

# EUROPEAN ROMA GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS (ERGO) NETWORK

## “Roma access to adequate minimum income and social protection in Bulgaria”

### I. Our organization and our share in the studies:

Integro Association (Integro) is a member of the ERGO network since its inception. It was established in Bulgaria, in October 2002. The organization’s mission is to promote respect and equality for Roma. All activities are based on developing active citizenship in Roma communities and ensuring adequate representation of Roma people at all levels of decision making. The organization has considerable experience in addressing anti-Roma attitudes, issues of social exclusion, and human rights violations. The team of Integro works on creating conditions for dialogue and co-operation with local authorities and national institutions in Bulgaria. This includes empowerment of individuals and groups both for leadership and for grassroots mobilization. One of the focuses of the team is empowering Romani women and youth. Integro Association maintains and supports a sustainable and wide-spread network of local community activist all over the country; facilitates the cooperation of the Roma activist with local authorities and NGOs. The association provides capacity building opportunities for all stakeholders.

For the purposes of the study “Roma access to adequate minimum income and social protection in Bulgaria”, as part of the Studies 2021 of ERGO network, Integro conducted: surveys in **six locations** (Shumen, Kaspichan, Velingrad, Krivodol, Botevgrad and Tsenovo)- in **different parts of Bulgaria**, including municipalities of **different sizes** in terms of area and population; a **desk study** on existing policies and regulations in Bulgaria, relevant to the topic; research and analysis of existing reports on Bulgaria’s minimum income schemes and social assistance policies as a way to combat poverty; and **semi-structured interviews with Roma of different ages**.

Apart for the purpose of the Studies 2021, conducted within the ERGO network, the results of this study can be used in advocacy actions related to the implementation of the Plan for Reconstruction and Sustainability of the Republic of Bulgaria. Also in the creation of an action plan to the National Strategy for Bulgaria for Roma Integration 2021 - 2030 and in the planning of local strategies for the period 2021 - 2027. The study will be published on the website of Integro Association and will be used for the purposes of advocating on local and national level; and for combating stigmatization of Roma.

## II. Romani people in Bulgaria:

Bulgaria is one of the countries with largest shares of Romani people in Europe. According to data from Census 2011, the number of people who self-identified as Roma is 325,343 (4,4% of the entire population). According to data of the European Commission, to which Eurostat belongs, the Romani in Bulgaria number 750,000 and they constitute 10.33% of the population. According to unofficial sources, the number of the Romani in Bulgaria is twice as this high.

As well known, Bulgaria has the highest levels of poverty and inequalities in the EU, there is a high degree of political inconsistency between different policy areas. The share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is the highest in EU with the value of 32.8% in 2018. Bulgaria, the EU country with the highest share of people at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion is a 'champion' in inequalities, as states in the EMIN report.

According to data from NSI (the National Statistical Institute), 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%.

The above data reveals that Romani people have bigger shares in the younger populations, while in the age groups 60-69 and above their share drastically decreases. This means that Romani people have shorter life span and/or they have more births and the group has more people in active age. Still, are there opportunities for this active Roma population to be active in the labor market?

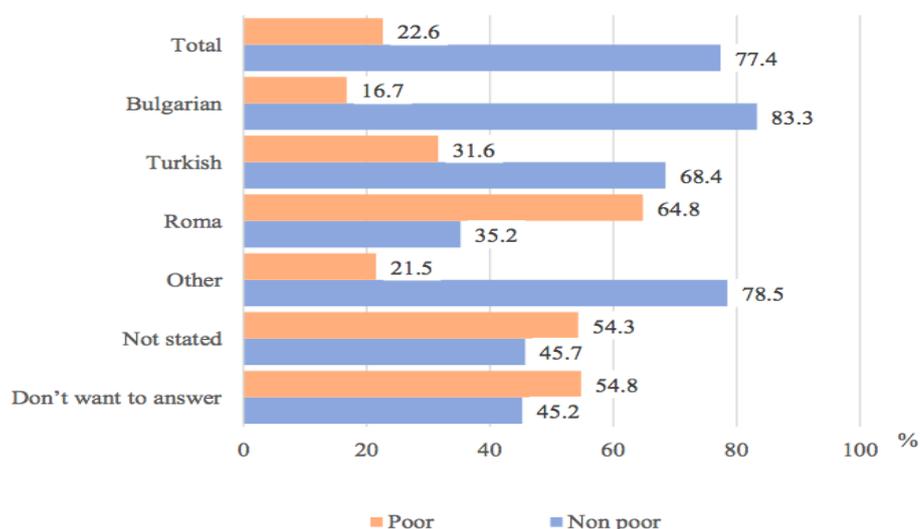
The National Statistical Institute - NSI data from the population census of 2011 reveals persistently significant differences in the economic activeness of the large ethnic groups in the country. 53.5% of all ethnic Bulgarians aged above 15 years are economically active, compared to 45.4% of the Bulgarian Turks and **only 38.8% of the Roma people. In spite of the fact that in this ethnic group has the youngest population**, and the share of pensioners is the smallest one, compared to the rest of the ethnic groups.

