

**CENTER FOR INTERETHNIC DIALOGUE AND TOLERANCE
“AMALIPE”**

HOT LINE AGENCY

THE ROMA STRATEGIES IN BULGARIA IN THE EVE OF EU ACCESSION



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPD – Child Protection Directorate

EDID – Ethnic and Demographic Issues Directorate

FP – Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society

JIM – Joint Inclusion Memorandum

MES – Ministry of Education and Science

MH – Ministry of Health

MLSP – Ministry of Labor and Social Policy

NAP – National Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion

NCCEDI – National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues

OPHRD – Operational Program for Human Resource Development

PIU – Project Implementation Unit

RIE – Regional Inspectorate of Education

SEI – Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities

UNDP – United Nations Development Program

FORWARDS:

THE ROMA STRATEGIES IN BULGARIA AND THE EU ACCESSION

The present position paper examines the implementation of the so-called “Roma strategies” in Bulgaria for the period July 2005 – July 2006. Several different documents designed with the intention to formulate, manage and realize sustainable governmental and public policies for Roma integration are called “Roma strategies”: Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society, National Action Plan for Realization of the Initiative ‘Decade of Roma Inclusion’, Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities, Health strategy for Ethnic Minorities in Disadvantaged Position, and National Program for Improving the Living Conditions of Roma in the Republic of Bulgaria (2005 – 2015). Despite their low legal status (most of them are only decisions of the Council of Ministers or even Order of the given Minister) they could be considered important enough because they are explicit recognition of the aching problems of the Roma community and signs for political commitment for coping with these problems by the governmental institutions. The fact that these strategies are outcomes of interaction and negotiations between governmental institutions and the civic sector provides additional value.

Both, governmental institutions and Roma NGOs consider the Roma strategies well-prepared documents that could found efficient, effective, sustainable and participative policy for Roma inclusion. At the same time it is a well-known and a recognized fact that their implementation is far from satisfactory. In fact all Monitoring reports of the European Commission repeat that “Efforts to ensure effective implementation of the Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society have been insufficient.”¹ Lack of administrative infrastructure and administrative capacity, lack of financial resources, lack of significant financing from the state budget and lack of mainstreaming are usually considered the main reasons for the modest or missing implementation of the Roma strategies. The general perception shared by almost all institutions is that these strategies are additional but not main and necessary task; they should be implemented mainly through donors’ financing with only supplementary financing from the state budget. As a result the strategies implementation follows a project based principle that sharply limits their extent, minimizes their results, and prevents their conversion into policy.

The process of EU accession has the chance to break down this vicious cycle and to enhance significantly the implementation of the Roma strategies. At the same time, it could de facto abolish them. If Roma integration is considered a periphery issue by the institutions and the working groups engaged in the preparation of the Operational programs, Roma will not be defined as target group and no operations and actions directed to Roma integration will be envisaged. This will leave the implementation of Roma strategies and the Roma inclusion process as a whole without the necessary financing and will de facto abolish both of them. If Roma integration is considered important enough, the EU structural funds could provide enough financing for extensive actions directed to Roma integration. Moreover this financing could change the overall project-based principle for Roma inclusion converting it into policy.

That is why the period from July 2005 to December 2006 could have crucial importance for the future of Roma strategies and Roma integration as a whole. This has motivated the authors to prepare this position paper. It examines the implementation of all Roma strategies in the

¹ Commission of the European Community, *Bulgaria. May 2006 Monitoring report*, p. 29.

period July 2005 – July 2006 except the Health strategy for Ethnic Minorities in Disadvantaged Position. It also reviews the activities for social integration of Roma undertaken by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy although they do not follow a special Roma strategy. Nevertheless, important spheres, such as agriculture and public administration that are extremely important for Roma integration remain outside this paper. Unfortunately, no Roma strategy exists in these spheres and no significant actions are undertaken. The paper is part of a bigger survey undertaken by Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe” about the stage of Roma integration in the eve of Bulgarian accession.

THE FRAMEWORK PROGRAM FOR ROMA INTEGRATION AND THE DECADE OF ROMA INCLUSION: EXPECTING IMPLEMENTATION

Context

The Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (FP) was approved in April 1999 (with a Decision of Council of Ministers from April 22). It could be perceived as the document that expresses the will of the Roma community in the highest degree since it has been signed by more than 70 Roma organizations. In June 2003 Bulgaria agreed to become co-founder of the initiative Decade of Roma Inclusion. The official launch of the Decade was in Sofia on February 2, 2005. The launch for Bulgaria took place on April 8, 2005. On April 14, 2005 the Council of Ministers approved National Action Plan for the Realization of the Initiative Decade of Roma Inclusion (NAP) for 2005 – 2015. It was prepared by a working group that included officials and some Roma activists. It develops further most of the points in the FP putting the accent on education, health care, employment, housing, protection from discrimination and culture.

The implementation of both initiatives is designed as mutual task for all state institutions. At the same time two institutions have special coordinating role for FP implementation: National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCCEDI) – according to Art. 2 (7) from its Regulations, and Ethnic and Demographic Issues Directorate (EDID) – according to Decree of the Council of Ministers 333/10.12.2004. Furthermore, both institutions play coordinating role for the Decade of Roma Inclusion. From July 2006 Bulgaria has taken over the Presidency of the Decade for one year. Yavor Dimitrov, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) was appointed a Coordinator of the Decade with Decision of the Council of Ministers from May 25, 2006.

The implementation of the FP and the commitments of Bulgaria within the Decade of Roma Inclusion during the period from July 2005 to July 2006 occurred in different normative circumstances but in similar manner and had one and the same outputs. The Framework Program implementation did not follow an Action plan or similar document. Such an Action Plan was approved through Decree of the Council of Ministers 693/06.10.2003 but it covered only 2003-2004. In 2005 there was no Action Plan. A consortium composed by European Institute (Sofia), Romani Baxt Foundation and Center for Modernization and Policies won a tender for preparation of an Action Plan for 2006. Despite the ToR envisaged the end of December 2005 as a deadline for this activity, the process took more time and the Action plan for the FP implementation in 2006 was approved on June 29, 2006. Unlike the FP, the Decade of Roma Inclusion followed its National Action Plan approved in April 2005.

Despite this difference, the implementation of both initiatives followed similar patterns. They did not have any special financing from the state budget². As a result the implementation was rather formal. It was based on ordinary activities undertaken by different institutions within the frames of their ordinary budget and responsibilities and often undertaken without any relation with the Framework program or the Decade. In fact, one and the same actions could be formally perceived as implementation of both initiatives and the outcomes are also the same.

This pattern sharply limits the opportunities for extensive actions directed to the implementation of the FP and the Decade engagements. Two options appear as possible stimuli for actions. The first is the Phare program. Since the FP was defined as one of the short-term priorities in Partnership for accession, several Phare projects directed to the implementation of important aspects of the FP were initiated. As a rule, all these projects appoint the NCCEDI as a Project implementation unit (PIU). The second possibility is an active coordinating role of the EDID and the NCCEDI. These institutions could require (within their competences, in soft and limited manner) the other state institutions to undertake actions for the FP and Decade implementation within their ordinary budgets as well as to realize their mainstream programs in a way serving the FP and the Decade implementations. Both options underline the role of the EDID and the NCCEDI for Roma integration.

Raising the administrative capacity of the EDID: For Roma without Roma and the difficulties to play jazz if one is trained in classic music

In July 2005 the Ethnic and Demographic Issues Directorate was practically not established yet. The administrative capacity of the former National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues was too low: staff number was small and key persons left the institutions. As a result the Delegation of the European Commission suspended the start of Phare projects managed by NCCEDI.

The process of EDID formation began in July 2005 when Maya Cholakova, PhD, was appointed as its Director. Three months later competition for appointing the other staff was launched. The process took several months and finished in February 2006. Two Heads of the EDID branches³ and 10 specialists were appointed: six of them in the “Ethnic identity and integration, demographic development” branch, three in the “Roma integration” branch and one was appointed as technical assistant of the whole Directorate.

The process missed the chance to engage the Roma community with the work of the EDID and to ensure Roma participation. It was expected that Roma would be appointed as staff members and even at leading positions since the Government pronounced the loudly principle “For Roma with Roma” and since one of the major criticisms towards the NCCEDI was the low engagement of the Roma community with its work. Nevertheless, Roma presence in the EDID seems rather limited: only 1 expert in the whole Directorate.

The reasons for the absence of Roma in the EDID are complicated. The requirements for the positions of Head of Branch were rather high for most of Roma who expressed interest,

² The only special financing dedicated to the Decade of Roma Inclusion dates from June 12, 2006 when the Council of Ministers provided 128,000 BGN for the needs of Bulgarian Presidency of the Decade but it was for the period July 2006 – June 2007. The only special financing dedicated to key activities from both initiatives for 2005 had to be 1,000,000 BGN for Center for Educational Integration but they were not absorbed because the Center was not established. For 2006 for the Center is envisaged significantly less financing - 500,000 BGN but it is too early to say whether it will be absorbed.

³ EDID has two branches established by Order № H-1291/21.12.2004 of the Prime minister: “Ethnic identity and integration, demographic development” and “Roma integration.”

especially the one of nine years administrative experience. As a rule, Roma have been appointed in the administrative system mainly after 1999 when the Framework program was approved and even those who were among the first to start work in the administration did not have the required years of experience. Possible solution of this problem, proposed by Roma activists, was to equate the experience in the NGO sector with the administrative experience. This idea was not accepted and no steps were undertaken in this direction. As a result Roma candidates for the Head position were rejected for not meeting the formal requirements. At the same time, a number of Roma candidates who met the formal criteria applied for the positions of specialists. Nevertheless, only one was appointed; for the other places non-Roma candidates were appointed. Managing the competition, the governmental administration did not use the opportunity provided by the Law for Protection from Discrimination to foster the employment of Roma candidates. It requires the employer to give preference to candidates from disadvantaged groups when they have the same qualifications as the other candidates.

