

Why does Roma integration fail in Bulgaria?

I. Introduction

Why does Roma integration fail in Bulgaria? This question is lately frequently presented in the public space. It becomes more and more topical, because after almost 30 years of democratic transition, Roma continue to be the most stigmatized, marginalized and discriminated group in Bulgaria. The social distance between Roma and the rest of society continues to grow; most problems in education, health, housing and employment become even more acute. The exclusion of Roma from social processes and the lack of opportunities for participation in the structures and institutions of society at all levels became more severe during the last years. And all this happens against the background of a significant number of initiatives, strategies and plans at national and international level that should show the interest and commitment of European and national authorities to solve the challenge of integration of the Roma community. This issue even becomes more and more prominent on the European Union's agenda. In the dialogue for the strategy Europe 2020, the European Commission emphasized the need for increased efforts for successful Roma integration and that the European institutions together with the Member States bear common responsibility towards this¹. As a result, new strategies and plans have been developed at national and regional level, but no real results and changes are visible almost eight years later, and the issue of Roma integration remains unresolved.

II. National Policy for the Integration of Roma

The official policy for the integration of Roma in Bulgarian society began on 22 April 1999, when by a decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria a "Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian society" was adopted. The Framework Program is focused on the challenges in several key areas: protection from discrimination, economic development, health, spatial planning of Roma neighbourhoods, education and protection of the Roma culture, of their presence in the national media and measures targeting Roma women. The Framework Program does not have national program status that has been approved by the Parliament of Bulgaria. Its performance is not legally guaranteed and contains no budgetary obligations, making its actual application impossible.

In 2005 Bulgaria joined the international initiative "Decade of Roma Inclusion"; the Bulgarian Government was one of the initiators of the Decade. It addressed for the first time the issues of social inclusion of largest European minority on the international political scene; however, one question remained unclear – who was to take responsibility for the implementation of the policies, which should have been the result of this initiative? The expectations have been for this responsibility to be taken jointly by the two main actors – the Governments participating in the Decade and the civil sector. This, however, for one reason or another, did not happen. The Governments relied on the civil society organisations to take the responsibility for the implementation of the measures, while civil society expected the Governments to finance the initiatives planned in the framework of the Decade. None made the first step.

¹ Communication from the Commission "The social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe 2010" 14/04/2010

In 2015 the Decade ended. It ended without a clear answer of the Governments regarding the results reached in these 10 years. It ended, leaving a great myth behind – that a lot of money is given for the Roma and the Government do a lot for them, disregarding the rest of the citizens.

Probably this myth exists until today because in the period of the Decade many strategic documents regarding Roma integration have been prepared in Bulgaria: the strategy for educational integration of the children and students from ethnic minorities, a national program for improvement of the housing conditions of Roma, the actualization of the Framework program for equal integration of Roma in the Bulgarian society (2010 - 2020) etc.

As a culmination a Communication came from the European Commission on April 5th 2011: “EU Framework for national strategies for Roma integration until 2020”. With this Communication the EC invited the member states to develop national strategies for Roma integration, and pointed out the concrete policies and measures, which should be included in these strategies. This has been a crucial moment in the history of the Roma movement. For the first time the Commission interfered clearly in Roma-related policies and tried to engage the Member States in the process. The Framework started a new stage in the planning of integration policy. Along with this it also gave new hopes that things will soon go in a better way. Certain foundations for these hopes existed. This time the planning has been made with the real participation of the civil sector and has been realized on every level. On national level and with the participation of all interested stakeholders, a National Strategy for Roma integration 2012 – 2020 has been elaborated. This Strategy has been endorsed with a decision of the National Parliament. For the first time such a document has been endorsed on high political level. The latter created a sense of responsibility among all stakeholders – something that has been missing previously.

