personal spiritual transformation which would then outflow to family and society around them. One pastor, for example, envisioned that there would no longer be a physical difference between "Roma neighborhoods" and the majority, but

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<sup>33</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Encountering Christ in the Full Gospel Way: An Incarnational Pentecostal Spirituality," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 27, no. 1 (2007): 5–19; Wolfgang Vondey, "Pentecostal Identity and Christian Discipleship," *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* 6 (1999).

<sup>34</sup> Tatiana Zachar Podolinská and Tomáš Hrustič, "Religious Change and Its Effects on Social Change for Roma in Slovakia," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 59, no. 1 (2014): 235–56; Elin Strand, "One Scattered Race like Stars in the Sight of God: The International Gypsy Evangelical Church," in *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity*, ed. David Thurffjell and Adrian Marsh (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2014), 109–26.



people could live peacefully according to society's rule and have good relationships with neighbors. Others mentioned changes in the socio-economic spheres including education, job skills, decrease in criminal activity, and better integration with other nationalities. About family life, pastors mentioned peace in the families, decrease in abortions, and respect of women. Finally, about spirituality, they envision more mentoring of disciples, leadership training, and prayer<sup>35</sup>.

The second theme my research illuminated is the slow process of discipleship and transformation. There are always a few converts leaving the church or not progressing in their faith, according to a leader's expectations. Although this area is significantly less researched, other scholars have discussed the phenomenon, explaining it because of the demands of poverty, marginalization and economic insecurity, and low self-esteem<sup>36</sup>. Roma leaders have attributed it to illiteracy rendering Bible study difficult, stress of poverty, difficult community relationships, and vices such as dabbling in witchcraft and alcoholism. It also must be noted that "backsliding" is not just a phenomenon among the Roma but is present in the wider literature of global evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. However, in this context, as the complex issues contributing to societal marginalization and poverty span generations and are multi-faceted, the movement of discipleship toward holistic change and transformation must and will be equally multi-faceted and thus will take significant time to manifest on a wider scale.

Therefore, engagement with and influence upon society from Roma Christians depends both on contextual factors in each situation and the theology and vision of a particular leader. As I noted earlier, in the countries of former Yugoslavia, Roma leaders' theology encompasses a broad social vision of transformation; however, the ways in which they work this out on a practical level is on a smaller in scale, due to lack of human and financial resources and the many obstacles and challenges in the Balkan context. Many

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<sup>35</sup> Melody J. Wachsmuth, "Separated Peoples: The Roma as Prophetic Pilgrims in Eastern Europe," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37, no. 3 (2013): 145–50; Melody J. Wachsmuth, "Roma Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges, Opportunities for Mission, Modes of Significance," in *Mission in Central and Eastern Europe: Realities, Perspectives, Trends* (Oxford: Regnum, 2017), 544–68; Wachsmuth, "The Good Life."

<sup>36</sup> David Thurffjell, *Faith and Revivalism in a Nordic Romani Community: Pentecostalism amongst the Kaale Roma of Sweden and Finland*, Library of Modern Religion ; v. 21 (London: IBTauris, 2013), 153; Tatiana Podolinská, "'Roma' Label: The Deconstructed and Reconceptualized Category within the Pentecostal and Charismatic Pastoral Discourse in Contemporary Slovakia," *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 11, no. 2 (2017): 146–80.



Roma leaders have increased their collaborative work in the last ten years, both with international partners and local leaders across the region. This has made efforts to address social issues less isolated and localized, offering more possibilities for networking, resource, and knowledge sharing. Since 2014, a grassroots movement called Roma Networks has worked to connect and build more relationships across countries and regions to share tools and knowledge from one ministry context to another. Thus, evangelicals are working both at local levels and sometimes across a broader region to affect holistic transformation in Roma communities. The following section will highlight some of the most critical areas that Roma leaders have identified, which could potentially lead to deeper societal transformation.

