

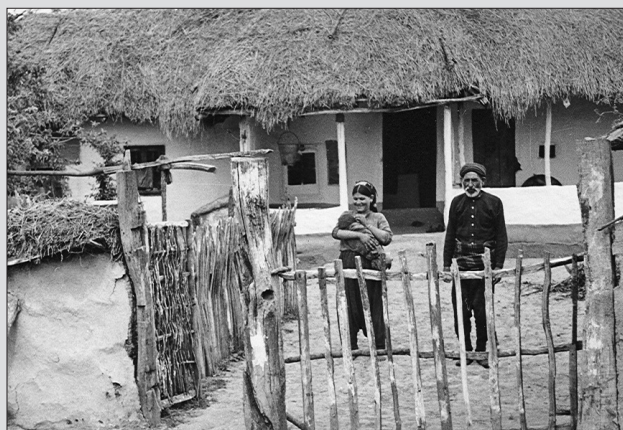


# Romani Muslims in the Balkans

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*For centuries numerous Romani communities have lived in the Balkans. Their members are referred to as “Turkish Gypsies” (турски цигани, турко-γύφτοι, țigani turci and other, similar names) by the surrounding population. In many cases the Gypsies themselves use the same appellation. These Roma are Muslims and in most cases entirely, or at least partially, Turkish-speaking. Many of them also speak Romani or have spoken it in the past. In some cases, the latter is preserved only by the older generations; in other cases, a mixture of Turkish and Romani is still in use. They are neither a unified nor a homogeneous community. The existing country borders divide the Muslim Romani communities. Additionally, they are further differentiated into more or less detached communities according to various parameters (including endogamy).*



III. 1, 2 *Xoraxane* Roma from Southern Dobruja. National Ethnographic Archive of Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (50ties of 20th century)

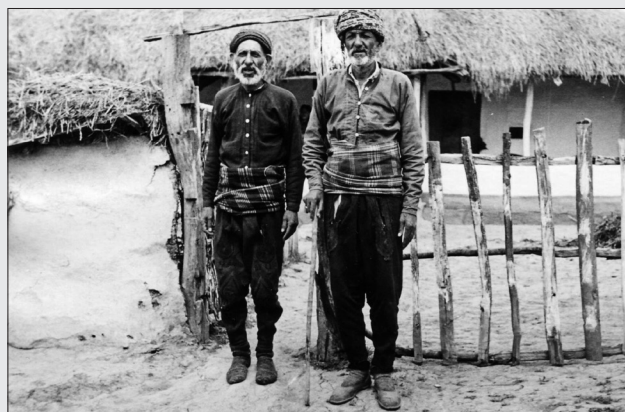
## HISTORY

The first arrival of Romani Muslims in the Balkans is connected to the Ottoman invasion and the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the region during the 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of the Romani Muslims were directly involved in the conquest by participat-

ing in auxiliary army units or as craftsmen serving the army. At that time there was already a Romani population in the Balkans who had settled there as a result of earlier migrations (starting from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and, according to some authors, even since the 9<sup>th</sup> century).

The Ottoman Empire dominated the Balkans for over five centuries and made a distinct impression on the culture

and history of the region, including on the new one-nation Balkan states, established in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under the designation *kıpti* or *çingene* the Roma living in the Balkans were described in various official documents throughout the existence of the Empire. From these documents, in particular from various tax registers (some of them specifically devoted to Roma), the changes of their



III. 3, 4 *Xoraxane* Roma from Southern Dobruja. National Ethnographic Archive of Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (50ties of 20th century)

religion over time can be traced.