Among the Roma population economically inactive are three fifths of the persons above 15 years - 61.2%. The group of pensioners (the only ones who generate own income) is the smallest one – just about 23.5% (14.4% of all Romani people at the age of 15 and more). The main reason lies in the age structure of the community, but also in the fact that many elderly Roma, who have been durably unemployed or have been employed in the informal sector, have no pension insurance and do not meet the requirement for a definite number of years of service for pension. The question is why Romani involve in the informal sector (usually get involved in underpaid temporary work)? Is education the only reason, or there are also huge levels of discrimination in the labor market against Romani people?

Data from NSI shows that in 2019, highest is the share of poor among the Roma ethnic group - 64.8% and lowest among Bulgarian one - 16.7%.

See the graph below, as presented in the EMIN project report:

**Figure 4. Distribution of households' members by ethnic group and risk of poverty in 2019**



According to another research, in Bulgaria, 40 percent of Romani people live below the poverty line which shows very high levels of marginalization. (*The Borgen Project, Emily Turner*)

Data by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights for 2014, referred to in the report, shows that 86% of Roma families in Bulgaria were at risk of poverty while only 22% of Bulgarian families faced the same risk.

**Roma are constantly exposed to poverty and material deprivations which do not allow them to participate actively in education, labor and social life and thus stay excluded.**

Despite the different types of definitions of poverty and the type of research, it is a fact that could be seen with a mere eye that Roma comprise the biggest share of people living in poverty in the country: the majority of the Roma population is concentrated in separate neighborhoods, often with bad living conditions, vast unemployment due to lower levels of education but also due to discrimination.

Nine years after the adoption of the national strategies for Roma integration, European institutions report that the Roma in Bulgaria and other EU member states continue to face discrimination - hate speech and hate crimes, segregated education, poor living conditions, lack of health insurance, **lack of effective measures to combat poverty and marginalization.**

In its 2018 Report on Anti-Gypsism, the EU Agency for Access to Rights (FRA) concluded that the process of Roma inclusion could not continue as before. It needs much more strength - political engagement and an open dialogue on the causes of policy failure. According to this report, discrimination is "in the activities and work of public bodies and institutions in all areas

and in all levels more often can create different forms of anti-Roma moods, which are most often expressed by not providing Roma with equal access to utilities and public services, in refusing to grant them equal rights and equal treatment..." (FRA. *A Persisting Concern: Anti-Gypsyism as a Barrier to Roma Inclusion*. 2018). Antigypsyism is a very broad topic, and campaigns are needed in the long term. It is going far beyond the topic of social aids.

The above conclusions of FRA are relevant to the spheres of education and economic activity, as they are interrelated. There are many surveys showing that the majority of Roma children study in underserved schools (often segregated schools or segregated classes) and they do not receive quality education. Many of them are functionally illiterate in primary schools (15% of the ones finishing primary schools are not even able to read and write). Roma youth struggle to succeed in school, with only half finishing the primary school and approximately 15% graduating from secondary school.

A very big share of the Roma community is excluded from employment, income, access to quality education, etc. Huge part of the community is marginalized and this continues for decades. Cases of domestic crimes are quickly and easily transformed into ethnic tensions and anti-Roma moods and anti-Roma discriminatory actions.

The situation is closely linked to the minimum income, as official propaganda fuels public opinion that "Roma do not work and survive only thanks to the social benefits." **This is also supported by the lack of official information on how many and what people receive minimum income and the amount of incomes they receive.**

### **III. Characteristics and elements of the Minimum Income Schemes in Bulgaria. Definitions. Regulations and requirements for Social assistance:**

**Minimum Income Schemes** are defined as, "income support schemes which provide a safety net for those of working age, whether in or out of work, and who have insufficient means of financial support, and who are not eligible for insurance based social benefits or whose entitlements to these have expired. They are 'last resort' schemes, which are intended to ensure a minimum standard of living for the concerned individuals and their dependents (EMIN definition)

**Guaranteed minimum income in Bulgaria (GMI):** the legal basis for determining the access to social assistance and used in determining the amount of social benefits. This is the minimum income required to cover basic needs. It is 75 BGN in 2020 (approximately 38.4 EUR per month per person).

**Differentiated minimum income in Bulgaria (DMI):** calculated by multiplying the guaranteed minimum income by an individually defined coefficient linked with age, health condition and social status. The DMI is used to determine who is entitled to targeted or monthly benefits depending on the income of their family members.

