

## **Romani self-representation in the 'Gypsy newspaper' of interwar Yugoslavia**

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*Romano lil* (Romani paper) / *Ciganske novine* (Gypsy newspaper), initiated and edited by Svetozar Simić, was the first and only Roma-led journalistic endeavour in interwar Yugoslavia. According to the editor, *Our newspaper has been set up in order to write about Gypsies, but understandably for Gypsies.*<sup>1</sup> The monthly four-page edition had only three issues released between March and May 1935.

After short presentation of the journal history and its structure on the background of Yugoslav context in terms of Romani activism in the first part of the paper, the second part will analyse *Romano lil*'s content and texts as (self-)representing narratives about Roma and for Roma. The analysis will focus on the following points:

- ✓ Presentation of a Romani collective;
- ✓ How the Romani belonging to the macro-society / nation state is expressed.
- ✓ Visions about what Roma should do for a better future;
- ✓ Encountering widely spread opinions and beliefs about Gypsies.

The analysis is placed in an interpretative framework developed by Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov in several publications (reference) seeing Roma as existing in at least two dimensions: as a community and as ethnically-based integral part within the society and respective nation-state. On the example of *Romano lil*'s texts we can see how these two dimensions (of belonging) are expressed publicly, and how Svetozar Simić, the Romani activist initiating the newspaper, conveys his visions about the Roma as a collective. The analysis of the newspaper's history and content will be placed in the historical context of the Romani movement for civil, political and religious emancipation dynamically developing in the Eastern European countries during the Interwar period.

### **The Yugoslav context: General developments and Romani activism**

There were dynamic processes in terms of ethno-cultural and political development in interwar Yugoslavia. The creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 led to emergence of national territories for some ethnic communities (Slovenes for instance), while other ethnic communities have lost their territorial and national independence (Montenegro became a province in the Serbian territories of the Kingdom). With renaming of the Kingdom (to Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1929), certain policies in the field of education and culture were

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<sup>1</sup> *Romano lil. Ciganske novine*, broj 3, Maj 1935, p. 1.

designed in order to reinforce a Yugoslav identity as one of the responses to activities on the Kingdom's territories, mainly concerning centrifugal tendencies (Croatian nationalism for instance, but also activities in Macedonia).

In the general atmosphere of studying all ethnic communities on Yugoslav territories, during the Interwar period scholars were researching the culture and language of the Gypsies/Roma from these territories. Tihomir Djordjević, a Serbian leading ethnographer whose PhD thesis from the beginning of 20 c. was about Gypsies, continued to publish the results of his research in both Yugoslavia and abroad. Whilst living in Prijedor near Banja Luka in Bosnia, Uhlik translated "O Devlikano lil e Sumnale Lukahtar" (the Gospel of Luke) into Romani (Bosnian Gurbet dialect) published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1938 in Belgrade. Uhlik collected oral traditions and studied the Romani dialects creating a Romani dictionary and numerous collections that were later published, while some remain unpublished. Yugoslav researchers published in the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society and were also in correspondence with the GLS leadership in regard to the research on Roma/Gypsies in Yugoslavia. In the interwar period professional and amateur researchers were publishing in relevant scientific journals or in some monographs published in Yugoslavia as well as abroad. On the pages of *Zbornik za narodni život i običaje Južnih Slavena* ethnographic material from all Yugoslav territories was published (Josip Kotarski, Tihomir Djordjević). Some local studies in the field of history and ethnography also included parts related to Gypsy groups on their territories (Josip Horvat, *Živjeti u Hrvatskoj: 1900.–1941*, Tihomir Djordjević, *Naš narodni život*).

Antun Medven, a Croatian catholic priest was also interested in the Roma groups, learned the Romani language, and collected oral folklore and other materials in Romani that have never been published. Medven was initiator of reading the mentioned Gospel of Luke into Romani for Roma Catholics in a town not far from Zagreb. Čedomir Nikolić, Rom from the village of Privlaci in Eastern Croatia, who seemed to have earned and saved money throughout his life time, in 1914 has donated funds for building of an Orthodox Church in the village that became famous as the 'Gypsy church' after WWI. The word about the church seemed to quickly spread and in 1938 the priest Lazar Staminirović has read in front of Romani audience from the Vukovar-Srijem region the newly translated Gospel of Luke, attracting the attention of Orthodox Roma who visited from other region of Yugoslavia, Roma Catholics and also Croat Catholics who were curious to listen to the unique Romani language service. Some of these events of the local cultural and religious life of Yugoslavia were reported in national media (reference) and are sign of the Romani endeavours for self-organization on local level.

The review of the Yugoslav archives of the time show that the state efforts in the fields of culture, civil organization and religious activities, both centrally and locally, were focused on strengthening a Yugoslav identity especially among the youth, counteracting activities labelled

