

God's Chosen People or God's Nation? Exploring Evangelical Roma Religious Experience through Bulgarian and Slovak Romani Studies

MAGDALENA SLAVKOVA



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*Magdalena Slavkova, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria, Moskovska 6a, Sofia 1000;
e-mail: magdalenaslavkova@yahoo.com*

In this article, I address the formation of an imagined Roma evangelical community based on their own conceptions of salvation through faith, referred to as “God’s chosen people” or “God’s nation.” Original research and scholarly interpretations from Bulgarian and Slovak national contexts are used to demonstrate that evangelical faith reconfigures the moral boundaries of Roma communities. The evangelical faith restructures social networks and alters followers’ relationships with traditional religious imagery, particularly through the reduced significance of the Mother of God and the heightened emphasis on Jesus Christ. This article argues that Roma evangelical identity is dynamic and continuously negotiated, shaped both by Roma group affiliation and national context, as well as by transnational religious networks. This dynamic form of identity provides Roma with new ways to cultivate a positive collective image, strengthen internal solidarity, and promote social integration. However, Roma pastors, who serve as recognized representatives of local religious communities, are not unanimous in their views on whether the Roma “God’s chosen people” community constitutes a self-sufficient category or a constituent part of the global Christian evangelical community. This paper is particularly interested in how Romani studies scholars respond to empirical findings on religious developments and how they engage with the concepts of “God’s chosen people” or “God’s nation,” as these notions appear in Bulgarian and Slovak Romani studies. Using both my own empirical results as well as scholarly literature devoted to the topic, my aim is to illuminate the fundamental assumptions underlying these interpretations, as well as the differences and nuances that shape scholarly analyses in each context.

Key words: Romani studies, evangelical Roma, God’s chosen people, God’s nation, Jesus Christ, Mother of God

Introduction

After 1989, Romani evangelical Christianity tried to wedge itself into the way of life of societies and occupy a space of its own, while aiming to dispute the bad reputation of the Roma people in the mainstream Bulgarian and Slovakian society. A significant number of Roma in Bulgaria and Slovakia decided to become evangelicals, motivated by the socio-economic difficulties of the transition period, which had influenced the emerging image of the Roma as a homogeneously poor and marginal social category.

The place of the Roma in post-communist society lies somewhere between their cultural traditions and the Roma communities' present-day religious experience. Bulgaria is a predominantly Orthodox Christian country but has a population of over half a million Muslims. Slovakia is a predominantly Catholic country that is significantly influenced by Lutheranism (Majo, 2011). In both countries, the Roma ethnic groups are the third-largest minority community, after the Bulgarians and Turks in Bulgaria, and after the Slovaks and Hungarians in Slovakia. In 2021, the Roma numbered 266,720 people in Bulgaria and 67,179 in Slovakia (Oficiálne, 2021; Prebroyavane, 2021). Such official statistics do not always provide accurate figures, as some Roma choose not to self-identify to avoid discrimination. Bulgaria and Slovakia are among the European countries with significant Roma populations, estimated at between 480,000–520,000 in Slovakia and between 700,000–800,000 in Bulgaria (Liégeois, 1999, p. 35; Kovats, 2025, pp. 137–145).

Heterogeneity is typical for the Roma populations in both countries, but group diversity is greater in Bulgaria. Communities such as *Dasikane Roma* (Bulgarian Gypsies), *Burgudži* (gimlet-makers), *Rešetari* (sieve-makers), *Kaldaraši* (whose self-designation is *Rrom Ciganjaka*), *Džorevci* or *Stari Bâlgari* (Old Bulgarians), *Thracian Kalajdži* (who use the group name *Vlaxorja*), and *Rudari*¹ are Orthodox Christians. The rest are Muslims – such as the *Xoraxane Roma* (Turkish Gypsies), *Erli* (locals), *Kalajdži* (tinsmiths), *Musikanti* (musicians), *Kamčibojli*², *Ajdi/Ajdini*³, and *Millet*⁴. The diversity among Roma is also reflected in the variety of their mother tongues. Not all Roma in Bulgaria speak the Romani language; for many, the mother

1 They have different community names, depending on the profession practiced in the past, including *Ursari* (bear-trainers), *Lingurari* (spoon-makers), and *Kopanari* (trough-makers).

2 The name derives from their place of origin, the vicinity of the river Kamchiya in eastern Bulgaria.

3 The etymology of the group's name is unclear. Its members live in the region of the city of Yambol in southern Bulgaria. They are former nomads, and today most of them are Pentecostal Christians.

4 The name is used by some Muslim Gypsies to distinguish themselves both from the Turks and the other groups of Roma.

tongue is Bulgarian (for example for *Džorevci* and *Stari Bâlgari*), Romanian (for *Rudari*) or Turkish (for *Millet*). All live in groups across the country, more or less mixed with the majority population (Marushiakova & Popov, 1993; Slavkova, 2007b). They live in their own neighborhoods, called *mahalas*, which are formed on an ethnic basis. The Slovakian Roma, such as *Slovačike Roma* (Slovak Gypsies), *Ungrike Roma* (Hungarian Gypsies), and *Vlaxike Roma* (Wallachian Roma) are Catholics or Lutherans. The majority of Roma in Slovakia speak Romani as their first or second home language. There are also Roma for whom Slovak is not only the official language of the country but also their mother tongue. In addition, some Roma identify as Hungarian and speak Hungarian as their primary language, which is reflected in the name of their group. Roma live mainly in Eastern Slovakia, often in separate settlements called *osadas*, which are socially segregated communities (Horváthová, 1964; Marušiaková, 1988; Marushiakova & Popov, 2007).