In practice, the guaranteed minimum income is determined annually by the Council of Ministers in Bulgaria "according to the state's financial ability".

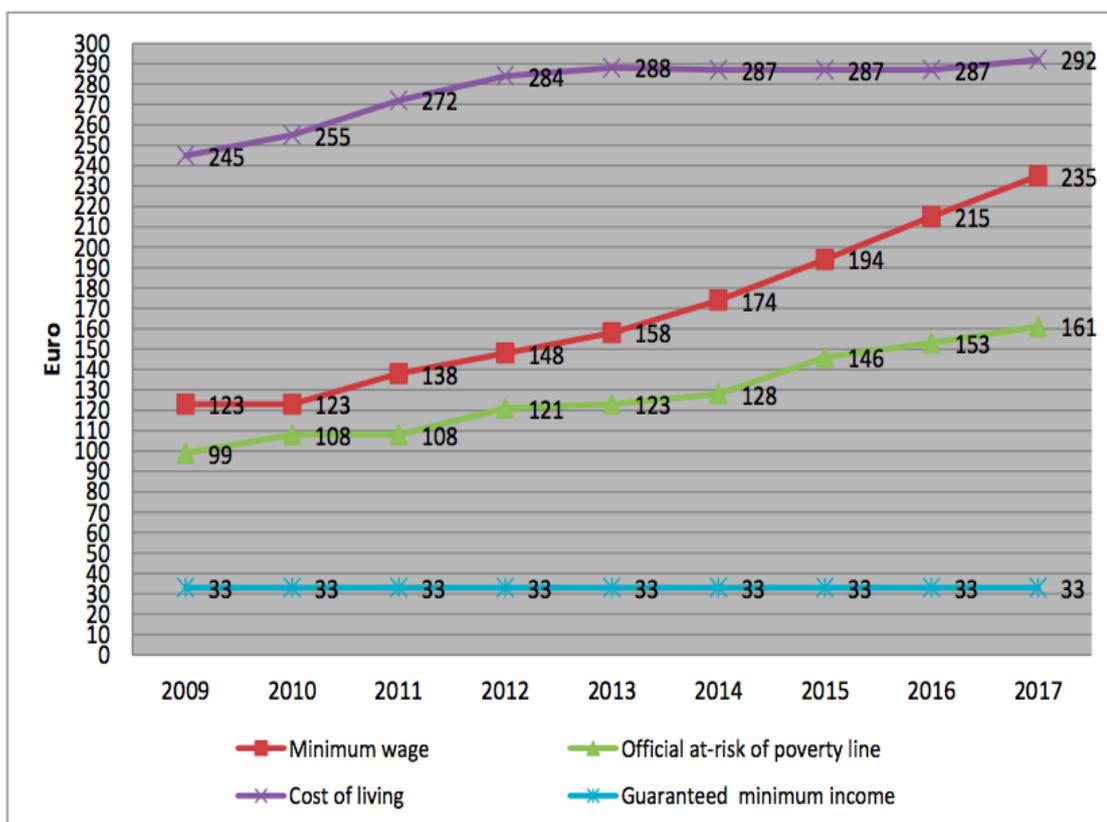
A minimum income is a threshold maintained by the state through various payments if and when the actual income is lower than the threshold.

According to the definition adopted by the EMIN project “minimum income schemes provide a safety net for those who cannot work or have access to a decent job and cannot benefit from social security payments.”

Many reports, including the EMIN report, reveal that **the minimum income schemes adopted in Bulgaria have little to do with adequate minimum income**, especially if it is defined as “income which is necessary for people to live with dignity and participate fully in society”. **This is because these minimum income schemes in Bulgaria are characterized with extremely low levels of income support, implemented mainly in cases of extreme poverty.**

This could be seen in the following graph from the EMIN report:

Graph 1: Trends in monthly cost of living<sup>3</sup>, minimum wage, official at-risk of poverty line and ‘guaranteed minimum income’ in Euro (2009-2017).



As per the Bulgarian Official Gazette published on December 27, 2020, the new minimum wage for **2020 has been set at 3.66 Bulgarian leva per hour and 610 leva per month.**

**For 2020, the guaranteed minimum income (GMI) is BGN 75 per month.**

In 2021, the **poverty line** for the country in total is BGN 369.00 monthly per household member. As it could be seen from the graph, even the minimum wage and the official poverty line are still far from the real cost of living and the purchasing abilities of people of main living products and services. The approved GMI is even further below the real needs. For 2020 the tendency is almost the same since 2017 with little changes: it was 33 EUR and in 2020-2021 it is 38.4 EUR per person per month.

At this level, below the **poverty line** were 1,659,900 people, or 23.8 percent of the Bulgarian population, as per data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI). As mentioned above, officially 68.4% of the Roma are poor.