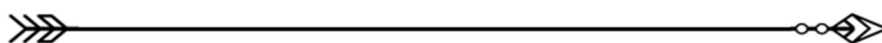
## EVANGELICALS WORKING FOR TRANSFORMATION

### *Roma Networks*

Roma Networks emerged out of a 2014 conference in Budapest, Hungary, hosted by a Chinese mission organization called the Great Commission Center International (GCCCI) (1993-2017). Dr. Sharon Chan, GCCCI's president, developed a compassionate interest in the Roma and after prayer, research, vision trips, and networking, the 2014 conference was attended by 160 representatives from 16 countries, 100 being Roma leaders. At this conference, a Board of six was appointed, three Roma and three non-Roma, and they developed their vision to network, connect, and research for the sake of sharing the gospel and seeing transformation in Roma communities throughout Europe. To accomplish this, their mission strategy was to share their vision with Roma and non-Roma leaders, focus on education and equipping for service, foster the work of transformation in individuals and communities, attract more missionaries for the work, and encourage ministries. The second conference occurred in 2016, and involved 180 participants from 31 countries, and regional representatives were appointed at this conference. The third conference took place in 2019 in Bosnia with 226 participants from 31 countries<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> "How It Started," *Roma Networks* (blog), 2016, [www.romanetworks.org](http://www.romanetworks.org), Accessed December 30, 2021; Melody J. Wachsmuth, "#Iwitness: An Unlikely Confluence for the Roma Church," *Evangelical Mission Quarterly*, 2016.

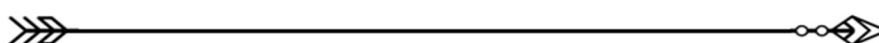


One of the most significant impacts of this movement was the development of friendships and deeper relationships between ministry leaders across countries and regions as well as from international workers. This contributed to the increase in ministry collaboration, encouragement, and a broadening of vision as leaders saw what is happening across the region. The conferences allow a chance for regional meetings as well as a sharing of skills and knowledge. In the 2019 conference, for example, the theme was centered around developing healthy mission partnerships. The keynotes of the conference explored principles for developing healthy partnerships, offering both positive and negative examples. This is critical in regions where there has been disappointment, unmet expectations, and cultural miscommunication and conflicts when different groups work together on a specific ministry or project. In addition, in one of the regional meetings of the conference (Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia), leaders decided to move ahead with developing a Roma Bible school, which began in March 2022.

In between conferences, the Roma Networks Board work on various initiatives in alignment with their vision. They continue to meet with the RN regional representatives to try to listen what is happening in their area and encourage them to be active in collaborating with other ministries in their country or region. RN was also meeting during the COVID lockdowns and connecting financial donors with the greatest needs in Roma communities. Currently, one of their main areas of focus are developing initiatives for job creation, one of the biggest needs in Central and Eastern Europe.

### *Job Creation*

As previously noted, the lack of jobs and the lack of training for jobs is a catastrophic problem in Eastern Europe for Roma communities in terms of poverty and suffering, migration to Western Europe and subsequent hollowing out of communities, and the potential for people to engage in criminal activity as a means of survival. Roma Networks formed a subgroup to operate as a thinktank and action group to address this problem. The job creation platform is aimed to inspire, train, and mentor to see change in Roma communities. Their goals in 2022 were to begin a website or Facebook page to disperse information, offer small business training, form job clubs, encourage social



enterprise, conduct training for micro entrepreneurs, and host a conference which would provide more workshops, support, and tools. The working task group has designed a step-by-step process to equip interested people in a slow, manageable progression. They also believe that the key to educating and equipping people regarding job creation and social enterprise is to offer long term mentoring and support in the process. Since 2023, the working group hosted two conferences.

Roma pastor Aleksander Subotin from Serbia is driven by Christ's command to take care of the "least of these" (Matt. 25: 35-40). This theological impulse ranges from feeding the hungry in the winter, but also extends to developing skills such as cultivating gardens. He hands out free seeds to his congregants, but they must sign an agreement to give a percentage of their vegetables to the poor. In this way, he is both discipling and teaching practical skills.

### *Education*

Another key issue that Roma leaders in Southeastern Europe see as critical to the uplift of their communities is education. The education statistics for Roma children in this context, although they have seen slow improvement in recent decades, remain far lower than the majority populations. In Croatia in a 2018 survey of 538 people aged 15 to 18, for example, only 2 percent attended high school. 27 percent of the survey group of people aged 19 to 25 had dropped out of elementary school. In a 2017 survey in Serbia, 62 percent of Roma had completed compulsory education in contrast to 94 percent other ethnicities, but only 14 percent completed upper secondary education, compared to 89 percent of other ethnicities<sup>38</sup>. One important factor to educational success for Roma children is pre-primary education, to prepare Roma children for the compulsory education. This is because of both language and cultural factors—some Roma children do not even start learning the country's national language until they begin school, which puts them at an immediate disadvantage with the other children. In Serbia, only 17 percent of Roma

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<sup>38</sup> "Predstavljnje Rezultata Istraživanja [Results of Research]," European Union National Strategy for Roma Inclusion (Zagreb, Croatia: European Union; Office of Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, 2018); "Roma at a Glance: Serbia" (United Nations Development Program, The World Bank, 2018), [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/eurasia/Factsheet\\_SERBIA\\_Roma.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/eurasia/Factsheet_SERBIA_Roma.pdf), Accessed December 31, 2021.



children aged 3-6 were enrolled in pre-primary education, the second biggest educational gap between Roma and non-Roma in the Western Balkans.