It seems that the leading principle in the process of appointing EDID staff has been the engagement of people with the highest possible administrative experience even if they do not have any experience in work with Roma, do not know Roma situation and are not familiar with the integration process.⁴ This raised two problems. The first one was the alienation of the Roma community from the work of the EDID. The second was the need for significant improvement of the knowledge and skills of the newly appointed staff about the Roma situation and the Roma integration process.

To cope with the alienation of the Roma community from the EDID its Director tries to establish open, transparent and cooperative style of EDID work. Roma NGOs are provided with information they require, many of EDID activities are preceded by consultations and meetings with NGOs, and so on. It is still early to judge how long this manner of work will last and what extend it will achieve. Nevertheless, it is hardly to expect that this is the only necessary measure for overcoming the alienation of Roma community from the EDID. More and urgent steps are necessary.

To cope with the lack of knowledge and skills for successful work with Roma community of the new staff members, the EDID initiated a set of trainings. Trainings were one of the basic activities of the EDID during the first half of 2006. No doubt, this is needed since most of the staff has not worked with Roma and has completely different administrative experience. Most probably the training would help establishing skills and knowledge necessary for the work with the specific target group. Nevertheless, the process of acquiring such competences will take more time and will delay the work of the EDID.

NCCEDI – expecting coordination and cooperation on ethnic issues

Although the establishment of the NCCEDI was formally envisaged in the end of 2004 (replacing the National Council of Ethnic and Demographic Issues) through Decree 333/10.12.2004 it was not established until the beginning of 2006. Formally, there was sole invitation for nominations of NGOs to become NCCEDI members but it was not accompanied with concrete steps for establishment of the Council by the governmental institutions. As a result no interest was expressed by NGOs. In January 2006 the Prime-Minister Emel Etem (Chairperson of NCCEDI) issued an order for nomination of candidates by NGOs and state institutions. After a short selection procedure, the members of the Council were appointed by order P-21/27.02.2006 of Mrs. Etem. The first meeting of the Council took place on March 1, 2006. Until July there was no other meeting although the Council's Regulations envisage that

⁴ The last was not included in any way within the formal requirements

meetings are held at least once every three months. (Art. 4 (1))⁵ There was also a meeting of the Commission for Roma Integration (within the Council) on April 19, 2006.

It is still early to conclude whether the Council will influence the state policy on ethnic and demographic issues and the implementation of the FP in particular or will function only formally as the preceding National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues. Nevertheless, it is clear that the NCCEDI meets three serious problems. The first one is its limited competencies. The Council has only consulting and coordinating functions and no managing role (Art. 1 (1) from the Council's Regulations). It could advise the state institutions for actions for Roma integration and could require information but not to oblige them for actions or to undertake actions on its own. The second problem is the inefficient structure. The NCCEDI has more than fifty members (representatives of 22 institutions and 31 NGOs). This makes the efficient work impossible. The Commission for Roma Integration within the Council has also inefficient structure: its members are 35 (19 institutions and 16 NGOs). Third problem is the lack of serious engagement of the Roma community with the NCCEDI. The level of Roma representation is rather low. Although 16 Roma NGOs are members of the Council many significant organizations with proved capacity did not apply for membership. Some of them perceive the Council as an institution without competencies and express doubts about the necessity of its existence. Even those who are members do not participate actively in the Council's work. As a whole the level of confidence towards the NCCEDI and its work is very low.

Actions for implementation of the FP and the National Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion

The National Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion (NAP) contains numerous aims, tasks and activities divided into six areas: education, health care, employment, living conditions, protection from discrimination and culture. Responsible institution, time, financing (amount and source) and indicators are envisaged for the fulfillment of all aims, tasks and activities. For the period 2005 - July 2006 129 actions for achieving of 45 tasks and 23 aims are planned.

The existence of such a Plan is a significant asset: in the period from July 2005 to July 2006 it was the only document directed to the whole process of Roma integration. The presence of clear responsible institutions and the financial engagements is a serious precondition for concrete steps and actions. At the same time the Plan contains three significant disadvantages that limit sharply its possibility for influence. The first one is the lack of special financing for the Plan's implementation. Every institution has prepared a plan of activities that could be financed only within its ordinary budget.⁶ This scheme has been proved to be inefficient during the Action Plan for Realization of the FP (2003-2004) and during the years after the FP approval. Nevertheless, it fitted within the general scheme for Roma integration in Bulgaria: lack of special financing outside the ordinary budgets of the institutions with only Phare co-financing as possible exception. This disadvantage sets limitations for all possible future actions.

The second disadvantage is the lack of clear criteria what types of actions are actions for Roma integration and could be included in the Plan. The Plan contains two different types of activities. The first are usual activities of different institutions undertaken without connection

⁵ the second NCCEDI meeting took place on August 2.

⁶ The only exception was the establishment of Center for Educational Integration that ought to receive special financing from 1,000,000 BGN from the State budget.

to the Roma integration process. Roma are part of the beneficiaries; within the beneficiary group their position can vary from insignificant (for example, in the Training for start of own business, Preparing program for consulting the family business, and so on), through significant (for example, Transformation of special schools for mentally disabled children into mainstream schools, and so on) to almost 100 % (for example, Reconstruction or construction of infrastructure in regions populated by Roma). The second type is actions that could be defined as positive actions for Roma integration since they are undertaken to enhance this process (for example, Establishing Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities). The presence of the second type is obviously reasonable unlike the first one which distracts and disperses the efforts in the Plan.

The third disadvantage is the modest financial engagement with the Action plan implementation. The overall amount envisaged for the Action Plan implementation for 2005-2006 is around 1,745,550 BGN (around 900,000 Euro) and 3,446,659 euro (within 2 Phare projects). For a country with more than 800,000 Roma this amount seems symbolic and far from sufficient for real actions. Most of the activities do not have defined amount of financing: only 29 out of 129 activities have concrete sums in the column “amount”. For the other 100 activities the column is empty or “No additional financing is necessary.” There are whole fields with no envisaged financing: employment and living conditions, for example. The reasons for the missing amount of financing for the vast majority of activities could be different: some of them are usual activities and no additional financing is necessary, the others seem just ideas with no concrete parameters. Nevertheless, it is hard to judge how realistic the engagement with activities with no financing envisaged is.

Even more limited is the financial engagement of the state budget. 1,230,000 BGN is the share for activities financed only by the state budget; 270,000 BGN are envisaged as financing by “State budget and donors”. The other 145,000 BGN and 3,446,659 euro are provided by donors (the biggest share is Phare financing⁷) or the source is not indicated. This symbolic financial commitment defines the limited scope of actions and the practical lack of outcomes.

Practically only few actions within the Action Plan were undertaken for the period 2005 - July 2006. Almost all of them were usual activities of different institutions initiated without connection with the Action Plan and with the Roma integration process as a whole. For example the biggest financial share is for reconstructions of 5 streets in Roma neighborhoods in different towns. This activity could be hardly perceived as Action plan implementation: hundreds of streets are reconstructed every year in Bulgaria and this is part of the ordinary duties and responsibilities of different institutions; moreover, it is alarming that only 5 of the reconstructed streets are in Roma neighborhoods.⁸ The other actions fell within different Phare projects initiated years before the Action plan preparation.

The share of realized actions undertaken deliberately for Roma integration and envisaged in the Action plan is insignificant. Their financing is close to zero. For example, none of the 4 actions in the field of education with envisaged financing of 1,080,400 BGN from the state budget has been realized. The Ministry of Health has provided only 30,000 BGN out of the envisaged 500,000 BGN for realizing activities within the Action Plan. In the fields of living conditions and employment there were no actions with envisaged financing. The actions

⁷ In 2005-2006 several Phare projects directed to Roma integration have been realized. It is not clear why only two of them are included in the Action plan. A possible reason is the lack of clear criteria what activities could be included in the Action plan by different ministries and institutions.

⁸ Most probably more streets in areas populated with Roma were reconstructed but the information was not provided to the EDID since these were not actions undertaken because of the Action plan implementation.

within Prevention of discrimination field were backed up with 105,150 BGN and within Culture – with around 50,000 BGN. In this way, the overall amount of financing provided for actions undertaken deliberately for Roma integration and envisaged in the Action plan is insignificant and does not exceed 200,000 BGN or around 100,000 euro.

Despite all the disadvantages mentioned above, a number of actions directed to Roma integration have been undertaken in the period in question: they will be analyzed in the following chapters. In general, they were not included in the Action plan and were not undertaken because of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. This is not by accident: it seems that the Action plan has rather limited opportunities to influence the process of Roma integration. Unlike its intention, it seems to have more formal and bureaucratic character rather than to be a general framework for enhancing and fostering the Roma inclusion.

The modest implementation of the Action plan for 2005 – July 2006 and its lack of significant influence to the process of Roma integration indicate the limited possibilities of the model for Roma integration in Bulgaria. *Roma inclusion is still perceived as additional task with no additional financing and institutional infrastructure.* The only possibility for special actions provided so far for Roma integration is through project based activities financed by foreign donors or by European funds combined with Bulgarian co-financing.

Since the Phare program is close to its end, the only significant factor that could enhance the process of Roma integration (and the implementation of Decade of Roma Inclusion and FP) seems to be its linkage with the European structural funds. Another possible option is shift in the general scheme of Roma integration in Bulgaria. This would require strong political will by the side of the Bulgarian political elite and serious (non-formal) financing by the state budget. Both factors seem rather problematic at the moment.

THE STRATEGY FOR EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION: NO VISIBLE IMPLEMENTATION ON THE HORIZON

During the previous three to four years education was the Leading sphere in the process of Roma integration. Initial steps for implementation of the educational part of the Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (FP) were undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and by several Roma NGOs. The MES established a certain degree of cooperation with Roma and other educational NGOs; it used to show signs for addressing Roma educational problem through combination of targeting and mainstreaming approach. During the past one year most of these assets have been lost. At present, the level of political commitment for implementation of the educational part of the FP is low: it is perceived as an additional task aside from the process of modernization of Bulgarian education and aside from the mainstream educational processes as a whole. The main direction of Roma educational integration is unclear. The cooperation between educational institutions (especially at central level) and Roma NGOs is problematic. Efforts for establishing institutional infrastructure dealing with Roma educational integration are undertaken; nevertheless it is still weak. The efforts for Roma educational integration are not included in the Operational programs and are not perceived as part of the EU accession process.

