The Black & White book

‘Typical Roma? is an international campaign addressing stigmatization and stereotypes as root causes of social exclusion of Roma. We want to promote a positive image of young Roma in Europe. Therefore, Roma groups from Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova joined forces in this campaign.

‘Typical Roma? was initiated by the European Roma Grassroots Organisation Network (ERGO). Besides international trainings, many national actions, a ‘Most Roma-friendly Mayor’ competition and many activities during the Roma Summit in Córdoba, Spain, in April 2010, the campaign team produced this Black & White book.

This book is written by Roma youngsters themselves, showing examples of successful Roma participation in society in South-Eastern Europe. The book also shows examples of places where things went wrong. This is no theory, this is about real life. Read it. And learn from it.

Find out more:
www.typicalroma.eu
www.ergonetwork.org
www.spolu.nl
www.romayouth.com
The BLACK AND WHITE BOOK

Roma inclusion in South-Eastern Europe in practice
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### 76 GORD demands
DARE TO LOOK AT WHAT’S GOING WRONG

What is it actually like to be young and Roma? Roma are the object of an ever-larger body of studies, programs, strategies and policy documents. But how do young Roma experience their lives? How can they shape their own future? And what are, according to them, examples of successful and failed approaches to promote Roma inclusion?

Roma youngsters from five European countries, both members and non-member states of the European Union, joined forces under the banner of the ‘Typically Roma’ to challenge stereotypes of Roma in their own towns and cities. They also took a critical look at their own environment to present this collection of stories - good and bad - about their situation, policies and projects that target them, and about the attitudes and approaches of local authorities.

ERGO Network believes these stories have a wider relevance as the anecdotal insights they offer are rarely found in policy evaluations. Roma figure prominently in ‘best practice’ studies, but these are only part of the picture. When policy makers look for the reasons why ‘best practices’ are relevant, they also need to be asking why those other practices are ineffective and how they can be overcome. This book shows the mechanisms of exclusion, hidden discrimination, and inaction at work at the local level where such policies need to be put into practice.

Such insights need to find their way into policy design, implementation, and monitoring. Although many negative case studies are available, they are not properly disseminated and applied to real life practices. Conversely, concentrating on successes affects European efforts to contribute to Roma inclusion as well. Beyond any doubt, the entry into the EU of countries with a significant number of Roma brought dramatic improvements in the lives of many Roma. But most of the money invested by the EU and member states in the social inclusion of Roma has produced limited if any positive results.

Although large sums of money are involved, the existing EU monitoring and assessment mechanisms are too diplomatic. The result is a paper balloon of positive projects and achievements, while, at the level of Roma communities, results are considerably less visible. Governments or implementing organisations exaggerate results of partially or even totally failed projects. Similar projects receive money in a next round of funding so that mistakes get repeated, not sanctioned. This has a profoundly negative effect in the longer term, discouraging objective reporting and critical, but constructive, analysis of failures. A flat learning curve like that means European and national investments in Roma inclusion will continue to achieve far below their potential.

It is remarkable that, up to this moment, not a single case study of the European Commission has focused on assessing failed projects. Not have other stakeholders published such studies, despite general agreement among them that most interventions targeting social inclusion of Roma did not achieve expected results. A serious, critical assessment of bad practices can only improve the way money is spent and increase the impact of social inclusion measures for Roma in Europe. Collecting and promoting good examples becomes meaningful only if we dare to look at what’s going wrong. This book is but a first step into this direction.
AN INTERNATIONAL ERGO CAMPAIGN TO RESPECT THE CITIZENSHIP OF ALL IN ONE SOCIETY

What is ‘Typical Roma’? It is up to you to answer this question. For us, ‘Typical Roma’ is an international campaign which addresses stigmatization and stereotypes as root causes of social exclusion of Roma. We want to promote a positive image of young Roma in Europe. Therefore, Roma groups from five European countries started the ‘Typical Roma’ campaign on January 27th this year in Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova. Of course, our preparations for the campaign started already months before.

‘Typical Roma’ (www.typicalroma.eu) is an international campaign, initiated by the European Roma Grassroots Organisation Network (ERGO). The campaign addresses stigmatization and stereotypes as root causes of social exclusion of Roma. The campaign raises the awareness for active citizenship of ALL in ONE society and intends to promote a positive image of Roma.

Roma are European citizens. Nevertheless, they face structural discrimination and marginalization. Prejudices and stereotypes are widely spread and remain often unquestioned in the media, in politics and in society. According to ERGO, stigmatization of Roma and anti-gypsyness are some of the main causes of social exclusion. Roma and non-Roma should take their responsibility as equal citizens in ONE society. We should create trust and respect for diversity and fight discrimination and stigmatization. Striving for a better life for ALL in ONE society, we have to stress that not Roma are the problem, but their marginalization, discrimination and bad social situation. Therefore, we have to address the root causes of their social exclusion: stigmatization and stereotypes.

WHAT HAPPENED?
The first phase of the campaign was dedicated to research in order to identify and analyze the key elements of stigmatization and exclusionary mechanisms in all countries. This ‘Black & White Books’ publication positive and negative examples of grassroots mobilization in the fight against social exclusion.

FOR A POSITIVE IMAGE OF ROMA IN EUROPE
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TRAINING & CAPACITY-BUILDING
The ‘Typical Roma’ campaign also trains volunteers who want to learn and develop new, creative and innovative methods of campaigning, in order to visualize the information on discrimination and stigmatization and make it accessible to a broad public on national and European level.

In November 2009, for instance, we held a three-day meeting in Veles in Macedonia with a dozen young Roma from the five participating countries. In the middle of January this year, a five-day training for 25 Roma youngsters on creative campaigning followed in Sofia in Bulgaria.

CAMPAIGN ACTIONS
In each of the five participating countries, concrete campaign actions were realized on local and national level. The ‘Typical Roma’ campaign focused on creative and innovative grassroots and media actions, in order to fight stereotypes. In some countries, for instance, our campaigners played with inclusion zones in the city centers.

MOST ROMA-FRIENDLY MAYOR
Each participating country organised a competition: which community has the most Roma-friendly mayor? The competition was announced in several communities. Participating mayors answered a question list. The winning mayor in each country was selected by an independent committee and announced during national events in the middle of March. The winning mayors will go to the Roma Summit in Córdoba, Spain, in April 2010.

EU ROMA SUMMIT IN APRIL 2010
During the EU Summit on Roma issues in Córdoba, Spain, in April 2010, independent Roma youth organisations and ERGO will organise a training for 40 Roma youngsters from all over Europe for a week. During the training, the youngsters will prepare materials and actions for the Summit. Further, during the Summit, this Black & White book with examples of Roma inclusion will be presented.

PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS
Participating organisations in the ‘Typical Roma’ campaign are: Integrro from Bulgaria, RAA from Albania, R.O.M.A. from Macedonia, CRRC from Romania and Porojan and Tarne Rom from Moldova.
such networks and activities and we want to continue to do so in the next five years. Another priority will be support for an international Roma youth campaign, similar to the typical Roma’s campaign.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Please take a look here:

www.ergonetwork.org
COMPETITION: «THE MOST ROMA-FRIENDLY MAYOR»

One of the most successful events of the «Typical Roma?» campaign was the «Most Roma-Friendly Mayors» competition which was organized in the five participating countries of the campaign: Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Romania and Moldova. On the next pages, you can read the stories about the five winners. And yes, these stories show that amazing results are achievable! Before getting into these exciting stories, we would however like to explain the concept of the «Most Roma-Friendly Mayors» competition. What was it all about?

MAKING THE CHAIN OF INFORMATION WORK

The idea of the competition was to strengthen the dialogue between municipalities and Roma communities and make best practice examples visible. By describing the best practices of Roma inclusion on a grassroots level in South-Eastern Europe and by bringing these stories to the EU Roma Summit in Córdoba, Spain, on April 8th and 9th 2010, we tried to build a «chain of information» from the grassroots level, all the way to the highest political levels in reality. In order to make this «chain of information» function, we brought all five winning mayors to the Roma Summit.

In order to come to an objective decision about who the most Roma-friendly mayor is in each country, the participants in the «Typical Roma?» campaign agreed on a list of questions that had to be answered by the participating municipalities.

QUESTIONS

Here are the questions we asked to the mayors:
1. Describe your municipality, giving special attention to the Roma minority.
2. Atmosphere: How is the interethnic atmosphere in your municipality? Describe points and events of encounter & dialogue between Roma and non-Roma. What is your contribution for that?
3. Participation & Dialogue: How do you involve and strengthen the participation of the Roma community? How many times has the mayor visited the Roma communities? Are Roma being represented in the council of the commune or municipality?
4. Roma Strategy: What do you know about the National Roma Strategy? What have you done so far related to that in general for the Roma community? Performance of the municipality: How have you fulfilled and worked with the demands of the communities (during the last mandate)?
5. Employment: How many Roma are employed in the municipality and in what positions?
6. Education: How is the school situation of Roma children and youth and what support have you given to education?
7. Why would your Roma community select you as «most Roma-friendly mayor»?

SELECTION COMMITTEE

In February of 2010, the participating NGOs announced the competition during press conferences, in the national media, on TV, radio, through the internet, and by personal meetings. After this, an independent selection committee was constituted in each country. Usually, in these committees, journalists got a seat, one young Roma, an independent advisor on minority issues, and a Roma expert. This worked very well. In the middle of March, the winners were announced in each country during national press events.

PRIZE

The winner from each country was invited by «Typical Roma?» to travel to Spain and attend the Roma Summit in Córdoba where the Mayors had discussions with Roma youngsters, had a meeting with the Mayor of Córdoba, held discussions with Members of European Parliament, participated in the presentation of this Black & White book, participated in the Summit, and of course enjoyed the beautiful city of Córdoba.

FUTURE

We received many enquiries about the Most Roma-Friendly Mayor competition from all over Europe. We hope to be able to repeat the competition next year and expand the concept to other countries as well.
ROMA ACTIVE ALBANIA (RAA)

Spolu’s partner Roma Active Albania (RAA) is a key player in Albanian Roma civil society. RAA is for instance the informal coordinator of the Roma Federation, a conglomeration of Albanian Roma NGOs. RAA is one of the founding members of the ERGO network and is involved in the decade of Roma inclusion. RAA is also one of the initiators of the setting up of an informal European Roma youth network, in which Roma youth groups from about eight European countries participate. Furthermore, RAA supports several Roma youth groups in Albania and focuses on raising the capacity of many Roma youngsters in Albania.

RAA supports networks and groups consisting of Roma leaders, youth, and women. RAA coaches two regional networks in the region of Fier and Korça. Both networks are coordinated by regional co-ordinators who empower local leaders to assess and monitor the implementation of local policies in order to enhance actions towards authorities and institutions in their regions.

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FROM AID TO REAL EMPOWERMENT

This is the story of my community. It’s a positive story, demonstrating that changes are possible.

