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From Informal to Illegal:
Roma Housing in (Post-)Socialist Sofia

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Abstract

This paper discusses the changing housing regime during Bulgaria's transition from socialism to post-socialism. Focusing on the Roma minority in Sofia I trace the present-day legacy of socialist housing policies. After 1989 the displacement of Roma people drastically increased. As their self-built houses and annexes were informally legitimised but not formally legalised under socialism, they were evicted by neoliberal urban authorities to clear the way for new private developments. Many small Roma neighbourhoods were pronounced 'illegal' and destroyed and their inhabitants were pushed out to zones without economic and education opportunities. Triangulating archival and secondary sources with ethnographic observation and qualitative interviews, I ask what past and present legal regulations, policies, and practices made Roma settlements in Sofia vulnerable to demolition and their inhabitants to displacement. I claim that, as in other periods of the development of the Bulgarian capital, quick-fix solutions were characteristic of the socialist period. In the case of Roma, in order to provide a temporary solution to the overall housing shortage the state turned a blind eye to the increasing amount of semi-legal housing. Furthermore, as Roma mostly remained low-skilled workers, they did not benefit from the redistribution that championed certain occupations privileged by the one-party state.

Keywords: Roma, housing, (post)socialism, neoliberalism, displacement, Bulgaria.

This study explores a number of contingent decisions, quick-fix solutions, and well-intended but badly implemented policies that compromised the colossal endeavor of the Bulgaria socialist government to provide decent housing for the poor. State socialism – unlike its adversary, decentralized *laissez-faire* capitalism – aimed at a centrally planned economy under which housing was provided to all workers. The socialist city was to become ‘an optimum living environment where enhanced productivity, social justice and maximum satisfaction of the inhabitants can be attained’ (French and Hamilton, 1979:5). Yet socialist urban planners had to start from certain inherent structural conditions: the post-war devastations, the spatial and social differentiation of the remaining housing stock, and the difficult balance between industrial growth and social expenditure (French and Hamilton, 1979; Szelenyi, 1996). After 1989 as many former socialist cities the Bulgarian capital Sofia quickly became a case of rapid neoliberal restructuring. In the process, the houses of many Roma people were pronounced ‘illegal’ and their inhabitants were evicted from parcels of land palatable for real estate developers (Ivancheva and Krastev, 2012).

The study is in dialogue with scholarly work on advanced urban marginality (Wacquant, 2008). In advanced capitalist societies neoliberal reforms push communities to the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004). In terms of housing policies, neoliberalism means the reorientation from redistribution to competition, institutional rescaling (especially decentralisation to sub-national i.e. regional or municipal), and an attempted revitalisation of the urban economy through privatisation, liberalisation, decentralisation, de-regulation and increased fiscal discipline (Brenner et al, 2009). With the growth of certain cities the value of land in their central areas is artificially increased (Harvey, 2008:34). Unable to compete, the old inhabitants and lower class newcomers are pushed beyond the urban frontier out of emergent global cities where they function as an easily exploitable surplus population (Sassen, 2001; Smith, 1996). This process also influences the very concept of citizenship, which is granted to global capital holders, whilst marginalised formal residents are ever more disenfranchised (Appadurai and Holsten, 1996).

Roma displacement in both socialist and post-socialist Eastern Europe has had similar effects (Ladanyi, n.d.). Socialist governments and urban authorities have followed a double standard. While they had a policy of ethnic desegregation, at times they also followed the logic of advanced capitalist societies. Roma people were removed from the city centres to places where they remained invisible and away from infrastructure. The authorities often closed their eyes to the precarious housing conditions, the informal property relations, and the ongoing encroachments on public property in these neighbourhoods (Kolev, 2003). After 1989, these informal arrangements became an easy target: the members of the biggest national minority were pushed out of settlements they had inhabited for decades (Ivancheva and Krastev, 2012).

The paper explicates some of the mechanisms through which Roma people remained a particularly vulnerable group despite the intervention policies of the Bulgarian socialist governments. Firstly, urban authorities in Sofia at the beginning of the socialist period inherited the mass destruction of housing and infrastructure and a refugee crisis, which exacerbated the inter-war housing shortage. The government tried to deal with the crisis and the sky-rocketing urbanisation with new construction,

cheap rents, and low-interest loans, but despite the mass construction, the needs of all those living in dire housing conditions were not met. Secondly, by the 1980s the speed of new construction often came at the expense of the quality of the housing, and benefited those who had closer links with the ruling elite, rather than those who were neediest. Thirdly, in their work with ethnic minorities socialist officials still operated with the figure of 'otherness' and 'contagion'. This was transferred from the poor living condition of Roma to a racist classification of the whole minority, both in terms of perpetual declassifying education and labour, and also with little understanding of their internal divisions and community dynamic. Despite the discourse of desegregation [*razrezhdane*], the double standard has furthered Roma segregation. I show how the legacy of some of these policies has made Roma vulnerable to neoliberal land and housing reforms after 1989.

