

**WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO THE ROMA  
INTEGRATION ACCORDING TO  
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE LOCAL  
AUTHORITIES**

**ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF A QUALITY RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN EIGHT  
MUNICIPALITIES**

**ILONA TOMOVA**

**Integro Association, Razgrad**

**2011**

The research was conducted within the campaign “Thank You, Mayor!”, which is part of the international pilot program: “Pan-European Coordination of Roma Integration Methods”, implemented by several partnering organizations: European Network of the Roma Organizations (ERGO), “Spolu International Foundation” Netherlands, “Policy centre for Roma and minorities”- Romania, “Roma Active- Albania”- Albania and Integro Association- Bulgaria.

The campaign in Bulgaria was realized by 15 partnering organizations: Integro Association-Razgrad, “Diverse and Equal”-Sofia, “World Without Borders”-Stara Zagora „Health of Roma”- Sliven, LARGO- Kyustendil, „Center for Strategies on Minority Issues”- Varna, „For a New World”- Vratsa, „Iskra” - Shumen, „Roma Solidarity”- Petrich, Mother’s Center „Good mothers- good children”- Sandanski, „Detelina”- Byala (Ruse region), „Sun for all”- Peshtera, „New Horizons”- Panagyurishte, „Indi-Roma”- Kuklen, „New Path”- Hayredin.

The entire responsibility for the content of the document rests with the "Integro" Association and under no circumstances can be assumed that the described views and opinions reflect the official point of the European Union.

The project is funded by the Directorate General "Regional Policy", European Commission



**With support of European Union, the EC DG Regional policy pilot project “Pan-European Coordination of Roma Integration Methods - Information and Awareness Raising”**

## INTRODUCTION

Despite of the National political framework for social inclusion of Roma, developed to address Roma issues, the number of concrete examples for improvements on local and regional level is too small. The critical Roma problems like the higher unemployment rate, lower educational level among the majority of the Roma community, the poor health status, the unacceptably poor living conditions and the lack of infrastructure in the Roma neighborhoods are all included in the Policy for Roma Inclusion through a series of strategic and operational documents demonstrating that these issues are part of the Government's agenda. While in practice the real implementation of the adopted political engagements related to the Roma community is too formalized and insufficient, especially on a local level, where the Roma people daily face the problems of exclusion. In the majority of the Bulgarian municipalities and regions, which have already adopted strategies for Roma integration, there is a serious lack of systematic and consistent work on Roma issues as well as practical implementation of the policies for their integration into the local communities.

Throughout the second half of 2010 we conducted a survey among mayors, deputy mayors, experts on ethnic and demographic issues, staff members of the Regional Employment Agencies and Labour Bureaus, among medical doctors, school principals, etc. from eight municipalities: Byala (Ruse region), Varna, Kyustendil, Radnevo, Kotel, Sofia, Peshtera and Petrich. The survey had the goal to explore the barriers to the Roma integration from the points of view of a number of people, who represent the local authorities. Another goal of the survey was to also explore some of the problems resulting from the stereotypical attitude toward Roma and the related with it risk for institutional discrimination on the part of the local administrations' staff.

One of the problems in organizing the survey was the fact that the majority of the interviews were conducted by nonprofessional interviewers, mainly Roma activists, selected by the local NGOs participating in "Thank you, Mayor!" campaign. In many of the cases they were known by the target local communities, or either they were easily recognizable as Roma and therefore the interviewed representatives of authorities took on a certain level of auto-censorship and cautiousness when they expressed their opinions and attitude toward the Roma integration topics. This created some obstacles for the research of stereotypes, prejudice and the overall institutional discrimination. Another problem was that some of the interviewers did not manage to solicit the desired information and they rather sufficed to receive short, generalized and unclear answers. This creates another problem for the analysis and makes it even harder.

## **Social policies and programs addressing Roma issues and aiming at integration of Roma into Bulgarian society in the municipalities of Sofia, Varna, Stara Zagora, Kyusendil, Petrich, Peshtera, Kotel and Byala**

Throughout the years of transition from planned economy to market economy, social inequality has dramatically increased in the country. The structural reform, implemented without the required legal framework and mainly working for the interests of powerful and centered groups holding enormous political and economic resources, in an environment of lawlessness, lack of control and rampant corruption, led to the huge concentration of wealth in the hands of very small number of rich people. While in the same time the middle class was abruptly and significantly reduced and disempowered and the Bulgarian population was massively impoverished.

The Roma community was the one that was affected to the biggest extend. It was struck by the most massive and prolonged unemployment, rating between 37% and 66% of the Roma who are capable to work, in the period between 1990 and 2009. A significant number of Roma who were employed after 2002 work for minimal salaries in the seasonal work sphere and also they participate in the temporary social activities within the programs, organized by the MLSP targeting people who have been excluded from the labor market for a longer period of time. The huge expansion in the sphere of construction provided work for a big number of male Roma population. As a rule they did not have labor contracts but were able to generate higher incomes, even through the work was seasonal. The economic crisis, however, led to a significant reduction of the construction work and consequently the majority of the employees in this sector lost their jobs. The poverty in their families grew even more over the past two years.

Along with the process of dropping out of the adult Roma from the labor market and the resulting impoverishment of their families, a significant portion of the Roma population dropped out from other social spheres, as well: education, health care, social services. Their living conditions were dramatically aggravated. The level of concentration of the Roma population in isolated neighborhoods grew even higher and very soon four fifth of the Roma community became isolated in segregated neighborhoods. The institutions left the Roma neighborhoods and thus the negative processes deepened and their living conditions aggravated even more. All these happened in an environment of dropping out of the Roma

from the political sphere and therefore this blocked their opportunities to oppose (in an organized manner) to their exclusion from the labor market and from the social sphere. In the same time the negative representations, the stereotypes and the prejudices against Roma intensified, the social distance between them and the rest of the population increased, the indirect discrimination against the members of their community intensified, as well. This, in turn, blocked the weak political will to address the problems of the equal integration of the Roma into the overall Bulgarian society. The driving force to a more active policy in this aspect was the work of the International and European organizations, as well as some structures of the civil society, while the reactions of the state institutions were delayed and reluctant.