For these heterogeneous Roma, the complex problem of religious affiliation and the formation of religion-based individual and group identifications would be presented in an oversimplified way if the activities of the new evangelical churches were to be omitted. A common perception exists, though somewhat stereotypical, that the Roma do not have their own religion, but rather adopt the religion of the surrounding population (Hancock, 2008). However, this view is challenged by Romani evangelicalism, which many Roma accept as their distinct, specifically Roma form of religion. The majority of Bulgarian and Slovak Roma become Pentecostals, a confession that has an extremely strong influence on the construction of their identity as believers in Jesus Christ, while others, such as Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans (Bulgarian Lutheran Church in Bulgaria and Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia), and Seventh-day Adventists have been Protestants for generations (Slavkova, 2007a; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010; Slavkova, 2025).

In this article, I draw on both my own empirical findings and the relevant scientific literature on the topic. I conducted extensive fieldwork in various locations in Bulgaria among different Roma groups and have been devoted to the study of Romani evangelicalism for nearly two decades (Slavkova, 2025). In 2024, I conducted open-ended interviews in Slovakia with *Slovačike Roma* from the Košice region, as well as with male and female Roma and non-Roma evangelical pastors from Pentecostal and Lutheran churches in Bratislava and the Prešov region. Some interviews were conducted in person, whereas others took place online via Messenger. All participants had pastoral experience working with Roma communities.

In the following section, I present a careful overview of works of Bulgarian and Slovak scholars, often reading between the lines, to show the nuances in their analyses of Roma religious life and how religion affects the Roma's knowledge of themselves.

Roma Evangelists in Ethnographic Literature

Keeping pace with the general increase of ethnological and anthropological studies on modern and post-modern religiosity, Romani studies scholars have been conducting intensive research. Researchers from Bulgaria and Slovakia work with definitions of Roma identities and identifications based on ethnic or social affiliations; this reference tends to shape the image of a people divided into culturally specific groups with a common historical origin – an image that often differs from the imaginary of Roma believers in Jesus Christ and members of the global evangelical Christian community. Their affiliation is based on a desired connection to a broader community rather than being tied solely to a specific geographic location. In both Bulgarian and Slovak scholarship, the authors adopt a perspective that the boundaries of evangelical communities are not fixed dividing lines between groups but rather negotiable boundaries based on religion.

In their classic work *Gypsies in Bulgaria*, Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov emphasize that the various evangelical missions in Bulgaria work purposefully with poor Roma, giving them an opportunity for social integration; the most successful missions are those that satisfy the followers' longing for miracles but also provide the possibility of choosing pastors (Marushiakova & Popov, 1993, pp. 165–166). Slovak Roma have also opened to various new religious movements; the explanation of this trend may be found in the new denomination-based identities that the new churches are offering. While the Roma have been segregated from the traditional churches, in evangelical societies they enjoy the same rights as non-Roma believers (Kováč & Mann, 2003, pp. 9–14). The evangelical conversion of Bulgarian Roma involves not only adopting new rituals and practices, but also re-evaluating their sense of self and how they interact with both the wider Roma community and non-Roma society (Slavkova, 2007b).

Several fundamental studies deal with Roma evangelical religiosity in Bulgaria (Slavkova, 2007a; 2025) and Slovakia (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010; 2011). Researchers base their assumptions on solid fieldwork experience, which is centered on different evangelical movements that have influence among the Roma; the authors acknowledge that Romani Pentecostalism in Europe is the dominant topic of Romani studies. They affirm that the heterogeneity of the Roma community is still relevant in the research. Some differences are evident between the empirical results of various scholars. Unlike Bulgaria, where special missions are being organized among the Roma ethnic minority to this day, in Slovakia the Pentecostal movement does not recognize Roma groups as a main target for evangelization, even though most of the Pentecostal missions are located in the eastern part of the country and, de facto, some evangelical mission activities are directed toward Roma communities (Podolinská, 2017a, p. 145). The society of Jehovah's Witnesses has greater influence among the Roma in Slovakia than in Bulgaria, and their missionary work emphasizes social cohesion between Roma and non-Roma within the congregation (Hrustič, 2012).

The Lutheran Church in Slovakia is an established church with significantly greater influence among Roma communities than in Bulgaria, where it has only minor influence and – like the Methodist and Pentecostal churches – is generally perceived as a newer church (despite its long-standing presence in the country) rather than as an established religious institution (Slavkova, 2007a; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010).

The first Roma Baptist church was established in Bulgaria in the first half of the 20th century, demonstrating the long-standing influence of the evangelical movement among the Roma as well as the emergence of a specific historical consciousness, which has been examined in the scholarly literature. This stands in contrast to Slovakia, where research tends to focus on the contemporary state of evangelical religious presence among the Roma. This difference reflects both the distinct trajectories of religious development in the two countries and, to some extent, the different scholarly approaches applied – historically oriented in the Bulgarian context and more socially oriented in the Slovak one (Slavkova, 2007a; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010). The discourse on female evangelical empowerment has been better analyzed in Bulgarian than in Slovak Romani studies, due to the development of female leadership in Bulgaria (Slavkova, 2021a; 2023).