Llakatund is a village close to the Albanian city of Vlora. Seventy Roma families live there. The economic situation of the people living here deteriorated with the decline of the communist regime. After that, the Roma faced a challenging reality. Although Roma families were entitled to land plots as provided by law, only a few of them managed to generate economic profit. Attempts to integrate into social life like other people seemed impossible for the Roma.

GET ORGANISED

For many years, the Roma learned to coexist with their problems and the indifferent attitudes of the mainstream society. Sometimes a non-governmental organisation came into the village to distribute aid or to organise trainings. However, the situation only really changed when the NGO Roma Active Albania (RAA) started to work in our community for and with us. Almost the entire community participated in the first community-oriented meeting in March 2006. During the meeting, everybody spoke up and introduced different needs and requirements.

«We want aid, we want houses, we want tractors to plough the land, we are unemployed, we want you to repair the road, we need money for the schoolbooks of the children, we want a better life», were the statements made by the Roma from our community. I remember very well that this meeting disappointed many of us. After the meeting had finished and the staff of RAA had left, the people continued to discuss. «What did they say? Was it something about empowerment, standing up for our rights, establishing contacts with the authorities, being active, organising ourselves?»

For a couple of days, the people spoke only about this issue. The more they discussed with each other, the more they became convinced that the time had come for us to raise our voice, to tell everyone that we, Roma people, live in this society too. Not everybody accepted the challenge. Some people were sceptical, others wanted immediate results, but all of us were aware that only by being empowered would we be able to take a position in our own society.

We started to organise weekly meetings, which became a community tradition. We elected a local board which was responsible to represent us and to be the voice of the community. We contacted the local authorities and presented them with our request for cooperation. Young people and women
established self-organising groups. We visited other Roma communities and saw how they solved their problems; we learned and encountered each other’s support.

MORE THAN JUST NICE WORDS

Nothing of all this was easy. Each minor or major improvement was achieved through sacrifices and persistence by the Roma people from Llqatund and with the support of Roma Active Albania. Initial steps for the establishment of cooperation with the local authorities showed us that not everything was easy. During the first meeting in a very friendly atmosphere, the chief of the commune assured us that he enjoyed his full support. However, when the moment came to provide us with concrete support, the commune gave up. We listened to the same words everywhere: “We would like to help you but we do not have any funds. What about your organisation, aren’t they supporting you?”

During a month, we went to the commune office each day to explain our needs and requirements. Only in this way we managed to obtain the support of the commune and make it aware of the role it had played in relation to us as a whole community. The first step of cooperation was the implementation of two projects in the community: road paving and the construction of garbage containers. The commune together with RAA invested in these two projects. It was the first time that the commune invested in the Roma community of Llqatund.

While we managed to build up good relations with the commune authorities, after the local elections a new chief of commune was elected and new staff came into power. Due to this, we had to start everything from scratch again. However, we did not give up and we followed the same procedure. We organised meetings to discuss the problems which concerned us: the discrimination we suffered and the rights we were entitled to according to the law.

WE LOVE EDUCATION

The commune recently supported us with the establishment of a community center and it solved the problem of the absence of a cemetery for the Roma community. Each year it now donates funds to celebrate Saint George as a way to preserve Roma tradition and promote a peaceful coexistence with the non-Roma community. One Roma person even became part of the commune staff. The commune now offers free schoolbooks to the children. Furthermore, two representatives from the Roma community started to attend the meetings of the commune council. The chief of the commune visited the community several times and promised that he would provide funds to cover some priorities of our community while taking into consideration our recommendations and the national strategy on improvement of the living conditions of Roma minority.

The young Roma in the community have also taken up an active role. Since the creation of the group of young people, they have carried out a series of sports and cultural activities. Their most recent initiative was the organisation of the campaign “We love education.” The campaign encouraged discussions in the community about the importance of education and cooperation with the school teachers.

Many women get together each week in the community center and discuss their problems and concerns. They have become aware of the need to adopt an active approach and now they contribute to a lot of activities, such as the sewing of traditional Roma clothes for the preservation of the tradition, cleaning the community area in the framework of a clean environment and celebrating March the 8th (International Women’s Day) to promote their rights in the community and society.

NO AID, BUT LONG-TERM CHANGES

Another positive development I must mention is when for the first time the community refused economic aid by a non-governmental organisation. The local board addressed the organisation that offered aid in the following way: “Maybe you will find people in the community who want aid and may need them, but this is not a solution. We do not want aid, we want long-term changes. We are ready to cooperate but not in this way. Economic aid makes us weak; we want to be our own masters. Aid is not our priority as it offers us neither rights nor a better position in the society.”

Although the community where I live continues to have problems and still much work has to be done, I am proud that now there are voices asserting their rights. Not to mention, these voices are coming from different places; from young people, women, elderly people, leaders and children. This voice will not fade even if NGOs will not support the community any longer. I now feel confident that within the community there will always be people who will continue to struggle to improve their life, to contribute, and to help heighten local authorities’ awareness of their responsibility. With our achievements, though modest as they might seem, I am more optimistic about our future.

I wish that anyone who reads this story will depart with the following message: “Let us try to build this society where everyone must have opportunities and chances to be someone. A place where parents shall be proud of their children, where a young person does not feel sorry that he was born as a Roma, where a Roma child may have the possibility to play and grow up alongside other children in the society without restrictions due to the colour of his skin.”
The Roma community of Nishnialla is located in the coastal area of Albania. At the beginning of the new millennium, when the Roma community was still living in abject poverty and were discriminated against in every possible way, the women of Nishnialla decided to take action. They organized a number of meetings, during which they discussed the situation in their community. The discussions focused on empowerment as a way to bring about positive changes. In one such meeting, they discussed the need for building new houses in the community. The women of Nishnialla had been living in substandard housing for many years, and they were determined to improve their living conditions. They also discussed the need for better access to education and healthcare for their children. The women of Nishnialla were determined to change their lives and improve the lives of their families.

In 2005, in an effort to establish a sustainable development model for the Roma community, the organization Roma Active Albania organized a community meeting. The meeting was very challenging, and in retrospect, the organizers were relieved that they had managed to pull it off. Despite the difficult circumstances, the meeting was a success, and the women of Nishnialla were able to voice their concerns and demands. They were also able to share their experiences and support each other. After the meeting, the women's group continued to meet regularly, discussing various issues and working towards resolving them. They formed a network of solidarity and support, which helped them to overcome their challenges and improve their lives. Today, the women of Nishnialla are proud of what they have achieved, and they continue to work towards a better future for themselves and their community.
ity. We are not asking for employment, we are not asking for social assistance, we are not asking for better infrastructure, we are not asking for housing, we don’t need positive discrimination, we are only asking for water supply which is one of the most essential needs for our daily life and it’s the responsibility of the municipality to provide running water.

After four hours of protesting by 70 Roma women, the mayor agreed to speak with them. Although a delegation of the Roma women afterwards had several meetings with the mayor, the final response from the municipality concerning the delivery of running water remained negative. According to the mayor, he had only limited public resources available, so he could not solve the problem.

**STILL NO RUNNING WATER**

People often say that Roma suffer from a lack of awareness and organisation. Mainstream society often stigmatizes Roma; they blame them for their problematic situation. It is a hard but not impossible challenge to stand up against social marginalization, and to aim at the elimination of barriers for equal opportunities. The state should provide basic services to its citizens. We learn this concept at school, in the society and in daily life. Yet, when the state abandons you, denies your existence and does not allow you to practice your citizenship, then what hope remains? Although the Roma women from Nishtrulla so far did not achieve their goal to get running water into their community, they have not given up and they are planning meetings with the highest governmental institutions. They will continue to protest until their issue is solved.
The most Roma-friendly Mayor from Albania is to be found in the city of Korca; a place in the south of Albania with 59,000 inhabitants. Before the Albanian selection committee made their choice, they started the competition with an announcement on February 20th 2010. On that day, the regional office of the NGO Roma Active Albania (RAA) in Korca announced the start of the «Most Roma-friendly Mayor» competition. During a press conference that day, Mr. Erion Jakupi, the regional coordinator of RAA, explained regional and national media the concept of the competition. «For the first time in Albania we are happy to announce the start of the «Most Roma-friendly Mayor» competition. This activity is part of «Typical Roma», an international campaign to respect the citizenship of all in one society. Through this competition, we hope to build up a tradition, to continue this activity every year as a way to start a real dialogue between local authorities and the Roma community in our country».

After this announcement, another regional Roma office in Fier launched the competition through announcements on TV stations. For one week, the Albanian TV station, Apollon, displayed the advertisement of the «Typical Roma» campaign and the «Most Roma-friendly Mayor» competition twice per day.

RAA sent information about the competition to eight municipalities and six communes in different regions of Albania. Five municipalities and two communes sent back their application forms. These municipalities were Elbasan, Lezhe, Berat, Korca and Maliq. The participating communes were Levan and Komuna –Qender.

In the end, the selection committee decided that the winner of the competition was Mr. Niko Peleshi, the Mayor of Korca. According to the selection committee, Korca presented the most serious application. The application expresses a clear vision for the future if compared to the other applications.

ROMA MEDIATORS
One of the strong policy measures taken in favour of the Roma in Korca was the decision to install two mediators. One of them is a Roma and the other one comes from the Egyptian community. The mediators are employed as specialists by the social service directorate. They are responsible for bringing the voice of their communities towards the policy makers.

Another positive initiative of the last years has been the so called «participatory budgeting», in which the inhabitants of all quarters can propose activities and investments necessary for their community. Roma have been involved in this activity although their participation could still be further improved.

EDUCATION FOR ROMA
In the field of education, the Municipality has supported the establishment of a Roma community kindergarten. The Municipality is covering all operating costs of the kindergarten and is also organising this kindergarten (where 60% Roma children go) as an example in the city. The Korca municipality also makes funds available, together with international organizations, to organise integrated summer camps where Roma and non-Roma children play and learn together. The summer camps have been very fruitful in the field of integration as these camps make it easier for the children to accept different traditions and cultures.

Another measure in the field of education is the special agreement between the Department of Education and the Roma Municipality. This agreement is the first of its kind in Albania; the central and local government agree to plan activities and share information in the interest of children. A joint group of these two institutions has drafted terms of reference which oblige the different parties to identify and resolve all cases where children drop out of school.

In the framework of child protection, Korca has made many investments in suburban neighbourhoods where a large part of the Roma families live. The municipality built playgrounds to prevent the Roma children to play or work in areas unsuitable for their age. This is a project of Korca with the support of UNICEF.

The Mayor regularly visits the Roma community. In collaboration with the Regional Employment Office, many young Roma are trained in career fields such as electricity, plumbing and tailoring (for girls). Further, the Municipality has given support to cultural and social activities of community-based (Roma) organisations. Every year the Union of Roma in Korea is supported with funds to organise festivals, such as April 8th (International Day of Roma), and Fëh Delezë (San Giorgio Day).