### **How Bulgarian government address the issues of poverty? What are the regulations and requirements for receiving social assistance?**

The social assistance system is legally defined by the Social Assistance Act and the Regulation for its implementation.

According to Bulgarian legislation a number of categories of citizens are entitled to receive certain social support if "... due to health, age, social or other reasons beyond their control they are unable through their own labor or income from property, or with help of those obliged to support them, to ensure the satisfaction of their basic needs." (Social Assistance Act, Art. 2, para. 3)

This legal rule defines the entitlement to a minimum of means to ensure the satisfaction of "basic needs" of people who cannot themselves make their money. According to the Social Assistance Act, (Additional Provisions, Article 1, paragraph 1), "Basic needs" are enough food, clothing and housing, according to the socio- economic development of the country".

In practice, this right is realized through a complex of payments that are provided if the incomes from other sources are under a certain amount, and if a number of other conditions are met.

The regulatory framework is comprehensive and fragmented, going beyond the above stated Act and includes other laws (like the Integration of People with Disabilities Act, the Family Allowances for Children Act, Act on Veterans of Wars, etc.), as well as regulations, rules, ordinances, etc., some of which are subject to frequent changes.

Thus, a complex for a social support is established and it includes several main benefits of the above stated type: social assistance allowances, family allowances, social pension for old-age. They all are non-contributory, paid only if the income is lower than the legally defined threshold, imply needs and means test and are accessible if specific accompanying conditions are met.

**Social benefits are based on guaranteed minimum income and differentiated minimum income.** The minimum income is considered sufficient to satisfy basic needs (i.e. for staying above the poverty line).

Targeted or monthly social benefits are paid to people whose income is under or around the minimum.

The differentiated minimum income (DMI) is determined on the basis of the number of family members and the number of people living in one residence. DMI is also linked to the age, family status, health and property of the people concerned.

**Income** is defined as all the money from pensions, wages, rents, leases, child benefits, maintenance payments, etc. **Family** is defined as spouses and all children under the age of 18. **Cohabiting** people are defined as those living together in one residence and one household.

The following social assistance allowances are in the **focus of our desk research** and our survey (interviews): **monthly benefit** (*месечни помощи*); **one-off benefit** (*еднократни помощи*); **targeted allowance** (*целеви помощи*).

- People are entitled to monthly benefits in the following cases: their monthly income is less than indicated in the differentiated minimum income table; they have no other home. To be entitled to assistance their home must be no larger than one room if you live alone, two rooms if your family consists of two or three people; three rooms if your family consists of four people. Another requirement is that people have no movable (e.g. a taxi) or immovable property (e.g. a residence) which could be a source of income. This condition does not apply to their own home if they have no other home. Also, people must not be registered as sole traders and do not own capital in a commercial company; Savings per family member do not exceed BGN 500 (BGN 1,000 for two people, etc.).

A very essential requirement is that people have to be unemployed and to have been registered for at least 6 months at the Labor Bureau/Unemployment Office. According to the legislator, this is a way to prove the desire of the unemployed person that he/she is actively looking for job. This means that they need to physically visit the offices of the Labor bureau and put their signatures exactly as scheduled every month which means that people need to pay for their travel costs from the villages to municipal centers and back. Missing a signature for not being able to travel means cancellation of the social assistance allowance for a year, as a form of punishment).

- one-off benefits are supposed to meet ad hoc health, education, utilities and other vital needs. The maximum amount is 5 times the guaranteed minimum income or BGN 375. Individuals and families may be granted one-time assistance once a year; for example, for the issuance of identity cards; to cover the costs of subsistence and accommodation for persons and their companions if a permission for treatment abroad is received by the Ministry of Health and when some costs are not included in the cost allocated for the treatment.

- Targeted allowances – there are different targeted allowances such as targeted assistance for heating; targeted assistance to pay rent; targeted allowance for travel for the elderly; targeted assistance to certain groups of people with disabilities. Persons and families whose income in the previous 6 months was less than or equal to the “differentiated minimum income for heating” (*диференцирания доход за отопление*) have the right to heating

allowance. The amount of this income is determined depending on the situation of the person concerned (e.g. person living alone, single parent, small children, disability etc.)

**The amount of monthly allowance is the difference between the DMI as determined for each individual situation and income from the previous month.** The differentiated minimum income (DMI) is determined as a percentage of the guaranteed minimum income (GMI) (Гарантиран минимален доход).