Housing is a crucial parameter in Roma poverty. Even if Roma have been given loans and terrains, helped with materials, targeted by slum eradication and slum upgrading policies alike (Slaev, 2007) and sometimes given free flats, mass unemployment and illiteracy makes them – especially women – ineligible to take out loans and become home owners. In 2011 non-Roma had on average 23 square meters of living space per person, whereas for Roma the figure was around ten square meters. Many fear eviction and discrimination (UNDP, 2012:9). Four fifths of them live in houses with an outside toilet, around half the population has access to fresh water, a drainage system, or reliable energy services (OSI, 2008:46-47). Lack of secure housing is a primary problem for Roma, followed by 'inequality in collective consumption': access to work, healthcare, and education (Zahariev, 2014:361). In 2006 87 per cent of Roma Bulgarians lived under the poverty threshold (51 EUR per month) and 60-80 per cent were unemployed (MC, 2006:7-8).

Yet, even if the ethnic character of the housing deficit among the Roma is easily identifiable, the mechanisms through which they become collectively vulnerable to eviction under neoliberal land and housing reforms remain to be explored. There is a glaring lack of historical research on property and housing during state socialism, both with reference to Roma communities, and to all Bulgarian citizens. Scholars usually attribute the living conditions of Roma residences to their microcultural and ethnic specifics (Pamporov, 2006), or to the macro state-level construction of 'otherness' through the recognition of Roma as a national minority (Grekova et al., 2008). Discussions of the Sofian citizenship has mostly abstained from the discussion of housing conditions (Vezenkov, 2009; Yakimova, 2010; Gigova, 2011). Works on urban planning focus on the revamping of the city centre (Stanoeva, 2010) or the green system (Kovachev, 2005). Structural inequalities, housing crises, and socialist land and property reforms have stayed out of critical scrutiny.

The focus on housing allows me to treat the Roma question in the intersection between ethnicity and class i.e. between structural and ethnic exclusion. I triangulate my findings from archival research at the Central State Archive in Sofia and secondary materials with ethnographic observation and interviews with state representatives, experts, and residents of a predominantly Roma neighbourhood of Sofia, Filipovci. I show some legacies of early twentieth century pro-capitalist regimes in the socialist era, and their impact on the present day. I problematise the doxa of legality in different periods of the Bulgarian recent history. I explore the historical limitations and

compromises of the socialist master plan of wealth redistribution, equality, and social justice. While the socialist effort to construct welfare institutions has been dismantled, its history still needs to be explored and learned from.

1. Filipovci: a reconstruction

The Filipovci *mahala* is located across the Sofia ring-road from the satellite high-rise neighbourhood of Lyulin. The dilapidated brutalist blocks of Lyulin contrast with Filipovci's low shanty houses. Both neighbourhoods were state socialist developments, but while Lyulin was built in late socialism, 'Filipovci was built in the late 1950s to accommodate families who lived along the Konstantin Velichkov and Stamboliyski boulevards, the former Tatarli *mahala*'. So I was told by Assen Georgiev, chief expert of construction, cadaster and town-planning in the Lyulin Municipality, whom I met before I first visited Filipovci in July 2014. 'The Roma were housed in small 'building blocks'. By now these blocks have become unrecognizable under the illegal annexes over and around their initial confines' he added.

The 'Gypsy mayor' [*ciganski kmet*] Miroslav Kolev showed me these 'blocks'. At the main plaza, where his reception white tent was positioned, he pointed to two houses with tiled roofs, heavily overbuilt with new construction. 'The sons of the owners built their own little houses [*kyshtichki*] around. Out of necessity not to stay put with their parents when they marry, poor boys'. He said this while we were watching a vast modern two-story house with a marble veranda with new-classical columns built as an annex to an original block in the very center of Filipovci. When he led me into the ever-narrowing streets of the neighbourhood, we passed by more such blocks. New encroachments had grown into the surrounding streets: some bigger, some smaller, some built of bricks or cement, painted, plastered or just left with the original, untreated material. 'This is where my family's first house was – it stayed with my brother', Kolev showed me one block. 'Then I got this one here,' he said, pointing to the other side of an alley. 'My sons kept the tradition and moved in with their father's family. Romani daughters get married and leave the house' he explained. 'The land under our houses is of course public, it belongs to the municipality. And I am all for paying rent. But this is how we live out of necessity', the Roma mayor explained.

Kolev's position as a Roma mayor is typical of many places with a high concentration of Roma inhabitants. The administrative figure of the Roma mayor was created specifically for Roma *mahalas* in order to establish distance – and thus spatial segregation – between the Roma community and the 'regular' institutions of state power. Having an outpost in the communities, the authorities would solve problems locally and Roma would not need to go to the city centre (Kolev, 2003: 140, 145). In post-socialist Bulgaria, this figure remained. While some Roma mayors are selected by the municipality, many are chosen by the community. While some are appointed as low-ranking municipal clerks, others are hired as 'junior experts'. Still, most Roma mayors are men recognised for their power and educational status (Pamporov, 2006: 102; 109). This precarious position can at any time be opened, closed, filled in or vacated by the elected mayor (Pamporov, 2006: 107). Due to low income, many

responsibilities, and little decision-making power many Roma mayors have resigned or looked for extra income schemes (Pamporov, 2006:106; Kolev, 2003).