Since the beginning of his term, the Mayor began individual visits to poor neighbourhoods in the city and areas where Roma live. Visits to Roma families have been an important part of the Mayor’s agenda. His public speeches focus on integration and the importance of education of the Roma community. They have played an important role in promoting the values of this community and are part of the comprehensive policy of the Municipality of Korca.
The Bulgarian Roma NGO Integro, from the city of Razgrad, started with a Youth Development Programme in 2004. This programme has the aim to stimulate the Bulgarian Roma youth to organise themselves in groups by their interests in order to let the youngsters implement their activities. After the beginning of the youth programme, we started to organise exchange visits between different self-organised Roma youth groups. We also organised common summer camps. In 2006, we started with the creation of an informal network of Roma youth and organised a series of activities to increase the capacity of the youth. In order to become role models in their community, it is very important to stimulate the Roma youth to visit secondary schools. In order to raise the number of students in the secondary schools, we started a special programme called ‘Support for Secondary Education’. Parallel to that, we started to organise meetings between students from secondary schools and students from universities, in order to bring the secondary school pupils in contact with possible role models and mentors.

For the next three years, Integro is planning to develop the Youth Development Programme in the following directions:

- Stimulating the civil activism of the youngsters through developing critical thinking and socially responsible positions in the society
- Raising the number of students in secondary schools through ensuring support in the framework of secondary education
- Creating a strong network of active youth through organising common activities and campaigns.

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Website: www.integrobg.org

Huddled at the foothills of the Pirin Mountains, the town of Bansko attracts both Bulgarians and foreigners. This place has preserved the balance between ecology, flora, fauna, and national character, combined with folklore and old Bulgarian architecture. The inhabitants of this winter resort town number some 8,500 people. More than 500 of them are Roma. Until a few years ago, the Roma in Bansko were having similar problems as Roma in other Bulgarian towns: insufficient housing, bad streets in their neighborhood, limited access to services and discrimination. However, in November 2006 Lilia Makaveeva and Milena Ilieva from the Roma association Integro from the city of Razgrad visited them for the first time. Lilia is the Executive Director of Integro and Milena had just started to work as a coordinator at Integro.

During the first three hours the Roma vented and described all their problems; there was a lack of housing for the families, a need for sports grounds for the children, and computers and internet access for the Roma youth. Furthermore, they were concerned about the bad infrastructure in most of their neighborhood. Unlike with most other communities, most of the Roma in Bansko worked and unemployment was not the foremost issue. »After this first meeting, my head swell as a balloon from their complaints«, said Lilia Makaveeva. »Lili, how can you endure all this? They only complain. They don’t want to think that they also have a responsibility to resolve their problems« said Milena to Lilia. This was their first meeting with the Roma community in Bansko.

NO CONTACT WITH THE MUNICIPALITY
After three hours of venting their frustrations, Lilia asked them, »OK, I understand that you have many problems, but what have you done thus far to solve them? Have you ever visited the mayor to present your problems and insisted that they have to be solved?« According to Lili, during first meetings people always complain and blame others for their problems. In addition, when you ask them this question, they usually answer: »Who are we, who will pay us any attention?« Then Lilia and Milena asked them how exactly they have presented their problems at the municipality. The local Roma could not answer this question. Apparently, somebody had said something to the mayor at some moment, but exactly what and when did not become clear. It did become clear however that the Roma had never visited the municipality to present their problems as an organised group. Usually, before elections, when the mayor went to see them, they mentioned their problems, but more or less chaotically, with yells and shouts, and after the mayor went away, the problems just remained the same.

When asked why they did not go to meet the mayor as a group, the Roma answered that they couldn’t unite. The Roma also said that each of them looks after his or her own interest and is not interested in the others. »And even if we succeed to get organised and arrange a meeting with the mayor, usually at the meeting we don’t succeed to say what we want«, said the Roma present at the meeting. It became clear that the Roma from Bansko were not capable of formulating their interests. They stated that they did...
not know how to formulate questions and issues in which they are interested. “They even did not know how to arrange an official meeting. According to Lili Makaveeva, “The people didn’t have the skills, knowledge, or self-esteem as citizens, to go to see the mayor.”

A SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR BANSKO

After a long analysis of the meeting and the Roma community, “Integro” included the community from Bansko in its programme “Strengthening the Roma Voice” in 2007. Seker Tymulevkhkhi took charge of the activities in Bansko. He was the coordinator for South Bulgaria, a well-educated Roma with appropriate experience. He organised a second visit to the community and met only with the Roma who were showing interest and willingness to cooperate in a group and learn together. From the 40 people, who were present at the first meeting, only ten young men showed such interest. From these ten, in practice only Sasho Manov, Slavcho Kostadinov, Atanas Mitrev, and Tzvetomir Mihailov continued to work actively. The coordinator Seker Tymulevkhkhi built close relationships with them, gained their trust and inspired confidence. Integro’s team elaborated a special programme for increasing the local activists’ capacities, taking into account their individual qualities and needs. This programme is far from including the traditional few days’ training. Integro’s experience shows that no matter how good such type of trainings might be, they are not enough to change people’s skills and their understanding about their own role as citizens.

TRAININGS ARE NOT ENOUGH

“Much more is needed than three-day trainings. In fact it is very difficult to make somebody come to a three-day training, as each day absence from work can be fatal for the family’s budget”, mentioned Lili Makaveeva. And for the Roma who do not have permanent and secure work, one day of absence from work to attend a training means one day without wage to feed the family. Thanks to the preliminary motivation work by the coordinator however, the activists from Bansko did attend a series of such trainings. “The trainings that we have organised were related to how to make them understand what a community is and what makes them a community. After that, the participants have to determine for themselves what type of community they are – an active or passive one”, shared Kadrin Hasanov, one of “Integro’s” co-ordinators. In his opinion, the coordinators should not decide alone what the problems of one community are and should not try to give ready-made recipes for their solution. Patience is needed, as well as skills how to involve people in a process in which the Roma themselves alone assess their community and outline steps for seeking solutions.

Another important step in the development of the Bankso activists is leadership-related training. “For us it was important that the Roma would understand what community-responsible leadership means. We did not aim to create grand leaders, but rather people with skills and qualities, who apply team principles and improve their relationships with each other and who involve their peers when addressing their common problems and interests”, Lilia said. After these trainings, more training followed on communications with local authorities, advocacy, NGO management, project planning, etc. Between these trainings, Integro’s coordinators provided continuous support to the group of activists from Bansko, by sending them appropriate information and by helping them with their written communications.

They also went together to the first meetings in the municipality, and elaborated together the first plan that was submitted to the mayor. Parallel to these activities, Integro hired experts for on-the-spot visits and gave practical consultations how to negotiate with local authorities. This was the programme for capacity building of the young Roma from Bansko who expressed willingness to work. Nobody paid them to participate in these trainings, they spent their free time to improve their social skills, because they understood their own role for the improvement of their own position. According to Kadrin, this is the correct working method, because thus the people build their self-esteem as citizens, who request their right to have asphalt-paved streets, children playgrounds, computer rooms, etc.

COOPERATION WITH THE MAYOR

After trainings and consultations, the moment came to apply the learned theory in practice. Seker Tymulevkhkhi, Sasho Manov, Slavcho Kostadinov, Atanas Mitrev, and Tzvetomir Mihailov organised themselves and went to meet the town mayor. Bansko’s mayor was pleasantly surprised with the constructive ideas of the young men and their will to work. The good thing in this case was that Bansko is a rich resort municipality and can afford to allocate funds for the improvement of the Roma position. Step by step, the Roma’s concrete ideas began to be implemented. During the whole period, Integro continued to provide support, ensuring expert assistance to the young men.

Today, the Roma quarter in Bansko has a sports facility and playground for the children, all streets are covered with asphalt, there is a computer room, as the municipality bought the computers and one of the local activists, Slavcho Kostadinov, provided the room. The most important gain is that the municipal council decided to give regulated land plots to the Roma, where they can build their dwellings. At present, Bansko has elaborated a municipal programme for the integration of the Roma population, which is to be approved at a municipal council’s session in the near future. Thus, the problems of the Roma will be included in the municipal long-term plans and the Roma themselves will learn how to follow up on its implementation. Not all of the problems of the Roma in Bansko have been resolved, but some steps have already been made and it for sure gives them the sense and the understanding that they are also citizens of their municipality. This step took more than two years, but it was worthwhile.
A LOST OPPORTUNITY IN VURBITSA

The small mountain town of Vurbitza is situated to the west of the heart of the Stara Planina, the Bulgarian Balkan mountain range. Vurbitza is famous as the "factory" of talented Roma clarinet players as the Roma musicians from this town are famous all over the country. Vurbitza is a rural town and constitutes the centre of the region of Gerovo. During the communist regime, the town was a well-developed tourist centre that attracted visitors from the whole country. Despite the picturesque nature and several historic sights, today the town’s economy is hardly surviving.

The town is an excellent example of a multicultural society. Roma, Bulgarians, Turks, and Bulgarian Muslims live in Vurbitza. The Roma are about 2,000 people. They live in two quarters: Tiroshka and the Musicians Mahala. The Roma constitute the majority of the population, but so far that hasn’t helped them to participate in the management of the town, nor to solve their problems. So far, there is only one Roma employed with the local administration; in the agency for social assistance. He is also a municipal councillor. For many years, unsuccessful attempts have been made to employ young Roma in the police department. Roma are also not represented in the high school board of trustees, where the pupils from Tiroshka and the Musicians Mahala represent the majority.

FIVE ROMA COUNCILLORS

During the local elections in 2003, things seemed to improve. Five Roma were elected as municipal councillors. Each one represented however a different political party. The leading political party then managed to prevent unification between the Roma. As a result, the problems of the Roma were hardly addressed by the local government.

The main reasons for the inefficient work of the Roma councillors on behalf of the Roma community in Vurbitza, were the lack of lobbying power, different political orientations, inexperience, a low educational level, and leadership ambitions of the municipal councillors. Many of them just did what the mayor told them to do. Others cared only for the wellbeing of their families, as often happens in Bulgarian political life. In addition, the Roma who had voted for them did not hold them accountable for the question whether they had done anything for the Roma quarters. Thus, an excellent opportunity to promote Roma interests was lost.

During the local elections in 2007, the larger parties who are also represented in Bulgarian Parliament, succeeded to divide the Roma leaders and the Roma voters, by offering money and promises for posts. The number of Roma councillors decreased from five to three. Again, new people entered on the municipal council; people who did not really have a clue why they were there.

TALKING TO THE MAYOR

In 2007, the Bulgarian Roma grassroots network "GORD", supported by Roma NGO Integro from the city of Razgrad, decided to promote its positive experiences with establishing activist groups of Roma at the municipal level, which are able to address and negotiate for Roma rights with local authorities. Thus, a member of the GORD Network, Nikolay Yankov from Shoumen, went to Vurbitza to meet with the local Roma and with the town’s mayor.

During the meeting, the mayor of Vurbitza pointed out that according to him, one of the major problems of the Roma community was the dropping out of school of Roma children, after they have finished their primary education. Another issue, according to him, was the early marriages among young Roma. "The mayor is good, but definitely he lacks the will to work on resolving Roma issues. He does not know the national documents on Roma policies and the programmes for Roma support. The municipal councillors should cooperate with him to resolve the problems in the Roma quarter", concluded Nikolay Yankov after the meeting.

