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OPERATIONAL PROGRAMMES BETWEEN REAL NEEDS AND INDECISIVENESS: LOOK AT THE NEW PROGRAMMING PERIOD

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The clear and sincere articulation/ pronunciation of an issue is the first step towards resolving it. Often, this is the most important step because it is about realizing that the issue exists and needs to be resolved.

I have taught this postulate for years as a teacher of philosophical subjects. We have been following it for a long time as a fundamental principle when working with schools to prevent dropouts and early school leaving - the most important first step is the principal and the teachers to realize that there is an problem and that they must work to resolve it. It is perhaps strange, or maybe quite natural, that I also face this challenge in my work as a participant in the working groups and committees of the main operational programmes that channel the European Union's assistance in achieving real cohesion/ alignment of the standards and capabilities of Bulgaria and the other Member States. Roma integration and the need for specific measures to achieve it is perhaps the clearest example of how difficult it is for the Bulgarian institutions to find the courage to acknowledge the challenges and to work to overcome them.

The main reason for writing this text is the reluctance with which the managing authorities / governing bodies of the main operational programmes in Bulgaria relate to the inclusion of the Roma integration theme, despite the obvious need, the desire of the main stakeholders (including civil society, schools, kindergartens, etc.), and the clear guidance in this regard by the European Commission (which, in practice, is the major donor here). I have observed this reluctance since 2006, when the first operational programmes were developed, and it has continued, albeit to a much lesser extent, during the current programming period. The specific reason is the absence of the topic of Roma integration in the first drafts of the Human Resources Development and the Science and Education Operational Programmes.

I am writing this text not as an impartial observer, but as an active participant in the process. As a representative of civic organizations working for Roma integration, I participated in the preparation of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRDOP) during the previous as well as the current period. I participated also in the Monitoring Committee of the HRDOP during the previous period, and of the Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Programme during the current period. I also take part in the working groups for the preparation of the new operational programmes. From this point of view, I do not claim impartiality, but a clearly expressed position based on the views of a wide range of stakeholders, as well as awareness of the ongoing processes.

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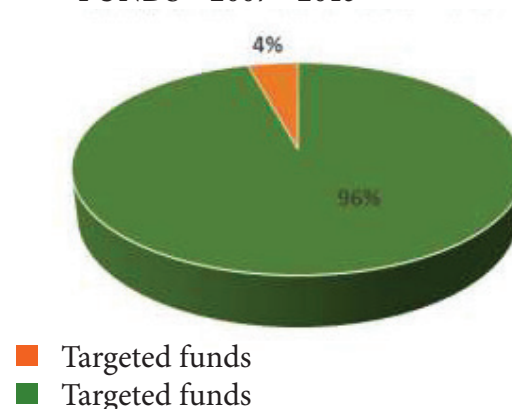
BRIEF BACKGROUND

The main reason for writing this text is the reluctance with which the managing authorities of the main operational programs in Bulgaria relate to the inclusion of the topic of Roma integration, despite the obvious need, the desire of the main stakeholders and the clear guidelines in this regard for the European Union commission.

During the 2007-2013 programming period, the European Social Fund co-financed two operational programmes in Bulgaria: Human Resources Development (which also included 2 priority axes for education) and Administrative Capacity. At that time, we, the civil society organizations, insisted that Roma should be identified as one of the target groups in 6 areas of intervention (the so-called then investment priorities for announcing specific competitions), and that there should be indicators to measure the real impact in the Roma community. Initially, this request faced strong resistance from the institutions involved (MLSP as a managing authority and MES as an intermediate body), but was strongly supported by the European Commission. Finally, the Operational Programme included Roma as one of the target groups in the fields of education, employment and social inclusion, as well as a specific chapter in the field of action for Roma accompanied by specific indicators. During that programming period, calls for projects, notably for educational integration of children and students from ethnic minorities, have been announced as part of the investment priorities addressed, as well as a competition for the employment of vulnerable groups. Contrary to the public opinion often fuelled by politicians and journalists, not more than BGN 52 million were allocated for such competitions, which is just over 4% of the total amount of the operational programme. The funds were used mainly by municipalities, kindergartens, and schools, and, only after then, by NGOs.

In 2011, the European Commission published the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies requiring all Member States to develop their own national Roma integration strategies or plans and to implement a purposeful targeted approach following the Explicit but not Exclusive Targeting principle. It was followed by the European Council Recommendations of 9 December 2013, which was the first of its kind European legislation on Roma integration. It is particularly important that the Regulation of the European Social Fund, following the spirit of those changes, made having an approved National Roma integration strategy a precondition for any country wishing to use the Fund. The Regulation also offered the Member States a specific investment priority, i.e. Socio-Economic Integration of Marginalized Communities such as the Roma. A total of 12 countries included this investment priority in their operational programmes.

FUNDS 2007 - 2013



¹ Kolev, D., Y. Grigorova, European Funds and Roma Integration in Bulgaria 2010 - 2011, p. 12. Plovdiv 2013. Available at: <http://amalipe.com/files/publications/Euro-fondove.pdf>

The Current Programming Period and the Socio-Economic Integration of Marginalized Communities such as the Roma

Not only Roma are involved in projects and activities funded under the priority socio-economic integration of marginalized communities such as the Roma, and the impact is not only for the Roma.