The presence of the Roma mayor is not surprising, in Filipovci – a neighbourhood that was a herald of a historically documented process of social engineering. Desegregation [*razrezhdane*] was recommended for those living in bigger congregations in the neighbourhoods of Konyovitsa and around Stambolijski boulevard by the first socialist document regulating the ‘Gypsy problem’: *Resolution 258* from 1958 (MC, 1958). According to *Resolution 258*, Roma people were to be given new houses in ‘relevant’ settlements, avoiding ethnic concentration (MC, 1958:3). Four million BGN were dedicated to this purpose (Grekova et al., 2008:73-74). ‘I am a member of one of the first families who settled here,’ Kolev told me when we entered his office, a dark room of sixteen square meters with a cement floor, that led into a room of twelve square meters: one of the original ‘blocks’. ‘This building and around ten more were called blocks and allotted to individual Roma families,’ Kolev recalled. A man in his sixties, Kolev moved to Filipovci in 1958, when he was a child. His parents, their six sons and two daughters were allotted twenty-eight square meters. Initially Filipovci included twenty non-Roma families who gradually left. Altogether Filipovci had 800 inhabitants (Grekova et al. 2008:95).

The plan was that by 1964 nearly one third of the whole Roma population, 75,000 people were to settle in 14,000 new flats (Genov et al., 1964:40). Yet, these flats never fully materialised and desegregation mostly failed (Grekova et al. 2008:96; 89). Often Roma communities got flats in the blocks built over their destroyed *mahala*. Under Prime Minister Anton Yugov (1956-1961) Roma were moved from city centers to outskirts and thus concealed from foreign delegations (Kolev, 2003:140,145). Far beyond the confines of 1958 Sofia, Filipovci exemplified this practice. By the 1970s the neighbourhood had doubled (Grekova et al., 2008:93). Internal divisions between Roma groups ensued. A letter to Todor Zhivkov, the Secretary General of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) signed ‘group of Gypsies’ expressed ‘energetic protest’ against staying in Filipovci together with the ‘evil Gypsy majority’ who ‘steal, beg, laze, and swindle’. The signatories called themselves the ‘decent twenty percent’ and requested flats in other neighbourhoods of Sofia (CSA 1B, 28:6). The next official Roma policy—*Order 7* from January 1st 1979—set 1990 as final deadline for the desegregation and destruction of unregulated *mahalas* (Grekova et al., 2008:89). Throughout the 1980s, the Sofia Municipal Council was trying to move Roma and destroy *mahalas*, but due to the housing shortage their number and density were growing (Grekova et al., 2008:107, 111; Slaev 2007).

Making a full circle through the neighbourhood, Kolev told me that it was in urgent need of reconstruction. He showed me the local school, where the neighbourhood assembly with municipal authorities was to take place the following week to launch a reconstruction process. Before the school we jumped over a vast puddle of water turned into a swamp. An encroachment built into the pavement had infringed on the gutter. ‘The pupils started getting all sorts of allergies... The only way to get this repaired is to destroy this house. But where do these poor people go?’ Kolev said, visibly concerned. ‘The only possible future for us is to go with the plan of the municipality!’ Kolev concluded. Back at his office he showed me the plan for gradual reconstruction: building houses outside the neighbourhood’s original

confines, moving people there, then destroying their old houses, building new blocks and repeating the process till a new neighbourhood is fully rebuilt. The project entailed new housing blocks, kindergartens, schools, gardens, and a community center. 'Everyone will get a new flat of sixty to hundred square meters, with all facilities' the architect of the project, Mladenov, told the people gathered at the school yard for the neighbourhood assembly.

This construction was part of a *National Program for the Improvement of Housing of Roma* (2005-2015) approved in 2006 (MC, 2006). The program recognized numerous problems: the limited financial access to housing given current market prices; the poorly maintained and energy-inefficient Roma houses; the non-existence of public housing; and the abundant empty houses in areas away from employment. The program required that the state invested 1,26 billion BGN for the reinforcement of infrastructure in Roma neighbourhoods (420 million BGN), improving buildings (520 million BGN), and finding new Roma settlement areas and upgrading existing ones (111 million BGN) in one hundred neighbourhoods across Bulgaria. Using sources from the state budget and EU structural funds it had to construct 30,065 new public housing units and improve the living conditions of 412,500 Roma Bulgarians (MC, 2006). Yet, by 2014 only a pilot program had begun. Bourgas, Vidin, Devnia, and Dupnitsa received sums of up to four million BGN to secure flats for a few hundred Roma families.