The data, gathered by the quality research conducted in a number of Bulgarian municipalities absolutely support the above-made conclusions. **On a local level the Roma are insufficiently represented in the political structures and institutions.** In few smaller villages with predominantly Roma population there are single cases of Roma who have been elected for mayors. In the municipal and regional centers there are Roma members of the municipal councils, but only as exceptions. There are a few places where some Roma are appointed as experts on ethnic and demographic issues, or either as health mediators, assistant teachers and social mediators<sup>1</sup>. A number of Roma neighborhoods in bigger towns and cities have offices of official representatives of the mayors with very limited powers. As a rule, all these positions are lower paid and the opportunities of the Roma to actively participate in the processes of developing the Roma inclusion policies, as well as in the monitoring, control and evaluation of their implementation are quite insufficient.

In the places with active and educated Roma who work in the local administrations and who skillfully engage regional/municipal governors, mayors and other administration staff with the problems of their communities, there are Roma inclusion programs developed, action plans and projects. Funds are allocated from the local budgets and other funds are raised through EU programs or from private donors (mainly West-European) in order to work on concrete problems. In these places we could witness a mobilization of the efforts of educated people living in the neighborhoods, of priests, women and youth to actively participate in solving various issues, in organizing the free time of the children and youth and also in the process of improving the living conditions of the neighborhoods. A typical

---

<sup>1</sup> For example in Petrich, where there are huge problems with the Roma integration into the local structures, the authorities appointed a Roma who was about to leave for Spain. After he left, there is no replacement on this position. There is a formal program adopted, but it is not being implemented in reality.

example for such a mobilization of local resources and activation of the municipal administration to work on Roma issues is the town of Kyustendil.

It is a widely-spread myth within Bulgarian society and especially among Roma, that over the last 15 years huge amounts of funds were allocated, but in fact nothing is being done. The truth is that various Roma programs and policies have been implemented throughout the entire country, but they were rather separate and not bound to a comprehensive strategy. They have not always solved the targeted problem entirely and sometimes they had good results but nevertheless, they were suspended due to the lack of municipal funding after the funds from grants were over. Even more: these programs are often initiated from “above” and the Roma seldom recognize them as their own, as no one has ever asked them what are the problems indeed, no one has ever involved them in their implementation, and because they have not participated in the monitoring and evaluation.

The lack of transparency in the process of expending the funds, allocated in the budgets or the funds from EU programs is another reason for the common belief that the resources allocated for Roma integration are wasted and do not reach the target group. Practically no one in the country knows what amounts of money and through what paths they have been received in order to solve various social problems of Roma. It is assumed that significant amounts have been left to the liaisons: various NGOs and political structures; also part of the funds allocated to companies to implement technical and infrastructural activities and services in the Roma neighborhoods have been kept at the expense of the quality and quantity of the provided stocks and services; another part of the resources has been spent for political election campaigns of the parties. Often there is a certain criticism that the poor quality of the services and activities implemented in the Roma neighborhoods lead to systemic waste of resources, which were originally allocated for equal integration.

In the majority of the surveyed municipalities there were various Roma policies and projects implemented at different periods of time. They all suffer from the defects mentioned above.

In **the sphere of employment** after 2002 such examples are the variety of projects within the Program „From Welfare to Employment”, Literacy programs and vocational trainings, street cleaning and trash picking, the seasonal programs of MLSP “Winter” to maintain roads, etc. An example for such activities is the description of the deputy mayor of Petrich:

*„Petrich Municipality has an approved project called “Improving the quality of life of vulnerable social groups from Petrich municipality through encouraging the social economy and creating conditions for social inclusion”. The project started on 01.03.2010, has duration of 18 months and it has to finish on 30.08.2011. The plan is to train 400 people and 40 of them are minority representatives. The first 11 people, identified as Roma, were trained in August. The goals of this training are to increase the level of motivation for active behavior in the labor market, to improve the work habits, social skills and provide support to find jobs. The participants are predominantly unemployed.”*

According to the regional Labor Bureau staff members, these policies have a positive impact for reducing the number of registered long-term unemployed Roma, although in the same time these policies are not sustainable and they provide very low salaries to the families and therefore they still remain in the group of the poor. In 2009 and 2010 the salaries received within these social programs were under the line for a minimal income, defined by the MLSP. These salaries do not cover the basic needs of the employed people, while in most of the cases these people have to provide the living of the unemployed members of their families. Thus the lower incomes within these activities, provided by the MLSP keep thousands of Roma families in the group of the extremely poor.

Another problem that was clearly outlined by the survey and which is targeted by some of the municipal policies is related to the problems of the **spatial segregation** of the Roma settlements and the slow process of **improvement of their living conditions**. We found out that in all sites where the survey took place there are varying in size segregated Roma neighborhoods<sup>2</sup>. Most of them are not included in the regulation plans of the towns. The predominant part of the houses is illegal. There are serious problems with the technical and social infrastructure and the poorest families live in unsafe constructions that put their health and even lives in danger.

As a rule the Roma neighborhoods within one and the same town differ significantly in their public utilities, level of integration in the overall structure of the town, participation of the residents in the local social life. Often, even within one and same neighborhood there is a social gap. A typical example for this is “Iztok” quarter in Kyustendil. This is the description of the regional expert on ethnic and demographic issues: :

*„Iztok” is situated in the Eastern part of the town. According to experts, NGOs and address register the number of the Roma residents is 9,000. There are social differences within the neighborhood. The neighborhood is divided into a New and an Old part. **The new part** that was built after 1950 is better urbanized and the living environment is more favorable. The residents of the New part are better motivated to search for jobs and to send their children to*