Despite the numerous studies, research on Roma evangelicals is often limited to a specific national Roma minority without drawing comparisons with other Roma groups or the broader population. I should point out here a kind of “methodological nationalism” in the production of knowledge about evangelical Roma; this is the term used by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002). Garapich also refers to this in his study of Polish Roma followers of the Jehovah’s Witness faith (Garapich, 2023). Although Bulgarian and Slovak scholars study the same phenomena and there are evident parallels in their analyses, cooperation between them has been only incidental. A special issue of *Romani Studies* has for the first time deepened the Bulgarian-Slovak conversation about post-traditional forms of religiosity and spirituality of the Roma in Europe (Zachar Podolinská & Hrustič, 2021).

The topic of the existence of an imagined community of evangelical Roma, called “God’s chosen people,” is mentioned only sporadically in the literature. Paloma Gay y Blasco was the first to analyze the Spanish *Gitanos* (Gypsies) as an imagined diaspora (Gay y Blasco, 1999, p. 49; 2001; 2002). The non-evangelical Roma are a different kind of imagined community according to Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov. The perception of an imagined community is held not by the Roma themselves but by the surrounding population, which sees them as united by their shared Gypsy/Roma ethnicity (Marushiakova & Popov, 2007, p. 12). Unlike Benedict Anderson’s concept of an “imagined community”, in which members of a nation feel connected despite never meeting and thus create their own sense of belonging, the idea of a Roma community is often based on connections that the Roma themselves do not necessarily recognize, but that are imposed or perceived by non-Roma (Anderson, 1983).

Gay y Blasco assumes that Pentecostalism transforms the representation that *Gitanos* have of themselves into the idea of a new kind of imagined community, in

which their status, roles, and interrelations are changed (Gay y Blasco, 2000; 2001; 2004). Similar to what I observed among the Roma with whom I worked, her informants believed that faith changed the life of *Gitanos* everywhere throughout the world and would make God's chosen people of them (Gay y Blasco, 2004, p. 257). However, in contrast with her observations, the Bulgarian Roma see a projection of the imagined community in non-Roma evangelicals as well (Slavkova, 2025).

The concept of "God's chosen people" proclaims equality between members in the name of Jesus Christ, as in God's nation. Based on her own empirical findings, Podolinská describes the global community as a specific category called "God's people" or "God's nation" (Podolinská, 2015), or only God's nation (Podolinská, 2017b). According to the author, the more widespread notion is that of a radical change, under God's influence, in the role of the Roma nation from the collective ethnic category of "Roma nation" to a different type of community, in which Roma groups are unified as God's nation (Podolinská, 2017a). In the Bulgarian context, this concept is present in a more fluid form due to the great diversity of Roma groups; the long historical experience of the Roma evangelical movement, which has persisted under various political regimes; and the more advanced institutionalization of faith through various Roma churches, societies, and associations. Many Roma pastors desire to be authoritative leaders; this pertains to cases of female leadership as well. Thus, there are no universal Roma figures around whom the members of the community of God's chosen people might be united as God's nation (Slavkova, 2025).

The affiliation to the community of God's chosen people is something desired rather than fixed or constant and is closely related to a person's moral commitment. Such commitment involves practices of solidarity between believers beyond their ethnic attachments and those supreme moments when they unite around a cause (Slavkova, 2025). Similarly, Tatiana Podolinská argues that the concept of "New Roma", introduced by the Pentecostal pastors, functions as a de-ethnicized category, even though the Roma remain ethnically and socially sensitive. According to her observations, among the converted Slovak Roma, ethnicity is constructed as an ahistorical category of practice that is emptied of ethnicity and filled with a specific content in line with morality at the individual and community level (Podolinská, 2017a; Podolinská, 2017b).

Despite the nuances that exist in the definitions of scholars related to the evangelical Christian community of the Roma, they agree that it is united around the figure of Jesus Christ, not the Mother of God. The Virgin Mary has difficulty withstanding the attacks of the evangelical churches and maintaining her specific place in the Roma religious culture. The cult of the Bogoroditsa (Богородица), or the Mother of God, is widespread among the non-Roma Orthodox population in Bulgaria (Baeva, 2012; 2017; Bogdanova, 2019), as well as among some Roma groups, such as the *Rudari*, *Burgudži*, and *Thracian Kalajdži*, but no detailed study has so far been conducted about the role of Mary as an ethnic emancipator for the Roma communities. For instance, Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov note that

Thracian Kalajdži visit the Bachkovo Monastery near Asenovgrad en masse on its patronal feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 28), without indicating the existence of any particular veneration of the Virgin Mary among them (Marushiakova & Popov, 1993, p. 161). In Slovakia, we find details on how the Roma worship Mary and how they react to the encounter between the traditional Catholic confession and evangelical Christianity in cases where they have to choose between remaining loyal to the Virgin Mary, as the most important subject of adoration in Catholicism, or being exclusively devoted to Jesus Christ after becoming evangelicals (Zachar Podolinská, 2021a; 2021b).