In Filipovci the impending reconstruction did not please everyone. New divisions emerged along the lines of class and belonging. 'They are going to destroy our houses,' said Angel, an elegantly dressed man of visible wealth who owned a three stories' high luxury annex to his father's house that blocked a whole street. During the neighbourhood assembly Architect Mladenov and members of the municipality reassured Angel that even if illegal his house was 'solid', and could be legalized. Such 'solid' houses however mostly belonged to people with higher economic standing. Angel was also the son of one of the first neighbourhood settlers so he seemed entitled to stay in Filipovci after the reconstruction not only on the basis of legality, but also due to the precedence of settlement. A demarcation was drawn between locals and newcomers (see Grekova et al., 2008:183-187). 'At present around six or seven thousand people live here over the infrastructure built for eight hundred. There are many newcomers [*prishylci*]. Neither newcomers from Kyustendil, nor such from Pakistan will join the new neighbourhood', Kolev declared through the megaphone during the neighbourhood assembly, hinting at the recent wave of refugees.

Maya, a divorcee of forty with two daughters and a granddaughter, was desperate: 'I divorced a local man, and bought a house. Now they will destroy it to build the houses for the 'real locals' as if I don't live here!' she exclaimed. Thus, even if Angel and Maya *de jure* had illegal houses, *de facto* they were placed by the authorities on the opposite sides of legality depending on their belonging to the original settler families. Beyond economic privilege institutional culture distinguished those who legalized their property and those who did not. Non-Roma Bulgarians from neighbouring villages had bought land on the outskirts of Filipovci and legalized it. They were now compensated by the municipality. This was not the case with Maya and most Roma in Filipovci: 'I was not smart enough to get a legal certificate. But I can show you a paper which says it black on white, I paid fifteen thousand Euros for

this house, all my money ... ', Maya said. Some educated Roma people had taken steps to legalize their property. Tania, an NGO worker, told me 'In all parts of the neighbourhood there are illegal houses, but some of the original inhabitants, such as the members of my family, are good at reading laws and started a legalizing procedure, whereas among the newcomers this was hardly the case'.

According to the Bulgarian Property Law, 'holders'—benevolent or malevolent—of someone else's property can be legalized and acquired by prescription only in the case of 10 years of non-interrupted dwelling (Law of Property, art. 79). Hence, some Roma encroachments could be considered as having endured the necessary time to gain a legal status. In many cases, despite uninterrupted dwelling and instead of being regulated, the former encroachments were treated as 'occupations' and cast as illegal. This process was facilitated by the Law of Property (1999) and Law of Land (2005). Aligned with the neoliberal priorities they removed the restriction on property ownership, divided state and municipal property, and deregulated the property market, allowing foreigners to buy land in Bulgaria. Since the 1990s no public housing has been built in Sofia, which left people in need of housing dependent on their own private savings or credits. While no new public houses were built, a rapid 'hygienization' of 'bad neighbourhoods' started to free space for the expanding commercial centre (Zahariev, 2013). Roma communities were evicted from their shanty-houses and resorted to occupations (Zahariev, 2013:346).

While this was happening a few campaigns for the legalisation of land ensued within the *Frame Program of Roma Integration (2010-2020)*. The *Frame Program* stipulated that Roma neighbourhoods in rural (46 per cent) and urban (54 per cent) areas should be regulated within the cadaster by abolishing 'the turgid bureaucratic procedure of legalisation', adopting the principle of 'minimal intervention'. Roma 'holders' of property were to receive documents of ownership (Frame Program, VI). A housing fund was to be maintained not through new and expensive construction, but via different forms of 'aid' (financial credits, materials, parcels of land, etc.) given to 'people who show willingness to improve their housing condition' (Frame Program, VI). Yet Tania and her neighbours have become increasingly disillusioned: 'Such programmes were designed with a different understanding of legality in mind; what was legal before 1989 simply stopped being legal then.' Tania told me that the house built by her father was also initially considered illegal. They had kept it as even though he got a one bedroom flat in a distant neighbourhood for him, his wife, his grown up daughters and their families, so it was impossible to move everyone.

Thus, in the post-socialist era, when large-scale town planning has been replaced by piecemeal 'incident architecture' (Yanchev, 2014), the new legislation was interpreted to the detriment of the poorest citizens. In this conjuncture, the state and municipal power have been used to create illegal categories of people – Roma being the prime example – whose presence in areas of high value in the capitalist property market threatens the interests of business elites. Against this background, Filipovci's reconstruction – if it happens at all – would still push newcomers from small towns and rural areas into further outskirts of the city. Natural calamities and growing inter-ethnic conflicts threaten to displace further Roma Bulgarians. While an integral housing policy for Roma and for all Bulgarian citizens is not even looming in the

distance, it is still worth asking how socialist planners provided houses for so many people, and why still so many Roma entered post-socialism in dire housing conditions.

2. Socialism: the build-up

The double standard of state policy towards illegal construction in the aftermath of 1989 has oddly mirrored struggles from before 1944. By the time communists came to power in 1944, the Bulgarian capital had already encountered many housing problems. Urbanization was rapid: in 1879, when Sofia became the capital to allow growth and facilitate unification with the territories divided by the Berlin Treaty, Sofia only had some 11,000 inhabitants. In 1944, despite the devastation of war, the population had already grown to 300,000, and by 1956 it had reached 757,000 (Gaytandzhiev, 1957:4). The ethnic *mahalas*—part of the Ottoman urban policy—were dissolved into new urban divisions (Pamporov, 2006). ‘Growing but never getting old’—as the motto of Sofia goes—already in the 1880s the capital’s urban authorities had received numerous complaints from tenants in need of housing. As there was no public housing policy in place, newcomers were eventually allowed to build in the outskirts forming the new ‘homeless neighbourhood’ Yutch Bunar (Dimitrova, 2013:367).