Based on the information from the corpus of law and regulations relating to the population in the province of Rumelia (covering most of the Balkans) from 1475, the time of Mehmed II Fatih, it is clear that all Roma, whether Muslim or Christian, paid poll tax (*haraç* or *cizye*) only payable by non-Muslims in principle, with some tax benefits for Romani Muslims. The vast tax register of Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent from 1522-1523, covering specifically Roma in Rumelia, recorded 10,294 Christian and 4,203 Muslim Gypsy households (including 471 widow's households, and in addition to the so-called *Gypsy sancak*, 2,694 Muslim households were included as well). This means that there were approximately 66,000 Gypsies in the Balkans, of which about 47,000 were Christian (i.e. the majority). Distribution of these 17,191 Romani households according to current state borders is as follows: Turkey – 3,185, Greece – 2,512, Albania – 374, the former Yugoslavia – 4,382 and Bulgaria – 5,701. The location of the remaining 1,037 households is uncertain. Considering these numbers and looking at the names of Roma in this register, it becomes clear that some of the Muslims used to be Christians in the recent past, i.e. there is a gradual process of Islamisation among the Roma in the Balkans.

On the one hand, the authori-

ties in the Ottoman Empire, without resorting to violent measures, promoted the adoption of Islam by Roma in various ways (mostly through tax incentives). On the other hand, Roma were in fact not accepted as “true Muslims”, for which there is much historic evidence. One of most outspoken examples is one case from Bosnia, where in 1693 the Rom Selim, the son of Osman, a baker, turned to the court in Sarajevo with the request to be exempted from the payment of the poll tax ‘as an infidel’. In the request he stated: “[...] I am the son of a Muslim and I am a Muslim. I live in the Muslim quarter and along with my co-residents pay the tithe when I can manage it. Moreover, along with the Muslims I pray five times a day and send my children to the religious school to learn the Koran along with the rest of the children. I work on my baking orders, and my lawful wife avoids strangers [...]”

With his request he enclosed his wedding certificate and a circular letter from the Sultan, dealing with the payment of taxes by Muslims. According to the final decision of the court the claimant was exempted from the payment of poll tax, although it is clear that in dozens of other cases the Gypsies did not have the opportunity to turn to the official courts.

Demographic data for Roma

in the Ottoman Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century are quite unclear. The last comprehensive evidence concerning the Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire available dates from 1695 when a total of 45,000 Gypsies were registered in Anatolia and Rumelia. According to the system of tax registration adopted, only the men paying tax were counted. Of these, 10,000 were Muslims paying 5 *kuruş* poll tax per person, while the rest were Christians paying 6 *kuruş*.

The ratio between Romani Muslims and Romani Christians continually changed. In spite of unreliable demographic data, we can state that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the balance had already radically altered and the Muslims were in the majority. The ratio of Christian to Muslim has been calculated by different authors as 1:3 or 1:4, but it is difficult to obtain a precise figure. From the numbers available we can conclude that over the centuries there was a continuing trend to adopt Islam.

The coming into existence of new ethno-national states in the Balkans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century radically changed the public status and the position of the “Turkish Gypsies” because the official religion changed from Islam to Eastern Orthodoxy and the official language as well as the system of government was reformed. The importance of this factor cannot be overlooked when examining

its influence on processes of changes in the complex structure of the religion and identity of Roma. These processes are diverse, multidirectional and sometimes

even contradictory in nature in addition to being influenced by different factors pertaining to the macrosociety in which they live as well as their internal hetero-

geneity. As a final result, complex and heterogeneous communities of Muslim Roma in the Balkans had already formed by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



III. 5 Nomadic Roma near Edirne.  
Archive Studii Romani (2005)



III. 6 Nomadic *Sepečides* peeling figs in Istanbul.  
Archive Studii Romani (2005)

## STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY OF THE COMMUNITES

The existence of numerous Romani Muslim communities in the Balkans is something natural (i.e. it is in conformity with objective laws governing the development of society), bearing in mind the historical fate of the region. They are most often called “Turkish Gypsies”, as there is a correlation and even reciprocal change between religion and ethnic identity in the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire. Thus the term “Turkish” could mean that they are Muslim, and in reciprocity, if they are Muslim, they are “Turks”.

In **Bulgaria** the most numerous and heterogeneous Romani community is the community of the so-called *турски цигани* (“Turkish Gypsies”) with the self-appellation *Xoroxane/Xoraxane Roma*.

The processes of identity change differ considerably from region to region as well as among different Romani groups’ metagroup units and subgroup subdivisions.