as nationalist and anti-Yugoslav, and activities related to ethnic communities with nation state outside of Yugoslav borders (German, Romanian, Czechoslovakian, etc.). The Roma cultural, political and civil initiatives were not an object of measures on behalf of the state and there were no political measures in these fields referring to Roma. This however does not mean that there were not such activities. There were such and they were all based on grass-root initiatives and self-organizing efforts of Roma, formal (in accordance with the general legislative regulations) or informal. So far we know about couple of civil society accomplishments led by Roma, that were more formal and took place mainly in Belgrade, e.g. couple of organizations and a newspaper enterprise. There were also others that were related to the sphere of culture and religion: the mentioned 'Gypsy Church' build in Privlaci by Čedomir Nikolić, organization of beauty contests and Gypsy Balls in city hotels (reference to *Politika*, *Vreme*). The 'Gypsy celebration' of Tetkica Bibija in Belgrade was continuously reported in Belgrade based national media since the beginning of the 20 c. Among Roma in Belgrade and in Central Serbia Tetkica Bibija is celebrated as an uncanonised 'Gypsy' Saint that protects Romani children from dreadful diseases and secures health for them and their families. An oral folklore narrative in various versions explains how Bibija cured and helped Romani children during a plague epidemic. The name Tatkice Bibija consists of both the Serbian (Tetkica, in diminutive) and Romani (Bibija) term for the word Auntie, a substitute name for the Plague. In the folklore and calendar customs of many communities in South Eastern Europe, the Day of the Aunt/the Day of the Plague is celebrated with a different components and prohibitions that have to secure protection from diseases for the children. Among Serbian Roma it has developed and perceived as a specific Romani custom, the Aunt thus presented as a black Gypsy woman in narratives and in iconography. Special chapels devoted to Bibija have also been made gathering a lot of Roma worshipers on the day of celebration.

Despite of the fact that these activities were reported in media and have been transmitted in the local memory of the Roma, no information about them could not be found in state archives keeping official governmental documents. We may presuppose that similar local initiatives showcasing Romani self-organization and activism were undergoing in other Yugoslav territories, however, further research needs to be undertaken to support such hypothesis.

As far as the formal civil activities of Roma were concerned, most probably in 1927 was formed the *Prva Srpsko-Ciganska zadruga za uzajamno pomaganje u bolesti i smrti* (First Serbian-Gypsy association (*zadruga*) for mutual support in sickness and death). The organization's statute is unknown, apart from 4 articles published on the membership card, the only original document pointing to the existence of the organization, apart from mainstream media publication. The organization's main aims were to secure support in case of sickness, death and funerals, to open a reading room for securing social activities of the members; on the day of 'the young St Nikola' (8 May, according to Julian Calendar) to celebrate the organization's

saint and organize church service devoted to the memory of its deceased members. The dating of the establishment is assumed again on the base the same document (membership card of the *Zadruga*) in which the membership starts in 1928, as well as few publications in mainstream media mentioning the *Zadruga* and its activities in relation to celebration of Tetkica Bibija and buying of a place for building up a chapel and later church devoted to the Roma Saint from the 1920s. It may be presupposed that the organization was established in accordance with the popular in that time model of creating *Zadruga*, but followed up on a more informal entity with similar activities of self-organization of the Gypsy community in Belgrade. This conclusion is based on the fact that media publications from the 1920s reported names of organizations as for example the *Club of the Belgrade Gypsies* (*Politika*) and interviews with Roma claiming that a form of *zadruga* was existing since the 1880s among the Belgrade Gypsies. Note that despite the fact the legislation on establishing *zadruga* as formal agricultural entities with the aim to sell the production of their member (e.g. cooperative) was introduced in Serbia only in the first half of 20 c., in the traditional culture the term was used for different kind of common property and management in the large family or local community, thus the term might have been used also as equivalent to community self-organization or informal structure of support within the local community. We can thus, presupposed that, forms or self-organizational activities among the Gypsy were existing much earlier than the 1920s, but only in the 1920s some were formally registered. According to an articles in *Politika* (reference) from 1926 the Gypsy Club's leadership was formed by Marinko Savić, President, and Pera Vujanać, Secretary.

More is known about the second civil organization of the time, *Udruženje beogradskih Cigana svečara "Bibije" (Tetkice)* (Association of Belgrade Gypsies Worshippers of "Bibija" (Tetkice) that was formed in 1935 in Belgrade. The Association also had a humanitarian character, but its special emphasis was placed on educational and pedagogical work with Roma children, and in particular the preservation of the existing as well as the development of new cultural values among the Gypsies. According for Article 8:

The goal[s] of the Association:

- 1) To work for the consociation, rapprochement/convergence and support of its members;
- 2) To contribute to raising the cultural level of all its members by establishing new and supporting already existing cultural and social institutions;
- 3) In Belgrade, to accept gifted kids and young people, especially war orphans, and to facilitate their accommodation, within the range of [its] material possibilities, with the aim of education and study of crafts;
- 4) To work on the realization of material means for maintaining its home/building in Belgrade.

According to Article 6, on the day of the celebration of the Association, the significance of all deceased founders, benefactors, founders, helpers and regular members of the Association,

as well as all warriors in the wars for the liberation and unification of our people will be praised; Article 7 states the Flag of the Association: from a canvas size of 1.20cm x 1m, blue with icons on the right side of Sv. Nikola and from the left of the Miracle Tetkica Bibija.

From the articles related to finances of both organizations, we can presume that their members were not poor people, but established citizens with financial possibilities. For example, according to the *Zadruga*'s Article 12 the members, depending on their category pay 500, 300 and 120 dinars once and for all.

It's interesting to note the inclusiveness of both associations. The statutes state that a member can be any citizen of Belgrade regardless of gender, faith and nationality. Furthermore, the Association of 1935 accepts children as members (art. 15 Children who have made any kind of a commitment or a gift to the Association, become benefactors or founders according to the value of the gift or the commitment).