World War I created a new housing crisis, which was only partially solved with measures facilitating private initiative in building homes. In 1924 and 1928 respectively the state started legalizing buildings with ‘transition’ upon completion and passed a Bill of issuing ownership acts for municipal land (Dimitrova, 2013:369, 370-72). These certified the ‘completion’ of often unfinished houses, after which the municipality—interested in rising property prices—could not destroy shanty houses (Dimitrova, 2013:376). The living conditions in the neighbourhood were similar to those in today’s *mahalas*. As late as 1939 there was one doctor and four visiting nurses for the whole neighbourhood of 42,000 inhabitants (Report, 1939:3), who mostly lived in ‘unfinished houses in poor hygienic conditions... without work and subject to hunger... all living in a room with one bed...and paper-covered windows’ (Report, 1939:14).

While the housing crisis was intensifying, and no public housing was built, a normative civilizing discourse was applied to discuss Sofia’s new neighbourhoods. It used notions such as those used for Roma *mahalas* today ‘uncontrolled’, ‘unhygienic’, ‘unplanned’, ‘vehement’, and ‘chaos’. The 27,000 small parcels of land given to newcomers were considered to have ruined the master plan of Sofia and made town-planning piecemeal (Sofia Municipality, 1998). To counter this fragmentation of a city that had aspirations to measure up to older European capitals, in the late 1930s the municipality invited German architect Adolph Mussman, who planned cities like Dusseldorf and Stuttgart, to plan Sofia. He planned it as a garden-city that would contract rather than expand (Sofia Municipality, 1998).

Because of WWII, however, Mussman’s plan was never implemented. 12,000 buildings in Sofia were destroyed and a new socialist government in 1944 had to face the old pressures while implementing new socialist ideals (Sofia Municipality, 1998). In 1945-1949, a new plan in Sofia was crafted. Sorbonne-trained socialist architect

Lyuben Tonev opposed the pyramidal spatial plan of Mussman and designed a poly-centric city plan. The city was to tackle the problems of housing and labour together, decentralizing neighbourhoods according to key industries (Announcements, 1946:3). The city center was renovated, and people from the areas that were demolished to build the central boulevards were moved to the periphery (Gajtandjiev, 1957:9).

The blocks of flats and city buildings from this era were monolithic, with heavy decoration, big rooms, and high ceilings (Gajtandjiev 1957:11,14). Yet, due to the increased postwar price of materials and growing urbanisation, this kind of construction soon gave way to prefabricated panel blocks (Announcements 1946:3). Some families in need received ready-made flats, while others obtained low-interest loans from the Bulgarian Investment Bank and built as private owners and in cooperatives. 50,000 new buildings were built by 1950, partly in the countryside (Gajtandjiev, 1957:5). After a competition in the late 1950s, Lyubomir Neykov of Sofproekt was awarded the task to design the new town plan. He partially continued Mussman's plan: a city that does not expand. Yet, despite his aspirations, Sofia expanded with the rapid pace of the urbanization and industrialization of the era (Sofia Municipality, 1998).

In the late 1970s, the new urban plan of Sofia was discussed (CSA 1b, 87:220). While BKP and its leadership were never criticised directly, their archived exchange show numerous problems faced by the socialist government. Lyuben Tonev was asked to review the plan. In his *tour-de-force* analysis of Sofia's urban development, Tonev emphasised the persistent problems of vast population growth: a problem atypical of socialist cities as Budapest, Prague, and Berlin which experienced only stagnant growth after the boom in the inter-war era (Szelenyi, 1996). A borough of 11,000 people in 1878, a century later the capital of Bulgaria counted 1,700,000 inhabitants. Tonev's review speaks to the lack of adequate policies that would respond to this massive growth. Beyond problems of traffic and pollution, Tonev explained that the new construction of flats did not adhere to any professional standards. Contrary to the recommendations of world experts, Sofia was overbuilt with high-rise prefab blocks: the higher the building, the lower the ceilings, and the less the green space outside (CSA 1b, 87, 220:25).

The review of Tonev signalled an emergent housing crisis (CSA 1b, 87:195). In bulletin from the spring of 1980 Radio Free Europe stated that despite the government's plan to build 420,000 new flats in the five years' plan leading to 1979, they only built 370,000 flats (CSA 1b, 87, 195:28). These numbers might sound extraordinarily high in the aftermath of state socialism, when no public housing is constructed. Yet, back then the situation was a matter of serious concern for BKP's. While Tonev was worried about the quality of housing, the provision of flats was a greater concern for the planners.