Context

The educational status of Roma in Bulgaria is sharply low and significantly worse compared with the average for the country. About 63 % of Roma have only basic or no education⁹, 32,2 % complete primary school, 4,6% – secondary school and less than 0.2% have a university degree, compared to 16,3 %, 25,7 %, 41,8%, and 16,1 % respectively from ethnic Bulgarians.¹⁰ The Roma illiteracy rate is 15 times higher than the rate for the non-Roma population. A recent study of Roma literacy found that 64% of Roma over the age of 15 were illiterate, while only 25% of Turks and 9% of ethnic Bulgarians can not read.¹¹ This disadvantaged educational situation deepens the social exclusion, poverty and unemployment of Roma community.

The FP stresses education as one of the basic means for Roma integration. It perceives Roma educational problems not only as social ones but also as problems of a discriminated ethnic group: access to quality education, educational segregation, lack of intercultural education, and so on. The Program envisages six areas of actions and five tasks for achieving educational integration. The main accent is put on the desegregation of the “Roma” ghetto schools situated in the biggest cities in Bulgaria.

In June 2004 MES issued Strategy for educational integration of children and students from the ethnic minorities (SEI). It was designed as a main political document conducting the governmental efforts for minority educational integration. The Strategy develops further the FP. It envisages a set of tasks and measures for achieving Roma educational integration centered on access to quality education, desegregation and intercultural education. In June 2005 the Minister of education signed a five-year Action Plan for Implementation of the Strategy.

The Action Plan (as well the Strategy itself) is based on the idea that the financial mechanisms for implementation of the SEI will be provided not by the state budget but by a specially established Center for Educational Integration that will raise funds from foreign donors operating also with “supplementary financing from the state budget”. In accordance with this the Council of Ministers issued Decree 4/11.01.2005 for establishing Center for Educational Integration. It states that the Center will be “secondary distributor of budget credits ... and supports the MES for carrying out policy for educational integration of children and students from the ethnic minorities” (Art. 1 (2)). The budget of the Center is composed of donations from foreign and Bulgarian donors as well as by subsidy from the budget of the MES; the latter should be spent only as supplementary financing for the activities financed by donors’ donations (Art. 9 (2)). The Decree envisages 1,000,000 BGN as state subsidy for 2005 and states that the Internal regulations of the Center should be prepared in two months. Despite this, the Internal regulations were not approved by the Council of Ministers and the Center was not established until July 2005.

Political commitment for Roma educational integration: the decreasing role of MES

During the period July 2005 – July 2006 the main efforts of the MES were directed to modernization of the Bulgarian educational system. Roma educational integration was not perceived as mean for fostering this process. As a result the political commitment for active measures directed to Roma educational integration was low. Furthermore, the Minister of Education and Science Ass. Prof. Daniel Valchev stated before representatives of Center

⁹ i.e. they do not have educational degree since the first degree is received after completing 8 grade – primary education.

¹⁰ Source: National Statistic Institute (01.03.2001).

¹¹ Study by ASSA-M, December 2005

“Amalipe” and Interethnic Initiative for Human Rights in May 2006 that “Majority children have enough problems to speak about the problems of minority children.

At the same time the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy began implementing programs closely connected with Roma educational integration: a program for training of Roma teaching assistants, program for literacy classes of illiterate elderly Roma, and so on. MLSP has been managing also the component for free breakfast for all students from first to fourth grade within the “Program for better inclusion of students compulsory to education” that has a significant effect on Roma students. The decreasing role of MES for the process of Roma educational integration negatively affects the implementation of the Strategy for Educational Integration since the latter engages only MES but not MLSP.

Connected with the decreasing commitment of MES is the possible change in the main direction of Roma educational integration. Up to September 2005 when the new government was established the main direction promoted by MES and most of the Roma NGOs was desegregation of the so-called “Roma ghetto schools”. After September 2005 there have been no clear signs that this direction would be remained. Minister Valchev or members of the political cabinet have not even mention the word “desegregation” in any interview or speech. No provision for desegregation is included in the Program for Development of School Education (2006-2015) prepared by MES and approved by the Parliament. At the same time during meetings with school principals and Roma activists Deputy Minister Kircho Atanasov expressed his opinion that desegregation of the neighborhood Roma schools is not desired by most of Roma parents. It is not clear whether MES will preserve the desegregation as major means for Roma educational integration or will shift to a set of social and administrative measures aimed at ensuring the presence of Roma children in schools without concern whether these schools are ethnically mixed or “Roma” – as it is in the Program for Development of School Education..

Political commitment for implementation of SEI – lack of mainstreaming

During the period July 2005 – July 2006 the political commitment for implementation of the SEI was controversial. From one side, the Strategy was not abolished and administrative infrastructure for its implementation began to be established. From the other side, there was a clear resistance for mainstreaming tasks and measures envisaged in the Strategy into the basic documents prepared by MES. Moreover, the latter contradicted important points of the Strategy.

The most indicative example in this direction is the Program for Development of School and Pre-School Education (2006 – 2015) – the main document prepared by MES and approved by Bulgarian Parliament. The Program does not contain any of the tasks and measures for educational integration of Roma children envisaged in the SEI. Desegregation and intercultural education – the main accents in SEI – are not even mentioned in the Program. There is no reference to the Strategy itself. The Program treats minority issues partially and at a very low level. The educational integration of minority children is presented as “Socialization of children for whom Bulgarian language is not a mother tongue”. This expression is discriminative in its essence: it depicts minority children as “unsocialized”; their culture and language are implicitly perceived as second-class and inferior. The measures envisaged are mainly connected with providing opportunities for better learning of Bulgarian language, social measures (such as free textbooks and free breakfast) and binding the social benefits for parents with the students’ presence at school. This is a sharp difference from the Strategy for Educational Integration where all measures for school integration are educational ones and are connected with the intercultural education.

As a result, the Program contains elements that would raise the number of drop-out Roma children and would result in deterioration of the educational level of the Roma community. These elements are:

- Finishing the primary education in the seventh grade (at present it is the eighth grade). This change would leave around 7000 Roma children out of the educational system every year. According to data from the MES, the percentage of Roma children in the eighth grade is 7.8% while in the ninth grade it is 1 %. This means that seven out of every eight Roma children who finish primary education do not continue into secondary. These are 7000 children per year. If primary education finishes after the seventh grade, these children will be left on the street.

- Eliminating classes with students under the minimum. The Program treats these classes in one and the same way as the so-called “merged classes” (classes where children from different grades study in the same classroom) when from an educational point of view they are completely different. It is difficult to have normal educational process in the merged classes while students from the different grades study different things. At the same time in the classes with small number of students the work of the teacher is easier because it allows individual work with each one of them. The eliminating of the classes with small number of students will additionally worsen the situation of the village school.

- Administrative abolishment of many schools in the rural areas: this is not mentioned explicitly in the Program but this would be one of the short-term results after the primary schools lose their 8th grade and their classes under minimum. (Due to the demographic crisis almost all village schools have classes under the minimum). According to the Census from 2001 47 % of Roma live in rural areas. Due to the cultural specifics of the Roma community, Roma parents are reluctant to let their children, especially girls, go to a school in another settlement. This raises serious problems in the settlements where the schools will be closed. The Roma children there will be left completely outside of the educational system and with regard to the cultural specifics the initial right of these children to education would be suspended. This problem could affect around 50,000 Roma kids

- Intensive professional education after the fifth grade: this practically will lead to worsening the knowledge of the Roma children in the major school subjects and will deprive them of the real opportunity to continue their education in the secondary schools. Until 1992 this practice existed and it led to the segregation of the Roma children in schools with intensive vocational schooling.

The Program provoked huge discussions. Center “Amalipe”, other Roma and educational NGOs, the trade unions, many municipalities and school principals expressed concern about the Program’s effect on Roma educational integration and proposed inclusion of the main points from SEI in the Program. During the discussions high officials from MES (Minister Valchev and Deputy Minister Atanasov) rejected it with the argument that the Program treats the problems of the whole educational system unlike SEI that deals only with minority students.

This lack of mainstreaming puts on doubt the future of the Strategy for Educational Integration. The Program for Development of School Education has significantly higher legal status (decision of the Parliament) than the one of SEI (decision of the Minister of education); the Program will be financially backed-up and will lead to changes in the legislation. This and the existing contradictions between the Program and the SEI put on doubt the scope and intensity of implementation of the Strategy.

Institutional infrastructure for implementation of SEI: head without body

After September 2005 when the new government was established, the implementation of the SEI and the efforts for educational integration in general have been delegated to Deputy Minister Mukaddes Nalbant. For first time the issue of educational integration become one of the main tasks of a deputy minister.¹² This opened the door for strengthening the administrative capacity and administrative infrastructure for realizing activities for educational integration.

Two different target groups are perceived as object of “educational integration” by MES: children with special educational needs (mentally disabled children and children from the institutions) and children from minority origin. The level of commitment for their integration, the tools used for it and the advance of the integration process differ for both groups. Concerning children with special educational needs there is strong commitment for gradual deinstitutionalization and integration in the so-called “mass schools”. MES (and its regional branches – Regional Inspectorates of Education) manages and coordinates this process. It is relatively advanced: in 2005/2006 school year 1277 children with special needs were integrated in the mass schools, the percentage of students in the special schools declined with 8 % compared with the previous school year, 70 classes less were approved in the special schools, 9 special school were abolished in June 2006, and so on. The level of political commitment for active measures directed to educational integration of children from minority origin is much lower as pointed above. Until now this process is implemented mainly by non-governmental organizations and the engagement of MES with it is unclear. It tends to acquire coordinating but not managing functions.

In respect with this the institutional infrastructure for both target groups is established in a different way. At central level they are subject to a common Directorate named “Educational and Cultural Integration”. It is composed of two branches: “Educational integration of children and students from the ethnic minorities” and “Integration of children with special educational needs”. This structure existed before July 2005. The clear intention of Deputy minister Nalbant to strengthen it through engaging more people and expanding the responsibilities of the Direction has no results yet.

