

## REVIEW

of a dissertation thesis for acquiring the academic degree of *Doctor (PhD)* in  
Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies  
(Sociology)

Author: Radostina Borisova Antonova

Thesis: The Influence of Group Belonging on the Life Prospects of Young  
People of Bulgarian and Roma Origin

Area of Higher Education: 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences

Department: Sociology, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

Doctoral Programme: Sociology

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Milena Iakimova, D.Sc., member of the Scientific Jury  
appointed by Order No. RD 38-404 of 27 July 2021 of the Rector of Sofia  
University St. Kliment Ohridski

The set of materials submitted by Radostina Antonova, **is** in compliance  
with Sofia University's Regulations on Academic Staff Development and  
contains all required documents.

The candidate has submitted a dissertation thesis, an extended summary of  
the thesis, and 3 publications on the subject of the dissertation. They are dated  
2002, 2011 and 2019, demonstrating long lasting though sporadically academic  
interest in the subject matter.

The dissertation thesis is situated between sociology of youth, research of  
collective identities and life chances and sociology of marginality and stigma,  
and consists of 426 pages, structured in an Introduction, six chapters, a  
Conclusion, 3 appendices, and bibliography containing 179 titles in six languages.

The Extended Summary presents the study in a correct way.

Before reviewing the thesis, I must state that I know the candidate as a  
devoted participant in the doctoral seminar of the department of sociology.

## *Characteristics of the Dissertation Thesis*

The content of the work is based on two extremely interesting field studies conducted with Roma and Bulgarian youth with a time span of 15 years. The analysis has one specificity: after the fieldwork has already been carried out (with certain preconditions, hypotheses and instruments), a new question is asked to the results and their primary interpretations: how belonging to one or the other ethnic group affects the life perspective of its member. The life perspective is not flatly understood in some pre-given coordinate system, but is plastically interpreted: as a thinkable horizon, as values, as accessibility or inaccessibility of socially constructed categories in which to lay expectations, fears, hopes. The first part of the dissertation thesis is devoted to the development of concepts of "life perspective" and "life project". For this purpose, a theoretical review is undertaken of the differentiation of childhood and adolescence as categories of social and human sciences, but also as a way of social positioning and institutional framing of young people. This is done in order to enable the interpretation of the data in terms of how young people (between 14 and 25 years) in adolescence and emerging maturity experience their group affiliation, assess their interactions with others and the social environment, seek and receive social recognition. And as far as the main precondition of the analysis is that the group affiliation to minority and respectively majority culture systematically changes the life perspective and as far as the interviewed young people from Roma community are residents of *Faculteta* district, the theoretical part develops a conceptual apparatus to think of the ghettoization of urban space and the even worse fate of hyperghettoization: the disgrace of the place and the disintegration of solidarity within it.

The survey, the most valuable part of the work, was conducted on two waves - in 2002 with 311 respondents and in 2017 with 202 respondents. The 15 years between the two waves are years in which the processes of liberalization of society have led to the fragmentation of social life, increased social insecurity, increased some forms of segregation and gave birth to forms of response. Among these forms Radostina Antonova has outlined the growth of nationalist attitudes among young urban people, the processes of impoverishment and intergenerational inheritance of poverty among Roma communities, but also migration and mobility as drivers of the de-ethnicization of poverty, where the borders of ghettoized urban areas become weaker and more permeable.

The task of this reconstruction through referencing and secondary analysis of other studies is to create a background for the interpretation of the change in the self-experience of young people from minority and majority groups - the dynamics in the positive and negative experiences of their intragroup and intergroup relations, in their identification with patriarchal values, in the self-confidence that they can control the events in their lives, in the experience of stigmatization. This is the main part of the dissertation, which Radostina Antonova honestly admits precedes the introductory conceptual and historical

reconstruction. This core part is really stimulating. But before commenting on it in detail, I want to emphasize some methodological and ethical merits of the work. The doctoral student is engaged in the life of her respondents not only as a researcher, but also as an activist. And extremely clearly, systematically and reflexively draws the distinction between the two views on the issue. The concern for the ethical side of the study is evident in every step of the presentation.