The differentiated minimum income is defined as follows:

1. for persons over 75 years of age living alone - 165% of the guaranteed minimum income (GMI);
2. for persons over 65 years of age living alone – 140% of the GMI;
3. for persons living with another person over 65 years of age - 100% of the GMI;
4. for persons living with another person(s) or family, and for each of the cohabiting spouses – 66% of the GMI;
5. for persons up to 65 years of age living alone - 73% of the GMI;
6. for persons with minimum 50% of permanently reduced working capacity – 100% of the GMI;
7. for persons with minimum 70% of permanently reduced working capacity – 125% of the GMI;
8. for children:(a) up to the age of 16, and –those studying - up to the completion of secondary education, but not more than up to the age of 20 – 91% of the GMI; (b) from the age of 5 to 16, and if –studying - up to secondary education but no more than 20 years of age, and has committed 5 or more absences absent for the month in question or three or more absences without valid reasons of pre-school education - 30 per cent of the GAM; c) from the age of 5 to 16, not studying – 20% of the GMI; d) from the age of 16 to 18, not studying but registered in the "Labor Office" Directorate – 66% of the GMI; e) with official note certifying the obligatory immunizations and prophylactic examinations of the child, issued by the child's GP (in the absence of a GP, by the Regional Health Inspection) – 30% of the GMI;
9. for orphan children, for children living with relatives or in foster family under the Child Protection Act, for children with permanent disability – 100% of the GMI;
10. For parents / child-raising parents: a) Up to 3 years of age – 120% of the GMI; b) up to the age of 16, and if studying - up to the completion of secondary education, but not more than up to the age of 20 – 100% of the GMI;
11. for pregnant women 45 days before birth and for parents raising a child up to the age of 3 – 100% of the GMI.

For example, if you live alone and are aged over 75 years, the DMI for your social category is BGN 123.75. If your income per month is BGN 100, the monthly allowance is BGN 23.75.

If you are a single parent, the DMI is defined as BGN 75. If your monthly income is BGN 30 (from child allowance), the monthly benefit is BGN 45.

People who have income can apply for social assistance, as long as they indicate the income realized in the previous month. If, for example, a family realizes a monthly income of BGN 100 from performing a certain job, then this family is obliged to declare this BGN 100 to the social service. Accordingly, the social service will deduct BGN 100 from the total amount of the differentiated guaranteed minimum income of the family.

The problem is in the extremely low amounts of the guaranteed minimum income, which is only BGN 75. This low amount, with which a person can hardly cover even the minimum of his/her basic needs, serves as a basis for calculating the amount of social assistance of a person or family. Even small amounts that families can receive from work can easily lead to the family dropping out of social assistance due to exceeding the differentiated guaranteed minimum income of the family.

#### **IV. What is the situation in reality?**

Despite of the fact that Bulgaria has the biggest shares of poor people in EU, there are statements that Bulgaria has a very small number of people supported with social assistance to combat poverty. There is a research, implemented by OSI - Sofia in 2013, according to which in Bulgaria, a very small percentage of the population receives monthly social assistance.

Probably the number of people with monthly social benefits fluctuate from month to month, as some people lose this right, others receive it in the meantime, but usually their share does **not exceed 3% of the entire population. Among the Roma this share is about 12%.**

There are grounds to make rough estimations that this share of Roma receiving monthly social assistance is even lower in 2020-2021 due to several factors:

- emigration to Western countries (according to all people we spoke with during the surveys, the majority of Roma in the neighborhoods are working abroad);
- Unemployed persons of working age who receive monthly social assistance under the terms and conditions of Art. 9 of the Regulations for implementation of the Law on Social Assistance are obliged to implement 14 days/4hour work for public services (clean streets, clean and maintain parks, etc.). Many young people say that this is unacceptable and unfeasible to clean the streets 14 days for just approximately 40 BGN monthly assistance and 200-300 targeted allowance for the entire heating period. This is not worth for the majority of them.
- too many conditions and requirements for the assistance (children at school age are not allowed to have more than 5 missed classes with no medical excuse, which could be missed for just one school day due to many reasons mainly related to poverty and deprivations such as lack of appropriate clothes and shoes, lack of school materials, etc.; people need to physically visit the Labor Offices to put their signatures once in a month or otherwise their monthly social assistance will be stopped which is often impossible for people from smaller villages who need to pay for their round trips, etc.)
- The regional offices of the Agency for Social Assistance and the labor offices are located in municipal centers and people find it difficult or if they cannot afford it to travel every month for a scheduled meeting with a signature;
- People who receive monthly social allowance do not have the right for employment when receiving the monthly allowance, while in the same time the amount of the assistance is extremely low;
- lack of relevant information for the application process and the possible types of allowances;

- Very few social workers engage to help the illiterate people to fill in documents. This job is done by other relatives, by all kinds of Roma mediators (educational, health, etc.). Some of them organise open days for giving application documents in small villages.
- Applicants who do not have bank accounts or ID cards do not receive support. This is a must. Again old and illiterate people receive help from relatives or mediators. Everyone finds their way as they can. Wherever, NGOs and centers are working, poor people receive support. But there is no government initiative for this. It should be definitely recommended to have staff members in the social services to provide regular support to illiterate and old people.
- other reasons;