He continued: »During my meetings with some of the Roma people in Tiroshka, I found out that almost the whole quarter is lacking a sewage system. To reach the quarter, you have to climb 200 metres of stairs or to use the road which is destined for cars. The majority of the people from the quarter use the stairs, which have not been repaired for the past twenty years. Besides, there is no lighting at night", said Yankov.

TRYING TO CONSTITUTE A GRASSROOTS INITIATIVE GROUP

According to him, the Roma in Tiroshka should constitute a grassroots group in order to negotiate for the solution of the Roma problems. »For some time I was in contact with Sylvia Mastikova, one of the few Roma students from the town. I gave her small tasks, such as to gather the youngsters from both quarters to discuss which useful things for the town they could do as young people».
said Nikolay. A couple of months later he arranged a meeting with Hristo Tatarov and Anton Hristov, two of the Roma councilors and leaders in Vurbitsa. Only Tatarov came to meet Nikolay. Later it turned out that the two of them dislike each other and because of this they do not want to cooperate, not even for the benefit of the quarter.

According to Nikolay Yankov, only Hristo Tatarov has indicated willingness to work. «The youth group that we tried to form did not exist for long, because one of the leaders in the quarter asked him: Why do you listen to Nikolay? Let him fix the problems of the Roma in Shoumen first, and then he can come here». A few weeks after the dissolution of the youth group, Yankov again headed for Vurbitsa. «I wanted to explain to them how important it is to establish a grassroots initiative group. Thus, they would be able to apply for funding from various institutions. With funding, they would be able to improve the living conditions in the quarter. With funding, they could also enable their children to go to various trainings where they would learn not to support their education and not to marry early». Yankov’s visit was however unsuccessful. He met only with Tatarov, who explained him that he couldn’t do anything alone.

Roma should not be divided

According to Yankov, Vurbitsa is typical for the level of Roma integration in many places all over Bulgaria. «Definitely, the Roma possess human resources. They only need will and willingness to work. The Roma should avoid being divided during elections. In the quarter, I heard how the present municipal councilors had been going around, giving food, shoes and money to buy votes for a particular party», told Yankov. He insisted that Vurbitsa needs a unifying figure to stop the scattering of the Roma votes. As a divided community, the Roma will not be able to address their problems.

According to Yankov, the local Roma leaders in Vurbitsa did not have any idea about national policies and documents on Roma inclusion. «In Vurbitsa the situation is the same as in many other places. Regrettably, in Vurbitsa too, the Roma issues are in the hands of the wrong people. The Roma themselves are not interested in the solution of their problems. I heard that street lamps had been assembled on the stairs, but after a couple of months some Roma broke them», noted Yankov sadly.

So even today, the problems of Gerlovo’s capital remain the same. The Roma from Troshtka continue to climb the stairs in darkness on their way home. The stairs turn into an ice rink during winter. When it rains, the area looks like a swamp. The acid stench from septic pits that flow out in the pine tree forest near the quarter is accompanying the path both in summer and in winter.

In the meantime, the clarinet players from the Musicians’ quarter, where many Roma survive, travel to the boulevards in Western Europe where they earn some money for food. A light in the tunnel are the few Roma students, who act as positive role models, serve as the link between the Roma pupils in town and the various programmes targeted at them.

Until six years ago, Kavarna was just a small town in North-Eastern Bulgaria. It was known for nothing else, but that it was on the Black Sea coast. Today however, our town is popular not only in Bulgaria, but also beyond the borders. Kavarna is the rock music capital of Bulgaria. Here, world famous rock stars played. They have done so for six years already. Besides, Kavarna has also become a model for good management. In Kavarna, both Bulgarians and Roma live peacefully in good conditions. All this is the result of the humane attitude of our mayor. That is how our conversation began with Mr. Martin Bashev, one of the assistants to Kavarna’s Mayor Mr. Tsonko Tselev. Bashev is a Roma, who lives in the Roma quarter in Kavarna with 4,000 inhabitants. In total, the city counts about 12,000 inhabitants.

HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ROMA IN THE CENTRE

In the beginning of his first mandate as a mayor, Tsonko Tselev created a Minorities Integration sector in the municipal administration that included three Roma staff members. These Roma are responsible for the elaboration of concrete measures for the implementation of the national policy concerning the different ethnic groups. Thus, for the first time a working method was introduced where Roma are directly engaged in solving the problems of the Roma minority in the Kavarna municipality.

According to Mr. Bashev, consistent and targeted work has been done in Kavarna since 2003 to involve Roma in the municipality’s social life. Mr. Tselev’s efforts are targeted at the creation of a favourable urban living environment, access to high quality health care and good education for all minority people, stated Mr. Bashev, who is the head of the Minorities Integration sector.

During 2007, with financial aid from the municipality, a two-storey administrative building was reconstructed into a dormitory that accommodated ten Roma families. During the past few years, the municipality tried to popularize the right of housing construction among the Roma population. Until 2008, five persons used this opportunity per year. During 2008 and 2009, fifty-seven people have already used the opportunity to construct their own home, which is indicative for the willingness of the Roma to have their own housing. Mayor Tselev said. Thus far, there is no single illegal house in the Roma quarter. Moreover, in the very heart of the quarter, there are three hotels, full to the brim during summer. Amazing, but a fact! This is Kavarna — the town of unlimited opportunities and dreams.

WHERE IS THE MAHALLA?

You would not notice anything unusual when entering Kavarna: a medium sized town with clean streets. Small pieces of paper and trash, characteristic for any Bulgar-
ian town of Kavarna’s size, are absent. The communist flat blocks are painted with pictures of Bulgarian and world famous rock stars. If you visit Kavarna, there is no way not to see and feel the different atmosphere and environment.

Now we are entering into the Roma quarter, said Martin Bashev. Where is the mahala? I asked and looked around for shacks, muddy streets, unfinished houses, and Roma children playing on the streets. We are in the quarter. I don’t know what you are asking for, answered Martin. I was surprised. All streets are asphalt-paved and it smells clean. There are paved sidewalks on both sides – broad and clean. It is not necessary to look for garbage containers, because there are at least ten garbage bins along twenty metres. There is a sewage system in the whole quarter. Besides, we have a gas supply system, explained Mr. Bashev.

We continued to walk around the Roma quarter with its beautiful and modern architecture. Our men are builders. That is why the whole quarter is beautiful. Foreigners often take it for the town’s centre, explained Mayor Tzonev with a smile on his face. He was awarded Man of the Year in 2005. I was amazed, because there might be no such Roma ’mahala’ anywhere in the world — tidy, pleasant, overlooking the sea. There is no way to get lost in this Roma quarter. The streets are marked as there are road signs at every crossing.

**EXEMPLARY KINDERGARTEN**

The integration work done by the municipality does not only mean construction of an excellent infrastructure. The process of including and keeping Roma children in the educational system relies on preventive measures and children’s involvement at an early age. There are two kindergartens in the Kavarna municipality, situated in regions with a high Roma concentration — in the town of Kavarna itself, and in the village Septemvriitsi. Since 2006, the children from Septemvriitsi enjoy a new building, which the municipality finished with funding under the “Beautiful Bulgaria” programme. The teachers in Bulgarian language work additionally with children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian. The other kindergarten in Kavarna, where all children are Roma, became a nice place after a major refurbishment in 2007. Mayor Tzonev officially inaugurated the kindergarten together with Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov.

Kavarna is an example of an equal start for all children, no matter what is their religion or ethnic origin, were the words of the Bulgarian President when cutting the ribbon. The best pedagogues in the whole municipality work here, no matter that it is in the Roma quarter. The team successfully works on projects for intellectual education, integration of bilingual children and children with special educational needs, explained Ms. Mimi Stoicheva, the kindergarten’s headmistress. From the outside, the kindergarten looks like a four-star hotel. Inside, it is equipped with modern audio-visual equipment, a rich music library, didactic tools, and many toys. All assistant-teachers and supervisors in the kindergarten are from Roma origin. The children are great. They behave well and are responsible. The parents take very good care of them, added Ms. Stoicheva.

The efforts to keep the Roma children in the educational system do not stop with this. In the primary school situated in the Roma quarter, there is an optional class in Roma folklore. A literacy course for the pupils’ parents is also organized by the school. The mayor is treating schools equally; no matter whether Roma or Bulgarian pupils prevail. He is equally good to all children, which proves his professionalism, shared Martin Bashev.

**ANNUAL HONORARY ROMA ELECTION**

At the initiative of the Mayor Tzonev, since 2004 the Roma from Kavarna commemorate the International Roma Day, on April 8th, with concerts and various sports and cultural events. With the support of the mayor, every year popular Bulgarian actors, performers, and bands take part in the Commemoration. Each year, a famous person is awarded with the title ‘Honorary Roma’. In 2009, Andrei Slabakov, a prominent Bulgarian actor and film director, became the honorary ‘Mangal’, explained Ms. Elena Baladjieva enthusiastically, head of the ‘Europintegration’ department in Kavarna.

Every month, each Roma family pays about 100 Euro for electricity, water, and gas. These payments are not a problem. Our men and women from the Roma quarter do not rely on social welfare. They are engaged in farming, civil building and construction. Others work abroad, often in Poland. After some time, they return. There are even mixed marriages in the ‘mahala’, told Tzonev with a smile on his lips.

The employees in the Municipality of Kavarna and the other institutions try to serve the citizens professionally. Citizens’ services are one of the most important benchmarks of the status of society. If we provide good services and have content citizens, then we can talk about civil society. However, if civil servants focus on the ethnic origin of the served person, then there is no professional service at all. In our contacts with the Kavarna citizens, we strive for professional relationships with them. We want to preserve their dignity as human beings and citizens. Only in this way we can build a strong and creative society, says Mr. Tzonev.

**WE DO NOT INTEGRATE ROMA**

“Roma integration is a delicate process. It is necessary that people who are working on Roma inclusion do this with a positive personal attitude. Only in this way real results can be obtained. We in Kavarna do not integrate the Roma: we ensure good living conditions, then the Roma integrate themselves. I do not divide the citizens of Kavarna into Roma and Bulgarians, white or black, tall or short. I accept them as they are. We succeed, because we want to,” Mr. Tzonev firmly stated. He obviously knows very well the right way towards building a comfortable society for all.
R.O.M.A.

ROMA is a Roma youth network from north-eastern Macedonia, founded in December 2007. The members of ROMA are young Roma who attend high school and university. Currently, we number around 40 youngsters. Around twenty of us are actively involved in the development of ROMA. We began with three university students, but this number already increased to ten. The other members are mainly high school students.

Currently one of the main activities of ROMA is the participation in the international “Typical Roma?” campaign. Other themes we are working on are Roma youth inclusion into all sorts of policies. Further, we want to promote positive values about Roma in mainstream society. Another goal we have is to strengthen the capacities of our members, so they can plan and implement activities and projects independently.