God's Chosen People: Implications for Identity

Historically, various groups of people – prominently the Jews – have considered themselves to be God's chosen people. In comparison with the Jews, who are God's chosen by birth, the evangelical Christians believe they acquire the status of chosen through their dedication to Jesus Christ. Evangelicals do not reject the idea that Jews are God's people. They believe Jews are God's chosen people through the Old Testament, while evangelicals are such through the New Testament. The belief in "God-chosenness" is not exclusive to evangelicals: it has also been observed in different versions among Muslim Roma and Orthodox Christian Roma as well (Marushiakova & Popov, 2000).

The notion of "God's chosen people" among the Roma constitutes an imagined community whose boundaries and meanings are dynamically produced through ongoing social and religious practice. However, all its members are convinced of its existence and share a collective identity, even if they never meet one another, in line with Anderson's concept (Anderson, 1983). This sense of an imagined community is maintained through adherence to an evangelical moral order – a factor that, while not central to the creation of a shared identity according to Anderson, is pivotal for evangelicals themselves. Roma's evangelical conversions have given a new meaning to the concept of "God's chosen people". Conversion involves the redrawing of boundaries, specifically between the blessed vs. the non-blessed Roma; these dividing lines are maintained through the adoption and practical observance of a morality. Belonging to God's chosen people is a way to build a cohesive (moral) community. This is related not only to the subjective perception of the faith, but also represents a conscious choice of affiliation that all converts make. Roma evangelicals participate in rituals that they believe other evangelicals around the world likewise perform, as well as adhere to the same moral order, and create and disseminate ideological and religious messages in Romani and non-Romani languages through social media, TVs, hymns, and religious literature.

The Roma pastors help maintain the vitality of the community of God's chosen people by encouraging and leading their people to social integration and the

emancipation of Roma believers. They serve as universally recognized spiritual leaders who influence the development of local religious communities, but they also possess a broader vision, maintaining contacts with national and international evangelical networks. These networks include connections and reciprocal visits between pastors from their own and various other countries, for example, between preachers from the Stara Zagora region in Bulgaria and those from the Stará Ľubovňa region in Slovakia. Roma pastors shape the thinking and behavior of their followers and define their relationships with other evangelicals as well as with non-evangelicals. In this sense, they function as visionaries who regulate perceptions of equality and solidarity within the social world of Roma believers. These pastors possess the authority and capacity to act in ways that not only preserve a sense of shared history, but also – unlike in Anderson's formulation (Anderson, 1983) – enable the re-imagining and transformation of that shared Roma history within the imagined community of God's chosen people. Through this process, they elevate a previously marginalized and stigmatized past into one that is recognized as valued and prestigious.

People in various Roma circles have shown a special interest in the possible similarity between the historical development of Jews and Roma. While some find it attractive that the Roma may be somehow historically connected to the Holy Land and the ancient Jewish people (because such a lineage displaces their unprestigious history), others are convinced this idea betrays a complete lack of historical knowledge. Although all Roma pastors and intellectuals are aware that the Gypsies/Roma originated from India, the story of their salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is an important pillar of their identity and in the reconceptualization of their affiliation to the global Christian community. Some Roma spiritual leaders and intellectuals go further, expressing hesitation about the thesis of the Indian origin of the Roma and instead emphasizing their supposed affinity with the ancient Jewish people (Slavkova, 2025).

When I began doing fieldwork among evangelical Roma in Bulgaria in the 1990s, I heard them assert on several occasions that the Roma way of life is very similar to that of the Jews as described in Holy Scripture. Similar to this opinion, the informants of Gay y Blasco believe the *Gitanos* are a lost tribe of Israel and are in fact Jews who wandered through the Sinai desert for 40 years. These *Gitanos* had found that the Bible was their own written history (Gay y Blasco, 2001; 2004). An informant of mine, Sulyo Metkov, who was a well-known Roma intellectual in the time of the socialist regime and who later converted to Seventh-day Adventism, rediscovered the truth about the Roma people in the Bible, thus generating the idea of “our history”, which has spread today among various evangelical circles. Thus, not only my informant but all God's chosen Roma see themselves as having a prestigious past, made obvious by the myth of their common descent with other ancient nations such as the Jews. They find the answers to questions about their present in Holy Scripture; this perspective makes it easier for them to live and deal with daily hardships in work and life in

general. It also gives them expectations for the future, for “all is written there”. Sulyo Metkov not only believed, though somewhat hesitantly, in the theory of the prestigious origin of the Roma and sought others who shared this view, but he was also an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Protestant community, both as a writer and as a translator. He translated the New Testament and the Book of Daniel into the *Erli Romani* dialect (Metkov, 1995; Metkov, 2000).

This tendency to question the Indian origin of the Roma and to construct a new, sacred history extends beyond Bulgaria and can also be found among the Roma in Slovakia and elsewhere in the world. In Bulgaria, for instance, some churches have begun adopting biblical names associated with ancient territories or indirectly linked to the Hebrew language, and Hebrew songs are now performed during worship services (Slavkova, 2025).