Having in mind that approximately 65-70% of the Roma live in poverty, even the share of the Roma receiving monthly assistance is still the same as in 2013, i.e. 12% of all the Roma population in Bulgaria (as per the study of OSI-Sofia during 2013), then there are **no grounds** for public statements from the type of “Roma live on the back of the Bulgarian tax-payers”. Moreover, as stated above, the probability that the share of Roma receiving social assistance is even lower by 2021, though there is no official data on this (the reason is that the Agency for Social Assistance in Bulgaria does not collect data on ethnicity of their clients). Moreover, the Roma who “benefit” from the monthly social allowances are actually working 14 days/4 hours for public interest.

Our statement for the decrease of the share of Roma, receiving monthly social assistance, is proved by the people we interviewed:

### **Snapshots from reality:**

According to T.M., a chief social worker at the Social Assistance Office in the municipality of Tzenovo, there is a huge decrease of the number of people who receive monthly social assistance because people emigrated to Western countries or to bigger towns and cities over the last couple of years. Due to the fact that this is a small municipality and people know each other, T.M. states that the Roma neighborhoods in the villages are almost empty and only extremely poor families receive social assistance. According to the local authorities, there are 820 Roma registered in the villages of the municipality by permanent address (while only 177 self-identified as Roma during the last census - but this is another issue). Out of them only 16-17 Roma receive monthly social assistance (**for Tsenovo this is approximately 2% of the Roma based on permanent address**). They agree to work 14 days for public services, receive 40-50 BGN, plus the targeted allowance for heating during winter. The reason is that these 17 people have no other alternative. Despite of the hardships, those of the supported families who have children, make sure that their children are decently dressed and they attend classes regularly. T.M also shared that these 17 clients of the ASA are supported by the social workers, who visit their villages once a month, to fill in the required documents. The social workers also inform and consult them about deadlines for signatures at the Labor office and needed documents.

The situation in the municipality of Kaspichan is almost the same. According to the local Roma activists, there is mas-migration of Roma families in the recent years. Out of 2770 Roma in the municipality of **Kaspichan only 50 people receive monthly social assistance (1.8-2%)**.

These 50 Roma live in extreme poverty. They live in the edges of the villages and some of the families do not have electricity and they use one water fountain for two-three families. They usually find some underpaid informal seasonal work to cover their living costs, mainly for food and rarely for clothes for their children (usually they get second-hand clothes). The Roma mediators help them to fill in application documents for social assistance. The rest of the Roma community members who live in the municipality prefer not to apply for the social assistance, due to the very complex and hard to implement conditions. They usually engage in temporary/seasonal work.

This process of decrease of the number of Roma receiving monthly social allowance, is getting place in many other locations throughout the country. According to Remzie, 26 years old Romani woman from Shumen, most of her friends who haven't emigrated yet do not receive monthly social support. She has two children: one 12 years and one 5 years. The elder attends school and the younger attends kindergarten. She thinks that it is not worth to work 14 days for such a small amount of money (40 BGN). Her husband usually gets temporary construction works and he earns the living of the family. They receive only children's allowances in the total amount for the two kids- 90 BGN. Her husband manages to make between 500-700 leva per month. Although, the family finds it hard to cover all the family needs, they manage to cover the basics: food, utilities, school materials and some clothes for the children. She and her husband dress from the second-hand stores. **Sometimes they get support from their parents, who work abroad.** She says that her friends in the neighborhood are in the same situation: most of them have one or two children, the husbands work and the wives take care of the children and the households. They do not get monthly social assistance, only children allowances (between 35-50 leva per child). The majority of the young families at their age are working abroad.

This tendency among the young Roma families to not apply for social assistance is relevant in other places, too. Anka from Velingrad is a 50 years old Romani woman, she receives around 40-45 leva monthly allowance, plus the targeted heating allowance and she works 14 days/4 hours for that. Usually she cleans the streets and parks in town. She lives together with her son's family (her son, his wife and their 5-year child). Her son and daughter-in-law are unemployed and receive only an allowance for the child. They do not want to get registered in the system. The social allowances received by the family are far from being enough for subsistence. They usually get engaged informally in herb picking and other type of seasonal work to make their living. According to Anka, only people around 40-50 of age are in the system for social assistance. Young people find that it is not worth. Anka's motivation is the targeted heating allowance. She buys wood for heating during the winter.