After the endorsement of the National Strategy regional strategies have been planned. These have been elaborated under a special framework, created with the participation of many institutions and civil society organisations. On the basis of the regional strategies, municipal action plans have been created. At this stage first weaknesses have been experienced. In the municipalities where active NGOs did not exist, the local authorities had no desire to ‘integrate Roma’ and as a result weak programs have been elaborated, copy-pasted from one another, either too ambitious or too unrealistic, or just formally prepared. There were also municipalities that did not accept such programmes at all. Even though the National Strategy has been endorsed by the National Parliament, which to a big extend equals a legal act, the municipalities were not obliged to develop municipal programmes for integration or to implement policies in this regard.

Thus the enthusiasm and the good intentions ended. We have a good national strategy, we have regional strategies, we have municipal plans for integration in many municipalities; however, we do not have real actions. It seems that the main problem is again the financing. The Government did nothing to back the financing of the integration plans, and all expectations for funding of integration measures have been directed to the European funds.

III. Funding integration policy

The main source of funding still remains the Operational Programmes financed by the European Social Fund. In the present period Roma integration and social inclusion of vulnerable groups are mainly included within the programme 'Human resources development (OPHDR)' and 'Science and education for smart growth (OPSESG)'. We also shouldn't underestimate the role of the Community-led local development (CLLD) approach, which came after the former LIDER program under the Rural Development Programme (RDP).

The first opportunities for implementation of local integration policies came from two schemes for educational integration – 'Support for pre-school education and preparation of children in disadvantaged situation' and 'Educational integration of students from ethnic minorities and/or seeking of or granted with international protection', for which two deadlines were given. These schemes however started with a scandal, as it turned out that there was a way to overstep the rules: The same people have registered 6 similar organisations and applied for close to 2 000 000 BGN under these schemes. These organisations have been registered several months before the publication of the calls. This would have been left with no attention; however, representatives of the NGO sector made their own investigation and raised awareness of the general public for this misconduct. The Ministry of Education conducted a revision and refused to sign the contracts with these organisations. However, further investigations have not been made. It remained unclear who were the board members in these organisations, if they were in conflict of interest and connected with someone, and how these projects had been evaluated if the organisations could not prove administrative or financial capacity and experience.

Another important scheme related to the general policy for Roma and other vulnerable groups' integration is "Development of social enterprises" in the framework of the OPHRD. The activities under this scheme focus on securing support for creation of innovative social enterprises and maximizing the activities of already existing social enterprises. On first sight the idea looks good, however, after a serious analysis of the admissible actions it becomes evident that the scheme is too similar to the projects for temporary employment and would hardly secure the improvement of existent enterprises or an increase in the number of social enterprises in Bulgaria. This is actually the smaller problem. The most important issue related to this scheme is that in the framework of one year the call had been denounced twice, when the projects have been already sent, and the application conditions changed three times. It means that one group of beneficiaries – the municipalities - had to plan, elaborate and apply for the same project grant three times. Thus the projects are still in the stage of being administratively evaluated instead of being already implemented. And, of course, some of the candidates decided not to apply for a second time, which in fact killed the meaning of the procedure.

One of the most eagerly expected and one the most important calls for the implementation of the municipal plans integration schemes has been the call for development of concepts for inclusion of vulnerable groups under the integrated procedure of OPHRD and OPSESG. The deadline for applying with the concepts has been 15 December 2016. The concepts included two components with approved funding of the amount of 80 000 000 BGN. Component 1 has been opened for municipalities that are not regional centres and have actualized integration plans. Within the component activities in four directions have been united: access to employment, education, social and health services, development of local communities and overcoming of negative stereotypes. In March 2017 the approved concepts have been announced – 52 in total. The total amount of funding for the approved concepts has been 26 000 000 BGN. This has been twice under the planned funding. After the approval of concepts - according to unofficial information - the municipalities were supposed to start with the planning of the detailed project proposals – a process that should have been developed in close cooperation with the ruling body of the programme. The implementation of the projects has been scheduled to start in the fall of 2017.

A year later the implementation of the detailed project proposals has still not started. The ruling bodies do not release any information regarding the municipalities with approved concepts. Some of these have already

forgotten the content of the concepts, in others the context has already changed. Nobody says when and how the procedure is expected to start.