In an ongoing debate on the 'acute housing crisis in Bulgaria' in 1979 (CSA 1b, 97:191), a special report by the Chairman of the Sofia's Municipal Council Petar Mezhdurechki addressed to Prime Minister Stanko Todorov, stated that 'the housing problem is headed towards a dead end street' (CSA 1b, 97, 191:11). Sofia's Municipal Council declared that fewer than 5,000 homes were provided for over 50,000 families in dire need. Among those who had a place to live '10,000 newlywed families with children are living in uninhabitable conditions and shanty houses [*border*]' (CSA 1b,

87, 191:6), and '14,000 of all 50,000 in need live in 'non-housing spaces' [*nezhilishtni pomeshtenia*]... in less than five square meter per person, whereas the rest of these 50,000 lived with around five square meter, against an average of 13.5 square meter for the rest of the population' (CSA 1b, 87, 191:13). The term *bordei* used in Bulgarian to describe exclusively Roma settlements and the specification of 'newlywed families with children' amidst a growing demographic crisis in the 1970s, and the square meters per person (CSA 16, 87, 191; 195) all signaled that the majority of these families were of Roma origin.

Mezhdurechki reminded that the Sofia Municipal Council's construction companies (SOFSTROY and Housing Construction Company-Sofia) should prioritize building housing for 'engineering and technical cadres engaged in significant production sectors, for active fighters against fascism, and for people in dire need'. According to *Directive 1342* of the State Council, he insisted, ten per cent of all housing had to be dedicated to the category of 'young newlywed families' (CSA 1b, 87, 191:10; 14). Instead, Mezhdurechki's recommendations draw attention to three root causes of the problems of redistribution. Firstly, he emphasized the companies' full capacity should be used to 'build new homes, and not to expand the existing living space' i.e., making certain flats bigger, and building holiday homes for those in possession of housing (CSA 1b, 87, 191:10). He also insisted that no second home be given as compensation to 'unmarried children of owners of houses destroyed' to free space for new construction (CSA 1b, 87, 191:12). In these cases, not only did parents get compensated, but so did their adult children regardless of their family situation and actual housing necessity. Thus, as an already propertied class expanded its own property, those in need were pushed further down the priority lists. Last but not least, the report recommended that people working for the State Council, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Culture as well as the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior in specific, he emphasized, had their own building facilities and budgets, which should contribute to the construction of houses for those in need (CSA 1b, 87, 191:14).

In his correspondence with Stanko Todorov, Petar Mezhdurechki reminded that according to *Resolution 7* from 10th of March 1974 and two accompanying letters the Army's facility and budget have been freed from responsibility to share its construction units and facilities with the Sofian Municipal Council. Mezhdurechki pleaded Todorov that the *Resolution* and the two letters were cancelled, and that that the Ministerial facilities were used for housing construction. He insisted that not only ten, but 30 percent of the budget of the Sofian construction companies was invested in the building of homes for families in dire housing need. He explicitly stated that too much pressure was put on the Municipality's construction company to construct private villas as well. He also asked that the members of the Army were not granted—as was a common practice—the automatic privilege of Sofian citizenship and a flat ten years into their office, as that deepened the shortage (CSA 1b, 87, 191:14).

Thus, despite the mass construction of housing, the allocation of flats did not start from the bottom. It had served elite privileges at the expense of those most affected by the housing crisis. To this point, as a result of the above mentioned correspondence *Resolution 54* of the Ministerial Council, from the 5th of December

1979, dedicated ten per cent of the new funds for housing to newlyweds: 450,000 new flats were all to be constructed for people in this category (CSA 1b, 87, 191:1). *Resolution 54* stated clearly that the way to solve the housing crisis was not to allow the Ministries, who had their own construction facilities, to receive more flats (CSA 1b, 87, 191: 2-3). However, a letter from General Dobri Dzhurov, a Minister of Defense, to Prime Minister Stanko Todorov attempted to block all measures proposed by the Municipal Council (CSA 1b, 87, 191: 20-24). Dzhurov refuted the accusations of Mezhdurechki and insisted that the Army used its construction facilities primarily for military purposes (CSA 1b, 87, 191: 21). He claimed that his Ministry already built homes for its employees, but more flats were needed because otherwise 6,000 Bulgarian Army employees would stay ‘totally houseless... with low self-esteem, in a bad mood, and with lowered labour efficiency’ (CSA 1b, 87, 191: 23).

The heated debates negotiating the solution for the housing crisis in the second half of the 1970s are rather telling. They show, firstly, that the housing crisis from the inter-war era had a heavy impact on the socialist urban planning. Secondly, they reveal an emergent conflict within the hierarchies of the socialist order, as its urban planning went both against the norms of socialist wealth redistribution, and against globally accepted construction standards. Despite the increased number of buildings, the flats were of ever poorer standard. They were allocated not according to necessity, but to an occupational hierarchy within the one-party state. The questions remain: What happened to prevent the desegregation and the accommodation of Roma into the new, rapidly growing neighbourhoods? How can we explain the persistence of illegal construction during state socialism?