At regional level there are experts in “Integrated education” in several Regional Inspectorates of Education. The assignment of such experts in the other RIE is envisaged and expected. All of them are responsible for the educational integration of children with special educational needs. Twenty four Centers for Support of the Integrated Education will be established soon . Their main responsibility will be to coordinate the process of deinstitutionalization and integration of children with special educational needs.

In contrast, there is no administrative structure dealing with minority integration at the regional level. There is no expert assigned deliberately for the implementation of SEI and for the educational integration of the students from the ethnic minorities. To start establishing administrative capacitance in this direction MES undertook two steps during the first half of 2006. The first one was to define experts responsible for the implementation of SEI in every RIE. This was done in April 2006 but the efficiency of this measure could be hardly estimated. All of them are experts whose main responsibilities remain different from the issue of Roma educational integration – elementary education, arts, history, mother tongue, integrated education (i.e. integration of children with special needs), etc. The implementation of SEI is an additional (“extra”) task for them. Most of them are overburdened with different

¹² Nevertheless it is hardly to judge whether this occurred owing to deep realizing of the educational integration importance or owing to complicated scheme for responsibility distribution among the three parties from the governing coalition in every ministry.

responsibilities and it is hardly to expect that they would leave a lot of time and efforts for SEI implementation. Second step was the appointment of students as interneer assisting the SEI implementation in RIE. This was done for the period April – June 2006. The internship was designed for students graduating from the Pedagogy departments. Their main responsibility was to assist the implementation of SEI. Although financial opportunity for internship was provided in all 28 RIE only 14 of them realized it. It is hard to say whether this step has led to real improvement in the administrative capacity of RIE for SEI implementation – the term of internship was too short (3 months) and as a whole the Inspectorates were not prepared for it. Nevertheless, this was the first time when special person in RIE has had SEI implementation as main responsibility.

Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities

Both the SEI and the Action Plan for Implementation of the SEI are based on the intention for decentralized way for minority educational integration: MES will play rather coordinating than executing functions; municipalities, schools and RIE will be the active players in the process. That is why a new executive agency was necessary for the Roma educational integration.

Decree 4/11.01.2005 of the Council of Ministers has envisaged the establishment of the Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities as fundraising and fund-providing agency for the process of minority educational integration. It is a juridical body subordinated to the Minister of Education who is the Chairman of its Board and appoints the Board members as well as the Center's Director. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the Decree, it seems that the Center will be the only way for financing the process of Roma educational integration by MES.

Despite the crucial necessity of the existence of this body and the provisions of Decree 4/11.01.2005 for establishing the Center in 2 months the Council of Ministers did not approve Center Regulations in 2005. As a result 1,000,000 BGN envisaged in the Decree for Center's functioning in 2005 was not used and the process of Roma educational integration was left without substantial financing. Low commitment to Roma educational integration, lack of administrative capacity and the parliamentary elections in June 2005 were some of the possible explanations for this delay. Finally, the Center's Regulations were approved by the Council of Ministers in the end of April 2006¹³. In June 2006 Minister Valchev appointed Director of the Center.

Up to now the Center does not have a Board, staff members and office and it does not function. That is why it is impossible to conclude whether it would provide the necessary start of necessary actions for SEI implementation. As stated above, it seems that the Center will be the only way for financing the process of Roma educational integration by MES. The ways for this financing is through support of projects prepared by schools, municipalities or RIE (Art. 20 from the Regulations of the Center)¹⁴ or through developing own projects (Art. 19). This scheme has two important assets. First, it provokes the active engagement of important players (such as municipalities and schools) that will receive financing for their efforts. Second, it opens the door for projects that take into account the real local needs and propose working local solutions since the main players will be local actors. At the same time, the scheme defines three disturbing disadvantages. First, it creates the real possibility for realizing no actions for educational integration at many places. If the local institutions (municipalities

¹³ Published in *State gazette* 40/16.05.2006.

¹⁴ NGOs are not eligible to apply for financing unless as partners of the institutions mentioned above.

and schools) are not active enough or do not have commitment for Roma educational integration they would not prepare projects and would not realize actions. There is no mechanism that could make them get engaged with the process of educational integration. Second, the financial engagement by the state budget for Roma educational integration seems to remain insufficient. It could be only “supplementary financing” (500,000 BGN or 256,410 euro for 2006). Most of the funding is expected by foreign donors. Having in mind that the donor’s financing is always for limited pilot initiatives and that with the EU accession most of the donors leave Bulgaria the level of financing is determined to be limited and insufficient. Moreover, there is no sign that MES intends to connect the Center’s work with EU structural funds and EU accession as a whole. Third, the scheme denies the opportunity of NGOs to realize projects independently or as leading partner. Having in mind that for the past years the process of Roma educational integration was realized mainly by NGOs, this provision would seriously affect the process.

It seems that although the Center could help and speed the process of Roma educational integration it could not convert it into policy. The process will continue as a set of small projects, limited in scope and number, and realized by more and diverse actors on the basis of their good will and capacity. Most probably it will help the advanced municipalities and schools with accumulated experience and capacity and will leave aside the other municipalities and schools (those with less will and capacity for actions). If the Center’s work is not connected with the structural funds and replaces the necessary substantial activity of MES for Roma educational integration, SEI would remain a “paper tiger” – good document without significant implementation.

Partnership with Roma NGOs

During the previous years Roma NGOs proved themselves as significant players in the process of Roma educational integration. The fact that most of the achieved results presented in the educational part of “Bulgarian contribution to the monitoring report of the European Commission” (February 2006) are achieved by Roma NGOs¹⁵ is a clear sign for the role of Roma NGOs. In 2003 MES established Consultative Council for Education of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities as tool for institutionalized dialogue among MES, minority NGOs and donors.

In the period concerned by this report the cooperation between most of the Roma NGOs and MES gradually has deteriorated and remained only at regional level (with RIE). The Consultative Council was not re-established after the end of its mandate (July 2005). This left Roma NGOs without opportunity for institutionalized dialogue with MES. It is expected that the Council will be re-established but with presence of only 1 organization for a minority. If this happens, Roma would not be really represented since there is several but not one Roma NGO with proven expertise in the field of education. Furthermore, the Roma minority can hardly be compared with some of the other minorities which are few in number.

Actions for SEI implementation

¹⁵ For example 3,500 Roma children study in mixed schools as a result of 7 NGOs supported by OSI-Budapest. 5,000 students study Roma folklore as a result of the efforts of Center “Amalipe”, and so on. See: “Bulgarian contribution to the Monitoring Report of the European Commission, February 2006.”

Roma and other NGOs have continued to play major role in realizing actions for SEI implementation. The MES and other institutions have also undertaken activities in this direction.

The role of MES was rather limited. In September 2005 it ordered the Regional Inspectorates on Education to prepare Regional Plans for Implementation of SEI. This step was necessary to fill the existing gap at the regional level: up to this moment national Strategy and Action Plan and numerous municipal Strategies for educational integration and Action Plans existed without any regional documents. The Regional Action Plans for SEI implementation 2005-2006 were prepared in September-October 2005. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this step could hardly be appreciated too high. There are no clear evidences that these Plans have fostered the process of educational integration. They were not financially backed-up since there were no funds available (there was no subsidy from the budget of MES; the Center did not exist yet) As a result the Plans summarized mainly activities of NGOs and limited other activities that did not require financing, as well as ordinary activities of RIE realized in no connection to the existence or not-existence of Action Plans. Moreover, the way of their preparation was not efficient: they were prepared without serious consultations with the municipalities. Therefore, they did not reflect the needs of the local Municipal Strategies and did not serve as a bridge between the national Strategy and the municipal ones.

MES did not use its big mainstream programs for promoting SEI implementation. For example, the component for providing bus transportation from the National Program for Better Inclusion of Students Compulsory to Education (component managed by MES) was not used for free transportation of Roma students who want to study in mixed schools instead of the neighboring segregated schools. None of the 219 busses provided by MES was used for this purpose and bus transportation necessary for the process of desegregation (one of the main accents in SEI) remained a task of the Roma NGOs. MES did not use the program for computerization for the needs of intercultural education, and so on.

At the same time other institutions undertook actions that serve the process of Roma educational integration far better. The National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCCEDI) and Ethnic and Demographic Issues Directorate (EDID) began implementing two Phare projects with educational components within Phare 2003 and 2004. Both projects aim at fostering SEI implementation through significant material support for ethnically mixed schools where Roma children are integrated (building reconstructions, technical equipment supplies, supplies of educational materials, etc.), training of teachers and teaching assistants in intercultural skills, elaboration of curricula for intercultural education, etc. The implementation of both projects is at an early stage and it is still impossible to evaluate it in regard to the SEI implementation. (For example, the implementation of Phare BG 0104.01 “Roma Population Integration” in 2004 rather disturbed than fostered Roma educational integration). Nevertheless, there are positive signs that the mistakes from Phare BG 0104.01 will be avoided. It seems that the NCCEDI and MES has taken into account most of the recommendations from “Evaluation Report for Phare BG 0104.01 realization” (prepared by Center “Amalipe” with the support of Roma experts all over the country). The role of the teaching assistant is elucidated: it is clearly defined in the project fiche of Phare 2004 – “mediators – social workers with educational knowledge.”¹⁶ Roma NGOs play significant role in the process of defining schools that will be supported, there are mechanisms for monitoring the project implementation at local level and Roma NGOs play a decisive role in them, the procedure follows high transparency, and so on.

¹⁶ Standard Project Fiche. Improvement of the Situation and Inclusion of the Disadvantaged Ethnic Minorities with a Special Focus on Roma, BG 2004/016-711.01.03, p.6.

Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) also initiated actions that serve the process of Roma educational integration. Such actions are training of 50 teaching assistants who will be appointed after the training to help the teacher in out of class activities and in the contacts with Roma parents for 2 years¹⁷; literacy courses for 2500 illiterate elderly Roma, and so on. Furthermore, the MLSP manages a number of programs that do not target Roma children but have effect on Roma educational integration. For example, the component for free breakfast within the National Program for Better Inclusion of Students Compulsory to Education (component managed by MLSP) significantly helps keeping Roma children at school.