There is no consistent and uniform perception among different Roma circles as to whether God’s chosen Roma are a constituent part of the global de-ethnicized community of God’s chosen people or rather represent a separate category. Indeed, some pastors tend to prioritize the concept of the Roma as God’s people, assigning to it specific functions for the emancipation and improvement of the life of the Roma worldwide without always showing any desire to categorically separate the Roma from the global community of God’s chosen ones. This is because Roma religious organizations at the local and national levels, and quite often supranationally, continue to generate similar (and even banal) self-identifications for their followers. According to Rogers Brubaker, we should rethink ethnicity in terms of practical categories, variable groupness, organizational routines, or institutional forms, among other attributes (Brubaker, 2004, p. 27). His view helps us construe the social reality of the community of God’s chosen people. Therefore, the imagined community exists through the perceptions and identifications of converts and is embedded in institutionalized forms of social relations (Slavkova, 2025).

Within the concept of “God’s chosen people”, Jesus Christ is God. Anyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social background, can become part of God’s chosen people by accepting Jesus as their Savior. The variety of opinions among those who believe they belong to the community of God’s chosen people suggests that the concept still has an uncertain, variable meaning. This illustrates how belonging to the imagined community affects the identifications of evangelical believers. Currently, the concept of “God’s chosen people” exists as the specific religious experiences of a converted man or woman, which involve the efforts of each person to behave as a believer who must daily fulfill certain moral obligations that ensure their affiliation to the community and that make up their very identity. However, the nature of the evangelical identity is fluid and must be actively negotiated. The process involves finding spaces where Roma evangelical identity can coexist peacefully with other ethnic, group, and national affiliations. Newly converted Roma present themselves under various designations, such as “new Christians” or “evangelists”, but one of the most common ones is “believers in Jesus Christ”.

Jesus Christ is the unique figure responsible for the creation of bonds between the Roma and other evangelical Christians around the world and is the center of the imagined community. While Jesus Christ simultaneously motivates, strengthens, and preserves the faith of converts, the Virgin Mary is in fact an ordinary human person. Evangelicals do not have a special attitude toward her. They are trying to change the privileged role that the Virgin Mary holds among the Roma. Orthodox Christians and especially Catholics recognize her as a defender and mediator, someone who is asked to pray to God on their behalf. A female evangelist from the *Xoraxane Roma* group in Bulgaria (who are former Muslims) stated, “we have already forgotten about the Virgin Mary” (Slavkova, 2025). Mary is also recognized by Muslims, who also believe Jesus was miraculously conceived and had no father, only a mother. However, it is easier for former Muslims to forget about the veneration of Mary than for former Orthodox or Catholic Christians, for whom she plays a significant and prestigious role.

In Bulgaria, the Roma perceive the Mother of God as a defender and a healer, but there is no well-formed ethnicized holy image of her, as exists among the Roma in Slovakia. One of the most common images of the Blessed Virgin Mary is of her holding the infant Jesus Christ. For the Catholic Roma in Slovakia, the Virgin Mary is an ethnicized cultural phenomenon with a special attitude toward the Roma and wielding great protective power (Zachar Podolinská, 2021a). The veneration of the Virgin Mary, which includes prayers, adoration, and visual images, is much more significant for the formation of the national and ethnic identity of the Roma in Catholic Slovakia than in Orthodox Bulgaria. Slovak Roma rely on her for daily guidance; they can communicate with her directly without a special mediator, such as a priest (Davidová, 1988).

Pentecostals in particular consider miracles to be part of everyday life; miracles happen thanks to Jesus Christ; they are produced by the Holy Spirit, which includes signs related to the relationship of the individual with God and tangible miracles, which are particularly attractive for the Roma. The Holy Spirit is also related to spiritual baptism. According to one of my female interviewees from southwestern Bulgaria, spiritual baptism is related to the idea that the Virgin Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit (Slavkova, 2025).

One of the questions the Roma ask themselves is whether accepting evangelical baptism does not make them less Roma/Gypsies. While the *Rudari* in Bulgaria have adapted to the new way of life that starts with evangelical conversion, they maintain a strong sense of *Rudari* identity, which sometimes translates into preserving some of their traditional practices. For instance, they continue to hold their feast for *Mama Buna*, who is a prototype of Mary. She is also called *Santa Maria*. *Mama Buna* means Good Mother and does not have a specific calendar date, but the feast is often held in August (or September) around the time of the Feast of the Holy Virgin (the Feast of the Assumption), which is celebrated on August 15 (or August 28). This feast is popular mainly in southeastern Bulgaria. The *Rudari* pray to the Holy Virgin for rain

or good health for their children (Slavkova, 2005). Women, who are in most cases the first to attend the evangelical churches, also believe in her power to protect children. They usually do not participate in the day dedicated to the Good Mother; only men do. Such is the composition of the participants traditionally, not under the influence of evangelism. Only one widow can accompany men to help prepare the food. In this case it seems easier for the *Rudari* as a group to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, although on an individual level this loyalty may be compromised. Here I am not claiming that all men participate in the celebration, because there are enough examples of converted men who refuse to do so, but compromises are made to preserve at least some of the protective role of Mary toward children and the sick – two categories considered to be particularly vulnerable. Thus, during church services attended by *Rudari*, the pastor quite often asserts the need to reject traditional rituals, emphasizing that only Jesus can help them in a difficult situation. Similarly, worship of the Virgin Mary is targeted by Pentecostal, Charismatic, and other evangelical movements in Slovakia. Mary is denied her potential role as an ethnic emancipator of the Roma, an attitude that could create tension among the Roma (Zachar Podolinská, 2021a, p. 144).