According to our vision, Roma youth should become promoters of positive values and an active factor in social happenings, which in its turn will have positive impacts on the Roma communities, by helping shaping their own future and life in a better direction. By doing so, our Roma youngsters can become active citizens and creators of public policies which concern them and the Roma community.

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FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION IN BEROVO

In Macedonia, people always have looked at Roma as entertainers or as deviants. Not even in their wildest dreams would they ever assume that Roma are ordinary people with ordinary jobs, who are trying to live an ordinary life, as much as possible without being labelled. Roma are trying the same thing that each one of us tries: to be ordinary.

NO PARTICIPATION

The Roma community of Berovo experienced this so-called “not being ordinary” some time ago. Visiting this community for the first time in 2008, the NGO Roma Progress noticed that the negative stigma that Roma usually encounter in Macedonia caused such a low self-esteem among the local Roma that they were even not bothered to go to regular meetings of the mayor with the citizens of the town. The Roma did not ask for help to solve their daily problems, since they knew that they are “different”. They would probably not even be allowed to see the mayor or talk to him or any other local authority of the municipality of Berovo. This perceived “difference” lead to a lot of problems for the Roma community. First, their daily problems were not addressed towards the authorities for solutions. Second, the community was internally divided, which lead to “individual” approaches towards the local authorities by some Roma, which on the other hand lead to having some individuals as beneficiaries, instead of the whole Roma community. This was not even a pleasant situation for Roma Progress, since many people were very sceptical about Roma NGOs. This skepticism came from having a lot of Roma NGO’s around, but without anyone experiencing the benefits of their existence.

IMPORTANT: REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

As mentioned above, the Roma people from the Berovo community were very skeptical of having another NGO, especially one that is not local and comes from a different community. It was natural for the people to ask why such an organization bothered to reach out to them and what would be the benefit from that for them. This was a life-time opportunity for Roma Progress to explain the so-called grassroots approach to the Berovo community. Roma Progress explained to them the benefits from mobilization and empowerment, as well as from having representatives on the local level.

Roma Progress explained that the first thing to do was to reach out to the local Roma leaders and to create a representative body. It was also very important to show the Roma that they needed to act as a unit in order to help themselves and get organized. It was very motivating to see that local leaders were identified immediately, and even more exciting that they had recognized leaders from varying demographics of the Roma community (youth and women).

ROUNDTABLE

The Roma needed a boost to improve their self-confidence, stop their skepticism, and to prove to themselves that they can act as an organised group. The Roma knew that the 8th of April, the International Roma Day was approaching, so this was the ultimate test to them. Stating that this would be the first time that this holiday would be celebrated in their municipality, they took this as an opportunity to show their culture and heritage, and create a positive image, they were more than eager to work to suc-
The Roma did dance and sang during the celebration of the 8th of April, the International Roma day, but they also sent out a message for change and peace, which was symbolically represented by having flowers thrown down the river.

**KEYS TO SUCCESS**

Because of the initiated self-organisation, living conditions improved for the Roma in Berovo. They now have their Roma centre in their community. They are meeting regularly to discuss the problems of the community and they even organised themselves for the local elections and made their own list of candidates for the Council of the Municipality, lead by Ramco Kundevski. They finally become ordinary citizens of Berovo with the help of an ordinary Roma grassroots NGO.

As shown above, with the help of grassroots organisations, change can be brought to the Roma communities. Teaching people methods of getting organised boosts their motivation to get mobilized and helps them feel empowered to lead the change. However, not only empowerment and mobilisation are the keys to success: working for the community and listening to the people is just as important.

In the end, even typical Roma deserve a happy end, don't you think so?

## STEREOTYPES IN A SYMBOLIC GARBAGE CAN

»Never forget about the small things you do, never forget about the extra efforts you made. The future lies in your hands«. Those were the words of a trainer, who was standing in front of a group of Roma students. I was one of those students.

These words were meant for us students. The trainer wanted to make clear that we are the ones who need to make a change in our community, that we are the ones who need to be creative in order to make change possible.

Each day, many Roma students take part in non-formal education, besides their formal education. Through our experiences in non-formal education, we all get the same knowledge and experiences. We learn through our participation in workshops, seminars, and trainings how we, as Roma community members, can contribute to our community and simultaneously be integrated into the larger society. This all leads to positive achievements and success of individuals.

### BE ASSERTIVE!

In the Macedonian media you can often hear or find remarks which insult the Roma. For example, »The Roma are doing gypsy things«. At a certain moment, we as Roma students decided to take action against such negative statements. We wanted to include all students, regardless whether they were Roma or non-Roma in this action. By including non-Roma students in our action, we wanted to make clear to the citizens of this country that we are all equal and that we are fighting discrimination together.

During the action, the students walked around our, Skopje, with posters. On these posters we published all the discriminatory statements, stereotypes, and prejudices towards Roma. When the public passed by and asked us questions, we students acted friendly and explained the goals of our actions to the people.

We also provided a special book which people could sign and write their opinion about the Roma. We organized our fight against stereotypes in a symbolic way. Anybody who wanted to could write his or her stereotype against Roma and throw it in a garbage can. That was a positive step for change and visibility.

The future is in our hands. As students, we have the power to make a real change. We are the critical mass of our community, but as long as we are not more assertive and do not act together, our status in society won't change.
STRUGGLING WITH THE FUTURE
... WHO AM I?

Asija and Bektas Ashemdovi have been married for almost 22 years. They have three daughters and seven sons, which means that they are a family of twelve people. The Ashemdovi family is a classical example of a socially vulnerable family; one of the many you can find in the Roma communities in Macedonia. The only support this family gets is their social welfare, which is around 60 Euro (3,800 denars) per month. This is not enough to cover the basic needs of the family, not to mention the needs of their children.

The ten children of the Ashemdovi family would like to be part of society and live a life just like their peers. «We never had an employed person in our family», says the 20-year-old Elvira Ashmedova. «I was an excellent student, but I had to stop my education in order to help my parents financially. I have been looking for a job for a long time already, but without success.»

LACKING ROMA REPRESENTATION
Elvira Ashmedova comes from Kocani in north-eastern Macedonia. In this community, 5.12% of the 38,092 inhabitants are Roma. Some Roma NGOs in Kocani try to improve the situation of the local Roma. Sometimes they succeed whereas sometimes they fail. One of the areas where they fail is in the area of their outreach. The NGOs do not manage to reach out to all the people from the Roma community although the municipality has a contact for minorities’ issues. However, this person, who is a Roma, cannot cover and help all the people from this Roma community. In the opinion of Mustafa Jakupov, the youth coordinator of the Roma Educational Youth Association from Kratovo, «Roma NGOs should have a clear target group and set priorities. Of course cooperation with other NGO’s and the local authorities is also essential». He continues, «Coordination between the local authorities and Roma NGOs is needed in order to help groups which are not reached by the interventions of the authorities and NGOs». Jakupov posits that the real problem is the fact that the Roma are not properly represented. «We need Roma who are actually employed in the local institutions. And when I am saying this, I do not mean Roma employed as cleaners, but Roma employed as officials. Social inclusion also means to have proper representation».

A question arises: Is this an exclusionary mechanism created by society, based on stigmatization? The European Roma Grassroots Organizations (ERGO) network is trying to fight against such a mechanism and tries to give answers. According to ERGO: «The exclusionary mechanism based on stigmatization in education, employment and health care, results in a reinforced assimilation of Roma, perceiving them as strangers in their own societies. Internalizing these negative images of themselves, many Roma accept them as normal, reproduce these stereotypes of the majority and are afraid to identify themselves as Roma. Especially young people struggle with their identity.»

HIGHER EDUCATED ROMA USUALLY STAY UNEMPLOYED
The local authorities do employ a small part of the Roma population, but these people usually do not get a position as an official and are often times confronted with a glass ceiling. Usually, they are employed as cleaners, workers and drivers. Those Roma with a higher educational background are usually unemployed or active in the civic sector, as the only option for employment.

NOT ENOUGH MONEY FOR EDUCATION
Many talented Roma students from Kocani wish to continue their education and want to finish high school at least. But often, they do not get any further than elementary education. The reason for that is poverty. Many Roma families are not capable to provide the basic needs for their children to visit high school, not to mention provide for a university education.

«It is really sad and almost a tragedy to see a dozen Roma students after finishing elementary or high school not to continue their education», says Ibraim Amedow, one of the few elder Roma from Kocani who has finished university with a degree in agriculture. «I don’t blame the kids or their...»
parents, since the bad financial situation of the Roma in our community is well known. Only half of them can provide food to their families and knowing this, I don’t believe that they care about education that much. All of them know that for supporting a high school student you need hundreds of Euros for school materials. This is a luxury for most of the Roma families in our community. It is sad, that in such modern times a lot of the Roma youth remain uneducated and without a chance to find a job, says Amedov.

**POVERTY IS A CRUEL THING**

Still, all these explanations and theories do not prevent Elvira Ashmedova from asking many questions. »Why can’t I find work? Am I different? We always need money for food, not to mention clothes and other things. I am an adult and I can see the real situation my family faces. I was an excellent student, but my family did not have the money to let me finish my education. They needed my help. Now I am aware how much I lost for not continuing my education. Poverty is a cruel thing and I am dealing with it daily. Nowadays I try to avoid my friends, because they are all dressed up nice with new clothes. I don’t want to embarrass them. My pockets are empty; I don’t have money to buy something for myself or my family. I made a promise to myself: I will do anything to avoid that my children will have to face the same destiny as me. But what can I do to change my future into something better? Can I improve things? How? Should I remain strong? Why? Who am I? ...«
DR ZORAN ALEKSOV FROM STIP!

Housing for socially vulnerable Roma and free language courses – these are just some of the initiatives taken by the city of Stip in North-Eastern Macedonia, headed by Mayor Dr. Zoran Aleksov. The Macedonian selection committee of the «Most Roma-Friendly Mayor» competition in this country was sure about it: Mr Aleksov is «The father of our town».

THE MOST ROMA-FRIENDLY MAYOR COMPETITION

In the framework of the international campaign «Typical Roma?», Roma youth organisation RROMA from Kratovo in North-Eastern Macedonia organised a competition to select the most Roma-friendly Mayor in Macedonia. After some discussions, the National Team of RROMA decided that it would be the best to hold the competition in the region where the organisation is most active, which means the north-eastern region of the Republic of Macedonia.

We sent out an application to the twelve nominated municipalities in the region. These municipalities had to answer a number of questions concerning their Roma community, starting with a description of their community, information about the interethnic relations, participation and dialogue, the Roma strategy of the municipality, employment, education and a why their mayor should be selected as the «Most Roma-Friendly Mayor».

Out of twelve municipalities, six (Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Sveti Nikole, Veles, Stip and Vinica) sent in an application. After the deadline had passed, the selection committee held a meeting to decide who would be the winner. The selection committee consisted of three committee members for minorities’ issues, one committee member from the local self-government for council affairs, one representative from Spolu International Foundation and one member of the National Team of the «Typical Roma?» campaign in Macedonia.