While the both the *Zadruga* of the 1920s and the Association of 1935 seem to be organizations of the same nature (support for the local Belgrade Romani community, celebration of Saints of importance for the Romani community) and probably run by the same people, in 1939 in Belgrade was established the first nation-wide (at least in terms of ideology and concept) Romani organization *Prosvetni klub jugoslovenske ciganske omladine* (Educational Club of the Yugoslav Gypsy Youth), gathering young generation of Roma of different background – belonging to different Romani groups, with various religion and mother language. It was established by a university student, high school students, workers and craftsman assistants, and the President was Svetozar Simić. The Statute was modelled as similar Yugoslav-wide youth organizations: The Club's primary goal was "gathering Roma youth" for their further education and education. One of the goals of this Club was "finding opportunities for scholarships" for talented Roma children who do not have the means to continue their education. In addition to social activities, the Club was obliged to "establish a library and reading room" in which the Roma youth will be able to teach and spend time reading. According to research done by Dragoljub Acković, the Club might have been affiliated to and funded by *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica* (Yugoslav Radical Union, founded by Milan Stojadinovic in 1935, then Prime Minister of Yugoslavia), the main political movement in the country by 1939. This form of self-organization of Belgrade Roma was of a short span, lasting until the beginning of the Second World War, but was the first sign of a Yugoslav-wide Romani movement.

### **The newspaper *Romano lili* and its editor Svetozar Simić**

The self-organization activities of Belgrade Roma were often reported in national mainstream media, but Roma have also initiated newspaper of their own. Svetozar Simić was born in 1913 to a Romani family in Kopljare, a village near Arandjelovac in Central Serbia. After graduating from the high school in Arandjelovac he moved to Jatagan ma(ha)le, one of the Gypsy

neighbourhoods of Belgrade and continued his studies, becoming law student in 1935. Through his lifetime we also worked on Romani grammar, vocabulary, writing down customs and legends. As student, he was writing for one of the major mainstream daily newspapers of the time, *Vreme*. Simić also wrote couple of novels – one in the 1930s that was rejected by the publisher and another one probably in the 1960s, that remains as a manuscript until today. He was one of the main young figures and activists in the civil activities among the Belgrade Gypsies during the interwar period. He was founder and president of the Yugoslav Club of Gypsy Youth that existed shortly by the start of the WWII. After the WWII Simić focused mainly in his personal career working for the new Yugoslav government in setting up local power structures. He then started attorney practice in Belgrade, but continued being active in the field of Romani activism. In late 1960s he addressed a letter to the authorities proposing inclusion of the term Rom in the National Statistical Institute categories with regards to the forthcoming Yugoslav-wide census of 1971. This means that he might well have been the first Romani activist to raise the issue publicly in late 1960s (similar demands were raised at that time by Slobodan Berberski, a Romani activist and member of the Communist Party Leadership in Belgrade) or at least that his efforts were in the same direction as the Romani activism of the time in Socialist Yugoslavia. He also continued writing and has an unpublished manuscript of semi-biographical essays reflecting on the destiny of Roma people. Simić also maintained his contacts within the network of activists and researchers of Romani culture: he was in correspondence with Rade Uhlik and participated in the founding assembly of the national Rom-Association in Belgrade (1969).

Having gain some experience in journalism from sporadic work for the national daily newspaper *Vreme*, Simić was the main brain power in creating *Romano lil* and he was editor, manager and main author in the newspaper. The personal archive of S. Simić and the administrative documents of *Romano lil* (folders with manuscripts, subscriptions, financial reports on income and expenditures, etc., newspaper office registration at the home of Svetozar Simić in *Jatagan mahale*, as well as the content of the newspaper itself) clearly show that the newspaper production and maintenance during its short period of existence was realized by Svetozar Simić. This deconstructs apparently one of the misconceptions at least for the international community in Romani activism and studies, namely that the editor of the newspaper was Aleksandar Petrović. Aleksandar Petrović was a physician interested in Romani communities as an employee in the Institute of Hygiene who have done research work among Roma, published articles in Yugoslav journals and in JGLS has been in correspondence with the leadership of the GLS sending the two first copies to the Society. According to information published in the JGLS (reference), Petrović is reported as the person who started, edited and tried to financially maintain the newspaper publishing despite all obstacle faced. Petrović was indeed one of the main contributors in the newspaper and,

despite the fact that he is not explicitly mentioned in the newspaper administrative records, he might well have been collaborator in Simić endeavours as the materials written by him form a substantial part of the small newspaper. Nothing, however, points to the fact that Aleksandar Petrović was the one who started or tried to maintain the endeavour, as in fact all archival documents from the archive of *Romano lil* – manuscripts, books of financial records, and the printed copies of the newspaper, etc. point to the fact that Svetozar Simić was the main figure behind its publishing. We may speculate why Petrović has misrepresented himself and was further misrepresented in the JGLS publication as the editor and main agent behind *Romano lil* publication. In a letter dated 12 May 1935 to Scot Macfie, then President of the GLS, Petrović sent two copies of *Romano lil* writing

*'I edit it and publish it together with a Gypsy student. But none of the Gypsies buy it. I had the idea to assemble as many as possible literate Gypsies around it, but it seems it won't be a success. I keep a diary of the history of the paper. All my experience in connection with it, will be a very good contribution to the study of the Gypsy psychology'* (reference).

What strikes here is the actual editor of the newspaper, Svetozar Simić, is reduced to an anonymous Gypsy student. Also, it seems that Petrović viewed the whole processes as a scientific experiment to contribute to the study of Gypsy psychology, quite in unison with the discourse of Gypsy studies of the time. Some researchers interpret Petrović writings as a pure Serbian *četnik* nationalism (reference), for others this is a show case of falsification due to historically affirmed practice of marginalization and underestimation of Roma not as active agents of their history and culture who always need to be led by non-Roma (reference to Acković).