In local evangelical communities, whether Pentecostal or not, there is a set of unifying rituals and practices, such as communal worship services, sermons, and prayers, and the singing of spiritual hymns, that maintain the cohesion of Roma within a community, which may be entirely Roma or mixed, including both Roma and non-Roma. When Roma whose mother tongue is Romani attend church, these rituals and songs are most often performed in Romani. The creation of religious songs in Romani, which evolves over time in terms of style, music, lyrics, and performance, is a phenomenon characteristic of both Bulgaria and Slovakia. In ethnically mixed religious communities, however, non-Romani languages – frequently the official language of the country, Bulgarian or Slovak – often predominate, allowing the communities to remain open to new followers of different ethnicities. The spiritual hymns are performed by a church choir of men and women, and the pastors themselves are often gifted performers of spiritual hymns. Such are Pastor I. Panov from the Prophetic House Church in Bulgaria and Pastor M. Gažík from KS Milosť Podolíneč Christian Church in Slovakia. These pastors also organize concerts with their groups and take part in evangelistic missions both domestically and abroad. The importance of composing new spiritual songs in the life of the Roma has been well studied by Bulgarian and Slovak scholars (Mináč, 2003; Slavkova, 2012; 2015; Belišová & Mojžišová, 2014; Belišová, 2024). The creation and spread of spiritual songs on an everyday level supports the evangelical Roma's sense of belonging, both to their local community and, more importantly, to the broader global evangelical Christian community. Pastors are leading figures in nurturing the Roma's confidence that they are God's chosen people when they create songs in praise of Jesus Christ; access to this practice is available to anyone who has the gift of singing and praising God.

The Concept of “God’s Chosen People” in a Labor Context

Evangelical doctrine emphasizes that Jesus Christ is involved in all aspects of everyday life, and that everyone is responsible to Him for their actions, including whether a person works and the kind of work they do. Here, I refer to the negative image of the Roma, who are sometimes described in the societies in which they live as people who do not like to work; this image is important in that, after conversion, it is countered by the figure of the morally responsible church member who strives to provide a good standard of living for his/her family, whether by finding a job in the country or seeking employment abroad. Evangelicalism in its various denominational forms, including Pentecostalism, has developed a doctrine of radical rejection of the world and building a new identity of God’s chosen people. In this sense, the secular world is a dangerous place for new Christians, who must be constantly on guard against the temptation to sin (Brodwin, 2003). However, this change cannot be complete, as evangelicals work in a world in which not everyone shares their moral ideals. To ensure that they will resist temptations at the workplace, will not engage in dishonest labor relations, and will earn their living in an honorable manner, evangelicals rely on the image of Jesus Christ, which is in their thoughts and feelings; here the image of Jesus’s Mother has no place. It seems very easy to be a believer during church service or during a ritual, when, under the pastor’s guidance, each churchgoer behaves as everyone else, but for the working Roma, daily work plays a key role in displaying devotion to Jesus Christ, because each person relies on himself/herself to follow the moral requirements related to work. Interaction with the world through daily labor activity gives evangelicals a sense of discipline in worthily obeying God’s will throughout their lives; they know they are doing something that matters to them and their family, while also testing their commitment to God.

With regard to every action in their daily lives, evangelicals accept and interpret things in two interconnected dimensions – as a converted person who should self-improve in the face of salvation and as a Roma who is part of the community of God’s chosen people and therefore must help other Roma and non-Roma brothers and sisters. This imperative also applies to work activities. It is a personal way of showing dedication to the path of salvation and a source of personal development. According to some scholars, work is the main religious source of meaning, and self-fulfillment at work implies a specific conception of the self (Bártová, 2024). Labor activity is a sphere of everyday life in which evangelicals actually put to the test the social solidarity between members of God’s family. The idea of exchange of solidarity between evangelicals pointed my attention to the concept asserted by Tatiana Podolinská and Tomáš Hrustič that the Roma religious society is a hybrid type of network, whose existence and effectiveness is determined by religion, not ethnicity. The two authors conducted research among the Slovak Roma participating in various Christian churches and found that the Pentecostal groups had the highest potential

to produce bridging social capital, along with those groups in which an inclusive pastoral discourse had been established (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010). In addition, Podolinská argues that being an evangelical enhances one's potential to enter not only family- and religion-based networks but also professional networks within the mainstream society, thereby increasing one's feeling of social security (Podolinská, 2017a).

In a considerable number of cases, businesspersons of Roma or Bulgarian origin prefer to hire Roma evangelicals only because the latter confess the same faith as them and want to keep alive the idea of God's chosen people. I do not mean to say that evangelicals receive higher pay for the same work compared with other workers, or that the employers are more indulgent toward them when they do not cope well with their tasks, but only that they have the advantage of being hired before non-evangelicals and have the chance to get a job simply because they are converts (Slavkova, 2025).