In northwestern Bulgaria as well as in Sofia and Kyustendil, Muslim

Gypsies have dominated in numbers in the past, but in the independent Bulgarian state most of them have converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. They have also preserved their Romani identity and their internal group division into e.g. *Erlii*, *Kalajdžii* etc. In most cases, they lost their century-old designation of *Xoraxane Roma* (i.e. “Turkish Roma”, in the sense of Muslims). In southwestern Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia) some of the *Xoraxane Roma* have preserved their Romani identity. A smaller fraction prefers to declare themselves as “Turks”, although not very emphatically, mixing ethnicity with the professed religion (Islam).

Some groups living in eastern Bulgaria who have preserved their Romani language as their “own”, or at least use it in addition to Turkish, have a more or less strongly expressed Romani identity. Some of them are still followers of Islam, for instance the *Futadžii*, *Košničari*, *Džambazi*, and the *Fičiri* and others in southern Bulgaria, the *Feredželi* in northeastern Bulgaria, the *Mexterii* in Dobrudzha, etc. Others have converted to Orthodoxy, for example the *Musikanti* (or *Čalgadžii*) in northeastern Bulgaria or the *Gradeški Tsigani* in southeastern Bul-

garia (both communities are very closely related in terms of their dialect and, more recently, they resettled from the regions of Sliven and Kotel). Other significant parts of the Romani community in these regions have a Romani identity but have lost their former group divisions and exclusively declare themselves as *Xoraxane Roma* (i.e. “Turkish Roma”).

In eastern Bulgaria there are also other large communities who speak exclusively Turkish or Romani in a strongly Turkicised form that is spoken only by older generations. These communities deny their Romani identity (although their surrounding population designates them as “Turkish Gypsies”). Usually, when they have to state their identity, they prefer the ethnically neutral term *Milliet* (meaning “people”) and rarely use other expressions such as “Muslims” and “minority”. A significant number have also adopted a Turkish identity, at least in front of strangers, and publicly declare themselves as Turks. Some of them, living in northeastern Bulgaria, have preserved their group identity, for instance the *Usta-milliet* (meaning “master blacksmiths”) and *Čarale* or *Kjuldžii* (meaning “ash”, the same in both Turkish





III. 7 Begging women with child in Istanbul.  
Archive Studii Romani (2006)



III. 8 Romani fortune teller in Edirne.  
Archive Studii Romani (2005)

and Romani), in addition to pointing to the fact that the name indicates their old group occupation of blacksmithing.

Processes of replacing the Romani identity with a Turkish one (which is often combined with the replacement of the Romani language with Turkish) already started during the Ottoman Empire when part of the “Gypsies” voluntarily chose to assimilate into the dominant majority.

It seems paradoxical, however, that these processes have rapidly intensified in the independent Bulgarian state (from 1878), i.e. in the time when these processes are oriented not towards the ruling majority, but towards another minority. The explanation for this could be found in the line of the common religion (Islam) and in mixing religion with ethnicity. However, the more important factor is the much higher community prestige enjoyed by the Turkish population in contrast to the Gypsies: Turks were not loved by Bulgarians, but it is known that they are inheritors of a great empire, they have their own large country of origin etc., while, in the eyes of the macrosociety, the Gypsies are simply Gypsies whose community prestige in society is much lower.

As a final result of these processes, large parts of the communities of formerly Muslim Roma have today entirely or partially lost their own language and are Turkish-speaking and demon-

strate a Turkish ethnic identity. This phenomenon is widespread throughout central and eastern Bulgaria, from large urban neighbourhoods (Burgas, Dobrich, Russe, Razgrad, Targovishte, Silistra, Veliko Tarnovo, Lovech, Haskovo, Kardjali, Plovdiv, and to a lesser extent in Sliven, Yambol, Shoumen and elsewhere) to their surrounding rural areas.

In **Romania**'s region of Northern Dobrudja the community of so-called *țigani turci* lives. They are related to the *Xoraxane Roma* living in Bulgaria in the regions of South Dobrogea and throughout northeastern Bulgaria. The majority of Romani Muslims in Northern Dobrudja are Turkish-speaking, and only some of them, mostly from older generations, speak Romani poorly. The majority of them have a preferred Turkish identity, and most of them are tied to local Turkish (or Turkish-Tatar) social and political organisations.