All three issues of *Romano lil* newspaper comprise of 4 pages and follow a similar newspaper structure: an editorial front page article / introductory note by Svetozar Simić, in second issue the article with such functions is written by Aleksandar Petrović; a large second page piece devoted to Romani and history culture in past and present (Our Tetkica Bibija in the first issue; From the History of Belgrade Gypsies and Djurdjevdan in the second issue; About Marko Vasiljević, and his soldier's contribution as in wars); shorter pieces reflecting on contemporary issues (the death of Aleksandar Karađorđević, health issues, etc.), and final part starting from p. 3 to the final with Romani folklore – short tales, recorded texts of songs in Romani original with translation by Simić and a feuilleton by Simić. The articles were mostly written by Simić, with several large pieces by Aleksandar Petrović, and a person called M. Milic, who judging from the style of writing might well be Simić himself. One piece was published by the following authors, apparently of Romani background as well: Several pieces by Mr Milic, a Romani craftsman from Jatagan mahale in Belgrade, who according to information published in n 3 of *Romano lil* is founder of the newspaper and also its *cirvo* – godfather, as he named it and was

reading the newspaper to the illiterate Romani audience in the neighbourhood also providing resume and Romani translations of its content to the Romani audience.

To flag Romani identity, the newspaper name was in Romani language and Romani was often used in phrases quoted in articles or when folklore texts in Romani (followed by Serbian translations) were published. According to one of the editorials, the newspaper had several hundred subscribers defined as 'intellectuals' from Yugoslavia, as well as from UK, USA and France.

In one of Simić's editorial it was stated that the newspaper is for Roma and about Roma and thus, directed to both Romani and non-Romani audience and positioned itself as a counterpoint to the image of the Roma exotic beauties published in other mainstream media (references to media materials about balls, Gypsy beauty competitions, etc.):

A newspaper such as ours could be edited in two ways: it could be written about the Gypsies and in it could be written for the Gypsies. If we were to write only about the Gypsies, we would have to take bit into account of the various tastes of our gadjovanske (non-Gypsy) readership. Without a variety of "stars", e.g. black and gypsy, and their respective pictures, our newspaper would hardly survive. Regardless of the beauty and attractiveness of our black beauties and dolls, we still do not mean to write about them. Our newspaper was launched in order to write about the Gypsies, but of course, for the Gypsies.

Due to financial unsustainability and lack of funds, the newspaper had only three issues. The memory about it, however, was kept among Belgrade Roma activists as inspiring example of both activism and journalism. The first Romani periodical that started to be published in Belgrade in the 1970s also was named *Romano lil* to signify a continuation of the endeavour.

### **Reading newspaper's articles as (self-)representing narratives about Roma and for Roma**

In the publications of *Romano lil* editor we clearly see narratives and addresses suggesting a **(re)presentation of a Romani collective**. Speaking about Roma/Gypsies, the newspaper authors used the pronouns of first person plural *we, our*, e.g. *we, the Gypsies; our people; our brothers, our dear brothers and sisters, our children* – in all newspaper texts. This way of writing suggests an 'imagined' Romani community (in the sense of B. Anderson), a collective comprised of all who are Roma/Gypsies. *Naš narod* (our people) is also a common phrase signifying a distinct community different from the other people. *Our brother(s)* and *our brothers and sisters* are also phrases used to refer to the Roma. This on the one hand, uses a common rhetoric construct among the Roma when addressing other Roma (brother and sister are addresses between Roma in general not only in family relations). On the other hand, it also



presents the idea about the unity of the Gypsies by their common belonging to the same 'family'. This narrative is a clear examples of a birth of a concept for a national community united by blood and belonging to a group.

Simić talks on behalf of Gypsies (speaking of our people, we the Gypsies, using verbs forms in first person plural) and at the same time addresses the Gypsies. The most common way of addressing the Romani audience is our brothers, and the Romani phrase *гуглален пра(х)лален* (sweet brothers) followed by its Serbian translation. The use of this Romani address from the everyday communication of the Roma suggests intimacy and warm feelings which should strengthen also the potential Romani identification with the author of the text. It also legitimizes and promotes Romani language addressing in print and public communication, thus strengthening the self-esteem of the Roma readers.

Another interesting feature of addressing the Roma is the special emphasis on both genders – Simić often writes *our brothers and sisters*. This points out to the equality of female and male personalities in the Romani collective as presented by Simić. He even speaks about the specific problems of 'our sisters', meaning Romani women, when talking about the lack of literacy. Thus, in the writing of S Simić of the 1930s, Romani women were viewed as equal to men and not as subordinated or right-less individuals. At this point we could also bring another example from the history of Romani activisms in Yugoslavia supporting this statement: According to the Statute of the Association of Belgrade Gypsies, worshipers of Auntie Bibija that was contemporary to the newspaper (established in 1935) 'Any person (of both sexes) who lives in Belgrade can be regular member of the Association, assisting members, founding members and benefactors of the Association can be any person' (article 11).

Not only materials authored by Simić, but also the articles by Aleksandar Petrović are written from the stand of a Romani collective, probably as a rhetoric technique (our people, we the Gypsies, etc.). But this fact also raises interesting question about the Romani belonging and participation of people of non-Roma ethnicity actively participating in journalism and activism in close collaboration with Roma (examples from Bulgaria, Russia, Finland). This is thus not a unique but rather common pattern that was part of the birth of Romani activism and is something that is observed until today in the Romani movement.