3. The old is never fully dying and the new cannot be fully born

Before the socialist era, Roma lived in dire poverty. In line with the Communist Party interpretation, a Fatherland Front publication celebrating the 20th Anniversary of 1944 presented the teleological materialist analysis of the Roma as a repressed proletariat: dignified workers, exploited both by the Ottomans and the Bulgarian bourgeoisie. By 1936, 90 per cent of the Roma were illiterate and one in five children died. Already under Ottoman rule Roma were allowed to do only low-skilled, low-wage, and exploitative work (in the tobacco industry, tin factories, and brick-laying) (Genov et al., 1964:13). Even Roma adherents of the Muslim faith dominant in the Ottoman Empire, who have historically formed one third of the Bulgarian Roma, were allowed only into certain socially undesirable professions, e.g., hangmen, gallows builders, and mercenaries (Genov et al., 1964:10).

During state socialism the processes of urbanization and industrialization happened concurrently with Roma resettlement into towns. Roma—only five per cent of whom were still living a nomadic life—were seen as proletarians in the making, as was the majority of the country’s agrarian population (Marushiakova and Popov, 2012:101). The Fatherland Front made a clear division between the agency of Roma under Ottoman rule as ‘mercilessly turned Turk’ (Genov et al. 1964:8) and their emancipation under Bulgarian rule as urban proletarians in new industrial centers and active members of the anti-capitalist rebellion (Genov et al. 1964: 14; 17). And yet,

when in 1947 the Turkish state allowed Turkish Bulgarians to resettle, as they were considered 'under siege by communists', thousands of 'Turkish', i.e., Muslim, Roma also applied for permission to become Turkish citizens. This 'threat' was sanctioned: newly emerging Roma newspapers were closed; Roma organizations had to enter the Fatherland Front (Marushiakova and Popov 2012:109-110).

After *Resolution 258*, In the second significant document dealing with Roma in the socialist era, *Order 7* from January 1979, which was preceded with months of debates on the housing crisis, Roma identity expression was reduced to their alleged 'Turkification'. Roma became the target of policies of 'complete and unconditional assimilation' and – eventually – of a forced renaming under the so-called Revival process [*Vazrozhdenski proces*] (1984-1985) (Marushiakova and Popov, 2012). 'Roma nationalism' – the very right of self-identification – was considered a national threat. Walls were built around Roma neighbourhoods in middle-sized cities; the question of Roma disappeared from the media (Kolev, 2003:140). This rendered them ever more invisible and segregated (even when framed as 'newly-wed families').

Beyond the 'Turkification' of the Roma minority, its members were not a priority of BKP (Stoyanova, 2012). Only in 1958 did the Party start dealing with the Roma in specific (Genov et al. 1964:27) by a policy of assimilation. In 1958 the above mentioned *Resolution 258* stated that despite the overall progress in its living conditions, Roma were still living as 'travellers' [*chergari*], 'engaged in begging and robbery', and 'spreading disease and contagion' (BKP, 1958:1). *Resolution 258* suggested a sanctioned 'sedentarization' of the Roma through a number of measures. The hygienization, reconstruction, and sanitation of Roma neighbourhoods went hand in hand with the admission of Roma into the agrarian and urban proletarian labour force (Genov et al., 1964:39).

Yet, Roma were still treated and spoken of through the notion of 'contagion'. Their spatial segregation was reinforced firstly by the development of the figure of the Roma mayor who secluded all problems within the space of 'quarantine', the *mahala* (Kolev 2003). As with peasants coming into cities in the rest of Eastern Europe, services for Roma people were kept out of the 'civilized' inner city where state institutions were (Petrovici 2012). A similar practice was reinforced via new education institutions dedicated to the Roma 're-education'. As the family was seen as the source of 'contagion', Roma children were desegregated from their families and re-segregated in schools for special education. As they graduated at a lower age (13) than most pupils in the country (18), and as only Roma students were subject to this policy, in actuality it re-segregated Roma children and disqualified them from higher education (Buechenchuetz 2000).

When it comes to housing, even if since the 1950s some Roma received flats and the Bulgarian Investment Bank was instructed to give up to 5,000 BGN loans to Roma families for the construction of houses (MC, 1958:2), the housing shortage described by the BKP's expert report in 1979 (CSA 1b, 87, 191; 195) related to a large extent to Roma Bulgarians. Order 7 signaled that well into the 1980s, the socialist government and local authorities were still dealing with illegal Roma settlements through dismantlement and 'repatriation'. Many Roma remained subject to segregation and further marginalization, and as a result 'fell out' (Marushiakova and Popov, 2012; Stoyanova, 2012). As Gospodin Kolev noted, by 1985 only 50 per cent

of Roma people lived in solid constructions, only six per cent had toilet in their house, and only 13 per cent had a bathroom (Kolev, 2003:29-30).