<sup>2</sup>Sofia’s biggest neighborhoods are “Faculteta”, “Hristo Botev” and “Filipovtsi” and there are lots of little ghettos, as well. In Varna there are 4 segregated neighborhoods: “Asparuhovo”, “Maksuda”, “Kamenar” and “Vladislavovo”. In Kotel- 2 neighborhoods: “Sadina” and “Iztok”; Radnevo- 2 neighborhoods: “Kantona” and “Garova Mahala”; In Petrich the two Roma neighborhoods are numbered and have no names. Peshtera also has 2 Roma neighborhoods. The Roma neighborhoods are isolated in Kyustendil, Byala and in the other of the sites, where the survey was conducted.

school. The problem of early marriages is not such a big issue, as the age for marriage has grown. **The Old part** is not urbanized and the living conditions are extremely harsh. There is no running water and no sewerage. The predominant number of homes are constructed with materials at hand. The attitudes, the status and the behavior of the residents of the two parts have differentiated clearly. The Old part residents isolate themselves even more and become marginalized. A clear sign for this is the fact that they always oppose to all indicatives for change, they express strong dissatisfaction and claim that everything is being done with the money that were allocated to them personally, they express their distrust to the social system and this an another sign for the level of their social isolation.

A big part of the neighborhood is out of regulation. The streets in the Southern part have no asphalt and no sidewalks and in the Northern part the asphalt is ruined. The numbering of the houses is incorrect, especially on the “Banska, Lyubimets, Ropotamo, Strelcha and Sofia” streets. There street lamps but 70% of them do not function. There is only one road leading to the market place.

The water supply system and the sewerage do not cover the entire neighborhood and it is old and broken. Some of the streets have no water supply throughout the whole year. Often there are emergencies and breakdowns in the water supply and sewerage systems and it is very had to fix them due to the lack of infrastructure. In the North part of the quarter the water pressure is insufficient and the water does not reach the second floors of the houses.

The living conditions of the Roma throughout the region are comparatively worse than those of the rest of the population. According to OSI the average living space of Bulgarian families is 66.72 square meters, while for the Roma families it is 49.15 square meters: approximately 31.25 square meters per 1 Bulgarian family member and only 12.89 square meters per one Roma. Although the Roma houses in the region are comparatively better compared to the country, still 22% of the Roma families do not have running water, half of the houses have no water meters, one third- do not have access to sanitation systems or septic tanks and approximately nine tenths have no bathrooms and hot water within their homes. Over 70% of the houses are illegally constructed. Since 1978 there are plans for regulations and construction for the territory of “Iztok” although they could not be put into practice because of the illegally constructed massive houses and the shacks all over the territory of the neighborhood. The ecological status of the neighborhood is catastrophic. There is trash all over the streets. There are three dumps in the neighborhood. The river bed of the Banshtitsa river is contaminated with any kinds of trash. The insufficient number of trash cans and containers is the main reason for the bad ecologic condition. Another reason is the lack of access to some of the streets. There are no green areas and playgrounds.

The problems with trash picking and the illegal dumps in the Roma neighborhoods are practically unsolved. It was reported that only in Kotel and Petrich there were attempts to regulate the number of stray dogs through castration. In none of the surveyed municipalities the experts did not have information about any measures of pest control, while the big number of the illegal dumps, the lack of regular trash-picking and street cleaning and the insufficient number of the trash containers in the Roma neighborhoods become reasons for the big populations of rats and mice. The poor hygiene often causes stomach diseases, according to

the interviewed doctors. In some of the places there were cases of hepatitis (Kotel-30 people in 2009, Radnevo and Kyustendil in 2010).

*„There are no streets, but only cobblestones. The trash containers are broken. There is an illegal dump. People have horses and pigs. There are 2 registered cases of hepatitis-A. The municipality handed out brochures to all the community members describing the reasons for epidemics. A firm was hired to disinfect the two homes.”* (This is from the interview with the senior expert of Radnevo municipality, “Social policies” department)

In some of the surveyed sites there is no public transportation linking the Roma neighborhood with the rest of the town (Byala, Kotel, Radnevo<sup>3</sup>). The condition of most of the streets in the majority of the neighborhoods are extremely bad and inaccessible for the vehicles of the Emergency, trash picking companies, the fire-police and the police and they are not able to react to emergencies when needed. This seriously affects people’s lives.

Another critical issue, outlined by the survey is the eviction of the Roma families from the illegal constructions that they inhabit and the problems of providing them with temporary or social houses. Throughout the last couple of years this turned to a very critical issue in Sofia and other cities.

*“According to unofficial data, 130,000 Roma live in Sofia. There are three big Roma neighborhoods: Fakulteta, Filipovtsi and Hristo Botev and along with them there are dozens of known and unknown smaller ghettos. Roughly we could say that there are 15 ghettos. We already have one negative experience five years ago with demolishing the “Asanova Mahala” in Lyulin that was built on a municipal land. The municipality cleaned the territory in order to build a hypermarket, while the Roma families were evicted and provided with caravans on “Europe” boulevard in order to have temporary shelter. Five years passed already and these families still live in caravans, in terrible living conditions. The reason why these families do not have the rights to be provided with municipal housing (according to the authorities) is that their previous homes in the demolished “Asanova mahala” were illegal. The situation in the ghetto of “Batalova Vodenitsa” is similar: the Roma have lived there for a fairly long period of time. The Roma families say that their families first settled there 100 years ago, while the authorities say that the Roma families are around for 40 years. Throughout this entire period of time the municipality has never reacted. Only when the land under the ghetto was traded, the municipality started massive demolitions of the Roma homes. Between 70% and 80% of the houses in the Roma ghettos are illegal. Some of them were constructed on private lands and others-on municipal land.”*  
(interview with the ex-chairman of the Decade for Roma Inclusion, MLSP)

In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century one of the most critical issues identified was the housing issue. It is further complicated by the fact that decades long the Roma neighborhoods

---

<sup>3</sup> The mayor of Petrich admits that there is not an organized public transportation to link the two Roma neighborhoods with the rest of the town and he immediately adds to justify it- that the town is small and there is no need to do this. In the same time he points out that he is doing his best to provide bussing for the children in elementary grades and thus he reveals that there is a problem with bigger distances from the Roma neighborhoods to the downtown and there is lack of public transportation.

have been constructed illegally and most of them are not included in the Detailed Development Plans (DDP) of the towns and cities; therefore, services like infrastructure, trash-picking services and social services could not be provided and thus other problems related to this come as a consequent. There was a decision to make efforts to include the Roma neighborhoods in the DDPs and legalize as bigger number of Roma houses as possible. There were plans to demolish some of those of the houses that are posing danger for their inhabitants and those that prevent the construction of roads, pipelines and electric systems. There were intensions to expend more than 3 billions of euros through EU Operational Programs to achieve these plans. Nevertheless, the lack of political will along with the negative reactions of the rest of the country's population blocked the implementation of these programs.