In the villages of Krivodol municipality, there are concentrated Roma communities, especially in the villages of Kravoder and Galatin. Galya, a 40-year-old Romani woman lives with her husband and their 6 children in the village of Galatin. Her children are from 3 years to 16 years of age. Five of them are at school age and the youngest one is 3 years old. They have big enough house with 5-6 rooms. Her husband got a punishment from the ASA and the Labor office for missing his scheduled signature last year. He needed to pay 10 leva for the trip to Krivodol where the labor office is located. They had other more urgent needs at that time and this is why he was not able to travel to the Labor office and conduct his scheduled meeting. Galya is still in the system, she works 14 days/4 hours in the streets of the village. Her DMI is

around 200 leva and the allowances for the children is 146 leva. She says it is not possible to live on this. Her husband usually finds temporary work. Galya has a small vegetable garden in their yard and they have hens and goats, so she raises the food for the family. With the allowance, they pay for utilities and for the needs of the children (school materials, clothes), she is preparing canned food from the garden and she makes hand-made bread every day for her family. There are several families in the village of Galatin, who also receive social assistance. Galya, says they are in a similar situation. The younger people leave the village and relocate to bigger towns where they can find jobs.

In the municipality of Botevgrad, with the support of the ROMACT program, the municipality opened up a Community center near the Roma neighborhood. They appointed a community mediator, who provides different type of support to the community: consulting for available social services, filling in documents, support with documents issued by the municipal administration/schools, etc. Valentina Mikova is the community mediator and she says that since the opening of the community center the number of people who are registered in the labor office and the agency for social assistance has grown. She says that their region is very poor and it is hard to find jobs. They identified people in need and helped them with filling in documents and applying for various types of social assistance. She says that 40% of the families in the neighborhood of Botevgrad receive one of the different types of social support: monthly allowance or/and heating allowance, family allowance, travel allowance, etc. One of the people, Mrs. Mikova helped, is the 55-year old Krasimira, who is a pensioner due to a disease. Thanks to the community center, she applied for heating allowances and for travel allowance, as she needs to travel to Sofia for medical checks. She lives with her mother who is a retired pensioner and only combining the incomes of the two of them makes it possible to cope with the bills and living costs. Krasimira is thankful for having a community center that helps her with many things. According to Valentina Mikova, there are also families with two-three children at school age who receive monthly social allowances. These 6-7 families live in extreme poverty and they do not own a house, they live in municipal apartments and the community center helped them to get targeted allowances to help them with paying their rent. In Botevgrad there are also many Roma in active age who are not in the system of social aids, as they find either full-time or temporary work outside of the town. There are some new factories in near-by towns such as Mezdra, and they prefer to have a job rather than applying for social assistance.

## V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

In 2016 and specifically in 2017 the EU Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for Bulgaria are well focused on the issue of poverty and connect Minimum Income Schemes (MIS) to this issue. The Country Report 2017 explicitly emphasizes that “The high share of people living at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion remains a major economic and social challenge. The social protection system, including the general minimum income which **does not have a transparent adjusting mechanism, does not provide adequate levels of support.** ..... The social transfer system is limited by its low adequacy and coverage. Bulgaria has one of the least-effective social transfer system in the EU and one of

the lowest levels of social transfers. The government spent just 0.2 % of GDP in 2015 on monthly social benefits and the heating allowance, which is the core of the minimum income scheme. The eligibility rules are very restrictive, leaving many poor families without support. This has eroded the protection capacity of social benefits and contributed to increased inequality in the country. A lack of a predictable mechanism for regularly revising the social benefits undermines their adequacy over time and creates a risk of large unbudgeted ad hoc revisions”.

According to the EMIN report, there are no reactions of the decision-makers to these Recommendations. For example, the updated Action Plan for the period 2017-2018 for the implementation of the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2020, adopted by the National Council on Social Inclusion at the Council of Ministers on July 13, 2017 includes only continuation of the existing practice of providing social benefits. There are no any ideas for changes and improvements. In regard with the minimum income schemes, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) announced that it has addressed the Ministry of Finance in relation with the ‘guaranteed minimum income’ and shared hopes that it will be possible to increase it. However, reacting to proposals made by CITUB and the ombudsman, the official position of MLSP was that even a small increase in the guaranteed minimum income would cost a lot of money because of its link with different types of social benefits.

As, the EMIN report shows, it is extremely hard for Bulgarian decision-makers to take into account event EU recommendations for improving the minimum incomes schemes and for combating high levels of poverty in the country.

There are no provisions in the Draft National Roma Strategy for any minimum income schemes. The focus is on illegal housing, education, employment, and health.

Due to the restrictive and hard to implement conditions for social assistance many poor people are left with no social support, despite of the fact that the amount of monthly or whatever type of social support is extremely low and it does not correspond to the real basic needs of people. The punitive character of the social assistance system also takes many people in need out of the system for very trivial reasons such as not having money to travel for a scheduled meeting with the Labor office. Bulgarian decision-makers do not address the fact that huge parts of the population are driven into marginalization and extreme exclusion from the social and economic life of the country and this situation is not beneficial for the entire country.