The practice of self-made unregulated housing continued, despite the new construction. The space offered was not adequate to accommodate a numerous household. Roma families who got a new flat would leave it to their eldest son, and stay in their handmade house with the rest of their children, gradually encroaching on the pavements and streets around it to construct new rooms for the new generations (Ivancheva and Krastev, 2012). State officials turned a blind eye to their housing arrangements: never destroying it, but never legalizing the ever growing construction either. As Gospodin Kolev described,

When a Gypsy family's kids grow up and want to settle down, the family would act. They feared the People's Power, but counted on its condescension. On a Sunday the Roma family would take a self-taught architect, some materials, and gather friends. From dawn till dusk a new house would be built and celebrated with beer and rakia. The Popular Power is of course quick to react. Men armed with pick-axes and hammers would appear on Monday to destroy the freshly built house. But to their bedazzlement they would find a Bulgarian flag waving from the roof, and the portraits of Stalin, Georgi Dimitrov, and Tito gazing at them with a smiling but stern look in their eyes from the house's windows and door. A difficult political situation for the Popular Power...

Thus, while a number of mechanisms both inside the Roma minority and outside the confines of this rather heterogeneous group, contributed to exclude rather than include the Roma within state socialism. Class belonging was of definite importance: the majority of Roma did not make it to the forefront of the Bulgarian socialist elite and were thus denied a number of privileges. Beyond that, the importance of patriarchal kin arrangements around property made the allocation of small socialist flats to numerous Roma families futile at best: many of them took the flat but returned to their initial building. The ever decreasing size and living and construction standards of socialist flats did contribute significantly to this tendency, though, arguably, not only Bulgarian Roma, but all Bulgarian citizens suffered from this. Segregation and racialization along ethnic lines was also a factor that contributed to the ongoing marginalization of this ethnic minority: a vulnerability which was quickly exacerbated during the post-socialist era when even the modest redistributive efforts melted into thin air.

Coda

My fieldwork took place at the time of the floods in Mizia and in the Roma neighbourhood in Varna in 2014. The mass media were full of stories of homeless Bulgarians especially from the Roma minority, whose houses in the country side were often built on steep hills and banks of rivers which raises significant safety concerns. During my interview with Iskra Dandolova from the Bulgarian Academy of Science, a hail storm raged outside with pieces of ice as big as a hen's eggs. Seated beside the window at the building of the Union of Bulgarian Architects we watched in numb

silence, concerned that many more people would be homeless or dead after the hail. 'All the policies to protect displaced citizens disappeared in 1989', Dandolova uttered when the storm calmed down. 'Today's Bulgaria does not understand people as citizens living in a shared space, but treats us as individual property owners.' Dandolova recalled that despite the housing crisis, there was no homelessness in socialist Bulgaria. 'There were rotational flats for the displaced. Emergency tenants could eventually obtain the property rights...'. Dandolova recalled 1990s Mayor Stefan Sofiyanski, who '...sold all public housing stock in order to build social housing'. Dandolova underlined the contradiction with a bitter smile, 'His administration actually sold the public housing for low prices to their 'low income' relatives and friends. Now people who lose their homes don't have any shelter.'

Roma property rights on the parcels of land and constructions are often dubious. This is not less the case with the illegal houses, villas, luxury complexes, garages, and balconies that have mushroomed among the majority population. In this paper, however, I show that similar mechanisms have been at play in the production of the Roma as an abject group during and after state socialism. The Bulgarian socialist government inherited a number of problems: the soaring housing crisis, the exclusion of ethnic minorities, and the struggle between old and new elites over property ownership. Before socialist times recurrent housing crises in the city have been treated by successive governments in an *ad hoc* manner with no mass housing construction in mind. During state socialism there was, on the contrary, a colossal effort to build public housing. Yet, as this effort was compromised by quick fix-solutions, it reproduced elite privileges and institutional racism. In the aftermath of state socialism marginalised groups were increasingly dealt with as surplus populations residing on land of growing financial value.

Whereas post-socialism is dealing with Roma people through exclusion and segregation and pushing them beyond the urban frontier (Smith 1996), during state socialism *mahalas* underwent what has been called a naturalisation of poverty: identifying economically vulnerable groups through their locality state agents try to turn 'bad poverty' into 'good poverty' (Murray, 2011:40-43). While taking people out of extreme poverty, this logic showed little understanding of the way communities reproduce economically and socially. The state provided poor housing, low-skilled jobs, and limited access to a full course of education, yet it left a significant gap between the poor and the economic elite.

As under state socialism at present the exclusion of Roma was transferred from the discussion of their poor living conditions to a more ethno-cultural and essentialist interpretation of their living conditions. Culture-centred policies with no structural underpinning and understanding the Roma within a broader stratum of impoverished Bulgarians resulted in always greater segregation and escalating inter-ethnic conflicts. The latter have been used to justify the eviction of Roma from land targeted by new real estate developments within the comprador free market (Ivancheva and Krastev, 2012). Given the current neoliberal dismantlement of all socialist welfare institutions, state socialism needs to be revisited despite the awareness of its historical limitations and intrinsic contradictions. In this line, exploring the state socialist housing policies for Roma, I show that errors were produced by inherent conditions of exclusion and

privilege of the old order before 1944 that never fully died, and engendered some morbid symptoms of the new order that emerged after 1989 (Gramsci, 1971: 276).

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