Petrich is one of those towns throughout the country that do not have Roma neighborhoods outside the Common Development Plan of the town. In the past, this town used to be a resort and used to hold opportunities for income generation in the sphere of services. Thus, two thirds of the Roma families worked hard and managed to build two-storey solid houses. Yet, even in this town we could see some of the issues that are typical for the majority of the Roma neighborhoods (see the text in the Attachment):

*„In regard to the new Roma neighborhood, there is a Construction plan but it was not observed. Only the constructions on 180 sq. and 230 sq. are in line with it, while the rest observed it partially. The engineer infrastructure is constructed in 60%; the pipelines are constructed in 80% and in some of the streets we changed the pipes with new polyethylene ones; the sewerage was built in 70% with concrete pipes. South-East of the “Luda Mara” street where the new part is situated, the streets are not constructed in accordance with the DDP requirements. There are no sidewalks and the streets are ruined by the rains.”*  
(interview with the deputy mayor of Petrich)

In some of the municipalities there were partially implemented projects to improve the housing conditions in the Roma neighborhoods. Such an example is Varna: “Asparuhovo” quarter- the municipality was provided with funds through the Operational Programs and they improved the technical infrastructure: they renewed the water-supply and sanitation systems in the neighborhood; laid asphalt on the streets and installed street lights; the roads linking the neighborhood with other parts of the city are improved. However, such improvements did not happen in the rest of the Roma neighborhoods in the city. In Byala, again through the Operational programs, the municipality allocated 1 million BGN to build sanitation in the Roma neighborhood, but still the streets were left in a poor technical condition. In Petrich: almost entirely the pipes of the water-supply system were changed with new ones and the sanitation system was reconstructed in one of the Roma neighborhoods. In the capital's Roma

neighborhood “Fakulteta”, a project for providing water meters for the families was initiated in order to be able to measure and pay the water used by the families. On the other hand, the “Sofiiska voda” Company (a water-supply company) will work on improving the quality of their services: renew the water-supply system, improve the sanitation system, etc. In Kyustendil: in 2010 the municipality removed the illegal dump due to the disease of hepatitis, discovered with a few people living nearby. The rest of the illegal dumps were not removed and the waste in the river-bed was not cleaned. In Radnevo: there was a program, but the interviewer did clarify what it was exactly about. We have the following information:

*“There was a project of the Ministry of Regional and Urban Development which was approved for only 4 municipalities but it was suspended. It was about urbanization. They demolished the shacks and barrack. The neighborhood was included in the Detailed Development Plan of the town, but the project was suspended. 15 Roma families were provided with housing (houses that were previously owned by “Maritsa Iztok”) and the municipality pays the rents to the Mines.”* (interview with the senior expert in Radnevo municipality, “Social policy” department)

All over the country the Roma who work abroad manage to save money and thus improve the living conditions of their families. This is the major mechanism for improving the quality of life for a big number of Roma families.

There are **efforts to improve the access to education and also improve the quality of educational services** in order to prevent the Roma children from early dropping out from school. In smaller places like Kotel, Byala, Radnevo and Petrich all the children study in mixed schools. Yet, in Petrich there are cases of segregated Roma classes within the mixed schools. The problem is with the bigger towns and cities as well as with the places with bigger percentage of Roma population, where the number of the segregated schools either remains the same or even grows bigger. The reason is: when the percentage of Roma children grows bigger in a mixed school, very soon the non-Roma parents enroll their children to other schools in downtown. So, according to the terminology of Professor M. Grekova we are witnessing the so called “secondary segregation at school”.

For example, in Kyustendil, during 2005 the regional expert on ethnic and demographic issues together with the mayor’s officer in the Roma district initiated meetings with the educational experts in the town and the municipality and tried to persuade them that if they close down one class of first graders in the local segregated school every year and if they do not allow the new pupils be enrolled in the school, and if the Roma children are enrolled in other schools in town instead, so in a period of 10-11 years all the Roma children will study in mixed schools along with their Bulgarian peers. They suggested that the facility of the segregated school could be used for kindergarten or extracurricular educational activities. Also some of the rooms could be used for offices and social services.

These ideas were not approved. Instead of this, the Regional Educational Inspectorate wanted to provide bussing to the Roma students and pupils to the neighboring village schools but the majority of the Roma families did not agree. At the end, the segregated school was saved, although many of the Roma parents acknowledge that the quality of education and the achieved educational results are much lower compared to average in town. The rate of the hidden school dropping is too high. Even more: the pressure on the part of the child gangs from the old part of the neighborhood intensified. These children are bullying the good Roma students in the school and try to make them give up studying. Thus the situation in the neighborhood aggravated even more.

All the municipalities included in the survey initiated various measures and projects aiming at keeping the children at school, prevention of dropping out from school and overcoming the linguistic deficits of the children who have a mother tongue different from Bulgarian. Yet, the results are insufficient. Generally, there are some nation-wide programs being implemented in the municipalities. In some places the 5-year old children are included in pre-school classes (Kotel). In other places children start pre-school at the age of 6. Radnevo Municipality allocates 427 BGN per child (per month) in order to provide an all-day education at school for the first-graders. The major institutional efforts made in Petrich are addressing the process of enrolling the Roma children to first grade. It looks like the institutions are not interested to further follow up and monitor the attendance rate of the children and the problems they face at school. In some places the municipalities pay for one breakfast per child for the pupils in elementary grades (sometimes it is a fruit). The children from disadvantaged families are being provided with free books and school material, but there is no information whether the children after 7<sup>th</sup> grade are provided with all the books and materials they need. Some of the municipalities (Varna, Byala, Kotel) allocated funds to renovate the school facilities, construct a gym (“Maksuda”-Varna) and renew the overall equipment of the schools. In Radnevo and Kotel projects for improving the linguistic skills of Roma children were implemented. The projects addressed the need of the children to learn the official Bulgarian language and it was funded through the Operational Program “Development of Human Resources”.