Let us now turn to the substantive core of the work - the field research, conducted with precise standardized tools and further illuminated by interpretations of data generated by a qualitative method and specifically focused on assessing the life prospects of young Roma and ethnic Bulgarians. The initial asymmetry in the resources to self-determine when you belong to a majority and a minority community, respectively, is embedded in the research hypotheses: when you are from the majority, you have the freedom to self-determine through personal characteristics, and when you are from a minority, this individualized self-determination is hardly accessible and self-determination flows along the lines of community traits, which, however, are stigmatized. This, in turn, transforms into self-stigmatization and closure into traditional values and norms that maintain the social cohesion of the stigmatized community - a double bind of a frustrated identity. It is the feeling of stigmatization that is the first to be tested in the field. It is immediately followed by the feeling of fatalism - comparing the beliefs in the two groups about how much their members believe, they can control the events in their lives. This asymmetry is also a relationship of dominance between the groups - the dominant and the dominated one.

What happened in the fifteen years between the two waves of field research? The data are extremely interesting and generally demonstrate a two-way process - increasing fragmentation of society and a parallel decrease in the experience of stigma and rejection among young Roma, as well as declining attitudes to stigmatize among young Bulgarians. However, this does not mean mutual opening of communities and entering into interactions, but is rather the other side of mutual encapsulation. What makes this clear? It is the growing sense of rejection experienced by the educated young Roma. It is them who practically interact with their peers and who feel stigmatized, contrary to the tendency of reduction of this feeling in the community as a whole. However, the decreasing general stigmatization and the decreasing intercultural tension are accompanied by a growing fatalism in both groups (much more acute among the Roma youth, but undoubtedly in both groups). Young Roma do not see a way to emancipation - at school they feel rejected, and in their neighborhood community they also feel different, deviating from the prescribed traditional role and normative models. Neither the general public, nor the Roma community can (want) to integrate the emancipatory oriented and trying to individualize young Roma. I view this diagnosis, derived from precise quantitative analysis, to be a serious contribution.

Very interesting conclusions are drawn from the also precise quantitative processing of gender data: among Roma youth by a number of indicators

(fatalism, stigma, intragroup and intergroup mistrust) there is a noticeable difference between the two sexes, while in Bulgarians there is no gender correlation. In both groups, social disorientation among men is growing, but the impressive phenomenon is young Roma women. Their social self-confidence is growing. Their tighter fit into traditional role models can only be part of the explanation. Along with it, there is a growing interest in independence and mobility.

There is a curious "opposite": among the Roma there is a decrease, and among the Bulgarians there is an increase in those who rely more on their family than on their friends. The same tendency is seen in the willingness to sacrifice one's own well-being, in the name of parental approval (for Bulgarians it grows, and for Roma it decreases). Those Roma who share traditional values more, feel less alienated, they feel comfortable in community cohesion. This conclusion is refined by testing whether the leading identification of young Roma respondents was with the Roma community as a whole or with the family community. As family identification decreases, so does overall social cohesion.

The dissertation research abounds in such contribution findings and interpretations, I will stop listing them. Their common ground is the dual process of, on the one hand, intensification of emancipatory and individualization processes among young Roma, and, on the other hand, of fragmentation of Roma communities and mutual encapsulation of ethnic groups, where neither the public nor the home environment shows a tendency to shelter and nurture the emancipatory impulse. The only hope that these data show is in the work environment, which reduces both the feeling of stigma and patriarchal affinities, while strengthening the belief in one's own strength. As a serious scientific contribution, I would like to point out here the highlighting of a fundamental issue: the relationship between emancipation and anomie.

### *Critical comments and questions*

In addition to extensive research, accurately conducted and thoroughly reflexively described, the dissertation is based on serious practical knowledge of the studied phenomena. With such a volume of practical knowledge, not everything can be covered by the theoretical design of the study. However, some threads of the theoretical model could have been drawn more closely to the interpretation of the data (a clear example of this is the topic of hypergetonization and the new urban marginality, a topic very interesting but not particularly useful for data analysis for *Faculteta* neighborhood, and in some points the data even reject this concept).

Another serious issue is the research grasp of the majority identification as a group identity. Although steps have been taken to outline its features (primarily the existence of a sanctified high national narrative), these steps are rather statements than explanations of how belonging to a national community with its canonized high historical narrative functions as a group affiliation.

I will ask a question to the dissertation research. One of the most impressive observations is about the aspiration of young female Roma respondents to emancipation. How does it relate to the processes of melting community cohesion?

**In conclusion:** The quality of the empirical research and the depth of the analyzes, which contain scientific and applied scientific contributions, along with the provided academic publications, give me reason to support awarding Radostina Borisova Antonova the academic degree of Doctor (PhD) in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Sociology).

Sofia

Reviewer:

26 October 2021

(Assoc. Prof. Milena Iakimova, D.Sc.)