Another way of representing the Romani belonging and common identity is through publication of materials narrating about the customs, beliefs, and practices that function as cultural markers of identity (in the sense of F. Barth) for the Roma, differentiating them from the other communities. Probably the two most important celebrations for the Romani community in Central Serbia that function as markers of Romani identity (for both Roma and non-Roma) until today are the belief in and celebration of *Tetkica Bibija* and the celebration of *Djurdjevdan*. There are even disputes among the Roma themselves which of the celebrations is 'more' Romani. It is thus not surprising that publications related to these important markers of Romani

identity occupy central places in *Romano lil*. In the very first issue of the newspaper, straight after the editorial article of Simić, on page 2 is published a one-page material *Naša tetkica – Bibija* (*Our auntie - Bibija*) presenting one of the legends explaining how Tetkica Bibija has saved Romani children from death because Roma have opened their doors to her offering hospitality despite their extreme poorness and sick children. According to the legend presented Bibija was 'black as every Gypsy woman' and was sent 'by God to the Gypsies to save their children from death'. Since the miracle event of saving Gypsy children happened, 'we the Gypsies from then on celebrate Her day. We accept for a night stay everybody who knocks on our door, and we give a slice of bread to whoever asks for it. Our neighbours, the Serbs, have seen this and started doing it as well.' This narrative presents Roma as helpers in need as opposed to their rich and hostile neighbours, and also as people beloved by God who takes care of them in disaster. The importance of Tetkica Bibije for the self-organization of the Romani community in Belgrade is also illustrated by the fact that one of the few organizations established in the interwar period is named after Bibije, and that a chapel devoted to her was created. The celebration was steadily present in mainstream media since the beginning of the 20c. and thus functioned as a marker of Romani identity also for the majority society.

In the second issue of *Romano lil* is published an article by A. Petrović about *Djurdjevdan*, the other celebration considered Romani marker of identity by both themselves and the non-Roma. The article is rather a reflection on the celebration than exact narrative about the celebration, referring to some stereotypical portraits of the Gypsies as 'children of nature' and 'children of the Sun'. Yes, its beginning contains very important statement about *Djurdjevdan* as the most important people's celebration of the Gypsy people as one people united by common culture and history:

*All the people have their own celebrations. These are days related to memory about some event from the life of this people or days of birth or death of people who served to this people. And we the Gypsies also have our great people's celebration. We do not know if this celebration is related to an event from our people's history as we do not have written history. Even our legends about it do not say anything about that. But still the celebration of Djurdjevdan is closely related to our people's life. The rest of the Christians also celebrate Djurdjevdan. It is honoured by the Muhamedans as well. But no one expects it with the same joy and merriment as we the Gypsies.*

The newspaper also published Romani folklore recorded among Roma, in Romani language followed by Serbian translation. In Eastern European countries the model of folklore materials collection and publishing repeats the well-known patten for the ethno-national states in the region that was developed in XIX and beginning of XX c. after the Herderian model for national emancipation through collection and publishing of a wide range of folklore materials, dictionaries, narratives about customs, traditional songs representing the national spirit. The

legends, short stories, songs and oral history materials published in the newspaper should be interpreted in this discourse – they (re)present Romani folklore as part of the Roma people's culture. The non-Romani audience may get acquainted with the rich Romani folklore, while Romani people would identify with it. The materials selected are sort, often with anecdotic and of humorous nature.

The body of oral Romani history on the pages of *Romano lil* includes records of events of historical significance or of contemporary character in the life of Belgrade Gypsies: for example, 'From the History of Belgrade' Gypsies as narrated by Jovan-Jovance Milosavljević making an overview of settlements in which Roma have lived and settled, or about a rich wedding in the Romani neighbourhood of Čubura.

Although the newspaper materials are based on sources about the culture, history and memory of the Romani community in Belgrade or Central Serbia, the narrative refers to a general collective, presenting Roma/Gypsies as a common people and a whole and also creating a common sense of belonging. The editor is of course well aware of the non-homogeneous, still common, nature of the Gypsy community. Simić demonstrates awareness about the different Gypsy/Roma groups and in the first issue publishes a material 'Where do we live and how many of us are' appealing to 'every brother of ours to the hands of whom comes our newspaper' to send information and data about their place of living, Gypsies who live in the place, occupation, time of settlement, languages spoken and religion'. Through the wish to collect information about the internal diversity among the Gypsy/Roma, the newspaper narratives reinforce the sense of unity and create the impression that all Roma should go in one path and belong to a whole. According to the visions of its editor, the aim of the newspaper is to implement a cultural-educational work directing the Gypsies to this path.

Along with the idea of Roma as a collective the **Romani belonging to the macro-society / nation state** (e.g. Serbian, Kingdom of Yugoslavia) is expressed. As Marushiakova and Popov have pointed out, Roma have not only sense of belonging to the Romani community (at the level of their own Romani groups, subgroup or meta-group), but also to the macro-society with which they constantly interact and are actually part of. Roma do participate in the social system, public and institutional life of their respective nation state, identifying with the symbols, national figures and events that symbolize the unity of the nation. The sense of belonging to the national community – e.g. the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – is clearly expressed in two pieces published in two of the three issues of *Romano lil*. In the very first issue of the newspaper issued in March 1935 there is a half-page article *Our people mourn their King* reporting how the news about the assassination and death of Alexander I (16 December 1888- 9 October 1934) Karađorđević also known as Alexander the Unifier. The assassination took place almost half a year before the publishing of the issue, but it seems that the event was of such significance for the Belgrade Romani community, so it was important for the editor to express

the belonging to this community to the people of the Kingdom, e.g. the body of the nation. The article reports that 'All of us were full of deep grief: all of us felt that he has lost his Protector, his Father...'