In some of the surveyed municipalities there were project implemented to **improve the access to quality health services and also improve the health condition of Roma**. Health centers were opened up in the neighborhoods of Varna, Kuistendil and Sofia (in some of the neighborhoods) and they provide the residents with easier access to medical services, make sure that all the children are vaccinated, provide preventing check-ups, laboratory tests, medical consulting, improve health education and family planning opportunities. Along with

the medical doctors working in these centers in Varna, Kyustendil and Stara Zagora, Roma health mediators are also providing valuable support in the vaccination campaigns and the prevention of social diseases. The Global Fund against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria funded a project implemented in Varna and Kyustendil about prevention and control of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. There were also family planning project for Roma implemented in Sofia, Kyustendil and Radnevo and they were also aimed at prevention of abandoning children to the institutions. The Roma from Kotel and Kyustendil have benefitted from the services of the mobile medical labs, purchased by the NCEDI, Council of Ministers through the financial support of PHARE. The survey reveals that the 50% of all the adult Roma (above 18 years), living all over the surveyed municipalities, have not paid regularly their mandatory health insurance fees (monthly) and this is why they lost their rights for free health care services. (According to the local GP working in the Roma neighborhood in Kyustendil, approximately 60-70% of the adult Roma are not insured. According to experts from Petrich the percentage of the uninsured Roma in town is even higher). Most of the GPs continue to provide check-up and prescriptions for treatment. Yet, these people are at very high risk if they have any serious or chronic illness that requires hospitalization or surgery.

## **Representation, stereotypes, prejudice and risk of institutional discrimination against Roma**

**The stereotypical attitude to the Roma is wide-spread** among the interviewed people although the representatives of the local authorities were cautious to demonstrate any negative attitude to the Roma interviewees out of courtesy or caution. These attitudes are revealed in a series of details recurring in the answers of bigger number of the interviewees. For example, **when the authority representatives describe employment they automatically start talking about the street cleaning and trash-picking services and pay particular attention to them**, even in the cases when the majority of the Roma are employed in other spheres. **When the authority members describe municipal programs and policies for Roma inclusion, they start describing the Welfare and Social Aid Offices**, although the programs implemented in the sphere of education, healthcare, youth work and sports are far more interesting and relevant.

**The exclusion of the Roma from the political sphere is not seen as a problem** by any of the interviewed experts. Even in the cases when the interviewees ask special questions requiring concrete answers about the Roma representation in the local authorities, the experts try to avoid the topic or say that they have no information. Only in few cases the interviewees express their opinion and it reveals their **readiness to blame the Roma about their passiveness** and for their insufficient participation in political structures and institutions.

*“No. I would not say that the opinion of the Roma is asked when the authorities identify and prioritize the community’s problems and needs. On the other hand, the Roma need to demonstrate stronger interest and position. A little more pro-activeness is needed... There is no monitoring and control {of the implementation of the various social project-authors’ note}, while the participation of the Roma is even more insignificant...”* (chairperson of the Municipal Council of Byala)

The readiness **to blame the Roma for their own disadvantaged position**, which is a common indicator for the prejudiced attitude to marginalized community members, is a common opinion of a significant numbers of experts in various social spheres. A good example is the description of the educational expert from Radnevo about the education of the Roma children:

*„ In Radnevo municipality the younger Roma children are all enrolled to school, but later they stop attending school due to various reasons. The Roma parents lack interest in education and they don’t control their children. There are some of them who do not send their children because they can’t afford it... We received information that 12 children dropped out*

*of school. The reasons: illiterate families, lack of interest of parents. There are some parents who want their children to study. All depends on the families. A case: when they have more than one child, they share a room and watch porno together. This prompts the children to early marriages and early parenthood. No education, no family values... this is about the "Kantona"... In order to achieve integration, they need to really want it and not to be only provided with it. Also there is a need for good attitude toward these people in order to integrate."*

As a rule, the Roma parents are blamed for the lower education and therefore the educational inspectors and the teachers often see **the financial sanctions of Roma parents as a main tool to keep the children at school.** They do **not even consider the need of the teachers to adapt their methods to the Roma children since the majority of them have a different mother tongue than Bulgarian or because they come from extremely poor families and are bearing to school the consequences of malnutrition, lack of heat at home, domestic violence or the trauma of being children of single parents.** These children lack any appropriate environment for studying at home and they are often involved in activities earning the living of their families or either they help with the care for their younger siblings.

The university diplomas in teaching are considered to be a sufficient guarantee for the quality of the teachers' work with children who have specific needs. Unfortunately, the needs and problems of these children are not even identified and addressed at all. There are no efforts to help the children overcome their problems. If the teachers demonstrate any kind of understanding to the children's problems it is rather seen as matter of goodwill. Here is part of the interview with a teacher from the segregated school in Kyustendil, who is the chairperson of the Teachers Union:

*„In my opinion we provide a good quality of education: 95% of the teachers have university degrees. However, the irregular attendance rate of the students leads to a worse quality of education and unsatisfactory results. The facilities in the school are not good enough and the municipality could do something more on this issues... A very little number of the children attend kindergarten since the grandparents and elder siblings are taking care of them.*

*There are some tough issues and problems... Our students might have some learning problems because of the language barrier. I assume that there are some Bulgarian words that are absolutely new to them... It depends on whether the teachers will take into consideration the level of their Bulgarian language skills...*

*Several times per years we organize a check-up and count the number of the attending children. This is how we identify the attendance rate... **I think that if we sanction the parents***

*that the children do not attend classes, then the attendance rate will increase. Also, if the parents are fined for letting their children to get married before 18 years, it would be possible to put an end to the early marriages.”*

Another example for similar judgments is from the sphere of healthcare services: people working in the healthcare system are usually explaining the epidemics of infectious diseases in the Roma neighborhoods through blaming the Roma for their cultural characteristics and risky behavior, like for example smoking. They do not consider at all the poverty, the poor living conditions (in terms of hygiene) and also the density of the population in the neighborhoods. They don't point the fact that the Roma are poor and excluded from the labor market and therefore they are not able to afford the prescribed medical treatments or buying medicines, but they rather point out that the Roma “are negligent and irresponsible toward their own health”. The hardships, that the Roma face when speaking Bulgarian and their lack of sufficient linguistic skills is often explained by people as a matter of misbehavior.