After studying all the applications, the committee chose the Mayor of Stip as the winner of the competition. Dr. Zoran Aleksov, Mayor of Stip, scored 34 points out of 36. Right after Stip came the Mayor of Vinica, who had 31 points. The Mayor of Kriva Palanka scored 24 points, the Mayor of Kratovo 16 points, the Mayor of Veles 14 points, and the Mayor of Sveti Nikole 7 points.

WHY THE MAYOR OF STIP?

During the call for the applications, the National Team of RROMA held several meetings with the Mayors to hear their personal opinions about the «Typical Roma?» campaign. One of the mayors we visited was Dr. Zoran Aleksov, Mayor of Stip. We were really surprised about the mayor’s approach and the way he approached solving the problems in his municipality, as well as his approach to the inclusion of Roma in his municipality. According to Mr. Aleksov, «The Roma are one segment of the mosaic of our municipality». Answering RROMA youth coordinator Mustafa Jakupov’s question, «What are the main problems that the Roma from Stip are facing?», Dr. Aleksov answered: «The housing situation and the educational level».

According to Mr. Aleksov, the Municipality of Stip is undertaking action to ease the precarious housing situation for Roma in his city. «The Municipality of Stip is preparing 40 buildings were socially vulnerable families will live. These buildings are especially meant for those people, whose houses are not urbanized. For that aim, our Municipality has already received one million Macedonian Denars from the Roma Decade programme (roughly 150,000 Euro) and from the budget of the Municipality of Stip another 250,000 Denars will be added to this housing plan».

Also in the area of education, the Municipality of Stip is taking steps. «When we are talking about education, my main concern is school attendance, children not going to school. In order to change this situation, the municipality started a project in collaboration with the schools for after-school education of the youth. In this project, we organise language-courses for free. Around 3000 candidates applied, 200 of them are Roma. Still, I am not satisfied with the number of Roma, since I was expecting that more Roma would apply», says Dr. Aleksov.

NATIONALITY IS NOT THE DECISIVE FACTOR

Mr. Aleksov has an interesting perspective on the interethnic life in his town. «In our municipality, the interethnic relations are relaxed and I don’t see or divide people according to their nationality. I see people mainly as either well-situated or less fortunate, and those who less fortunate need our help». According to Dr. Aleksov, the Roma should not be abused for political causes. «They need a chance to find their place in society. Their nationality is not the cause of the problem.» How is Dr. Aleksov planning to solve the problems which he mentioned? «During my mandate, we need to start brainstorming, and during the next two or three mandates, we need to start solving the issues, since the problems are not here since yesterday.»

From this meeting, we concluded that the Mayor did not prepare himself in any special way, nor did he arrange specific actions just to please us as an NGO or as Roma. To us, it was obvious that this man has a long-term vision on how to solve the problems in his municipality. Therefore, he deserves the title «Father of the Town» and «Most Roma-Friendly Mayor 2010» of the North-Eastern region of the Republic of Macedonia.

We wish him all the best and luck for the realization of his plans and we wish more authorities like him.
POROJAN

Asociatia Porojan was set up in 2007 with the help of Spolu. Porojan is a resource organisation that aims to increase the capacity of Roma children, youth, and Roma NGOs in Moldova.

Porojan is coordinating the Roma Youth and Children Network (RCYN) in Moldova, in which more than 60 Roma children participate. These Roma youngsters take part in debate clubs, theatre circles, Romani lessons, and other forms of non-formal education. They also participate in summer camps and are in the process of setting up new, independent Roma youth groups in different places in Moldova.

Porojan is working on the foundation of a Roma students’ network in Moldova, in cooperation with Roma organisation Tarna Tom. Porojan also focuses on increasing the lobbying capacity of Roma NGOs from Moldova.

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A SUNDAY SCHOOL FOR THE ROMA CHILDREN IN HINCESTI

The Roma are one of the most inaccessible ethnic groups in Moldova. This makes communication between Roma and other ethnic groups very difficult and certainly has a big impact on the social integration of the Roma. Due to the poor cooperation between the Roma and non-Roma communities, local authorities too often take unfavourable positions towards the Roma.

Many Roma families live in Hincesti, located in central Moldova. The large majority of them are traditional Roma which means they still observe the traditions left by their ancestors. The Roma women, for example, stick to the traditional way of dressing and wear long skirts to the ankles and they cover their heads with a kerchief. The main occupation of the Roma is commerce and trade, although the income they gain is usually very low.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

The lack of education within Roma tradition explains the negative attitude of many Roma towards school. The majority of the Roma considers school as something which does not bring any income. Therefore, many Roma do not attach much importance to their children’s education. It is clear that the Roma community and its way
of life has its charm, values, and traditions, but education is one of the most important ways the community can actually promote these values and traditions, and at the same time be respected and accepted by the larger society. Modern society in Moldova often considers the Roma community to be one of the most problematic communities as in many European countries where the Roma are treated as intruders or even delinquent. Under these conditions, it is very important that the Roma welcome governmental policies aimed at improving their situation, integration, and the promotion of non-discrimination. In Hincesti, the Roma community took the initiative to organize additional lectures in the Roma language and Roma culture in addition to their obligatory school lessons. The local Roma leaders and the children from the village started to look for opportunities to open a classroom where the Roma children were able to study their native language and culture. They were looking for a place where they also can improve their knowledge of the Romani language and where they can obtain other important and necessary knowledge. Furthermore, they have achieved their goal!

**SPECIAL CLASSES**

Through a special project, supported by the Dutch Spolska International Foundation, the young Roma from Hincesti succeeded to organize these classes at the «Mihai Eminescu» theatrical Lyceum, as part of a so-called «Sunday school». Soon thereafter, the classes became much appreciated by the local Roma community and the local administration: especially by the teaching staff. Thus far, the classes have been provided since two years and are very important in the educational process of the Roma children. The teachers who teach the Roma children are also Roma which is a very important element in the learning process. Although the teachers did not receive any special education, they cooperate well with the other teaching staff and they contribute to the education of the generation of the Roma children with new ideas, views, and aspirations. Some of the teachers went to a special training in Romania, where they learned from colleagues who participated in similar projects on how to educate Roma children.

During the extra classes in the «Sunday school», the Roma children learn how to read, to write accurately in the Roma language, and obtain knowledge in areas which are not covered by obligatory school courses. At the same time, the Roma children acquire special skills and attitudes and they become accustomed to attending school, working with school books, listening to the teacher and to their classmates’ opinions. Thus, they become more confident in themselves and believe in their abilities. They have also become more open for cooperation with children of other ethnic groups, making friends, setting goals and making efforts to achieve them.

Educating Roma children is a very efficient method in creating a new generation of Roma which will be seen and treated as equal, valuable people. In this way, education is helpful for the society to overcome the stereotypes and taboos often expressed towards the Roma. Through this project, the Roma in Hincesti now can start to really feel included in the society, by being accepted and respected by virtue of their culture and the contributions they may give to the development of the entire community.
People have a natural urge to learn new things. Each human being has the right to learn in order to become better, more educated, and more self-confident. Children are like sponges, ready to absorb as much knowledge as possible. Therefore, it is very painful if children do not have the opportunity to receive education in their vicinity.

**A TEMPLE OF KNOWLEDGE**
The educational situation for the children in my native village in Moldova is very unpleasant. Ursari is a village that is almost exclusively Roma, with old, deep-rooted traditions, customs, and with a rich culture of self-knowledge. Both the adults and young people in Ursari fight for improving their lives, social affirmation, and for better relations both within the district and throughout the country. The adults are always ready to help neighbours and other villagers and the children who always play together and have fun with other children, regardless of their ethnic group and locality, are a very united group. However, it is unfortunate for the children and teenagers in our native village that we do not have a school. It was the Romanian king Carol the II who said, «School is not an educational institution, but a temple, the priests of which are teachers.»

The lack of a school in our village is a burden for all residents, but especially for the small children. Imagine a community with many youngsters who are eager to learn new things, but who cannot gather at school to enjoy school books and cannot enjoy reading. The situation does not seem to be that tense as long as there is a school in the neighbouring village of Buda, with whom our village shares a common administration. However, for the school children it is a long and exhausting walk to the village and causes problems for the lunchbreak of the children. This distance decreases the enthusiasm of the school children to attend school in the neighbouring village of Buda as there is no public transport and the children have to walk large distances during the summer heat and also through the snow in the cold winter months.

The small children and teenagers from Ursari try to attend the school in Buda, have to wake up very early. It is a tiring and exhausting walk to school and takes much energy. Because of this, many children refuse to learn and their parents do not bother to send them to school without asking themselves what their children will do in the future. These circumstances discourage the school children. It is painful to wake up in the morning and to think that you would like to learn something new today, but then to realise that you have to cover four kilometres by foot.

**HOPE FOR A NEW SCHOOL**
Today, the Ursari villagers complain that they have no opportunity to offer their children a possibility to learn. The small children from the village can only hope for an improvement of this situation. The Roma community in Ursari has made efforts to open a school. It has tackled this problem at many meetings with the local administration of the commune and the district. Some time the inhabitants of Ursari were very happy when the news spread that the Mayor will try to solve the school problem. The local council proposed a two-room house in the village and would serve as a place for the school. We know that it is a modest offer, since the building is not in a very good state. However, the idea that we will have the possibility to study here in the village made us very happy. Unfortunately, the dream did not last long, because soon, the local council realised that there is not enough money to open a school in our native village...
VALERIU GUTU FROM CIORESTI

The local public authority has undertaken a range of measures for cooperation with the community of the Roma, like meetings with citizens, roundtables, group- and individual discussions, etc. The local Mayor’s office involves residents of Vulcanesti in the decision-making process through public hearings, public opinion polls, through direct participation in development and implementation of the decisions of community interest. In the local council of Cioresti, the citizens of the village of Vulcanesti are represented by the Roma councilor.

ROMA SUPPORT PLAN

In order to involve the Roma children in pre-school, primary, and secondary education, as well as to motivate the parents to have their children participate in the educational process, the local authority focused its activities in the past several years on the opening of the kindergarten and a well-functioning gymnasium.

In 1992, a school for 380 pupils was built in Vulcanesti. At present, 198 pupils study at this school. In 2007, a ‘parent and teacher association’ cooperated with local public authorities and the Roma National Centre of Moldova and organized a restoration of the gymnasium of Vulcanesti. A new roof was built and a heating system was installed.

In 2007, after consultations with the population, the Communal Council of Cioresti decided on a plan of action to support the Roma of Vulcanesti for the period of 2008-2010. The main objectives of this plan were:

- Opening of a kindergarten for 50 children
- Gasification of Vulcanesti and the social institutions within the territory
- Installation of telephones and access to internet
- Supply potable water to social institutions (kindergarten, gymnasium, medical station) and citizen farms

In February 2010, a newly equipped kindergarten opened for 50 children in Vulcanesti. The kindergarten employs ten people. The district Council of Nisporeni, the local Council of Cioresti, the SOIR Moldova project and the Step by Step project pooled their resources to get the 150,000 Euros needed to build and equip the kindergarten. This is the first kindergarten meant specifically for Roma children in Moldova. In addition, Vulcanesti has one medical station where a medical assistant works and a qualified family doctor renders his services once a week. In 2007, this medical station was repaired with the financial support of the Roma National Centre from Moldova.