In **Greece**, the so-called *Turko-gifti* (i.e. “Turkish Gypsies”), most of whom are Turkish-speaking and only some of whom speak Romani as well, live in Aegean Thrace (between the rivers Mesta and Maritsa). This region was incorporated into Greece after the Greco-Turkish War under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) which provides for the protection of the Muslim minority in Greece. The “Gypsies” presently living there have undergone changes regarding their identity with different results. Some of them

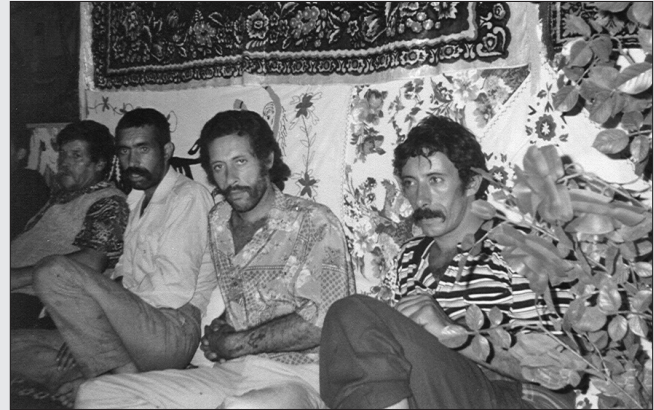
continue to use the ethnically neutral category “Muslims”, which is also accepted officially by the Greek state under international agreements. Another relatively small part demonstrates a more or less pronounced preferred Turkish identity. A third fraction expresses quite clearly the preference for a strong Romani identity, which is reflected in the statement: “Only we, the *Turko-Gifti*, are the real, the truest *Roma*”.

Under the Peace Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 an exchange of population between Turkey and Greece was conducted, as Muslims (including almost all Romani Muslims from Aegean Macedonia and Thessaloniki) departed for Turkey. Not only ethnic Greeks migrated from Asia Minor in what is today Greece, but, dragged by the general movement of population, also significant numbers of Roma. Most of them were Muslims at the time, but nowadays the descendants of groups such as *Sepečides* or *Sevljara*, *Kalpozaja*, *Filipidži* and others live in Athens and Thessaloniki and in some places in central Greece and Aegean Macedonia and are now mostly Orthodox Christians.

All Roma living in **Albania**, are, at least nominally, Muslims. In fact, the old settlers, who have lived on Albanian soil for centuries, are from the *Mečkara* group. In more recent times, namely the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries, nomadic communities such as the *Kabudži/Kalburdži*, *Kurtofja*



III. 9 Romani Muslims working as shoeshine boys.  
Archive Studii Romani



III. 10 *Balame Xoraxane* Roma in Bulgaria,  
region of town of Pleven. Archive Studii Romani (1996)

and *Arlia* also migrated there. The last migrants to arrive in Albania are the *Sepedži* from Asia Minor who came through Greece in the 1920s after the treaty of Lausanne and the subsequent exchange of population.

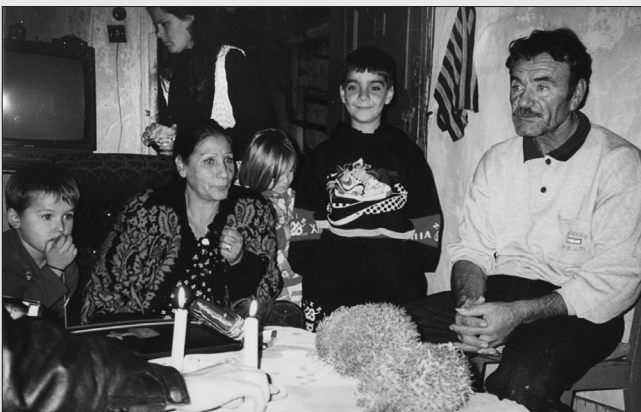
There are diverse communities of Muslim Roma living on the territory of the former **Yugoslavia**. After the creation of the Serbian state in 1817, a large part of the Muslim Gypsy population left the country while the rest gradually converted to Orthodox Christianity and lost their characteristics as “Turkish Gypsies”. The accession of the Sandzhak of Nish to Serbia in 1878 caused the Serbian state to try to force the Gypsies to accept Ortho-

doxy, but without any particular success. Today most of the Gypsies in this region of southeastern Serbia (the regions of Niš and Vranje) are Muslims. The name “Turkish Gypsies”, however, is used quite rarely nowadays, as the Romani identity has strengthened and they refer to themselves as “Roma”. They are differentiated from the rest of the Roma (mainly as *Arlia*).