*„The adult Roma are very negligent toward their own health. They do not do what I advise them, don't come to check-ups and they don't even buy the medicines that I prescribe them.”* (Varna, interview with a GP)

*„To some extent, the language barrier is a factor creating problems in the communication with Roma, although I am trying to understand them. Still, there are some young Roma who do not want to speak Bulgarian on purpose.”* (Varna, interview with a GP)

*„The major barrier in the education of the Roma children is the language... The other major issue is the attitude of the Roma parents to the education and to the school as an institution.”* (interview with an educational expert, Byala municipality)

In the sphere of healthcare, as well, the sanctions against the “non-compliant” are often regarded as a panacea. For example, in Peshtera, there is practice to suspend the disbursement of the monthly welfare aid to the Roma families on welfare, whose children do not have all the vaccinations. Even the so-much-respected, GP who works in the Roma neighborhood of Kyustendil, claims that until recently he managed to put the mandatory vaccines to only 70% of the children, while after introducing this penal measure, the percentage of the vaccinated children rises to 95%.

In some of the cases the interviewed authority members try to conceal their judgmental attitude and their preferences to attributing the blame to the Roma for their own status. They do this through either not mentioning the problems or through understating them, especially when representatives of the Roma community come to them not as clients but this time as

representatives of NGOs. So, this is a reason why they do not describe that the majority of Roma live in illegal houses in neighborhoods with no infrastructure and poor condition, with no access to electricity, while they rather direct their answers to the cases with no problems. The presumption is: the local authorities and institutions take responsibilities for only the “low-abiding” citizens, while all the rest take their own responsible for the “negligence”, “breaking the rules”, “irresponsible behavior”, etc. A typical example is the interview with the mayor of Petrich, who constantly avoided the answers to the questions related to the problems of the poorest Roma, as they “live in illegal houses”. For example:

*„I think, all the legal houses, of course, have access to water-supply and sanitation systems and electricity). We have problems with a place that I would not call a quarter or a neighborhood, but rather a concentration of people in one of the neighborhoods, where this problem exists. Though it results from the fact that the houses are illegal and they have no access to electricity. In our region it is the CEZ Company that works on these issues... While those of the houses that are legal do have the access to water supply, sanitation and electricity.”*

In a similar way, the mayor prefers to discuss only the fewer number of employed Roma and he just adds quickly about the remaining majority of Roma that they are unemployed but yet most of them try to find solutions through involving in a temporary or seasonal work abroad. The important fact that is not stated directly is: according to Bulgarian laws, the local authorities have no obligations to find solutions for the unemployment even through proving temporary social activities for the unemployed, or either through providing welfare aid to those who work abroad temporarily, even for those who have left the country only once and for just one day. Such are the cases of the majority of the Roma from Petrich.

A common form of avoiding specific answers to the questions that would otherwise reveal the disadvantaged position of Roma is the replacements of descriptive phrases with formal and imperative phrases (revealing the disadvantaged position would raise some questions like what the local authorities and institutions are doing to fill those gaps). There are no comments about what are the problems. Rather the comments are about what should be done. Here is a typical example for it- again from the interview with the mayor of Petrich:

*Question: „What should be done, in your opinion, in order to solve these issues?”*

*Answer: „Hm..., it is very important to have understanding not only on my part, but also on the part of the municipal council, of course, since a big number of the problems require financial solutions. So, we are trying to balance- both the municipal administration and the council- when working on these issues. I am far from thinking that we are able to fill all the gaps, but at least we have to resolve the most critical ones.”*

The interviewer asked a question whether there are projects implemented in the municipality within the EU Operational Programs that include components on some Roma issues. The mayor of Petrich with pleasure described an upcoming project about improving the central part of the town with no Roma residents and he added that the Roma will benefit from it as well since they also come to the center “or at least have access to it”:

*Question: „Are there any project or components of project that are targeting the Roma?”*

*Answer: „So, we have a project and we are now in a process of implementing the procedures of construction. This is about the access to the city, within the program for city/town environment: renewing central streets, constructing playgrounds and sport grounds in the biggest quarter in town “Bilyana”. Of course, this is not a project that will only benefit the residents of this quarter. All the citizens will benefit from it. All the citizen have or should have access to the new streets, sidewalks, playgrounds, green areas, street lamps etc. we participate in all possible programs that provides us with funding from those Operational programs from EU.”*

**In a big number of municipalities<sup>4</sup> there are programs adopted for Roma integration, or at least they have action plans within the Decade of Roma Inclusion program, although in some places they are only on paper,** even the local administration staff members are often unaware of their existence or have no information what are they about.

*„There is a plan for the Decade of Roma inclusion but whether it will be put in action...”* (an experts on minority integration at the municipality of Byala)

*„Couple of years ago there was a local healthcare strategy for Roma, but it is over now and is not renewed”* (senior expert in Radnevo).

*„The municipal council adopted a program for minority integration, and more specially for Roma integration. As far as I know, there is a component for healthcare, since there were 2-3 questions that the council asked me on it. I think, there is... I cannot say whether the strategy is being implemented. Most probably it is not being implemented.”* (Director of the “Social activities and agriculture” Department in Petrich)

In some of the places the ways the Roma neighborhoods are indicated demonstrate that the Roma are not considered as normal human beings. For example, in Petrich there are two Roma neighborhoods and they have no names or even they are numbered instead. *„We have 2*

---

<sup>4</sup> There is not a Roma integration program, neither an action plan for the decade of Roma inclusion in the Municipality of Kotel.