With the start of the new programme period the implementation of the CLLD approach under the RDP started. The new elements in the present period are: Significantly raised financial resources, which gives an opportunity for covering at least 1/3 of the territory of the rural regions in Bulgaria; Opportunity for development of multi-fund strategies for local development with a budget up to 6 000 000 BGN; Inclusion of measures from the Development of Rural Regions programme and the programmes "Human resources development" "Concurrence" and others. A special element of the approach is that it should include and target the needs and the interests of all groups on the territory of the local initiative group. It includes also the Roma as a specific group on local level. The inclusion of measures focused on Roma and other vulnerable groups was supposed to add points in the process of the evaluation of the strategies. It created an opportunity for the CLLD strategies to become a source of funding for the implementation of the municipal integration programmes thus being a precondition for implementation of positive changes in the rural regions.

Despite the fact that the contracts for financing of the first 40 strategies were signed a year ago, the real implementation has still not started. The reasons for this are strictly administrative – changes in the rules for the applications, synchronization of the normative and sub-normative acts etc.

Generally the RDP 2014 – 2020 has been the programme with the biggest problems concerning the transparency of funding. The interested stakeholders have no access to actual information, such as: how many projects have been applied for under a certain measure, what are the deadlines for the evaluation, publication of the evaluation protocols that could solve the problem with the subjectivism of the evaluation process etc. What is more – the programme has no dedicated website, but uses the website of the State Fund Agriculture. These are just a few examples for the processes.

IV. Institutional Framework of Integration Policy

The text of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Roma Inclusion (2012-2020) states that "it is an integral part of the government's overall strategy for achieving real changes in the life of all Bulgarian citizens. Coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the strategy are carried out by the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEII). The Secretariat shall provide information, analytical, administrative and technical activities of the NCCEII". However, neither the National Council nor the Secretariat had the necessary resources and mandate to fulfil these roles. That's why in 2013 the most active NGOs have left the NCCEII, manifesting disagreement with the unclear status and functions of the council, which in fact did not allow the council to participate in the ruling and implementation of the National Strategy on Roma Integration.

In 2013 – 2017 several governments resigned. There have been some attempts to re-vitalise the debate about the role and the status of the National Council. Concrete rules for operation have been proposed, proposals for restructuring and creation of new administrative structures have been made. Regrettably, currently despite the acting Secretariat of the Council, it actually does not exist. Even its internet site has been closed.

Does someone actually remember that in 2016 – 2017 the secretariat of the council has implemented the project „T.E.A.M – Together we can do more”? The aim of the project has been to strengthen the national consultation process through the establishment of the National Roma Platform (NRP) as a

mechanism for dialogue, exchange and cooperation of the stakeholders in the process of implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy 2012 – 2020. The project has been realised with the financial support of the programme “Rights, Equality and Citizenship” of the European Union, governed by DG “Justice and Consumers” under a call for applications with project proposals with priority to “Support for creation or strengthening and restructuring of the national consultative process in the Member States through national platforms and under the governing of the National Contact Points. In the framework of the project thematic meetings and regional forums have been organised with the participation of interested stakeholders. Actually, this project, which ended in June 2017, should have been the fundament for the actual debate in the framework of which the National Roma Platform has been expected to be established, including rules for regulation, programme, budget for meetings etc. Despite the successful beginning, the National Roma Platform does not exist in Bulgaria. The reason for this is that the Bulgarian Government has decided that this is not necessary and did not apply for the second stage of the project, ignoring the idea for the creation of national platforms.

Maybe this is due to the total lack of political will of the Government to implement the Roma integration policies. An example for this lack of will is the policy: “Demolitions instead of creation”. The most painful examples for this can be seen in Plovdiv, Asenovgrad, Gurmen, Orlandovtsi, and many more. These examples show how the demolition policy can be used for calming down the general public, taking aside the possible solutions of the problems, creation of humanitarian crises and other similar actions, which lead to nothing.