Nevertheless, all these actions could not be perceived as implementation of the SEI although their positive character is obvious. From one side, as program of MES the SEI does not engage MLSP. The lack of coordination between both ministries often provokes difficulties. For instance, neither MES, nor its regional branches helped methodologically or logistically the literacy courses for illiterate elderly Roma with the argument that this is not MES program. This provoked a bulk of difficulties: lack of educational curriculum, pedagogical tests, etc. Paradoxically, the regional branches of the Employment Agency looked for the support and cooperation of Roma NGOs to cope with these problems. From the other side, many of the MLSP actions have only social character that do not fit within the intention of SEI where the social measures are closely connected with the pedagogical ones. In this way the passive behavior of MES could lead to shift in the overall process of Roma educational integration – from pedagogical to only social measures.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Several immediate steps are necessary for ensuring the process of Roma educational integration and SEI implementation:

1. ***Mainstreaming the Roma educational integration and SEI implementation.*** MES should raise the issues of Roma integration as integral part and mean for modernization of Bulgarian education. This includes usage of main programs managed by MES (the component for providing bus transportation from the National Program for Better Inclusion of Students Compulsory to Education, the program for computerization and others) for the needs of SEI implementation. Significant changes in the National Program for Development of School and Pre-school Education (2006-2015) directed to incorporation of the main SEI points as well as to avoiding those points from the Program that would deteriorate the educational level of Roma community are necessary.
2. ***Establishing proper administrative infrastructure for SEI implementation.*** This includes strengthening the infrastructure at national level (within MES) and establishing regional one. Special experts whose main responsibilities would be Roma educational integration and SEI implementation should be appointed. Their Roma origin would be an asset.
3. ***Connecting SEI implementation with EU structural funds.*** SEI implementation as a whole and the work of the Center for Educational Integration should be connected with the process of Structural funds absorption. It is a subject of urgent activities to include important points connected with Roma educational integration in the Operational Program for Human Recourse Development.
4. ***Establishing proper forms for cooperation between Roma NGOs and MES.*** The Consultative Council for Education of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities

¹⁷ Important disadvantage of all programs for training of teacher assistants until now is that they do not provide employment after the training

should be re-established. It is important for it to provide opportunities for proper Roma representation and not to limit it. Clear and democratic procedures for defining the Roma representatives in the Council are necessary. The same is valid for selecting Roma representatives in the Board of the Center for Educational Integration.

5. *Establishing cooperation between MES and other institutions working for Roma educational integration (NCCEDI, MLSP, etc.)*

NATIONAL PROGRAM FOR IMPROVING THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF ROMA (2005 – 2015)

Context

According to the 2001 census, about 46% of Roma live in villages and 54% in cities. Most of the Roma, living in cities, reside in inner-city neighborhoods either in the capital Sofia, or in regional centers, such as the cities of Plovdiv, Burgas, or Sliven. The living conditions, even in community housing, are usually abhorrent. Often, these settlements are walled to prevent the public from seeing them.

After 1990, the massive unemployment and dependency on social benefits forced many Roma to move to large cities, where such benefits were paid more regularly. Many of these newcomers were drawn into existing Roma neighborhoods, where often utility bills did not have to be paid and building of illegal housing was relatively easy. As a result particularly of the illegal building the municipalities and the state abandoned such neighborhoods and they gradually transformed into shanty towns and city ghettos with decrepit basic infrastructure. With the privatization of utility companies these neighborhoods declined further as water and electricity became available for only a few hours per day, as companies were trying to minimize losses. The enforcement of these limitations is regularly carried out with the assistance of the police, which is called on to protect utility workers from the protests of the residents. This has led to further deterioration of the relationship between the police and the Roma minority, as they increasingly find themselves in situations of conflict.

Roma neighborhoods are characterized on the basis of two groups of buildings: those supplied with electricity only and those supplied with water supply and electricity but without a sewerage network. In one extensive survey, 92% of urban houses including those of the Roma had the full range of services, while for the Roma alone this was 46%.¹⁸

Such figures, however, usually conceal irregular operation and in some cases damaged and unusable services. Significant shifts in household sharing and locational preferences are discernible. Overcrowding within the dwelling among extended family households is causing extreme social stress. The living conditions of the Roma and the opportunities for improvement are embedded within a general housing context, in which many aspects are far from favorable. Municipal transportation networks do not reach many Roma settlements. Buses often stop at the edge of Roma neighborhoods. Where there is public transportation, the buses often do not run as frequently and are of lower quality than those that serve other neighborhoods. In some Roma communities, people are even forced to drink contaminated water, to share one source of water among dozens of families, or to travel considerable

¹⁸ “National Program for improving the living conditions of ethnic minorities in urban areas”, UNDP Bulgaria, 2005

distances to reach the water source. This is the situation in one of the largest Roma ghettos in the capital Sofia – “Filipovtzi”. Local Roma are forced to share one source of water due to the lack of adequate sewerage and water supply system in the neighborhood.

Some Roma slums have evocative nicknames; for example, “Abyssinia” and “Cambodia” are extremely impoverished areas within Bulgaria’s Roma ghettos. A household survey data show that Roma living quarters are smaller than others, have larger households, and are consequently more crowded. 95.4% of Roma household have electricity supply, 9.4% of them have access to hot water in comparison to 39.4% of Non Roma in Bulgaria and 36.7% of Roma are using earthen floor to sleep in comparison to 7.9% of non Roma.¹⁹

Surveys record around 25% of Roma housing without legal status. Although lacking clear criteria this is likely to be grossly underestimated.²⁰ Especially among central and local government officials, legalization is considered the most critical obstacle to the integration and development of Roma neighborhoods. Up to date cadastre mapping with accurate property registration is rare. Questions about the legality of property ownership have arisen with land as well.

The relative poverty and weak labor market position of people from minority ethnic communities restricts their choice in the housing market and constrains their ability to be residentially mobile in order to improve their housing situation. It is indicative that more than ¾ of Roma have never lived outside of the city or village where they were born. Legal status and ethnic origin are key factors affecting access to housing. For Roma, racial discrimination and harassment play an important role in the disproportionate housing exclusion they experience.

National Program on improving the living conditions of ethnic minorities in urban areas

The National Program for improving the living conditions of ethnic minorities in urban areas was initiated by United Nations Development Program as part of an advisory and programming support to the Government of Republic of Bulgaria in 2005. The advisory service has been aimed at supporting the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works as well as the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers in addressing an urgent need for developing the extensive opening in the National Housing Strategy adopted by the Council of Ministers on 14 May 2004.

The Program was targeting ethnic minorities living in urban areas with special focus on Roma population. Extended consultations were held in several municipalities with compact Roma inhabitants: Sofia, Sliven, Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Lom and Kyustendil, Roma and non Roma NGOs operating on the territory of these cities, national and local representatives of state administration.

UNDP support to the formulation of the National Program was based on an integrated and multi-sectoral approach, which resulted in the preparation of a technical and operational plan for the eradication of Roma ghettos based on international best practices and tailored to the specifics of the Bulgarian context. And the design of a financial mechanism to facilitate

¹⁹ Source: Yale dataset; Revenga et al. 2002, “Roma in an Expanding Europe”, *Breaking the poverty cycle*, World Bank, 2005.

²⁰ “National Program for improving the living conditions of ethnic minorities in urban areas”, UNDP Bulgaria, 2005

implementation of the National Program, including specification of the first steps needed to make it an operational mechanism.

The Program is comparable to the currently implemented Urbanization and social development of areas with predominant minority population project in its scope and ambition, as well as in the integrated approach it assumes to address the complex problems of underdeveloped Roma communities. Unfortunately, it is also an example of the discrepancy between the ambitious policy commitments of the government and the capacity of its administration to design and implement those policies. Assuming that the Bulgarian decision makers are genuinely concerned with this situation, UNDP has seen an opportunity to provide the missing expertise in terms of designing a comprehensive National program for improving the living conditions of Roma in the period 2005-2015. Therefore this intervention was timely and highly relevant to the identified needs, on the one hand, and to the announced policy priorities, on the other.

The extensive document, prepared by UNDP, is an example of evidence-based comprehensive approach to policy making. An impressive amount of data has been gathered and processed and a variety of factors has been profoundly analyzed: the divergent trends in the Roma communities, the dynamics of the labor market and the market of real estate, the structure of household income generation and expenditure, the existing legal and institutional framework, the technical aspects of the project, etc. A special effort has been made to gear the capacity and the interests of the various potential stakeholders and to match different sources of funding (savings, bank loans, municipal budgets, state subsidies, etc.) to come up with a workable scheme for co-financing this ambitious undertaking. A review of the existing good practices is provided, a number of predictable risks and shortcomings are identified and taken under consideration and adequate procedures for monitoring and evaluation are envisaged. Another merit of the program is the participatory philosophy, embodied in a set of concrete and interrelated measures for involvement of the Roma at individual, family and community level. The supportive components, accompanying the major construction activities, form a coherent ensemble of activities, informed by the best practice of community development. The document builds on the experience of UNDP with other Roma related projects such as Beautiful Bulgaria and JOBS, thus providing a model for a learning organization.

The vulnerability of the program is paradoxically inherent in its own complexity and sophistication, which presupposes coordinated and complementary activities to be carried out in synchrony by a variety of actors. The integrated approach, underlying the program design, can hardly work unless a certain level of synergy is attained. As long as the program relies on the commitment and voluntary participation of the different stakeholders, its success is kept hostage on the fragile consensus of the local actors, undermined by rivalries.

As an example of this statement is the consecutive effort of UNDP Bulgaria to start pilot project for improving the living conditions of Roma in “Iztok” neighborhood, Pazardzhik municipality. However due to the lack of capital financial resources of the local municipality the project failed to start. Although positive circumstances were in place, under the Phare program eleven houses were built and Roma families were placed to live there against modest monthly rent. The conclusion was that there is support and willingness by the local Roma NGOs, local community, but the municipal authority could not afford large investments in the neighborhood. Another substantive reason for the pilot project’s failure was the existing discrimination attitude shared and expressed by the majority of ethnic Bulgarians.