In **Macedonia**, where the majority of Roma are Muslims, the situation is slightly different. Most Roma there have preserved their Romani identity and intergroup division, or at least a memory of it, such as the *Kovači*, *Barutči*, *Topanlii* and the *Bugurdži*, *Muxadžiri* and others

who migrated from Kosovo in more recent times. Some Romani Muslims who live mostly in the cities of western Macedonia – Štip, Veles, Kochani, Strumica, as well as in Skopje (not in Romani *mahalas*, but spread among the surrounding population) have a preferred Turkish identity, while the other Roma mockingly call them *Jalâm ağalari* (irregular Turkish language, the correct version would be “yarım ağalar”, i.e. ‘half-lords’). They still preserve their Romani language to a degree, and also speak Turkish.

The vast majority of Roma living in what is today **Kosovo** are also Muslims. Some of them designate themselves most generally as *Arlii*, others kept



III. 11 *Kaburdži* Roma, in Albania, Tirana.  
Archive Studii Romani (1999)



III. 12 *Mečkara* in Baltëz, Albania.  
Archive Studii Romani (1999)





III. 13 *Arli* Roma, Skopje.  
Archive Studii Romani (2000)



III. 14 Newly married women from the Egyptians' group dancing at a wedding, Podgorica, Montenegro. Photo Sofiya Zahova (2008)

their group division, such as *Bugurdži*, *Arabadži* or *Kovači*, *Maljoko* etc. While in Serbia the community designated as *Gurbeti* are Christians (as well as the related *Džambazi* in Macedonia), they are Muslims in Kosovo. In the past, part of the Albanian-speaking *Aškali*, which today is preserved mainly among those of them who are refugees in Serbia and in western Europe, have a Romani identity.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** part of the Muslim Roma lost their group identity long ago and now designate themselves only as Roma. Only some of them have preserved their group identity and appellation, such as for example the *Ka-*

*loperi* and *Čergari*. Part of the community of *Čergari* (referred to also as *Gabelji* or *Madžupi* by the surrounding society) also live in neighbouring **Montenegro**.

After World War II many Muslim Roma, mainly from Kosovo, moved to other Yugoslav federal republics, especially to **Croatia**. From the 1960s to the 1970s migrations of Romani Muslims were part of the overall process of labour mobility of former Yugoslavian citizens who worked in western Europe (mainly Germany and Austria), where some of them later settled permanently. The migration of Romani Muslims to the west increased sharply after the collapse

of Yugoslavia and subsequent wars and ethnic cleansing and widened the circle of countries where Muslim Roma settled (Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands etc.). Large parts of the Muslim Roma from Kosovo settled in **Serbia** (including Vojvodina).

Romani Muslims, descendants of migrants from the Balkans, also live in **Ukraine** and **Russia**. These are *Krimurja/Krimci* or *Kırımıtka/Kırımıtika Roma* (from *Kırım*, the Tatar name for the Crimean peninsula) whose ancestors settled on the peninsula during the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nowadays some of them continue to live in the Crimea, but most of them have migrated to Ukraine, southern Russia and



III. 15 Sheikh from the Muslim Romani group, Konik neighborhood, Podgorica, Montenegro, Photo Sofiya Zahova (2009)



III. 16 *Čergarja* from Selimović kin with their youngest son, Bijelo Polje, Montenegro. Photo Sofiya Zahova (2009)

to the Povolzhie (along the river Volga). Until recently some of them lived in Transcaucasia and central Asia, but in recent years have migrated to different cities in the Russian Federation and Ukraine. They continue to profess Islam at least formally, are often characterised as “Turkish Gypsies” as well, have preserved their Romani

language and have a strong expression of Romani identity.