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FUTURE PLANS

The Mayor of Cioresti has ambitious plans for 2010: The sports hall of the gymnasium of Vulcanesti will be repaired and supplying of potable water to all village residents is another urgent priority. The mayor is currently trying to attract new investors.

A main problem of the local administration is low school attendance. From a total 198 school pupils, about 70 to 100 children attend school on a daily basis. Measures to increase this number include the following:

- Visits to the children’s homes
- Meetings with parents
- Financial support
- Provision of material assistance to vulnerable families
- Exemption from payment for textbooks rent (at present 30 students are exempted)

EQUAL TREATMENT

Mayor Valeriu Gutu of the commune of Cioresti, believes that he won the “Most Roma-Friendly Mayor” competition in Moldova for the following reasons:

- In the recent two years, considerable funds have been invested directly in (Roma) community development
- Personal involvement in the solution of the most pressing problems of the Roma community
- Equal treatment of the different ethnic groups of Cioresti
- Turning promises into reality
- Overcoming the “barrier of inferiority”, which has given the Roma the confidence that they are treated the same way as the other ethnic groups by the local administration.
RESOURCES CENTRE FOR ROMA COMMUNITIES (CRCR)

CRCR from the Romanian city of Cluj-Napoca focuses mainly on supporting four different youth groups in the cities of Cluj, Sebes, Tițu Mutes and Baia Mare.

The Roma youth clubs in these cities are coached by independent youth workers who have the goal to make the different youth groups eventually self-organised, independent youth groups. The youth groups promote a positive image of young Roma in their region. The regularly meet each other in order to exchange experiences.

Through network activities, like summer camps, CRCR enables connections and cooperation between the youth and their clubs. Although the youth clubs are dominated by Roma youth, they are open for non-Roma youngsters as well. This summer, CRCR is planning to organise a youth exchange with Moldovan Roma youngsters.

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COLTAU – A BLOSSOMING ROMA COMMUNITY

It’s a cold, bright winter day in Coltau, a village in north-western Romania. The snow, lying thick on the roofs, glitters playfully, as it reflects the rays of the midday sun. The asphalt road leading to the Roma community — a result of the locals’ effort to make their life better — has been cleared of snow. The size of the houses suggests that the people living there must be prosperous.

Coltau lies in the western part of Maramureș County, about ten kilometres from the county capital city, Baia Mare. Alongside Hungarians and Romanians, the village boasts a sizeable Roma community. The traditional occupations of the Roma here used to be brick-making and basket-weaving. The Roma also used to be the musicians of the village, and some used to make a living by doing seasonal work in agriculture by harvesting vegetables and fruit.

CLAIMING THEIR RIGHTS

The Roma community of Coltau was not in its best shape when the communist regime fell in 1989. It was only in the early nineties that the Roma felt confident enough to speak out about their problems, such as their limited access to education, the bad state of the roads, the lack of a sewage system, the lack of drinking water in the community, and the lack of official documents proving people’s identity. All these problems needed urgent attention, which is why local Roma leaders started to organise the Roma community.

The leader of the Roma community, Ionuț Covaci, set up the first local Roma NGO called Lungo Drom in 1995. In the years before, he already had participated in many meetings and seminars dedicated to supporting Roma communities. Then he decided to set up an NGO to represent and support the development of the community.

“I believe it is very important that the Roma in the community solve their problems, so this NGO is meant to carry the voice of our community,” said Mr. Covaci.

Over the years, a long list of donor organisations provided support for the Roma of Coltau: the Canadian Embassy, Romani CRISS, AIDROM and the German Lutheran Church. Mr. Covaci, who was one of the first Roma activists after the 1989 revolution, left no opportunity unused to make people aware about the situation in which the Roma of Coltau had to live. At the local and the national level he presented the situation of the Roma. Mr. Covaci proposed partnerships and attracted important organisations to the community. “Because I was and I still am interested in the welfare of my community, I brought together NGOs and important institutions, who wanted to support us,” says Mr. Covaci.

One of the first projects his NGO organized focused on creating employment for Roma in the community. This project was considered a definite success. In addition to supporting employment, the Canadian Embassy also funded the Roma of Coltau to purchase a warehouse that was turned into the local school, which now hosts the kindergarten and the Roma first-graders. Roma teachers as role models

When we entered the Roma community, a group of people came out on the street to greet us despite the chilly weather. We asked them about their life, and they described the progress they had witnessed in the last decade. “We have been fighting for a long time for a new road and eventually we man-
aged to get one. We are very proud of it. The Lungo Drom NGO has supported us all the time», said an elderly Roma woman whom we talked to on her way to the grocery store.

The Roma from Coltai are clearly proud of the asphalted road and the drinking water supply system. Since 1999, the community has Roma teachers who function as genuine role models for the young generation. Since 2004, the community has also benefited from the work of a health mediator, who in 2005 was joined in her efforts to support the Roma community by a school mediator. These developments became possible because of a Phare project which was implemented in 2005 by the Ministry of Education using European funds. The Ministry partnered with the County School Inspectorate of Maramureș, and the local Town Hall. Through this Phare project, the community also got a new school and kindergarten building.

**LUNGO DROM**

Coltai is home to a group of Roma musicians, who are known in Romania and abroad as ‘Lungo Drom’. They play Roma music and perform dances to entertain large audiences. ‘Lungo Drom’ started performing in 1990. The same year they were awarded the first prize in the Romanian Mi-

orities’ Festival. The Roma community of Coltai leads a rich cultural life. They use a variety of holidays as opportunities to promote performing arts. The International Day of the Roma People on April 8th is celebrated with local music and dance every year. Each fall, the village organizes the Sandor Petofi Ball. Sandor Petofi was a Hungarian Romantic poet and revolutionary. The local legend has it that he brought the first Roma woman, his lover, to the community of Coltai. As described already, the Roma community currently has an active NGO, called Lungo Drom, which is chaired by Mr. Iosif Covaci.

Last but not least, the Roma people have three councillors in the local council. The Roma representatives in the Coltai City Council support, inform, and promote the Roma community. They propose measures for the Roma community of Coltai at the local, county and even national levels in various circumstances. Thanks to the efforts of all the above, and to the partnerships the local community has engaged in, Coltai is a thriving community with numerous future plans for further development. The community wants to build a chapel, as well as a sewage system in the Roma community. These plans have already endorsed by the Mayor of Coltai.
Could you live one day in a room with fifteen other persons, without furniture, gas, electricity and running water? Imagine nearly 200 people living in sixteen of such rooms in these conditions.

Harghiaș is a village in Comuna Mica, situated in Mureș county. The village counts about 900 inhabitants, of whom 700 are Hungarians and Romanians, and 200 are Roma.

LIVING IN BOXES
The Roma in Harghiaș have no land. In the past, they used to live in small cave-like houses which they dug in the hills near the village. In July 2004, the village council of Harghiaș relocated the whole Roma community to an area on the edge of the village, where the municipality built sixteen box rooms of five metres by five metres, in which 40 families were moved, without water, gas, electricity or other facilities which are available to the other inhabitants of the village. The rooms had no furniture, only concrete floors, no windows and the roof was made of straw and tin to protect them from wind and rain.

The distance from Comuna Mica to Harghiaș village is huge; the road crosses areas of pasture. It is nearly impossible to make running water, gas or electricity available to the Roma, as they are located far away, on the edge of the village.

In July 2004, the mayor of Comuna Mica decided that the area inhabited by the Roma should be cleared, and thus 200 people had to move into six rooms of five by five metres. The Roma had to spend one week without a roof above their heads in improvised tents and log cabins, as they were forced to relocate before the new rooms were ready.

ALCOHOLISM AND VIOLENCE
Although some of the Roma from Harghiaș still master the traditional craft of mat weaving, many of them have to live from begging around the village. Many of the men suffer from alcoholism and they often mistreat their wives in front of their children. There are scenes of violence almost every day and they may lead to suicide attempts due to poor living conditions.

The local school offered the Roma community one single classroom, where primary school children learn in the morning, while secondary school children learn in the afternoon. The villagers consider the Roma to be stupid, bad-smelling and ignorant. The Harghiaș villagers' attitude towards the Roma population is one of marginalization and discrimination. There is a bus connecting Harghiaș and Mica available to all villagers except for the Roma, who are not allowed to get on the bus because of their ‘bad smell’. One woman said, «We do not allow gypsies to go on the bus with us, because they smell bad.» Another woman said: «I do not allow gypsy people to enter my bar because of their bad smell. They stink.»

UNSUCCESSFUL SUPPORT
In the past, several organizations tried to support the Roma in Harghiaș and to improve their situation. One of them is Armei lazării. This charity and human rights organisation tried to help the Harghiaș Roma, but they were not supported by the village council. The organisation started building a house with the purpose of creating a place where humanitarian activities for the Roma could be organised. The Mayor tried unsuccessfully to stop the building of the house. The house was in use until 2007, but because of the constant opposition, the organisation ceased its activities in that year. Eriksjälp is another humanitarian organisation that tried to support the Roma community, but the opposition from the authorities led to the abandonment of their project to build a house for the local Roma.

Other organizations tried to help the Roma from Harghiaș with getting jobs, but they were also unsuccessful.

Unfortunately, the low self-esteem of the Roma in Harghiaș prevents them from standing up for their rights. A project with the aim of providing education and practical instructions to the people in the Roma community, teaching them how to make use of their skills and abilities would be beneficial to the community. Such a project would help the Roma to come up with solutions to their own problems. It would encourage initiatives within the community, so they would become able to defend themselves when the authorities obstruct actions in favour of the Roma. If they make their voices heard with the local authorities, they can claim their rights to better living conditions and equal opportunities in education for their children.
A NEW LIFE FOR APALINA

Apalina is a village in Reghin, a municipality in Mures County in central Romania. You might have come across the name of Apalina in reports about violent events that happened here less than four months before Romania’s accession to the European Union on January 1st, 2007. In autumn 2006, in a raid of special law enforcement units, more than twenty locals of Apalina were shot. Members of the European Parliament came to investigate and expressed their protest against the authorities’ choice of handling the events. The acts of violence were primarily borne out of poverty and frustration. More than three years after the events, there are plenty of reasons why many Apalina residents are still frustrated with their standard of living. One aspect of their community, though, has improved significantly: they now have asphalted roads.

HOUSES WEARING THE COLOUR OF MISERY

Apalina is inhabited by 262 Roma families, totaling about 1,150 people. The Roma live quite separate from their non-Roma fellow citizens. Some of the houses of the Roma are made of brick, some of mud. Some are covered with regular roofs, others with large pieces of nylon as a roof to keep the rain, but not the winter cold out. A few of the people who live here work in the construction sector. Their houses are better-looking and painted in a variety of bright colours: from yellow through ochre to orange and green. Most people, though, are seasonal workers; their houses rather wear the color of misery.