*neighborhoods- an old one and a new one and they are known as n.37 and n.182". (interview with the mayor of Petrich)*

One of the lessons, which were learnt from the death camps and the camps for prisoners of war during the World War II, was that the mortality rate among the detainees significantly increases when they are identified by numbers and are not called by names. One of the most important guidelines for social work in strongly marginalized communities is the requirement for the social workers to know by name as many clients as possible and also they have to know their personal stories. In such cases when the neighborhoods are indicated through a number and its residents remain anonymous, very often these residents are not respected, they are not considered human and they become an easy prey for direct and indirect institutional discrimination.

There is one specific way to manifest the disapproval of the idea for equal integration of the vulnerable ethnic minority communities throughout the country and more specifically the Roma, which are labeled as "gypsies" ("tsigani") by the rest of the population and **this is the rejection of the idea for temporary positive measures in order to reduce the social disparities and the definition of these measures as "discrimination" against the rest of the population**, despite all the interpretations of the meaning of the term "discrimination" in all the documents of the Council of Europe, European Union, Commission on Human Rights and European Court of Human Rights.

As the mayor of Kotel points out: "*The projects are addressing the needs and problems of all the citizens throughout the municipality. They are not focused only on Roma issues.*"

Some of the interviewees state that there is no need for any special measures, since the country's legislation include the needed acts and articles prohibiting the discrimination based on ethnicity, religion and social status. Another group of interviewees even **deny the existence of specific problems** that a significant number of Roma still face- like, for example: the linguistic barriers, the lower education and more specifically- the early dropping out from school. These are all barriers that need to be addressed by the institutions through special measures. **The still-existing segregation of the Roma children in separate classes in the schools** is not regarded as a problem, neither the spatial segregation of the predominant number of the Roma population in isolated neighborhoods, which often turn to ghettos. Except for the Roma experts on ethnic and demographic issues, none of the other experts has

ever mentioned the issue about the huge number of the Roma children and youth who are involved in the grey and the black economy, nor the specific vulnerability and exploitation of the child labor among the poorest Roma.

A concrete example for denying the existence of specific barriers to the education of the Roma children is Byala. There are no segregated schools in Byala and the children from all ethnic groups are studying together. On the other hand it was brought to our knowledge that Bulgarian is not the mother tongue of the Roma children and the majority of them face serious problems in learning the language prior to starting schools. Obviously this is one of the main reasons for the early dropping of some of the Roma children out of the educational system. This happens while it is the obligation of the state to ensure opportunities for these children to learn the official language of the country. It emerged from the interviews that over 50% of the Roma children manage to finish primary school but still a big percentage of them drop out from school earlier. Very few number of Roma children manage to finish secondary education. The program for providing literacy and vocational training for the illiterate Roma, which have been implemented by the regional labor bureaus, is over. The regional inspector on education does not consider the linguistic barriers and the higher rate of early school drop-outs as a problem and she does not realize the specific role of the institution she manages in overcoming these problems. She is rather inclined to deny the existence of any educational problems for the Roma children:

*„There are no school drop-outs in Byala municipality. The municipality did not allocate funds in the budget for keeping the Roma children at school... Very few of the Roma children attend preschools or kindergartens.... It is not necessary to provide control as the attendance of kindergarten is recommended.... There are several mechanisms to address the dropping of Roma children out of the educational system: the role of the families in school attendance; the feedback- communication between students, teachers and parents; inclusion of the Roma children in extracurricular activities.”* (interview with an educational expert from Byala municipality).

Often the educational institutions' staff members state that they are not able to provide specific information for the education of the Roma children because they do not separate the children based on their ethnicity and they do not collect data disaggregated by ethnicity. This fact explains the lack of special educational policies targeting the Roma children. In 2010 a deputy minister on education was dismissed for attempting to collect information disaggregated by ethnicity and therefore this was a warning for the staff members at lower levels. On the other hand the tendency to not develop specific programs for improving the educational level of Roma increased even more and this could be discussed as **indirect institutional discrimination** based on neglecting the serious gap between the educational level of the Roma and the rest of the citizens.

*„In the process of work the school experts have never separated the children based on their ethnicity and this is why we do not have concrete information about the number of Roma children in the school, nor about the number of the Roma children who dropped out. We also*

*don't have information about the number of Roma children who do not attend kindergarten and there is no way to track this down. The doors of all kindergartens are open for everyone... We could only say that we have problems with the children from Gradets village due to the constant migration of the families... There is no statistics about the Roma students who drop out; I cannot say their number is big or small simply because we don't have a concrete indicator for measuring this. It is true that there are students who drop out, but they are not only Roma. There are drop-outs from other ethnic groups as well. So this problem is relevant for all the children and not only for the Roma children... It is quite possible to identify linguistic problems. These are bilingual children and they live in environments speaking a different language. It is expected for them to face barriers when they start school. Nevertheless, we could overcome this barrier through a hard and quality work of the teachers. This is problem that is mostly observed in the elementary grades and the children overcome it in the upper grades... Special initiatives that are addressing the Roma- there are no such things here.” (Department manager, Kotel municipality).*

Clear evidence that the linguistic barriers are not overcome is the fact that a significant number of Roma students drop out before they finish 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 50% of the Roma children living in the municipality succeed to finish primary level of education and less than 10 % make it through the end of the secondary level of education.

**The inaction of the institutions targeting to discourage the Roma to work for solving their own problems** is a specific form of discrimination. This “strategy” is very common in the sphere of housing and infrastructure. A typical negative example comes from Kotel.