Inspired by the formulation of Podolinská and Hrustič (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010), I developed a new idea in relation to the presence of the community of God's chosen people beyond the national context. Considering the results of my own fieldwork in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, and Portugal among job-seeking Bulgarian citizens of various ethnicities, I believe that social ties and religious ties are interlinked among the evangelicals, including Roma evangelicals, who all behave according to the same logic of mutual assistance. This gives them a special social advantage, which I define as *religious and social commitment* and which is especially valuable in the context of labor migration: when the newly arrived Roma need help and support, evangelical networks are the most active in providing it (Slavkova, 2018; 2022). Although the church community does not completely replace the circle of relatives as the primary network of support among Roma, it serves as an additional network and, in some cases, is the main social network that members have access to when looking for work that kinship ties cannot provide, following Granovetter's concept that weak ties (with people outside the immediate kin group) can be just as effective as strong social ties (relatives), and even more so in certain life situations, such as the search for work (Granovetter, 1973; 1995). Most importantly, in some cases, evangelical ties are more effective than kinship ties for providing help and support not only to the evangelicals themselves but also to their unconverted relatives. That is, their non-evangelical relatives may also use the religious network as a source of employment information, advice, or support (Slavkova, 2018).

Two important elements illustrate how Roma evangelicals cross national borders and how they use the advantages of religious and social commitment. The first is labor mobility, the practice of looking for an unskilled job abroad that is common among Roma in both Bulgaria and Slovakia, who often share the same migration destinations, such as Great Britain (Guy, Uherek & Weinerova, 2004; Slavkova, 2022; Uherek, 2018). Migration not only gives the Roma a chance to work, earn money, and raise their families' standard of living, but also provides them the opportunity to

continue their life as evangelicals in the local churches abroad (Slavkova, 2021b). In the context of migration, evangelical Roma tend to rely more than other Roma on securing employment through religious networks. Whether or not they know someone personally who can help them find work, they are convinced that, through evangelical solidarity, fellow believers, regardless of whether they are Roma or non-Roma, or what their denominational background may be, will assist them. This reliance provides further evidence of the vitality of the Roma imagined evangelical community. A clear example comes from Spain, where Roma migrants from Bulgaria depend on evangelical contacts to obtain employment and, despite having no prior acquaintance with these individuals, are confident that they will receive help (Slavkova, 2008). The second element concerns the transnational character of evangelical missions, which are organized not only in the Roma believers' home countries but also abroad. In some cases, during visits to foreign missionary sites, the Romani language becomes an important means of communication with potential evangelical followers, whereas in others the national language, Bulgarian or Slovak, is used instead.

The emigration of *Rudari* from southeastern Bulgaria to the Greek island of Crete is a specific example, because it did not change their practice of celebrating the Day of the Good Mother; there, they continue to believe in her protective role. The *Rudari* are foremost among those who look for work in the European Mediterranean countries; they start as low-paid workers in agriculture, tourism, construction, domestic services. Though I cannot say evangelicals are the prevalent category among people going to work abroad, they, too, are among those forced to leave their native places in search for a better life and work. The way in which the Roma talk about their experiences from work mobility and migration is like their stories of evangelical conversion. The narratives about migration and religious conversion tend to build on the dichotomy between the "old" and the "new" way of life, experiences that permanently change the Roma's way of thinking and acting (Slavkova, 2025).

The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is celebrated on August 15 (or August 28) and the holiday *Mama Buna* is observed in September. The latter is celebrated by men, who gather in a green meadow or park for the occasion; but all must contribute money to buy a sacrificial animal for *kurban* (animal sacrifice). Before going to Crete, some *Rudari* families lived on the islands of Lesbos and Mykonos. When the time came to give money to buy a sacrificial animal, two of the men failed to contribute their share; soon after, one of them had a car accident on their way to work and the next day the other fell off his scooter. Following the Bulgarian custom, the women, who are more often Pentecostals than their husbands, practically do not participate in the *Mama Buna* holiday, although they are potential users of the protection and power of the Good Mother.

The status and role of Mary are under attack from evangelical churches, which reduce her role to that of an ordinary human who is the mother of Jesus Christ. All supernatural elements should be removed from her image, and, in the ideal case, she

should be forgotten as a spiritual confidant, given that the Roma are expected to communicate directly with Jesus Christ. This is more likely to happen in Roma groups that have abandoned some of their traditional cultural practices and whose community life is organized around evangelical churches than in communities that have largely preserved their group way of life. The latter find it hard to forget the Virgin Mary's role as protectress, even if there are evangelicals among them, as in the case of the Bulgarian Rudari.

Conclusion

This article contributes to ongoing debates about whether evangelical movements are “de-ethnicizing” Roma evangelical identity by foregrounding a religious self-understanding or instead creating a hybrid identity in which being Roma and being evangelical are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. It fosters discussion about the development of the Roma evangelical community understood as “God’s chosen people” or “God’s nation,” the expectations that Roma themselves place upon one another to keep this community vibrant, and the challenges that contemporary religious trends among Roma evangelicals pose for scholars. The concept of “God’s chosen people” expresses the believers’ conviction that they have been specially called by Jesus Christ. It not only articulates emerging forms of communal identity and moral and cultural renewal, but also mirrors the internal dynamics and distinctions that exist among diverse Roma groups. The concept of “God’s nation” implies a collective identity, which may overlap with or redefine Roma ethnicity.

