



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria social briefing:

**BULGARIAN GOVERNMENTAL PARTY ISSUED A NEW
“CONCEPT FOR THE INTEGRATION OF THE UNSOCIALISED
GYPSY (ROMA) ETHNICITY”**

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BULGARIAN GOVERNMENTAL PARTY ISSUED A NEW “CONCEPT FOR THE INTEGRATION OF THE UNSOCIALISED GYPSY (ROMA) ETHNICITY”

One of the most sharp and alarming issue in the Bulgarian society is the one with the Roma population, its social status and living conditions as well as it's integration in the existing social, economic and political structures of the state.

According to the latest census in 2011, the number of the Roma population is 325,343, constituting 4.4% of the total population, in which only one ethnic group could be opted as an answer and 10% of the total population did not respond to the question on ethnic group. The majority of the estimated 200,000-400,000 Muslim Roma tend to identify themselves as ethnic Turks, some deny their origin, or identify as Bulgarians.

The demographic collapse in Bulgaria affects only ethnic groups other than the Roma. According to data of the European Commission, the Roma population in Bulgaria number 750,000 and they constitute 10.33% of the population. An NGO estimates that the number of the Roma in Bulgaria is twice as this high and their population grows by 35,000 a year.

The persons from the Roma ethnic group are distributed across all regions in the country. Their share of the population is biggest in the region of Montana – 12.7% and Sliven - 11.8%, followed by the region of Dobrich – 8.8%, Yambol – 8.5% against country average of 4.9%. Approximately half (55.4%) of the persons who identified themselves as belonging to the Roma ethnic group reside in the cities.

The age structure of the Roma population shows a distinctly manifested tendency – the relative share of the age groups decreases with the increase of the age: children in the age group 0 to 9 years constitute one fifth (20.8%) of all persons who identify themselves as Roma, the groups of 10-19 year-old and 20-29 year-old persons show equal relative shares of 18.3% each, 30-39 age group

constitutes 15.2%; 40-49 age group – 11.6%; 50-59 age group. - 8,7%; 60-69 age group - 4,9%; 70-79 age group - 1.9%; 80+ age group - 0,4%.

At the same time all data analyses show that In Bulgaria Roma population is highly discriminated: 59% to 80% of non-Roma have negative feelings towards Roma. They are emancipated social group, having higher crime, unemployment, birth, death and poverty rates, and not many of them attend school. Though most live in poverty, the Roma are represented in Bulgarian mafia and rich Roma crime bosses deal with drug trade and prostitution. Though most of them are officially unemployed, they have a high rate of child sex workers. Roma constitute the majority of prison population according to self-identification of inmates, with 7000 prisoners (70%) out of 10,000 in total. According to the current data, the poverty rate among Roma is between 61.8% and 71.4%, in contrast to a rate of 5.6% - 15% among Bulgarians. At the same time 84% of Bulgarian Roma lived under the poverty line, compared with 32% of ethnic Bulgarians. The unemployment rate of non-Roma in Bulgaria was 25%, while of the Roma it is 65%-77%. In 2016 only 23% of the Roma in Bulgaria are employed. The unemployed enjoy more financial aid than other citizens, especially for children, which may have prompt the higher birth rates of the Roma.

All this causes a serious social but also a number of political problems facing all the governments of the country no matter of its ideological background. This led to series of constant political efforts for solving the issues listed above mainly through measures of the effective social, economic and political integration of the Roma population in the society.

The official policy for the integration of Roma in Bulgarian society began on 22 April 1999, when by a decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria a "Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian society" was adopted.

In 2005 Bulgaria joined the international initiative “Decade of Roma Inclusion”; the Bulgarian Government was one of the initiators of the Decade. It addressed for the first time the issues of social inclusion of largest European

minority on the international political scene; however, one question remained unclear – who was to take responsibility for the implementation of the policies, which should have been the result of this initiative?

Later, on national level and with the participation of all interested stakeholders, a National Strategy for Roma integration 2012-2020 has been elaborated. This Strategy has been endorsed with a decision of the National Parliament. For the first time such a document has been endorsed on high political level. The latter created a sense of responsibility among all stakeholders – something that has been missing previously. The Strategy is a political framework document setting the guidelines for the implementation of Roma social inclusion policy. The strategy covers six main priorities: education, healthcare, housing, employment, rule of law and non-discrimination, culture, and media.

After the endorsement of the National Strategy regional strategies have been planned. These have been elaborated under a special framework, created with the participation of many institutions and civil society organizations. On the basis of the regional strategies, municipal action plans have been created.

The text of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Roma Inclusion (2012-2020) states that *"it is an integral part of the government's overall strategy for achieving real changes in the life of all Bulgarian citizens. Coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the strategy are carried out by the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEII). The Secretariat shall provide information, analytical, administrative and technical activities of the NCCEII"*. However, neither the National Council nor the Secretariat had the necessary resources and mandate to fulfil these roles.

At the National Assembly, only within parliamentary scrutiny are questions raised to the Minister of Interior concerning the ethnic tensions that have occurred in many places with predominant Roma population; to the Minister of Education in connection with the so called “positive discrimination measures” for providing scholarships for Roma secondary students; or to the Minister of Health in the case of incidents with emergency response teams. Sessions have been held in

connection with the National Roma Integration Strategy when submitting the bill or for its annual report. Although the Strategy itself was approved by a Decision of the Parliament and required an Annual Monitoring Report about its implementation, the only such plenary session was held on 5 July 2017 to discuss the NRIS Administrative Monitoring Report for 2016.