National Program for Improving the Living Conditions of Roma in the Republic of Bulgaria (2005 – 2015)

In March 2006 the government of Bulgaria adopted a National Program for improving the living conditions of Roma in Bulgaria for the period 2005 - 2015, as part of the National housing strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria. The Program is a result of the joint efforts of experts from the Directorate of Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, representatives of the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, UNDP Bulgaria, municipal representatives and Roma non-governmental organizations.

The Program is envisaging the implementation of the following measures:

- Infrastructure investments for Roma neighborhoods'
- Assigning of new areas for the location of part of the Roma population;
- Construction of new dwellings with public financial resources, which afterwards shall be available for Roma against monthly rent payment;
- Changes in the spatial development in areas with predominant Roma population.

The program is also foreseeing the construction of 30 065 houses. In a period of ten years the living conditions of 412 500 Roma shall be improved or 85 900 Roma households, inhabitants of 100 neighborhoods in 88 cities of Bulgaria. The expected expenditures for the next ten years are estimated at 1,26 billion BGN, funded by the Bulgarian government, EU and the local government's budgets. The correlation is as follows 40% contribution by the government, 30% by EU Structural and Cohesion funds, 17% contribution by local government; the other financing will be provided by the beneficiaries themselves and by other financial institutions.

At this early stage of implementation of the Government's Program it is difficult to say to what an extent this approach will prove to be efficient and sustainable. Several serious Program's advantages are obvious. First, it is integral part of the National Housing Strategy, i.e. targeting approach is combined with mainstreaming one that is a precondition for serious concern about Roma housing problems and for sustainability of the actions undertaken. Solving Roma housing problem is seen as necessary precondition for improving the overall housing situation in Bulgaria. This approach is missing in the other "Roma strategies" (such as the Strategy for educational integration and the Framework Program for Roma Integration as a whole). Second, the financial engagement from the state budget seems significant. The Program does not rely on the good will of foreign donors (perceiving EU structural funds in this way would be a mistake) unlike the other "Roma programs". Third, there are certain indications for connecting the Program with the EU structural funds. If this is backed-up in the Operational programs, the Program would receive serious normative and financial support. Fourth, one of the basic Program's principles is the participation of Roma community.

At the same time several problems could be seen even in this early stage. There are certain indications that the commitment of the local authorities and their capacity for coordinated action has been overestimated. The reluctance of the local municipalities to contribute with own funding in the pilot phase of the indicative program creates considerable obstacles, a municipal contribution towards such a pilot scheme should be at least 17% of the total project amount, which could be also in kind – assigning municipal terrains. While the district

administration, supposedly responsible for the implementation of national policies, has distanced itself from the problem and shifted the responsibility to the municipal authorities.

What is more alarming is the mechanistic reading of the document, prepared by UNDP Bulgaria by the administration, which has produced misunderstandings. The official document, circulated by the Ethnic and Demographic Issues Directorate presents nothing but a selective copy and paste version of the Program, where important aspects have been lost. Unsurprisingly what has been willingly or unwillingly omitted in the official document is precisely the logic of interdependence among the various actors. This apparently minor fact discloses alienated and formalized attitude on the part of the state administration and foretells ongoing difficulties in the implementation phase. Another significant omission in the government's strategy is the lack of demonstrative projects that would've served as verification of the model.

The mechanisms for ensuring the state budget financing also look unclear. According to the Program this would happen through the budget of the Ministry of Regional Development "on dependency of the opportunities of the budget" and "in the context of the expenditure limits and the other programs within the budget of the Ministry".

Serious alarming problem is that the Program is oriented only to Roma who live in urban areas. The same is valid for UNDP Program. Both aim at solving the harsh living problem in 100 ghettos situated in 88 cities and towns. At the same time the housing problems of Roma who live in the rural areas are not concerned at all. Almost half of Roma in Bulgaria live in villages. They are even poorer than the "urban" Roma and their living conditions are as harsh as the ones in Roma ghettos situated in the cities. Despite this, the Program is not directed to "rural" Roma at all.

A bizarre fact is also the priority for elaboration of strategies for local economic development without the inclusion of local NGOs and Roma community in its amplification, which once again dooms the Program to failure.

For the start of the Program's implementation an Action plan for 2006-2007 was approved by the Council of Ministers in May 2006. It provoked new questions about the future implementation of the Program. The first is about the real financing that would be provided for the Program. The overall amount of the Program is 1,26 billion BGN until 2015; 500 million of them are from the state budget. The financing envisaged in the Action plan is rather modest: 5,747,610 BGN (from them – 2,991,260 from the state budget) for 2006²¹ and 18,488,351 BGN (from them – 14,238,350 BGN from the state budget) for 2007. This means that for 8 years the Program should accumulate more than 1,23 billion, or more than 97,5 % of its overall amount. The financial engagement of the state budget for these 8 years should be 483 million BGN, or more than 60 million BGN per a year. There is no logical explanation why the financial weight is shared in so non-proportional way through the years. Since the Program is adopted with a Decision of the Council of ministers, it is not clear whether the next governments would engage to carry out more than 90 % of it.

The second problem of the Action plan is the type of municipalities where actions would be undertaken. For 2006 and 2007 most of the activities are preparatory ones which is logical. Nevertheless, these activities are concentrated only in "municipalities with more than 10 % Roma population". Although this looks justified and fair, it shifts the accent from the real problems. Most of the municipalities with sharp Roma housing problems and big and numerous Roma ghettos are with less than 10 % Roma: Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas,

²¹ In fact, 5,227,610 BGN (2,486,350 BGN from the State budget) of them are for a project co-financed by the Banc of the Council of Europe that was started long before the Program.

Pazardjik, and so on. These are big cities with numerous population and where many Roma declare themselves as Turks or Bulgarians; therefore, the share of Roma in them is less than 10 %. In this way, almost all cities with harsh Roma living problems will be left aside – at least in 2006 and 2007.²² It is an alarming fact since it puts under doubt how and when these cities will be included in the Program.

The third problem is the extremely small amount envisaged in the Action plan for building of new “social houses” – 186,600 BGN. It is strange because the Program envisages more than 520 million for “social houses”. When this amount will be provided remains unclear.

The bottom line is that the Action plan is an eye-wash exercise without the inclusion of the targeted audience in its implementation or commitment of sufficient financial and human resources for it.

It is clear that improving the living conditions of Roma in Bulgaria has moved high up on the political agenda and the main reason for this is the forthcoming EU membership of the country. Nonetheless, such programs as the above mentioned has a great number of disadvantages on the account of its benefits. A successful implementation of such a complex, specifically time-bound Program would greatly depend on the principle of constructive partnership and mutual support from all participants. In the process of Program implementation a broad public support should be sought, as well as participation of the Roma civil associations. Without strong and well-informed communities working in close partnership with the authorities and linked into a national network for exchange of experience, there is a grave risk of getting the activities ordered from the higher levels, without being properly understood and targeted, which would result in fragmentation and financial impossibility and, ultimately, would alienate them from the people, thus barring any willingness for participation and commitment within the target group.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works in cooperation with the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues and approved by the Council of Ministers should develop a concept for the establishment of a special “Directorate” for implementation of the National Program for improving the living conditions of Roma in Bulgaria, involving Roma professionals;

2. The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works should establish a Steering Committee composed of representatives of all concerned ministries and state institutions involved in the Program implementation, as well as representatives of local Roma communities and leading Roma NGOs with proven record of activities in addressing housing issues in order to bring transparency and build credibility of the Program;

3. The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works should implement a wide information campaign amongst the public society and the Roma community about the Program and its implementation on ongoing basis;

4. The government should develop in joint collaboration with local NGOs and respective institutions a stronger policy framework and sustainable settlement of legal and property issues that also corresponds to the understanding and respect of the ethnic diversity;

²² Only Sliven, Lom and other smaller towns could be included in this way.

5. The government should provide the availability of financing instruments and cease the wrongful practice of delegating the responsibility and stay put only to the EU funds;

6. Action and indicators should be envisaged in the Operational programs that would support the implementation of the Program for Improving of the Living Condition of Roma

7. The government should cease the discrimination practice of evicting Roma slums and instead develop concrete housing projects with the support of technical expertise and monitoring mechanisms of EU Commission, World Bank, EBRD, UNDP Bulgaria, Roma NGOs, etc.

8. Solving the housing problem of Roma living in rural areas should become an object of special concern and actions

9. Solving the housing issues of Roma in Bulgaria has to be set as priority and urgent need to be addressed, however other problems have to be also tackled and solutions provided – provision of employment, improvement of access to quality education and health care services.

SOCIAL POLICES FOR THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA

Before July 2005 the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy was not considered an institution with active engagement with the FP implementation and the Roma integration process in general. It did not develop its “Roma strategy” and did not participate actively in the preparation of the Action plans for the Decade of Roma Inclusion and for the implementation of the FP. Furthermore, Roma experts did not work in MLSP. At the same time, the Ministry has Roma as beneficiaries of most of its general social programs without developing any tailored approach and without perceiving Roma as special target group that requires such a tailored approach. The only exceptions were several Phare projects. After September 2005 this situation changed. Yavor Dimitrov, a well-known expert of Roma origin in the field of employment was appointed a Deputy Minister in the MLSP. Gradually the Ministry started developing a tailored approach which takes into account the specifics of the Roma community within its mainstream programs.

The MLSP’s vision about the Roma issue perceives it only as a social problem rather than an issue of preserving and supporting ethnic diversity which can give more opportunity for the community as a whole. Building social capital in the community should be one of the main polices of the MLSP involving the stakeholders from the Roma communities. For first time special programs targeting Roma have been initiated. MLSP has showed signs for active engagement in the implementation of the “Roma strategies”: in June 2006 Deputy Minister Dimitrov was appointed Coordinator for the Decade of Roma Inclusion, establishing special Consultative Council for Roma Integration is envisaged, and so on. This process is far from its end and it is still early to make conclusions about its effect and sustainability. Nevertheless, the signs are good.