In Bulgarian social science, the history of religious mobilization coming from the evangelical religion and forms of male and female leadership among the Roma have been studied in detail (Marushiakova & Popov, 2021; Slavkova, 2025); these themes have been less researched in Romani studies as a whole. In Slovakia, the Roma’s social integration is constantly negotiated with the majority population; the Roma are in daily contact with different types of religiosity but evangelicalism is the religion that seems to offer them positive social change and various opportunities for professional mobility (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010).

The specific contexts in the two countries have fundamentally shaped the ways the Roma are perceived and analyzed as national minorities. However, the ways in which evangelical Christians construct, imagine, and justify the existence of their “God’s chosen people” community obliges us to consider the topic not only within the framework of the nation-state, but beyond it. Of course, the knowledge we produce is influenced by the cultural, political, and social processes going on around us – it is useless to try ignoring that fact – but the ethnographic terrain at times tells us more than we see at first. I am not advocating that we should always look for ever new phenomena to overcome the limitations of our national reflexes, and I am not against

digging persistently in a certain ethnographic field. Still, what we should do in some cases is to escape from the convenience of the established terrain. The silence kept on the importance that the notion of “God’s chosen people” has for the Roma, and for research, seems to be due to the fact that scholars are content with studying the manifestations of Romani evangelicalism as organically related to the local and national levels, even though most scholars have discussed it as a domain of new (religious) identity. I see the following reason why evangelicals become a special object of study and that they can be simultaneously viewed and analyzed as a local, national, and global object of research in the perspective of a “God’s chosen people” or “God’s nation.” Researchers emphasize the importance of the transformation of the converted man or woman and the building of the moral community united by the authority of the religious leader, who might be male (in Slovakia) or either male or female (in Bulgaria), in making possible the mobilization of local and non-local ties. The migration of Roma from Bulgaria and Slovakia to various countries, where they often engage with local evangelical missions in their efforts to find work, demonstrates that Roma believers themselves affirm the existence of their imagined community, which transcends both the local church and the national context. The sense of self-worth derived from being God’s chosen people is continually reinforced by pastors through frequent sermons and is sustained by members’ religious and social commitment to their spiritual brothers and sisters, whether they live in their homeland or abroad. This dynamic enables Roma evangelicals to think and act locally while remaining connected, through imagined bonds, to other evangelicals around the world.

Bulgarian and Slovak scholars describe identical structures of the imagined community of God’s chosen people or God’s nation, but their analyses differ according to the different contexts and configurations of the respective Roma groups. The dilemma is not so much about how the community is defined and named, but how it problematizes the evangelical faith and negotiates its cohabitation with traditional practices and beliefs, and how the Roma perceive biblical law and see their social integration with the majority. On the one hand, evangelicalism denies the past (sinful) life and disputes the marginalization of the Roma, whereas on the other, it has difficulty fighting some elements of the Roma tradition that affect the purity of faith. The evangelical Roma in Bulgaria and Slovakia are unable to handle their new identifications and activities (related to the “God’s chosen people” community) alone; this indicates the need for new spiritual leaders and new ways of organizing the Roma churches and societies.

Believers easily imagine God’s chosen people as a legitimate community in Bulgaria, but do not always imagine them as God’s nation, owing to the large diversity of Roma groups in the country and the fact that the spiritual and moral authority of separate Roma pastors is widely challenged: there are no universally recognized leaders of the church. Also, two different opinions exist in Roma circles as to whether Roma converts belong to a God’s chosen Roma community or to the universal community of God’s chosen people, of which people become members

regardless of their ethnicity, social status, educational profile, gender, or professional qualifications.

The evangelical Roma in Slovakia imagine they belong to God's nation. There are various explanations for this, including the facts that the diversity of Roma groups is greater in Bulgaria than in Slovakia and that Slovak Roma have been integrated into society as a social community with different ethnic characteristics. By contrast, in Bulgaria the Roma are perceived by the majority population as an ethnic community, which in fact means they are invariably perceived as Roma by the majority regardless of other characteristics, such as religion or whether they are poor or rich.

Through the voices of their prominent spiritual leaders, the evangelical societies and churches provide believers in Jesus Christ with ways to transcend traditional boundaries and commitments, to choose their own path to salvation, and to fight for a better place in society. Through religious practice, preachers in Bulgaria manage the converts' confidence that the Roma are God's chosen people. The identity of God's chosen Roma is supported by pastors by virtue of their religious and social commitment (Slavkova, 2025).

Roma evangelicals strive for, and succeed or fail to realize, their ideal of a righteous Christian life organized around the image of Jesus Christ – an ideal that automatically gives them access to the community of God's chosen people – by trying to abandon (with various degrees of success) the veneration of the Mother of God. The struggle that leads each evangelical to honor Jesus Christ and not to worship saints such as the Virgin Mary reflects the everyday spirituality and practices of the Roma.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAGDALENA SLAVKOVA (ORCID: 0000-0003-3828-0274) – is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She is the author of articles in peer-reviewed national and international journals and of the books *Evangelical Gypsies in Bulgaria* (in Bulgarian, 2007); *Busco Trabajo. Work and Social Relations of Bulgarian Migrants in Spain* (in Bulgarian, 2022); and *Conversion, Leadership and Identity of Evangelical Roma in Bulgaria* (2025).