Interestingly enough, this is the Serbian language text published in *Romano lil* with the largest usage of Romani. The editor reports the reaction of the Roma in Romani language with phrases and gestures that are common and characteristic for the Romani community on occasions of deep grief and emotional state, providing authenticity of the narrative, followed by Serbian translation:

*Ux, phabilam, bi baxt bari – Ah, we are lost – we are burned, a big infortune! Along with this, our women were pulling their hair and cursing the children of the one who did it. They were cursing also the dead assassinator, saying: Dear God, Dear God, with what kind of heart could he do it? Sar savo soro sasle? (How could he dare do it). Our people were beating their breasts with fists. If the children, excited by the behaviour of the adults started making problems, they were cursed: ‚Majlac(h)e baksuzona te mylana tu, (haj) te kava na ashunav´ (You´d better be dead, Jonah, rather than the news I have heard). Some were talking: ‚We have lost a Lord, who was the dearest to us after God and the Sun´. Others would swear: „Let God kill me, if it was not easy for me to have all my children killed and my house burned down“.*

The article reports also that the moment this news was discussed a drizzle was falling down, the Roma took down their hats and commented in Romani: I o Del rovel, i Vov(h)aćarel o dji (God is also crying and mourning for him).

We can also claim that the Romani language and authentic Romani phrases characteristic for mourning or state of strong emotions come to underline that the Roma are integral part of the peoples in the Kingdom who are equal to the other communities constituting the Kingdom, and this claim can be proved by the paragraph of the article reporting the following

If some of us had a *dinar*, he would with this very last money buy *rakija*, spread on the ground the first drops saying: *Let his rest in peace and be glorified brothers! He loved us and took care of us as his own children. And he did not make any difference between Gypsies and Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. He protected equally all of us. For every Easter and Christmas he gave us support from his own salary* (br. 1, p. 3)

Another piece from the third issue of *Romano lil* also contains narrative that should be interpreted as expression of Romani belonging to the nation state. Many Roma took place in all wars that Serbian Kingdom had participated in since the second half of 19 c. After the WWI there were many war veterans and also many Roma who lost their lives in the wars in which Serbian citizens were involved (Balkan and the 'Great War'). After the wars, Belgrade Roma from the charity *Club of Belgrade Gypsies* (probably informal organization at that time) seemed to have self-organized themselves and build a memorial monument devoted to 54 named Gypsies who died during the Balkan Wars and WWI, as reported in Serbian media in the 1920s

(reference). Some Roma who took part in the wars were also awarded medals for their heroic deeds and among them were Ahmed Ahmetović and Marko Vasiljević. *Romano lil*'s article reports about the latter and his memories about the Serbian army in battle's locations among which Ada Ciganlija, Banovo Brdo, Čukarica, Zaklopace, Varonice. For all these, he was awarded the Order of Karađorđe's Star.

**Visions about what Roma *should do for a better future*:**

The most strategic pieces in the newspaper are the editorial articles at the beginning of the first and third issue of *Romano lil*. In them Svetozar Simić shared his own visions and reflections on the issues existing among the Roma and the way how these issues could be addressed and overcome with the efforts of the Roma themselves. His programme articles can be viewed and interpreted as visionary statements and outlines of an agenda for the development of the Roma. Thus, in his first, editorial articles with which starts the very first issue of *Romano lil* we read:

*Nowadays, in order for a person to be able to earn a slice of bread for himself and his children, he has to fulfil at least two conditions: to be literate and to have in his hand a permanent occupation [...]*

*And we think that the only remedy for this evil and embarrassment is that every one of our children is visiting a school, and after the end of the school is immediately though into some craft or some skill. A man who starts to work from childhood, gets used to it, and can never be without work. [...]*

*That's why we have launched our newspaper. We want to open our eyes to our brothers and show them that it is our first and foremost task to send our children to school, in order to become literate, and to let them learn some craft or skill right after graduation. Whoever could afford and wishes more, let give the children to [learn] trade or to schools. And let our children there with good masters and teachers learn how to earn a piece of bread fairly. Remember those proverb of ours about the lazy guys and suckers.*

*But knowledge is not obtained only at school. Only afterwards, when the student graduates school, only then [the student] begins to develop mentally and to learn how to recognize the world and people in it. Our newspaper will do all its in order to give our brother a helping hand in his cultural, and this means, a mental and material improvement. - On the one hand, we will give ready-made knowledge and statements, and on the other hand, we will show the paths that lead to them.*

*(Hawa ppa peč, Romano lil 1, p. 1)*

The last issue also contains an article relating the visions about the Romani community

development and the need to improve the way of life of the Roma. The means for this are:

*We should not forget that our newspaper has to fulfil a cultural first-order mission. From the interest in certain poems and stories printed on a language spoken by them, our people are turning to more serious things, turning to our life in general. The question of improving our way of life is largely in our own hands. A little more economy in the house, higher order and cleanliness: a little less visit to the tavern, less card-playing, less drunkenness; and most of all, more literacy, paying more attention to our children and their preparation for the future life, we will live much and much better. The future will show, if we would be able to convince our brothers and sisters how important it is for each of our children to complete elementary school and learn some crafts.*

Reading this pieces as visionary programme shedding light on both problems and their solving for a desired future of the Roma, we can see essentially three main points, or priority areas, in which Roman have to concentrate. They are all related to the Romani children or the future generations among the Romani community, they are interconnected and are in a sort of consequent relation: On the first place Roma have to take care of schooling their children (*first and foremost task to send our children to school, in order to become literate*), on the second place, this has to be followed by professional training securing an occupation and regular works (*and to let them learn some craft or skill right after graduation*). In addition to this Roma have to 'elevate culturally' by gaining experience and knowledge about the world and the people and this is to be achieved by the engagement of the experienced, educated and active Roma from the older generations. What is interestingly to point out is the fact that these visions for the desired development of the Romani community are not related to demands from the state, political or government measures, but to demands towards the Roma themselves (*The question of improving our way of life is largely in our own hands*). This, could mean that the state has secured the Roma as citizens with access to education and professional realization, as well as with means for cultural elevation, and it is thus a question of Romani own agency, initiative and self-organization to achieve their better future through using the already exiting mechanism in their environment.