A specific case in the Crimea is the community of *Tajfa/Dajfa* (according to different Tatar dialects the expression means “clan” or “family”), with their older self-appellation *Urumčel* or *Urmačel*, who are also Muslims, today Tatar-speaking and

with a preferred Crimean-Tatar identity.

Their ancestors migrated to the Crimea during the Ottoman Empire (probably in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries) from the Balkans and Asia Minor.



III. 17 *Dajfa/Tajfa* on the market in Evapatoria, Crimea.  
Archive Studii Romani (2002)



III. 18 *Krimurja* fortuneteller in Alushta, Crimea.  
Archive Studii Romani (2002)

### CONTEMPORARY PROCESSES - OLD AND NEW IDENTITIES

The processes of identity change, from a Romani identity to a Turkish one (often accompanied by a shift from Romani speakers to becoming Turkish speakers) among a large part of Romani Muslims has continued for centuries. However, in most cases, these processes remain incomplete, and Romani Muslims have failed to assimilate (despite their willingness) into the Turkish community because of their rejection (at least in most cases) by the Turkish community itself.

This incompleteness of the process explains why when the situation changed under the influence of “external” community factors (i.e. under the influence of the macro-society of which they are an integral part), these processes could not only be suspended and reversed, but even taken into quite another direction - to construct new identities.

A new situation arose in the

Balkans in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Eastern European ‘socialist camp’ and the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, under the conditions of a period of transition to democracy and market economy. On the one hand, Turkish satellite television broadcasting entered into the homes of the Roma in the whole region, and so the usage of the Turkish language and preferred identity was strengthened. On the other hand, foreign assistance for the development of the Romani NGO sector, numerous governmental policies and projects for Roma and also a rapidly growing Romani evangelical movement took the process in another direction. Under their influence individual representatives and large parts of the Muslim Roma, previously with a preferred Turkish identity, returned to their Romani identity, and some even recovered their Romani language (mainly under the influence of evangelical gospel hymns and sermons in Romani).

There are, however, other trends associated with searching for a “third way” to identity development, which liberates the “Turkish Gypsies” from having to make the difficult choice of identity - as “Turks” or as “Gypsies or Roma”. The beginnings of such a development (but still with no clear results) are observed mainly in Bulgaria and also in Greece.

The most far-reaching and most complete forms have nowadays reached the search for a new identity among the Albanian-speaking communities living in the western Balkans (Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia). These communities are univocally defined as “Gypsies” by their surrounding population (*Jevg*, *Madžup*, *Гюпту/Гюпци*, *Египќани* and similar local appellations are used), although for a long time large parts of these communities had a preferred Albanian identity. The beginning of the process of seeking their own alternative identity in these Albanian speaking communities dates





III. 19 Grave of *Krimurja* in Kiev, Ukraine.  
Archive Studii Romani (2007)



III. 20 *Teatri Ashkali* at the Celebration of the anniversary of the *Ashkali* Minority.

back to the early 1970s. The processes sped up following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the creation of new states and nations in the 1990s. The process was completed after the proclamation of independence of Kosovo, where, under the influence of international forces, the existence of all RAE communities (*Roma*, *Ashkali*, *Egyptians*) was confirmed on the constitutional and legislative level with the guaranteed right to elect their representatives in the local

parliament. The processes in neighbouring Montenegro are also developing similarly where after the resettlement of thousands of refugees from Kosovo, the officially used umbrella term nowadays is “Roma and Egyptians” (this term includes Slavic-speaking *Kovači* from the towns of Bar and Ulcin).

The construction of a new identity is also advancing in the Albanian-speaking community of *Ashkali* in Kosovo. Official recognition

of the new community in Kosovo (as part of RAE) has further strengthened the process.

Mass migrations and refugee waves of Muslim Roma from the western Balkans towards western Europe created a new phenomenon whose complete dimensions are not yet clear. Increasingly apparent, although still weak and incomplete, are trends for the formation of individual Romani Muslim communities in western Europe.

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