Context

During the last two years the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy has started the implementation of several programs targeting the Roma community. Most of the pilot actions

were funded by the EU²³ but the mainstream programs like the national program From Social assistance to Employment, the program “Overcoming Poverty”, Beautiful Bulgaria, SSANE Project (Social Services Against New Employment), are funded from the state budget. Although the programs are not specially designed for Roma they de facto have a large number of Roma clients. The National Roma Literacy and Training Program, which has started as a result of the adoption of the National Employment Action Plan 2006 is an example of a program targeted especially to the Roma community. Hopefully the program will include a thorough monitoring procedure so that the results and the impact can be duly assessed; the lack of any monitoring procedures is very often a characteristic feature of a number of mainstream programs. Currently procedures for the integration of the Roma into the labor market are opened under two PHARE funded programs.

Despite these efforts however there is still lack of a long-term targeted approach to the Roma community. There is no doubt that poverty and social exclusion remain serious issues for Bulgarian Roma. One of the reasons for the difficulties in designing long-term sectoral strategies directed to the problems of the Roma population is the lack of reliable official data concerning Roma. As a matter of fact the law does not prohibit collection of such data; moreover, it says that it is mandatory during the National Population Surveys with the explicit consent of the respondents. Such information can be collected and used for the purpose of policy design observing the rules set out in the personal data protection legislation.

Other reasons are the lack of good balance between mainstream and special targeted programs and the insufficient coordination between actions carried out in different ministries.

Child Protection in the Roma Community

There are no special political measures about children living in the Roma communities despite the fact that many of the cases come namely from the community. A lot of Roma children live in specialized institutions, which is an alarming sign. The capacity of the Social Assistance Directorates is still low especially for the small municipalities where a deficiency of qualified staff exists. Social workers in the Social Assistance Directorates and their Child Protection Departments (CPD) rarely get training. Mostly the CPDs in the small municipalities employ one or two social workers. In terms of investigating child cases they do not have enough staff and the quality of their work is not sufficient. There is no special policy to hire social workers or social assistants of Roma origin in the CPDs. So even though there is no statistic we assume that the number of Roma on such positions is insignificant. There is no doubt however that there are many places where such a need exists. In many cases the Roma families find that the new child policy applying the child legislation is very restrictive for them. The real social and family problems are still not assessed from the Social Assistance Directorates and their Child Protection Departments.

It is believed that many of the children who have been placed in institutions are of Roma origin (about 60-80%). As mentioned above, however, there is no official date to support this fact. The childcare institutions are still managed by different ministries which are facing difficulties in applying continuity in their policies not only for Roma children but for all children placed in the institutions.

The childcare institutions under the MLSP are responsible for children with physical and mental disabilities from 3 to 18 years. The Medical and Social Care Institutions under the Ministry of Health (MH) accommodate disabled or abundant children from 0 to 3 years or

²³ Integration on the Labor Market of Ethnic Minority Groups under the 2004 Phare Program, Development of a Network of Centres for Adult Literacy, which are to start by the end of this year.

more but not older than 7 years. Children from 3 to 18 years are placed in the specialized schools for children with disabilities under the Ministry of Education and Science (MES). There are seven types of specialized schools under MES which are Auxiliary Schools, Boarding Schools of Corrective Training, Convalescence Schools, Institutions for care of children with impaired vision, Institutions for care of children with hearing problems, Social Pedagogical Boarding School and Residential Care Homes for children without parental care. There is a process going on children from some of the special types of schools to be taken out from the list of institutionalized children but there are still discussions about the Auxiliary Schools and Social Pedagogical Boarding Schools.

There are practices for children's placement in special institutions serving the interests of one or another party and not observing the real situation of the child. The procedures for placing children in special schools are regulated by the Rules and Regulations for the Application of the National Education Act, art. 6A and Ordinance No.6 for Education of Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Chronic Diseases from 19 August 2002. According to it the RIE-Directors issues an order on a yearly basis to establish a Commission for complex pedagogical assessment for pupils who should be directed to special schools or classes or integrated in the mainstream schools. The team includes the expert in integrated education in the RIE, a psychologist, a primary teacher and so on, but after the changes in the National Educational Act it does not include any more a medical specialist who could estimate the level of disability of the child. Thus the functions of the Commission have been shifted from diagnostic to just pedagogical assessment. This allows mentally healthy children to be directed to the special school after a request from their parents (for different reasons, usually social – free clothes, food, accommodation and so on).

Most of the children placed in Auxiliary Schools are from Roma origin and have no deviance in their development. The case of the special school in Mindia (Veliko Turnovo district) is indicative for the situation of Roma children in the special schools. The school had 86 pupils in school year 2005/2006. After an order by the Minister of education the school is to be closed from the beginning of the new school year and all the children have been examined again. The Commission estimated that 74 of them are appropriate for integration in the mainstream schools and only 12 of them have serious mental disabilities and need to be redirected to the other remedial schools in the municipality. Almost all the children in the school are Roma children.

As a whole the methodological help for the specialized institutions is provided mainly through official letters or on the phone. The practice of organizing working meetings with the participation of specialists from the Child Protection departments and the private and public social service providers is rare. Such events are occasionally organized on the initiative of NGOs. The activities of these NGOs are mainly funded through tenders under the World Bank or other donors' programs. This NGO activity is gradually gaining growing support by the governmental agencies involved with the drafting and implementation of social policies. So there is already basis for the cross-sectoral cooperation that should become the core of the new policy for provision of modern community-based social services.

The process of restructuring and deinstitutionalizing of the social care institutions under the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and Ministry of Health (MH) has been practically ceased and limited mainly to discussing the interest of the staff working in the institutions rather than the interest of the children placed there.

The MLSP and MES have addressed the reducing the drop-out rate and the increasing of the attendance of children in early school age in the National Program for Better Inclusion of Students Compulsory to Education. The program was proposed by the Council of Ministers

and approved by the National Assembly and is currently being performed. 219 buses have been provided during school year 2004/2005 to different municipalities for free transport of the children from small and scattered places to the schools in the neighbouring centres. Until 2004 free textbooks were provided to all children educated in pre-school preparatory kindergarten groups, pre-school classes and Grade I in the schools. Since 2004/2005, free textbooks are provided likewise to all children in Grade II, III and IV. As of school year 2004/2005, all children in the primary grades receive free breakfast and a cup of hot milk.

The government positively assesses these programs concerning the reduction of the number of drop-out children. However, there are also experts and beneficiaries who consider the Program “Free breakfast and a cup of milk” not very efficient. It is early to make a final evaluation of the program. What we can say at this stage is that the program can not be considered very efficient in terms of results compared to the size of investment. A reason is that the program is not targeted to those who really need it. At some place (especially in rural areas and schools where significant percent of Roma children study) the program does lead to a higher reported school attendance, but it is not clear how sustainable and effective in terms of education outcomes these results would be. The program alone does not address the fundamental problems that lead to school drop out. These are deeply rooted in the whole family and neighborhood environment that some children (e.g. those of Roma origin) come from. It is obvious that this program should be accompanied by truly educational measures (such as introducing intercultural education, inclusion of Roma parents in the School Boards of Trustees, including Roma culture in the school curriculum, and so on) to achieve sustainable results among Roma.

Compulsory education in pre-school kindergarten groups and pre-school classes was introduced in school year 2003/2004. This has been a particularly helpful step for the children from the Roma and the Turkish minority groups as pre-school education gives them the opportunity to improve their command of Bulgarian language. According to RIE, in school year 2004/2005 91% of the children in the pre-school age (12 131 children) finished pre-school preparatory groups or pre-school classes

Access to social protection

The JIM Implementation Report in its part for Access to social protection shows that in November 2005 the pilot **Social Investments in Children Program** has started. The idea of the Program is the social protection to be transformed into a possibility for creating **new conditions for social inclusion of groups at risk, including ethnic minorities**, in which the processes of social isolation are very deep and are already influencing the next generations. The processes of isolation, especially because of the poverty risk, influence the children and have negative effect on their normal development. In this sense it is necessary to elaborate active and not in the last place educational policies, focused on the possibilities and the right of every child to have a meaningful childhood and equal start and chance in life. The factors having a negative influence on the processes of integration are a few and in this respect social investments are necessary for the social inclusion and normal development of the children in families at risk. With regard to implementing these measures and reaching the goals, a pilot Program for Social Investments in Children has been launched in seven municipalities in the country (Lom, Stara Zagora, Smolyan, Kazanluk, Muglitzh, Byala Slatina, Razgrad).

The selection criteria for the pilot municipalities is the high number of persons and families in working age with children whose normal development is endangered. The priority aim is to cover families with children (mainly from the Roma community), for whom data is available, that the monthly and one-off social assistance benefits are not used for the right purpose.

For the families receiving assistance, in which the normal development and social inclusion of the children is not guaranteed, the measures provided by Art. 25 of the Rules of Implementation of the Law on Social Assistance will be purposefully applied. The Program provides the following ways of granting the monthly benefits for the needs of the children in the supported families: complete or partial payment of the crèche taxes; complete or partial payment of kindergarten taxes; complete or partial payment of the tax for food at a canteen; purchasing of clothes and shoes; purchasing of school materials; for other purposes, defined after a social study. Three months after the start of the Program 770 social investments have been made. The monthly average number of children, for whom individual social work for identifying their specific needs is carried out, is 216. The flexibility of the Program allows each month different investments in different forms and amounts to be provided for every child from the families included or the children themselves according to their concrete needs. Each month the taxes for crèche and kindergarten for an average of 100 children are paid completely or partially and for average of 70 children the food at the school canteen is paid. In the rest of the cases food, clothes, school appliances and aids are purchased. The Program is flexible and the investments are not constant in terms of their amount, as well as in terms of their designation and scope of children.

The effectiveness of the Program implementation needs to be assessed, to show the results of the program and the impact on the Roma communities.