Drawing a vision for Roma and their opportunities for a better future, and in relation to the need for Romani agency in achieving a better life for the Roma as a collective, some parts of Simić articles also engage with **critique from within** the community and criticizing some actions, views and habits among the Roma that prevent them from reaching prosperity and – to use the words of the newspaper – 'elevate to another cultural level'. There are two common themes in this respect that appear in more than one issue of the newspaper. The main critique, observed in the editorial articles by Simić, is to the Romani community itself for not paying enough attention to the schooling and professional skill of their children and the lack of interest

to Romani civil activism in few ways. The second critique, met in the articles by Dr Petrović, is the negligence of Roma of the importance of health issues, especially children's health.

Simić criticizes the lay Roma for neglecting their own and their children's opportunities for success:

*A little more economy in the house, higher order and cleanliness: a little less visit to the tavern, less card-playing, less drunkenness; and most of all, more literacy, paying more attention to our children and their preparation for the future life, we will live much and much better.*

But his main critique is directed toward the education Roma who are 'guilty' for the situation in the whole community. In his first programme article Simić criticized the educated auditory, those who have succeeded in society and enriched themselves with their professions and status, asking rhetorically:

*And then why, sweet brothers, our richer brothers are ashamed of their own brothers, their name, their blood?*

In *Our intelligentsia and aristocracy* signed by Milić, but clearly influenced by Simić style we read:

*Among us however, they are lords. But the only problems is that they are ashamed, even though they were also born by a Gypsy woman and breastfed with her milk. But they can do a lot for us. Can't they be more engaged with this, until literacy spreads among our people? Can't they create one association that would assist us in a case of sickness and death. They can help us create reading rooms and courses for our illiterate adults. They could help us a lot so that every child of ours learns a craft and profession and honestly earn his bread.*

*Unfortunately, they do not do anything of this. Just the opposite, those who call themselves 'Gypsy intelligentsia' and 'Gypsy aristocracy' doctors and other state servants are openly against our newspaper. They spread the word among our illiterate brothers, especially among women that our newspaper only disgraces the Gypsies, that the owner of our newspaper is against Gypsies, and that no Gypsies should read and support the newspaper.*

A similar critical message is conveyed by Simić in his editorial of the same issue of *Romano lili* when reflecting on the effect of the newspaper publishing among the Roma in contrast to the *gadje*, non-Roma:

*And now let's see what success has our newspaper achieved among our Gypsy brothers. [...] The vast majority of our brothers, and not to mention women, our sisters, - are illiterate. Understandably, our newspaper can not count on their support. The other, literate minority, with little exception, does not read anything at all. And when reading, they are interested in various sensations, such as murder, theft, quarrels, trials, etc. [...] Many do not even want to have writings about the Gypsies. They say: "That Gypsy newspaper is just disgracing us."*

[...]

*However, this does not surprise us all. We knew our people from before. And we were aware of whom we are running this newspaper for. Something must be started, something has to be done to make our people wake up from an eternal slumber, but what?*

This critique from within actually accuses Roma of lack of civil engagement and activities for the benefit of the Romani community and its prosperity. The main critique addresses primarily those who are literate and educated, as they are the ones who are supposed to engaged an active position towards their own community. The author portraits them, however, as either passive and uninterested towards topics discussed in *Romano lil* or as people with negative opinion towards the Gypsy newspaper mainly because of the criticism addressed to the Romani community.

In the interwar period across many countries was raised the issue of public health, that often went in hand with eugenic policies, etc. In the spirit of the time *Romano lil* published two pieces devoted to children's health and promoted free public health services offered by the state. One of the article was signed by Dr Al. Petrović and probably the second, unsigned one, was authored by him as well: *Čuvajmo zdravlje naše dečice* (Let's keep the health of our children) in issue n 1 and *Za našu decu* (For our children) in n 2. These texts insist on the fact that Roma are negligent towards their health despite the fact that the health is one of the most important values for the Roma. In the first issue of *Romano lil*, the author writes:

*Sastipe si majbari bax, health is the biggest happiness, says our people's wisdom ... health is, dear brothers our biggest happiness, why does not each of us take care about it? ... Well, but many of our brothers who say: I buy bread because I have to, but I do not go to the doctor's as I can bear with my illness a bit.*

What is interesting to note is that the texts are clearly directed to the Romani reading audiences and uses arguments with examples from Romani cultural practices and concepts, and Romani phrases that should apparently convince the Romani audience about the point of the articles. What comes to one's mind when reading the critique are the striking similarities with the contemporary situation and writings or statements of some activists from Eastern Europe directed to Romani audience: Critiques engaging with the attempts of successful Roma to hide their Romani origin because of the negative public opinion towards the Gypsies, the need to 'wake up' and develop civil activism and activities related to the prosperity of the own Romani community.

### **Encountering stereotypical non-Roma narratives**

The fact that the main issues discussed by the newspaper programme articles are related to critique toward the own Romani community, does not mean that the image of the non-Roma is completely absent or that critique towards the majority community is not present.