Another moment is that Roma are stigmatized as “not working and living on the back of the social system”. If they work they have the highest shares of the so called “working poor” (as data from NSI reveals); those who are in the social assistance system have a small share, compared to the real needs, and they also have to put up with all the conditions: not to be employed, work 14 days/4 hours; conduct their monthly scheduled meetings at the Labor office, send their children to school regularly despite all the deprivations and hardships, etc.

The levels of stigmatisation were extremely high in the public, fuelled by the media 5-10 years ago. Currently, in the last couple of years, the number of all Roma and non-Roma beneficiaries of social assistance dropped. The reasons are already mentioned: migration, it is not feasible for people to work 14 days for such a small amount, etc. Due to this small numbers of social aid users, there is almost nothing in the public media. Now the focus is how “Gypsies use the social system of Western countries”.

What could be done:

- **Change the Guaranteed Minimum Income.** At the end of July this year, the government changed the coefficients applied to the guaranteed minimum income (GMI) to determine the differentiated minimum income (DMI), but did not change the amount of the GMI and it remains at BGN 75 per month. The non-increased amount of GMI does not significantly increase the amount of differentiated minimum income. For example, even with child benefits, a family of four - with two unemployed parents and two children attending school regularly - will receive a monthly allowance of BGN 360 - an amount that is below the poverty line set for 2022 at BGN 413 per person / per month. In order for social assistance to have a strong effect on living conditions, the amount of the GMI should be significantly increased – for instance to be doubled.
- **Combat the stigmatization of the Roma community** as permanent clients of the social welfare system: NGOs and local activists need to use social media and local media stations to inform the community how for example the cemetery yard or the park of the town was cleaned by people who receive social assistance and who work 14 days for public interest. Such things should be published as local news so the public is well informed;
- **Stop the punitive conditionality.** For example, through giving people a chance to inform the Labor offices in cases of impossibility to travel for their monthly scheduled meetings and be able to postpone them; the offices of the Agency for Social Assistance should be more supporting to people from smaller locations who need to travel and stop punishing people for this reason. Another way of solving the issue is to extend the schedule from monthly to a 3-months basis and social workers and labor consultants could travel to those small places;
- **Provide comprehensive support that supports empowerment.** In Bulgaria, and not only, there is a special fear of the development of social and labor passivity among the recipients of social assistance. Most of the poor people who receive social benefits are considered to become dependent on social payments and do not make much effort to look for job, to develop new social and work skills, to acquire a profession. Even if they complain that they are made to work 14 days for the miserable social benefits they receive, they do not take steps to get out of this trap on their own; they do not become active enough to find their own way for personal development. The Bulgarian social assistance system has a huge deficit that hinders the overcoming of this dependency of the poor from the social benefits. It works in isolation, does not partner with other institutions that are also involved in addressing poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalization. It lacks competent social workers who assess the

development potential of social assistance recipients, their ability to acquire new social and work skills. There is no mechanism for sharing this assessment with the employment intermediaries of the employment services, who could accordingly individualize their working approach and offer a qualification course to the recipients of social assistance according to their wishes and possibilities. Therefore, it is extremely important for the social assistance system in Bulgaria to be modernized by adapting to the needs and potentials of the people, and not to force people to adapt to its rigid bureaucratic rules and procedures.

- **The Social Assistance system should be more supportive** and positive to people who are illiterate and live in marginalization in order to prevent the situation becoming even worse. The local department for social assistance should hire mediators to help the illiterate people with consulting, helping with finding all the needed documents and filling in the application forms. If possible these mediators should be Roma with an appropriate education and attitude towards the issue. In places where community centers are launched within EU operational programs, local authorities and social assistance offices should work with them in a close cooperation;
- **Cooperation with active community members:** Representatives of local authorities, including the offices for social assistance and the labor offices should take part in community meetings with other authorities (schools, hospitals, police, municipality, etc.) with participation of Roma community activists (like members of community councils or use the model of Taskforce within the ROMACT program); take part in trainings for effective work with and in the Roma community; take part in trainings for effective intercultural communication, etc.

Having a big share of people living in poverty and being at risk of poverty is not beneficial for the entire country. The problems are not capsulated within a certain group. So, not taking effective measures to combat poverty has negative effects not only on the poor themselves but to the entire life in the country. It has a negative effect to all aspects of life in the country. As an example, according to the World Bank, Bulgaria loses nearly \$526 million annually because Roma are not integrated into the labor market. If one part of a body is aching, the entire organism gets sick. Therefore, punitive restrictive measures with high levels of stigmatization and discrimination are only fueling the problems for the entire society. More understanding and cooperation is needed at all levels so that EU and national funding is more effectively utilized in supporting the neediest communities in the country.

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