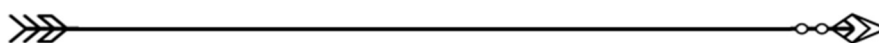
Roma leaders have recognized that the lack of education contributes to many Roma being unable to be competitive in the job market and thus depending on social welfare for survival. They believe one solution is beginning Roma pre-schools which specifically help prepare Roma children in terms of language and culture. One of the first models of this in the region was begun in Jagodina, Serbia, by Pastor Miki Kamberović and his wife Suzana in 2003. He and his wife were one of the first group of church planters from Leskovac, beginning a church in 2001 in Jagodina, Serbia and moving there in 2003. They have a primary church, three church plants, and 3-4 home groups in different villages. In addition to the children's kindergarten, they also run summer camps. According to him, his motivation for the pre-school is the "transformation of Roma society. It starts with the children, and it starts with education, alongside the gospel of Jesus!". From 2003-2013, more than 150 children attended the school and 80 percent of those successfully finished primary school. For children who did not attend the pre-school, only 30 percent finished primary school<sup>39</sup>.

The success of the pre-school in Jagodina motivated one of the churches in Leskovac to begin a pre-school in April 2021. The school started with two groups of eight students, and it commenced in both Serbian and Romani, gradually emphasizing Serbian by the end of the year. Their goal is to create a new generation of children who have expanded visions for their future. Misha Bakić, who is part of this initiative states: "...we had on our hearts for many years to start a preschool education for Roma kids in which there will be a teacher who's going to teach the kids the Serbian language, Bible lessons, hygiene, culture, good behavior, and is going to help the kids to be able to follow the lessons and be good students. This is going to be a place of blessing, a place of education, and a place of the Bible. Lots of joy, lots of toys, and praises be to the Lord"<sup>40</sup>. In addition to making Christian faith an integral part of the program, they will provide parental workshops and developing relationships with the parents.

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<sup>39</sup> Facebook communication with author, December 20, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Alfinda Herman, "New Preschool for Roma Children Opened in Leskovac, Serbia," *Roma Networks* (blog), April 26, 2021, <https://romanetworks.org/2021/04/26/new-preschool-for-roma-children-opened-in-leskovac-serbia/>, Accessed December 31, 2021.



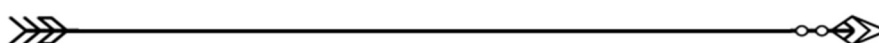
Another aspect of education is the need for after-school help. This is particularly critical in situations where there is no quiet place at home for a child to study, the parents themselves are unschooled or illiterate, or do not value education. Projects run by evangelicals are in North Macedonia, Croatia, and Serbia, with leaders reporting that positive results emerge slowly yet significantly over a period. This is particularly critical because of the amount of schooling Roma children from poor communities lost during the COVID pandemic. Pastor Sokrat Apostolovski who serves among the Roma in North Macedonia, regularly hosted after school help for children for over ten years. During the pandemic lockdowns, many children could not participate in online education due to their lack of access to technology and their parents' illiteracy. His ministry group began remedial programs for education to help the children learn and refresh educational basics<sup>41</sup>.

Sinisa Nadazdin, a Bosnian Serb pastor who has been serving Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities for years, recently implemented an after-school tutoring project<sup>42</sup>. His analysis of the situation illustrates the gap between state policies and real transformation. Over the last few years, education and state authorities began a concerted effort to keep Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian children attending school, even making family social welfare payments dependent on their ongoing attendance and offering free transportation. However, this integration revealed the large culture and language gaps between Montenegrin children and these communities, as well as the lack of help and support the children received at home. According to Nadazdin, educational gaps could not be closed by the occasional use of "Roma mediators" to assist the children. Despite children not being able to read and write properly, teachers would pass them through to the next grade. Nadazdin decided to organize after-school tutoring help twice a week, involving a multi-cultural group of Christian and non-Christian volunteers. However, like Apostolovski, he recounts that there are many challenges as children are often so far

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<sup>41</sup> Apostolovski Ministry Newsletter, September-December 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Roma, Ashkali, and Balkan Egyptian are acknowledged ethnicities in Kosovo, although other populations often group them together as "Gypsies." Ashkali and Egyptians are Muslim, Albanian-speaking peoples and do not consider themselves Roma. For more background and context, see: Lichnofsky, Claudia. "Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo: New Ethnic Identifications as a Result of Exclusion during Nationalist Violence from 1990 till 2010." *Romani Studies* 23, no. 1 (2013): 29-59; Trubeta, Sevasti. "Balkan Egyptians and Gypsy/Roma Discourse." *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 33, no. 1 (2005): 71-95.



behind that volunteers have to return to basics of learning and thus achieving positive results will be a long-term process<sup>43</sup>.

## LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLESHIP DEVELOPMENT

Another important aspect for social change that many Roma leaders have identified is the need to develop emotionally healthy leaders—critical for both healthy churches and societal transformation. Radko Kratsov leads Youth with a Mission (YWAM) in Bulgaria and has spent years doing leadership development with young people and pastors in Bulgaria; but also, further afield, teaching in Ukraine and holding annual leadership camps in Macedonia. His leadership training in Macedonia extended over 12 years, beginning with two people, but by 2019, 80 people were involved. Kratsov is motivated by a conviction that this is a critical time to prepare the younger generation for life and service in Bulgaria, the Balkans, and around the world. He notes that the one of the critical factors in this process is bringing healing to the deep wounds and bitterness toward life that many young Bulgarian Roma have<sup>44</sup>. In a recent leadership training for the Roma in which 53 people participated from 13 different locations in Bulgaria, he noted that years of poverty and marginalization contributed to repressed creativity, concentration, and lack of trust among the leaders, and he is developing ways to encourage freedom in these areas. During the COVID lockdowns, he instigated leadership and discipleship trainings over Zoom<sup>45</sup>.

Another leadership initiative is encouraged by Roma Networks, developed by a Roma leader from Bulgaria, Dimitar Angelov, in partnership with an American, Kirk Anderson. In 2021, they are beginning Leadership Discovery groups, which is based around exploring the leadership style and teachings of Jesus. These are tailored specifically for young people, to mentor them to be leaders in their families, churches, communities, and societies.

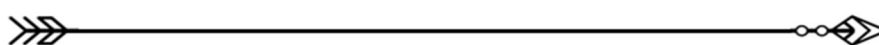
Finally, as mentioned earlier, another initiative that was birthed out of the 2019 Roma Networks conference was a movement to begin a contextual, mobile Roma Bible

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<sup>43</sup> Ministry Report on private facebook group, December 8, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Kratsov ministry newsletter, November 3, 2021

<sup>45</sup> Zoom conversation with author, May 2021.





school, which began in March 2022. The school's first generation has fourteen students, but the next generation will accept 25 students. The school's vision is to educate, empower, and equip Roma to be able to form life-long disciples of Jesus in their communities. One of the sub-goals is to develop emotionally and spiritually healthy leaders who can produce other leaders. This point has been emphasized by Roma leaders after witnessing the detrimental effects of unhealthy leaders both on churches and the Christian movement, as well as on Roma communities in general.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The engagement of Pentecostal and evangelical Roma with society is not a singular story in Southeastern Europe but is more like the many strands woven to create a spider's web. The amount of social engagement in which a leader is involved depends on individual gifting, vision, personality, and the strength of their networks and relationships forged both within the country and internationally. Roma leaders believe that fundamental change cannot begin until an individual is "born-again" or converted into a new life and a new way of being. However, leaders link this focus on individual conversion to the hope for familial, communal, and societal change, both through theological and sociological motivations. Theologically, they believe in God's love and greater purpose for the Roma people, based in scriptural references such as God using the weak to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1.27). In fact, many Roma leaders from former Yugoslavia believe that the Roma are key to evangelizing greater Europe<sup>46</sup>. This sense of missional purpose is fueled by their faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to affect this. However, this movement from individual to society is also motivated by the Roma leaders' social consciousness. They understand and see the social marginalization, suffering, and poverty their people face, and they believe that the churches have both a spiritual and practical role in eliciting change. When churches engage in a project that is successful, it motivates further action and vision. Ultimately, research indicates that Roma Christians and churches can be a key component in affecting substantial and deep-seated transformation in Roma communities.

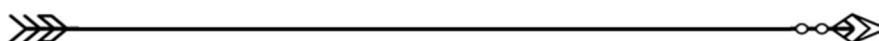
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<sup>46</sup> Wachsmuth, "Separated Peoples.": Wachsmuth, "Mission in Central and Eastern."



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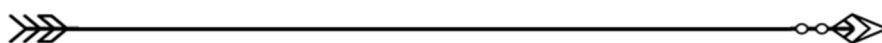
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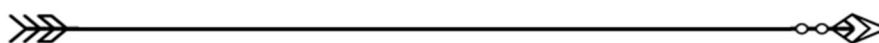
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