Labor market

A milestone in the development of the labor market policies in Bulgaria is the drafting of the National Employment Action Plans. The target groups defined in the 2006 National Employment Action Plan are the long-term unemployed, unemployed young people, unemployed people above the age of 50, unemployed disabled people, unemployed people with low level of education without specialty and profession, and discouraged people. Although Roma are not explicitly mentioned in the list of target groups, it is assumed that Roma form a significant share of most of the target groups on the list.

In small municipality located in a typical area of multiple deprivations at local level there are controversial opinions about the impact of the program 'From Social assistance to Employment'²⁴. Despite this it remains the main instrument for fighting unemployment. Municipal administrations plead for more freedom in the implementation of the program. The main argument behind this recommendation is that local needs and specifics are not always taken into account and people are assigned to unnecessary activities. The municipality also state that the program should provide funds for the purchase of materials that can be used in the activities of the program's clients.

The maximum number of months for which one can receive unemployment benefits is twelve. Only workers with more than 25 years of service are entitled to benefits in the course of twelve months. For workers with shorter service the number of months of entitlement to unemployment benefits gradually decreases to 4. After that period the unemployed may receive monthly social benefits if they qualify for such. These are mainly young people who loose their jobs and are entitled to unemployment benefits for a shorter period of time than people with longer service. Long-term unemployed (>12 months) do not get unemployment benefits and can move to the social assistance system if they meet the criteria set out in the Social Assistance Act. Cash benefits in the social assistance system are on average much

²⁴ The program is also referred to in English as 'From Social Welfare to Employment'. Even in different official sources both names are used for the program.

smaller than unemployment benefits. Unemployed persons who have become eligible for cash unemployment benefit prior to the expiration of three years from a previous occasion of exercising of the right to an unemployment benefit, receive the minimum amount of the benefit for a period of four months. Apart from that according to the Social Insurance Code Art. 54a (1) “Cash unemployment benefit shall be paid to persons who have been subject to mandatory social insurance for all insured social risks for at least nine months in the last 15 calendar months prior to the termination of the insurance”. This roughly means that if somebody has worked less than 9 months in the last 15 months he/she is not entitled to unemployment benefits.

There are substantial weaknesses in the existing mix of policies, which are meant to target reintegration in the labor market. One of the biggest problems is that while the idea of activation has been developed on a conceptual level, implementation suffers from many primitive assumptions about the patterns of behaviour of program clients and hence about the creation of working incentives. One of the biggest constraints is the limited opportunities offered to program participants. Cleaning of streets and offices are the most widespread type of activity under the most expensive program From Social Assistance to Employment.

During the first years of the implementation of the program there has been a marked discontent in some Roma communities²⁵ about the ‘active’ measures. The initial effect of the program for a large proportion of the beneficiaries has been a replacement of an income from benefits with roughly the same amount that now had to be earned by taking a job from a very short list offered by the local labor office.

The program has to develop towards diversification of the job positions offered to participants. This will take some additional efforts on the planning phase and much more capacity in the local directorates of the Employment Agency in terms of adapting the framework of the program to the specifics of the local labor market and matching a variety of jobs with the skills, education and aptitudes of local clients. Such an approach may as well require some investments in training of the staff of the labor offices.

In order to have any impact beyond the time of subsidized work, the activation policy has to include a much bigger training component. Investment in human resource in the form of training continues to play a very insignificant part among the policy instruments for fighting unemployment.

Conditions for access to various benefits defined in the Law on Social Assistance define sharp cut-off points where the client has to invest more efforts for less income. This is one of the important factors for the persistence of small scale subsistence agriculture and a good explanation for at least part of the existing grey economy. The issue of the disincentives to work created by social benefits were first raised in the report “The Labor Market in Bulgaria” (USAID, 2003). The report concludes that for the unemployed person with many children it is not profitable to work for the minimum wage, because he or she earns more from the social benefits²⁶.

Liberal strand economists in Bulgaria have suggested that the solution is in reducing the amount of benefits to make even small incomes more attractive and reverse incentives to work rather than live on benefits. In a yet unpublished study on the economic aspects of

²⁵ Expressed for example in the course of meetings of one of the authors of this report with Roma organizations from the town of Kyustendil.

²⁶ <http://www.socialrights.org/article576.html>

(non)-inclusion of Roma ²⁷ the economists George Angelov and Lachezar Bogdanov come to the conclusion that ‘the design of part of the existing social programs creates dependence and incentives to avoid (legal) work’.

The authors give the example of a Roma household where the man participates in a subsidized employment program and receives 160 levs per month (the minimum wage). The woman raises 4 children and receives social benefits and child allowances. The household also qualifies for heating allowances. One-off social payments for pregnancy and child birth are also added to the sum. At the current level of benefits the authors estimate that this household would get 470 levs of net monthly income. At the same time if both parents worked for the average salary (around 320 levs gross), they would generate a net income of about 600 levs after deduction of social security contributions and personal income tax and addition of child benefits. At the same time due to lower education and lack of experience the members of the Roma family will hardly find a job at the average salary. They would most likely get a gross salary slightly above the minimum (i.e. in the range of 200-250 levs). Under this scenario the family will lose about 10% of its income without taking into account the difference in the efforts required. Under both scenarios however such a family would be rather poor.

As part of the implementation of the initiative for providing subsidized employment in 2006 to people who have been trained for mediators invitations have been sent by the Employment Agency and the respective Labor Offices to the 50 persons trained by the Ministry of Health for health Roma mediators. 12 persons of the total of 15 who declared their will to start working as mediators under the conditions of the National Program “From Social Assistance to Employment” have already signed labor contracts under projects of the respective municipal administrations and are currently working²⁸. Other 2 persons have meanwhile been appointed under projects of the National Program “From Social Assistance to Employment”. Refresher courses are to be held for those people. Another 14 persons are waiting for jobs to be created.

Since the beginning of 2006 there has been an extensive public discussion as well as a discussion within the government about the need to reshape social policies in a way that will put in place better incentives for seeking actively employment and reducing the risk of dependence on social assistance. The main issues of the reform are the introduction of an official poverty line, which is estimated at about 150 BGN, the increase of the minimum salary and so on.

From July 4th 2006 the amendments in the Regulation on the Implementation of the Social Assistance Act entered into force. The term for receiving social benefits as unemployed was reduced from 36 months to 18 months. If after taking benefits for 18 months the person finds a jobs and works with no break for 12 months he/she is entitled again to social benefits. The child benefits for attending school will no longer be calculated in the income. This will allow those who receive such benefits to qualify also for other forms of social assistance. This will be especially important for the Roma community since child benefits are now designed to boost school attendance and it is important that parents have incentives to receive these benefits.

The most recent amendments to the Law on Employment Promotion (**enforced in February 2006**) provide for an incentive measure **for the unemployed who live on social welfare** who are looking for a job on their own and start a new job. The people who have been registered as

²⁷ Luchezar Bogdanov, Georgi Angelov, *The Integration of the Roma in Bulgaria: The Necessary Reforms and their Economic Effects*.

²⁸ These figures are quoted in the Report on the Implementation of the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion of the Republic of Bulgaria, July 2006, p. 40-41. This report was signed by the Minister of Labor and officially sent to the European Commission.

unemployed and have received unemployment benefits and find a job without the assistance of the Employment Agency will receive monthly amounts for the time when they are at work, but not longer than 12 months. This measure encourages active behaviour on the labor market and promotes new employment²⁹.

Operational Program for Human Resource Development (OPHRD)

MLSP manages the preparation of the Operational Program for Human Resource Development (OPHRD) that will regulate most of the spheres included in the Framework Program for Roma Integration. In May it published on its web page draft of OPHRD. Important asset of the draft is that it contains special “Roma part” that is a precondition for serious treatment of Roma issues. At the same time, the draft has serious disadvantages. The Roma part is rather formal: it contains connections only with some of the operations, the type of activities envisaged does not promote tailored approach, and the indicators are not fully relevant. Roma are not considered as target group in the operations and the existence of Roma part does not change this situation. The process of OPHRD preparation does not promote the principle of participation of the Roma community – no Roma or Roma organization is included in the working group.

After publishing the draft several Roma NGOs prepared proposals for amelioration. MLSP reacted positively and organized public discussion with Roma representatives in the end of July. The process of negotiating necessary changes in OPHRD is going on.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The Government needs to collect official data about the ethnic origin of the recipients of different programs. This will help the relevant bodies to apply more effective programs in the social inclusion process.
2. Systematic research is needed on the situation of the Roma communities in relation to their access to public services and their relations with the bigger society, which could feed in the process of policy design.
3. There is a need for better targeted social programs involving the stakeholders from the Roma communities. Such programs should address the specific needs of different target groups like children, unemployed people, elderly people and other vulnerable groups in the Roma community.
4. There is a need to upgrade the skills of people in helping professions to work in a modern, flexible and client friendly way. This should produce even better results than the efforts on improving the targeting of social programs.
5. Working in the field of social inclusion all programs addressing Roma need to include Roma people in the managing bodies. This approach will help the better implementation of the projects.
6. There is a need to create good monitoring mechanisms under all mainstream employment and social programs especially under the programs targeting vulnerable minority groups because the general public is very sensitive to such public spending. The new generation of such programs include The National Roma Literacy and Training Program and the Program “Integration on the Labor Market of Vulnerable Ethnic Minority Groups. These

²⁹ Ibid., p.7

programs are an indication that the Ministry of labor and Social Policy is seeking a balance between access of Roma to mainstream actions and special targeted programs. It is still to be evaluated whether such a balance will be successfully achieved.

7. There is a need to continue the trend to promoting more active attitudes on the labor market and creating the right incentives, which encourage activity and discourage dependence. In this process it is crucial however to keep in mind the special situation of some groups of Roma where long-term dependence on social benefits has already reached high levels. The quick and straightforward enforcement of the new rules can create social tensions and exacerbate the existing problems of such groups.

8. Significant changes in the draft of Operational Program for Human Resource Development both inside and outside the “Roma part”. The Program should include non-formal tangible specific activities directed to Roma in most of its operations as well as relevant indicators. Roma should be defined as one of the target groups. As a whole the Program should define the future framework for actions for Roma integration and to establish guarantee for their implementation.