Many people connect the lack of political will with to new configuration of the Government. No doubts, the presence of patriotic formations aggravates the problem. However, the lack of will existed already previously. It is a fact that the cohesion policy is not applied for Roma settlements for years. A typical example for this is the “Nov put” Roma settlement in Vidin. The settlement is intentionally surrounded with a wall and the only possible entrance is in the farthest corner. The explanation for the wall is that “It is more secure this way”. Another example for anti-cohesion policy is seen in Montana, where the Ogosta settlement (place in the central part of the city) is excluded from the water cycle project of the municipality. Contrary to the general opinion, the settlement is within the city regulation plans, there are no unlawfully built constructions there and all inhabitants pay their taxes. Their only problem is that they are Roma. Other examples for surrounding and hiding one can see in the Karmen settlement in Kazanluk and in the Iztok settlement in Kyustendil.

The unwillingness for the implementation of the engagements undertaken by the Government concerning Roma related issues went even further. In the past year the Government did not even want to discuss the issues. The appointment of Valeri Simeonov as Chairperson of the non-existing NCEII has been a clear message to the representatives of the Roma civil society sector as to what extend their opinion can be disregarded. Not taking into account the protest letters, the signatures gathered and the other forms demonstrating disagreement with this appointment, Valeri Simeonov continues, even in a formal way, to be responsible for the integration policies, at least as long this Government is in power.

v. Conclusions and recommendations for the improvement of social inclusion of Roma

We are ahead of an unprecedented change of configuration of the EU with Great Britain leaving the Union. We observe every day how populism in the whole EU is growing and how society is more and more willing to find someone to be blamed for all the problems. Antigypsyism is reaching an extreme level. Many Roma living in Sofia and other big cities are concerned as they face hate crimes, or just because no one wants to play with their children on the playground, because of their darker skin colour.

The year 2020 is soon to come and the planning for the next EU programming period is underway. No one knows if Roma related issues will be included, where and how. It is a fact however that this issue is left out of the agenda, despite all the efforts of the civil organizations. It is neither because the problems are solved, nor because antigypsism is overcome; it is because someone decided that it is not a priority anymore. It is a fact that the current approaches did not lead to significant results. Despite that there are some improvements, the society is not happy.

What is needed to do in a very urgent order is the creation of institutions and mechanisms to ensure strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, to plan and carry out the planned integration activities, to evaluate the results.

For the successful integration of vulnerable minority groups into the majority society, the following conditions are also required:

- Political will to pursue the practice of national and regional laws against discrimination, implementation of strategies adopted for the integration of vulnerable communities, development of action plans for these strategies with the active involvement of Roma in all stages of decision-making, implementation of tasks and monitoring of processes of integration;
- Appropriate institutional support;
- A strong civil society and independent NGOs defending democratic principles of effective equality and dignity of all citizens, regardless of ethnic, racial, religious or social identity;
- Respect of fundamental rights of the individual and (national) minorities;
- A positive media environment based on individual rights and upholding the dignity of every individual and minority rights;
- Constant equal cooperation between institutions, local authorities, civil society organizations and representatives of vulnerable groups to discuss issues and priorities and for the planning of activities, their implementation, evaluation and monitoring;
- Good coordination and administration of planned activities.
- State / local authorities should provide substantial support for the integration of Roma and other vulnerable ethnic groups by providing adequate legal, institutional and financial frameworks to enable the institutions, local authorities and civil society organizations to work effectively to achieve this target.

Roma communities shall be given the opportunity to actively participate in the development and implementation of policies and social inclusion programs to ensure their effectiveness. If we allow Roma to be leading in the formulation of solutions for the development of their community, and if local authorities, donor organizations and all who sincerely desire and work for their social inclusion show the



necessary understanding, sensitivity, flexibility and patience, the developed local policies and actions for their implementation are more likely to be successful and can achieve the goal of building an inclusive community with reduced social disparities.

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