A quarter of the Roma people in Apalina never went to school, and over a third only went to primary school. When they go out of their quarters searching for work, they would prefer to hide that they come from Apalina, because Apalina is usually regarded by other people as thieves and troublemakers, so who would hire them, even for a day? It was not long ago that Roma Apalinans couldn’t hide where they were coming from. Their muddy boots in the rainy season or their dusty clothes in the dry season would quickly make clear where they came from.

STREETS TURNING INTO MUDFLOWS

There are two main roads running roughly parallel down the Roma neighbourhood: Caprioearii and Soimilor streets. These streets have narrower side streets branching out between the houses. Until about a year ago, these arteries of the neighborhood regularly turned into mudflows. The holes in the earth roads were a threat to any motor vehicle daring to drive along them. Those who decided to risk the holes had to endure the curses of the people on the sidewalks, as they usually would be covered by clouds of dust which were raised by the cars, or by splashes of mud that often landed on the newly painted walls.

In 2005, things changed when the local authorities decided to build roads in Apalina. In addition, in 2006, money from the Romanian government geared towards improving infrastructure in rural areas was used in the rural-looking neighbourhood of Apalina to extend the sewage system.

NEGLECTING THE ROMA

When one hears about Apalina, you may think «Roma», but not all Apalina are Roma. In fact, both infrastructure projects mentioned above managed to use up their funds just before they reached the streets called Caprioearii and Soimilor. The Roma people were deeply frustrated. «Why are they neglecting us? Aren’t we entitled to the same facilities as the other Apalinans?», the Roma asked themselves. They decided to petition the municipal hall of Reghin and asked for the Prefect of Mures County to come and see for himself the conditions they lived in. Ciprian Dobre, the Mures Prefect, visited the Roma neighbourhood in Apalina on September 25th of 2007. He listened to the representatives of the Roma community. He concluded that the issues the Roma faced were «serious and some of them need urgent measures.» One of these burning issues was the roads. Still, another year went by, and Apalina had to be entered among the 100 poorest communities in Romania to actually get the ball rolling in favor of the Roma in Apalina.

A NEW LIFE FOR APALINA

On January 16th, 2008, thirty Roma people from Apalina came together and had their Initiative Group registered with the Reghin municipal hall. This was a necessary bureaucratic step for them to become beneficiaries of the money allocated by the Romanian Social Development Fund (RSDF). «A New Life for Apalina» was the title of the project that led to the building of the new asphalt roads down the Caprioearii and Soimilor streets. The side streets were paved with stone. The local administration paid 7,500 EUR to match the somewhat over 100,000 EUR contributed by RSDF. The main roads were finally clad in asphalt, just before the 2009 winter set in. Mr Ionif Biga, the Roma leader from Apalina, expressed his satisfaction: «We always hoped that these roads would be asphalted. We, the Roma of Apalina, have finally been granted a cleaner and more hygienic life». One can however doubt whether he is completely pleased with the results. When there’s no microphone held up in front of the Roma, their leaders admit that judging by the quality of the work, the roads might not last for long, and if the decision-makers had done some more profound thinking, they would have put in the long-promised sewage system, and only then built the roads. There are still a number of issues that claim the full attention of both the local community in Apalina and the local authorities. The lack of a sewage system is a serious issue with implications for health and the environment. However, with a strongly organized Roma community, it is likely that after some time there will be other reports of successful, long-awaited achievements here.
AND THE ROMANIAN WINNER IS

IOAN ALDEA FROM BAGACIU

The most Roma-friendly Mayor in Romania is Ioan Aldea, Mayor of the Bagaciu commune in Mureș County. Mr. Aldea is in his third term as mayor. He was elected by a Romanian selection committee of five persons. This committee consisted of both Roma and non-Roma people.

“I never considered myself different from other people. Roma, Romanians and Hungarians, we are all the same”, says Mr. Aldea, the 51-year old Mayor of Bagaciu, who is not connected to any political party. According to Mr. Aldea, with his unpredisposed stance, he can easily reach out to the people in his community. In this way I succeeded not only to get to know the Roma people better, but also to reach mutual respect for each other. The proof of this my re-election for three consecutive mandates”.

DANISH VISITORS

The commune of Bagaciu is made up of the villages Bagaciu and Deleni. The total number of inhabitants of the Bagaciu commune is 1,348, with 71% Roma, 25% Romanian, 3% Hungarian and 1% Saxon inhabitants. The first historical records date back to 1351, when the village was recorded under the name Bögeschdorf.

Around 1821, Saxons from German origin brought Romanian and Roma settlers to the village to work in agriculture and animal breeding. After the Saxons departed, the Roma and Romanian people stayed on to continue the work. In recent years, the village regularly sees Danish visitors. They do not come on holidays, but they experience Bagaciu as a recovery place for elderly people who usually live in special nursing homes or are people on special recovery programmes. This activity adds to the positive image of the village and it is also a source of income for the villagers.

ISSUING DOCUMENTS

During the last ten years, Bagaciu undertook a very impressive number of actions in order to improve the situation of the Roma people. For instance, measures were taken to facilitate the issuing of identity documents for those lacking them. The municipality also organised parent meetings in partnership with the school headmaster, in order to emphasize the importance of education for school children. As a result of these meetings, the school attendance among Roma children increased.

During the last years, the roads in Bagaciu were asphalted and gravelled; including all the streets where Roma people live. The municipality extended the electricity distribution network and fifteen poor families received financial support which covered the expenses needed for introducing electricity into their houses. The municipality bought approximately two hectares of land to be allotted to 43 Roma families for building houses. Furthermore, the municipality granted material and financial aid in order to renovate places of worship for various religious communities.

EMPLOYMENT FOR ROMA

In accordance with Law 76/2002 with regard to employment policies, twenty Roma people were given jobs in the last few years. In addition, the so-called water supply project of the municipality, and more recently the sewage project, included all the streets in the village with no exceptions for the Roma neighbourhoods. This is still not all: a nursery school and a school are being built for the over 350 Roma children. Further, Christmas gifts have been given to school children every year, and the local dance group, performing Roma dances received financial support from the municipality.

At the moment, the community is in ongoing negotiations with a German investor who bought approximately 150 hectares of land in the Bagaciu area and is planning to plant grapevines and develop a business employing local people. The municipality would like to employ as many local Roma as possible in the proposed vineyards. Bagaciu is also supporting the renovation of the external part of the houses of Roma families with municipal funds. It is also working on the completion of the building of the kindergarten, the school, and on completing the multipurpose sports centre which will benefit of the 350 school children and other youth in the village.

FUTURE PLANS

Finally, Mayor Aldea has the following future plans:

- To build water supply systems for the newly built houses on the land which the municipality allotted to the Roma families
- To make pavements for all the streets in the village
- To replant 300 hectares of grapevines in the former Agrozoovitcicola cooperative that are derelict at present
- To attract investors to the area since all economic conditions are favourable as infrastructure already exists: running water, electricity, gas, sewage, roads and ready workforce

All in all, Mayor Ioan Aldea truly deserves the title «Most Roma-Friendly Mayor» in Romania.
Participation of Roma in mainstream society should be done at the local level. However, the framework for such participation should be set by Roma policies at the national level. Such policies to improve the living conditions for Roma do exist in South-Eastern Europe, but are the words on paper also implemented into practice? This is one of the central questions for GORD, a network of grassroots Roma groups from Bulgaria. In December 2009, GORD invited 30 representatives from Roma grassroots organisations to an international meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria. The participants came from Turkey, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Albania, and they used the meeting to exchange experiences about Roma policy implementation at the local level.

QUICK SCAN
In the autumn of 2009, representatives from the Bulgarian GORD network initiated a quick scan, which focused on the implementation of the Bulgarian national Roma policy at the local level. The scan was done in 21 Bulgarian municipalities. The results were really shocking: The research made clear that although a national Roma policy exists, many mayors and local councils are either completely unaware of these policies or very reluctant to adopt them since the municipality would be obliged to allocate funding for solving Roma issues. This demonstrates the typical attitude of many authorities. In fact, one could describe this as “applied anti-gypsism” at the grassroots level. “In fourteen out of the 21 researched municipalities, strategies or plans on Roma issues are missing,” said Gancho Iliev, one of the Bulgarian GORD activists who took part in the research.

The Macedonian Roma representatives from the North-East of their country succeeded to include Roma in different institutions through the so-called Ohrid Framework, a Macedonian piece of legislation which provides regulations for minority representation. Further, the Macedonian Parliament adopted a Roma strategy in 2005 and since 2009 it also offers financial support for Roma initiatives. In municipalities where civil society manages to build up pressure, local strategies for Roma are adopted as well. For instance, this happened in the Macedonian municipality of Delchevo. The goal of the Macedonian representatives is to initiate civil groups which will compel the authorities to adopt and implement Roma policies at the local level in more regions. This happens only in the municipalities where there is an active Roma civic structure.

In Albania, the municipalities are usually badly informed about the existence of the national strategy for Roma (this strategy is similar to the Albanian Roma Decade Strategy). Roma organizations are usually seen by municipalities and local governments as structures which bring funds for solving specific issues. The representatives of the Roma Active Albania (RAA) Network are trying to compel the local municipalities to implement the national Roma strategy, but the municipalities usually respond that they do not have special funds for Roma issues available. The Albanian network is also lobbying for Roma representation in the administration and in the local councils, but this needs political engagement and the mainstream parties are not interested in putting Roma in elective positions.

The Turkish Roma representatives are worried about the existence of any policies for Roma so far in their country and about the steps for democratization which the government takes. Despite this, there are some positive developments. In a meeting on March 14th, 2010, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan met with representatives of Turkish Roma organizations and announced measures for improving Roma living standards and actions for countering discriminatory practices in Turkey. The Turkish Roma representatives also shared their experiences with organizing a national round table for Roma and addressed Roma issues not only as social issues, but also as issues within the context of the larger society.

SIMILAR IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEMS IN ALL FOUR COUNTRIES
The Roma representatives from the four countries concluded that a lot of similarities exist between their countries when it comes to the implementation of national Roma policies on the local level. Some of these similarities are the following issues:

- National strategic documents on Roma policy seem to contain “window dressings” for international bodies in most of the countries, with no real implementation mechanisms at the local level
- In places where there are no active Roma organizations, Roma issues are not in the agenda
- The Roma network members experience high expectations towards them; at the same time they cannot solve all existing problems
- The limited number of adopted local Roma strategies do not lead to significant changes in the countries

The representatives of the different Roma grassroots networks concluded their meeting with the following demands:

- Investments in Roma human resources at the local level are needed to ensure equal participation in society
- Roma representation at local councils is limited and should be strengthened
- There is a lack of mechanisms which ensure the exercising of active citizenship in the society
- Mechanisms for introducing the national Roma policies at the local level are missing, such should be introduced in the national legislatures
- National Roma policies should also be reflected in the national budgets
- Changes in administrative law should be considered in order to ensure that there are mechanisms to link the implementation of the national Roma policies at the local level
- Growing “anti-gypsism” should be tackled
- A comprehensive EU Roma policy should be priority at EU level in order to overcome the existing position and status of Roma