The most frequently used term the non-Roma in the Serbian language articles of *Romano lil* is the Romani word proper, namely *gadje*, provided in its Romani original followed by a Serbian translation: *гађе*, (нецигана). In this way the newspaper legitimizes its positioning as Romani/Gypsy newspaper that represent the Romani point of view and conceptualization and also introduces the Romani concept to the non-Romani audiences. Rarely in use is the word non-Gypsies on its own (*Драги читаоци нецигани и ми гуглален пра(х)лален колико вас има, купујте и ширите наш лист!*). The Serbs, being the non-Roma population with which the Roma from Belgrade and in the region are in contact, are also present as a term for the non-Roma in tales and oral folklore narratives published in the newspaper, but also when referring to the non-Roma audience in general:

From our brothers, Gypsies, as well as from their friends, the Serbs, depends the further destiny of our newspaper as well as whether its volume will increase or not (*От наше браће, Цигана, као и от њихових пријатеља Срба зависиће даља судбина нашега листа као и то, да ли ће се његов обим увећати или не.*)

Simić also engages with critique of the macro-society and mainly its misconceptions about the Roma existing in the public discourse. He addresses in his programme articles two of the most common and wide spread in all historical periods and geographical areas misconceptions about the Gypsies, namely about Gypsy criminality and about Gypsy begging.

From the position of a Romani run newspaper addressing a wide reading audience Simić on the first place discusses and challenges narratives that were characteristic for the mainstream media reporting criminals and criminal activities not by naming the perpetrator, but by pointing out on the first place the fact that this is a Gypsy, suggesting equalization of criminality and being Gypsy in general. Indeed, even a supervision look into the media of the time, shows that most of the media materials are related to reporting illegal and criminal activities by Gypsies. Simić, also disputes the legal absurdity of attributing collective guilt to an individual criminal acts.

*All Gypsies are not and can not be guilty if one of them breaks the law, and the newspaper instead of saying: this and that, by name and surname, did this and that, they report in large bulky letters: Gypsies have stolen ... Gypsies have cheated ... Gypsies have killed ... Gypsies have been mutilated ... have blinded ... Gypsies ... Gypsies ... Gypsies As if a there is not a single criminal act in the world in which a Gypsy guy has not been involved. In the human history, there has not yet been such a case in which what an individual belonging to given people may have done is attributed to all the people. And all Gypsies could never answer for the deeds and idleness of individual Gypsies.*

Another misconception of *gadje* that is discussed and deconstructed is the equalization of Gypsies with begging practices.

*But if we are not blamed for what the newspapers write, we must think carefully about another misfortune that bursts upon our neck. Many gadje (non-Gypsy) think that a Gypsy and a beggar are the same things. However, this is not the case.*

*There are two types of begging. The first is: when a man loses his job, he is hungry, his children are hungry. If the state or the municipality does not help him as a citizen of this country, then only two exits are left to such a man if he does not want to die of starvation: either ask for a piece of bread or steal it. Asking for a piece of bread is forbidden neither by religion, nor by law. Only the one who beats the one who steals is punished. The second one is the kind of begging, when a person, instead of working, goes around and in various ways, lures money from honest and pious people money for bread. We, all the Gypsies, whatever number we are, are against such kind of begging. We fight and will fight against it.*

Simić challenges the wrong perceiving of begging as a Gypsy cultural practice by providing explanation related to the social circumstances in which every person can find himself. Indirectly he hints to the fact that if the social infrastructure of a state can not provide for its citizens in difficult situation, then begging is just a survival strategy. Furthermore, Simić criticizes begging as a practice misused as occupation replacing the proper work. He ends up with a clear message that begging as an occupation is unacceptable for ‘all Gypsies’ who are against it and will fight it.

As a matter of fact, both non-Roma narratives (about equalization of Gypsy with criminal and with beggar) challenged by Simić are still present in the public discourse and continue to be addressed by Romani activists across the world. A recent study from Sweden following up on the debates in the Swedish public field on the occasion of massive spread of Romanian Roma begging across the main cities of the country showed that while the majority of the Swedish citizens believe that begging is a legitimate cultural practice and Roma ‘have the right’ and ‘must be allowed’ to beg (reference). In contrast to this prevailing opinion many Romani activists from Sweden were raising voices against this public view pointing out that begging is not a Roma cultural practice, that it is result of socially underprivileged conditions, and it should be forbidden and not tolerated in Sweden, demanding that the Swedish state should create better living and working conditions for the Romanian Roma who currently beg and live on the streets (reference).

## **Conclusion**

The interwar period saw the birth of Romani civil activism and the emergence of the first Roma-initiated publications in the public space in most of the countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was not an exclusion. The Yugoslavian capital was the place where most of these activities took place -- the few Romani organizations from that time being established and developing activities there, the only Roma-led newspaper *Romano lil* published there, and the first Yugoslav-wide organization (Educational Club of the Yugoslav Gypsy Youth) set up there for only couple of month before WWII. There were also local and regional initiatives led by Roma that, because of their informality, are less known and need to be investigated further. They were less formal, but showed forms of activism of Roma as local citizens in the field of religion and culture.

The most prominent Yugoslav Romani activist of the time, Svetozar Simić, started publishing *Romano lil* giving tribune to his own visions on what Roma should do for the prosperity of their own community. According to his statements, Roma had to provide schooling for their children, followed by professional training and 'cultural elevation'. These pleads were directed towards the Roma themselves, who had to awaken and self-organize the sake of their own community. The newspaper publications in terms of content and way of narrating seem to be strategically thought out with the aim to create a common narrative of the Gypsies as people united by common culture and historical memory, thus equal to the other people of the Kingdom. Expressing the Roma belonging to the nation and sharing its history was also important component of the newspaper content. Looking into the essence of the messages that the newspaper conveys to both Roma and non-Roma audience -- the need for Roma to be more engaged and self-organize as a community, the need for education and professional training as a key for better future, the fight against majority misconceptions about the Gypsies -- one is astonished by the resemblances with some of the messages of nowadays Romani activism and tends to think how little has changed despite the fact that a century has passed.