There are 2 Roma neighborhoods in Kotel: Sadina and Iztok. Both of them are out of regulation and the predominant number of the houses are not constructed with official permits. There are shack that put the health and lives of their inhabitants in danger. The streets are in a very bad condition and they are not cleaned although the municipality provides trash-picking services. Not all of the houses have access to water supply and sanitation systems. There are no initiatives from the municipality to include the neighborhoods in the DDP of the town, legalize the houses and improve the living conditions of the Roma. Here how this is explained:

*„During the period of communism attempts have been made to regulate the neighborhoods in Kotel. Still, this not completed yet due to the lack of political will.” (a Roma municipal councilor, Kotel)*

*„The municipality have not received requests coming from Roma to improve their housing. If we ever have such a request from a Roma to fix the roof of their house, for example and if the municipality approves such a request- the next day there will be strike in the central square. Such activities might turn the municipality to a social ministry and we*

*have to construct houses...*” (a Roma municipal councilor, Kotel)

*“It is true that we have several requests but we rejected them because their houses are not legal and do not have the required documents. Therefore, they could not be supported.*  
(mayor of Kotel)

Similar problems could be observed in the sphere of healthcare and are directly related to the spatial segregation of the Roma throughout the country. For example, the experts on ethnic and demographic issues from Byala and Kotel are insisting that there is a need for health centers in the Roma neighborhoods in both places due to the bigger distances to the hospitals in the central parts of the towns and the lack of public transportation. Unfortunately, almost no other experts share the same thoughts and they do not see a need to do this but rather argue that it is a better practice that all the Roma use the services of the hospitals and GPs like all the rest of the citizens. In the “Iztok” neighborhood in 2009 there were 30 Roma infected with hepatitis, the lack of a health center makes it harder to include all the Roma children in the vaccination campaigns, as well as to prevent the epidemics of infectious diseases and improve the health culture of Roma, including family planning. **The lack of specific initiatives addressing this issue could be characterized only as a form of indirect institutional discrimination.**

In the sphere of social services it is an often practice to discourage the Roma to ask for support. In Radnevo, for example, the interviewed social worker openly shared:

*„We have provided almost no disbursements of one-time aid. We have some cases of filed requests for it but we rejected them...In regard with the personal assistant positions there are no requests filed that are abiding by all the requirements and criteria. Lots of women declare that they are single mothers, but we conduct regular check-ups in their homes and when we find out that they are living with partners, we reject their requests for aid, although, they try to deceive as by saying that these men are cousins or relatives.”*  
(social worker from Radnevo)

We found out that one-time aid funds have not been disbursed at all in Peshtera, as well.

There are lots of requirements and criteria, which limit the access to welfare services of all Bulgarian citizens. On a first place, one of them is the requirement for extremely lower income rate of the family. Thus, even some families, which are practically not able to provide their basics like food, clothing and heat, are often excluded from the welfare system. Another mechanism to exclude people from the welfare system for monthly aid is to catch them working (even temporary) in the grey economy sectors, or find out that the beneficiaries have travelled abroad even for a short time and even if they were not been able to find jobs; also in

the cases when the beneficiaries have forgotten to sign at the Labor Bureau on the same date and at the same hour, or in cases when they have been receiving monthly aid for more than a year.<sup>5</sup> There are senior citizens with really lower retirement compensations who are rejected seasonal aid for heat due to the fact that they have passed properties to their descendants, even long ago, or because they share a home with one of their children.

*„We provide welfare support to a little number of single parents in Kotel. The younger people are always not responding to all the needed requirements for welfare... The issue with the seasonal aid for heat is much tougher. This is year we have much more information from a bigger number of sources and we reject a big number of the requests for support... There are some up-dates in the Regulations, there is bigger migration, and sales of properties, some applicants don't have address registrations... When we reject requests because they do not abide by the rules and requirements, we often have quarrels, arguing- unpleasant scenes... Sometimes the funds we disburse are too insufficient. We have clients who pay monthly 100-150 BGN for medicines and we are able to give them only 9.75 BGN per months. The funds are always insufficient... The amount of the monthly social aid is 47 BGN per person and this is absolutely insufficient. The poorest people are not able to understand when their requests are rejected. We need to develop clearer rules and criteria as the regulations and normative documents could be interpreted equivocally.”* (senior expert in the “Social Aid” Department, Kotel)

A very important finding of the survey is the total lack of addressing the problem with the spatial segregation of the Roma neighborhoods all over the surveyed places. None of the interviewed mayors, deputy-mayors, experts, municipal councilors or staff members of the Labor bureaus and welfare offices **ever addressed the spatial segregation of the Roma in isolated neighborhoods**. Even the opposite: **they would rather take on a defensive position by saying that the segregated Roma neighborhoods in their towns and villages are not ghettos**. They were able to make such statement despite of the fact that: the living conditions in those neighborhoods are really poor; there is total unemployment, extremely lower incomes and lack of socialization efforts for the younger Roma. All over the world, the spatial isolation of ghettos results in lack of institutional presence, as all the institutions gradually leave them, and therefore, the quality of life and the access to social services of the ghetto residents is dramatically affected. The situation throughout all the surveyed sites was quite similar. The spatial isolation significantly affects employment opportunities for Roma, especially the opportunities for steady and well-paid jobs. These issues were not even mentioned by anyone, while in the same time, they have negative impact on the socialization mechanisms of the Roma children and over the community control on youth behavior. Only the regional experts on ethnic and demographic issues from Kyustendil pointed out that living in a ghetto reduces

---

<sup>5</sup> The last requirement was dropped since 2011 after a decision was taken by the European Commission on Human Rights, which qualifies it as a violation of the right to receive welfare support in situation of poverty (act. 13 and 14 from the revised European Social Chart).

the chances of the Roma children to receive quality education as a result of the poor quality of education in the segregated school, and also due to the pressure exerted over them by the street gangs in order give up studying.

The widespread negative stereotypes and prejudice against the Roma population block the political will to resolve their problems and equally integrate them into the Bulgarian society. The media significantly contribute to the increasing negative image of the Roma. Unfortunately, civic education is not included in the Bulgarian educational system, and therefore, the opportunities of the school as an institution to develop tolerance to diversity are blocked. In the same time, the social exclusion of the Roma from the labor market, from the social and political spheres, as well as their spatial isolation- accelerate the process of separating the Roma in a parallel world and increasing the huge gap between them and the rest of the Bulgarian population.