The debate clearly showed the dissatisfaction with the status of the integration process and the implementation of the Roma integration policies (shared by representatives of all parties) as well as the existence of deep prejudices against the Roma among many MPs (mainly from the extreme nationalist spectrum, but also among representatives of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party (the biggest right-centrist party) and the Socialist Party).

Currently the United Patriots Coalition in the National Assembly includes three parties with traditional anti-Roma rhetoric and anti-Roma policies. One of the leaders of this coalition, Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov, defined Roma as: "... arrogant, insolent, and ferocious pongids", and Roma women as "stray bitches" when he was an MP during the 2015-2017 National Assembly. Another representative of this coalition is MEP Angel Dzhambazki, who systematically, in interviews, blogs, and posts, calls Roma "non-humans". MP Stanislav Stanilov (from the same coalition) systematically calls Roma "social nomads", which has the connotation of "social system parasites", when speaking on the floor of the legislature. In 2014, the Patriotic Front's political programme included the following proposals concerning the Roma in Bulgaria:

- The children of ethnic groups with a mother tongue other than Bulgarian must take a language test one year before going to school;
- Separate settlements should be created outside the large settlements, using deserted state wagons;
- Birth limitation: limiting the number of children in Roma families.

In the programs of the other parties represented in the National Assembly – especially GERB, Bulgarian Socialist Party, and Movement for Rights and

Freedom, there are no such anti-Roma messages and, at least nominally, they adhere to a policy of support for integration and interethnic peace. The program of the present Bulgarian government (a coalition between the right-centrist party GERB and the United Patriots Coalition) does not include any anti-Roma points.

The overall political context for Roma integration has encountered controversial developments over the last few years. On the one hand, the parliamentary majority, established both before and after the general elections in March 2017, and the governing coalition for the past two years include nationalist parties known for their anti-Roma rhetoric. On the other hand, some current mainstream policies of the current Government have a real opportunity to accelerate Roma integration, especially in the field of education.

The period of 2016-2017 marked the full collapse of the legitimacy of both the NRCP and the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEII), which have been fully abandoned by the Roma NGOs and cannot implement their consultative and coordination roles. The policy dialogue between the Government and the Roma organizations is not terminated but occurs through other consultative formats (such as the Monitoring Committees of the EU co-funded Operational Programs) and direct dialogue between NGOs and institutions.

The usage of EU funds for Roma inclusion has increased significantly during this period. Combined with absent or low state budget investment and the crises of the NCCEII, this has gradually converted the use of these funds from technical means to ones that combine policy design and policy implementation.

In this situation and on the background of several recent cases of violent clashes and tension between Roma and Bulgarian population Bulgarian Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Krasimir Karakachanov, who is also the leader of the nationalist VMRO party, in February 2019 proposed compact measures aimed particularly at the country's ethnic Roma population. The issued document is called "*Concept for the Integration of the Unsocialised Gypsy (Roma) Ethnicity*". It includes a package of ghetto eradication measures, tackling

gypsy crime, community service, and control of social benefits, stopping childbirth, and a number of other mechanisms for the real integration of the marginalized part of this ethnicity. To address all these problems, the government aims to attract that part of the Gypsies that have been fully realized in society and represent authorities in their areas.

Some of the proposed measures are to stop welfare payments if Roma refuse to work or send their children to school, or if they “demonstrate an expensive lifestyle incongruous with their socially disadvantaged status”.

Karakachanov goes on to propose compulsory kindergarten classes for every child above the age of four and compulsory graduation from secondary school – which is already compulsory in Bulgaria.

Other measures include eliminating “lone mother” status for Roma women and providing free abortions to Roma mothers with more than three children.

VMRO’s plan calls further for the destruction of unauthorized Roma houses and the total elimination of so-called ghettos by local authorities, while providing Roma with the opportunity to buy the land on which they live.

Lastly, the measures include a crackdown on so-called “Roma crime” in ghettos, with a specific focus on “ring leaders, phone scammers, prostitutes and beggars”.

The propositions have alarmed human rights organizations, which are also a target of VMRO’s criticism, for allegedly “swallowing hundreds of millions of Euros” in integration funds and “making matters worse”. According the Bulgarian Defense minister „Nearly BGN 1 billion has been spent on Roma integration programs for the period 2007-2018, with no real results". He estimated that over BGN 815 million were spent by about 500 Roma NGOs, many of whom were registered only to implement a program and the intention was not to do anything real, but to get some money.

The newly proposed concept suggests also those unable to pay street cleaning tax must clean the areas they occupy themselves. The document also plan the "uneducated and unemployed" Roma to be sent to "training centers." The bill

also proposes cutting social assistance if the Roma refuse to work or send their children to school as well as creating voluntary security units in areas populated by the Roma.

The idea of the concept is to place emphasis on the socialization of the Roma population and their inclusion in the accepted standards of life in society, both in keeping a life conforming to the legal norms in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Whether the proposed new concept will be adopted by the government is yet to be seen. Deputy Prime Minister Karakachanov threatened that if his proposal was not accepted, he would resign.

No matter of everything one thing is very much clear and it is the fact that Roma integration fail in Bulgaria and this issue becomes more and more topical, because after almost 30 years of democratic transition, Roma continue to be the most stigmatized, marginalized and discriminated group in Bulgaria. The social distance between Roma and the rest of society continues to grow; most problems in education, health, housing and employment become even more acute. The exclusion of Roma from social processes and the lack of opportunities for participation in the structures and institutions of society at all levels became more severe during the last years. And all this happens against the background of a significant number of initiatives, strategies and plans at national and international level that should show the interest and commitment of European and national authorities to solve the challenge of integration of the Roma community.