

The influence of the European Semester on the situation of the Roma community in Bulgaria

In 2012 the European Commission took actions in support of reaching the objectives of the Strategy Europe 2020. The establishment of the European Semester has been one of the most important acts in this direction. Generally the European Semester presents coordinated efforts for reaching the objectives of Europe 2020 through economic and financial instruments. The Commission performs a detailed evaluation every year aimed at prevention and correction of the macroeconomic imbalances; prepares a report evaluating the progress of the structural reforms and makes specific recommendations to the Member States based on the report.

Since the start of the European Semester cycle in 2012 up to now some recommendations for Bulgaria concern measures within the National Strategy for Roma Integration (NSRI). The first-year report stressed the high level of unemployment among the Roma community. The recommendations addressed the need of improvement of the educational level, as this is identified as main reason for high unemployment level among the Roma. The report also criticized the lack of financing directed at the municipal integration plans.

In 2013 the specific recommendations for Bulgaria started with the conclusion that limited progress was reached as concerns the implementation of the 2012 recommendations. This report also pointed out the high unemployment level among Roma and the high level of early school drop-out among the Roma students, as well as the limited access to quality education of the Roma children and students. The report found that the implementation of NSRI is "lifeless" and "Bulgaria did not make progress as concerns securing the implementation of the Strategy". The specific recommendations towards Bulgaria have been directed to the Employment Agency as concerns the high unemployment level among the Roma. The recommendations also address the connection between the regular school attendance and the monthly child allowances.

The 2015 report addressed the growing share of the Roma population in Bulgaria pointing on the negative consequences of the exclusion of these people from the labor market. It stressed the need of effective implementation of the "Youth Guarantee" initiative, mobilization of the unemployed, out-of-school students and people who are not actively seeking working opportunities. A serious accent is put on the issue that there are no real effects of the implementation of the NSRI. As one reason for this the report mentioned the lack of real mandate of the National Contact Point that is responsible for the coordination of the implementation of the Strategy. Regardless of these findings, the 2015 EC recommendations concerned only education issues. Reforms were recommended to secure access to quality education for the children from vulnerable communities.



In the following year, the findings reiterated the unsatisfactory progress made in the Country-specific recommendations of 2015. Again, emphasis was placed on poverty, poor quality of education and ineffective implementation of NSRI. That year, for the first time, the need to introduce a monitoring system for NSRI implementation was mentioned. Besides the quality of education and employment, the first Country-specific recommendation was to improve the efficiency of the health system by improving access and funding as well as health outcomes.

In 2017, the EC continued to point out the lack of progress concerning the eradication of poverty among Roma and the exclusion from the labor market of young Roma who do not work, do not study and do not actively seek work. A particular emphasis was placed on the increasing number of early school leavers. It was explicitly mentioned that the law prohibits the formation of ethnically segregated classes, but control over this observance is small and ineffective. As in the previous year, healthcare issues have been identified again, with only 45% of the Roma community having access to public health. The specific recommendations to Bulgaria kept the spirit of previous years, namely; to improve policies for active inclusion in the labor market and to provide better access to quality education and health.

In 2018 the Commission continued to focus its findings on poverty, broken through the prism of high levels of unemployment among the Roma, poor quality of education, high levels of early school dropout, poor access to public health. Regarding education, it was noted that a mechanism has been created for enrolling students who have dropped out of the education system but that the mechanism has not yet been improved and an effect of its implementation was not visible. The specific recommendations remained the same since 2017.

From the review of the findings and specific recommendations for Bulgaria concerning the Roma community since the establishment of the European Semester up to 2018, it is clear that the main recommendations concern employment among the Roma, access to education and access to public health. This is perfectly understandable as the European Semester has been created to support the achievement of the Europe 2020 goals. Looking at the findings and recommendations from the beginning of the Semester to the present, it can be seen that they had no effective and efficient impact on Roma-related policies, despite the measures and actions taken by the Government in the areas of employment, education and health.

Analyzing the situation, Integro Association and the Intellect National Coalition have come to the conclusion that the lack of progress in integration policies is a result of antigypsyism in the Bulgarian society, deeply rooted in both the public opinion and the attitude of the institutions towards the Roma. The social discourse characterizing the Roma as a "social burden" and a "privileged community" influences the representatives of the institutions that are responsible for the implementation of Roma-related policies and lead to the fact that these are often only formally implemented, which in turn does not lead to positive results. Taking action to improve the status of the Roma often leads to the





strengthening of anti-Roma perceptions in society. It is a fact that important measures (example: the construction of social housing during the last programming period) were stopped precisely because of public discontent.

We believe that in order to achieve the goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy, it is necessary for the findings and country-specific recommendations to Bulgaria to pay serious attention to the need to develop meaningful policies and measures to overcome discrimination, to fight against antigypsyism in the society and to curb the hate speech against Roma.

Another important moment in the cycle of the European Semester is the development of appropriate instruments and measures to make national governments take greater account of the recommendations. This can have a positive impact on both the effectiveness of the European Semester and national integration policies.