During the current programming period, the ESF has co-financed three operational programmes in Bulgaria. After education was withdrawn from the Human Resources Development OP, a new operational programme - Science and Education for Smart Growth - was made. One of the important achievements of the country mentioned in numerous reports of the European Commission and the Bulgarian government is the inclusion of the Socio-Economic Integration of Marginalized Communities such as the Roma as a targeted investment priority in the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRDOP) and the Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Programme (SESGOP). This time, the request of the civil society organizations in this direction was supported not only by the European Commission but also by the two governing bodies - MES and MLSP.

The current programming period is not yet over as its projects will be completed by the end of 2023. However, at least two points can be made regarding the implementation of the Targeting Marginalized Communities such as the Roma investment priority:

1. In the projects and activities funded under this priority, there are not only Roma involved and the impact is not only on the Roma. This is in line with the sound logic and the overall idea of the European Commission and the governing bodies. In fact, there is not a single competition or even a single project involving only Roma. All competitions announced so far under this priority state that “in order to achieve a real integration effect, representatives of the majority must also participate in the project activities”. In the largest operation, the MES Active Inclusion project involved 1,500 kindergartens, i.e. three-quarters of all kindergartens in the country, although children from vulnerable groups are over 20% in only 300 of them;

2. At the moment, under both operational programmes, this is the investment priority with the fewest competitions announced and the largest financial resource still available: the HRDOP invited municipalities only once, in the distant 2016, to submit project concepts. The process of evaluating and preparing comprehensive project proposals continued for another two years, and the projects started only in March 2019, with 48 municipalities as specific beneficiaries. The SESGOP started much more decisively the activities under this investment priority, but since the programme was discontinued in 2017, there has also been a delay. The MLSP’s indecisiveness to announce competitions targeting marginalized communities and, especially, the implementation of the municipal plans for Roma integration can hardly be explained by the lack of need or interest. The manner in which the HRDOP’s investment priority is structured gives the necessary opportunity for the municipalities to obtain a resource for the implementation of the municipal plans for Roma integration by applying through a single project;

3. There are already two important examples of operations under that investment priority, which should be continued and followed by measures under the other priorities targeting other target groups. In other words, these are operations that can be an example of how operational programmes can be implemented as a whole. The Active Inclusion in Pre-School Education systematic project of the Ministry of Education and Science shows something that is a requirement for all measures under the operational programmes, namely, to implement the national policies that the respective line ministry had conceived without European funds as well. In addition, the project has become a catalyst for an important government decision, i.e. the abolition of kindergarten fees for families with incomes below the national minimum. To this end, the government uses both the Active Inclusion project funds and additional state budget resources (under Article 101 of the 2020 Budget Act). Beyond this important added value, we should also emphasize the fact that the project is the

first major investment in the development of kindergartens that have fallen significantly behind schools since the introduction of the delegated school budgets. These are not just kindergartens teaching Roma children; as I mentioned above, three quarters of the existing kindergartens will be supported under the project. Also, the families for which the kindergarten fees will be paid are not only Roma families - the criteria for their participation are social, not ethnic. Thus, despite the many operational issues inevitably linked to the implementation of the Active Inclusion project, it can serve as an example in two ways:

- How the European programme not only implements a national policy but also stimulates important national decision-making;
- How the Explicit but Not Exclusive Targeting principle is applied in practice and how the Socio-Economic Integration of Marginalized Communities such as the Roma investment priority supports a wide range of vulnerable groups.

The second example is the operation Socio-Economic Integration of Marginalized Communities, Integrated measures to improve access to education. The 48 municipal projects launched under Component 1 have been co-financed by the HRDOP and the SESGOP, and the projects under Component 2 (which will be implemented in the large urban municipalities where construction of social housing is envisaged, too) will be co-financed by the Regions in Growth OP. The good about this operation is:

- The possibility to finance, through one project, activities to improve access to education, employment, social and health services, and even housing conditions in large cities. Thus, municipalities can actually receive a resource for the implementation of their municipal plans for Roma integration. At present, nearly 200 municipalities have such plans approved by municipal council decisions, but they rely mainly on an external resource for their implementation. Being able to apply through a single project rather than multiple projects is the only real option for financing the implementation of such municipal plans. Thus, human resources in these municipalities could be realistically engaged in activities rather than in project preparation and reporting;
- Inclusion of activities to create a favourable public environment

There are already important examples of operations under the investment priority identified, which should be continued and followed by other priority measures directed at other target groups.

Not only Roma are involved in projects and activities funded under the priority socio-economic integration of marginalized communities such as the Roma, and the impact is not only on the Roma.

and stimulate community development (including activities to overcome early marriages and other patriarchal practices): both types of activities are key ones for the successful implementation of the integration policies;

The precedent of co-financing one operation by two or even three operational programmes. The implementation of Component 2 of the said integrated operation faced important problems that need to be taken into account. The construction of social housing provoked public tension in many municipalities and led to the respective municipalities refusing to implement the entire project. The negative trend began in the previous programming period, when the municipalities of Burgas and Varna abandoned their already approved projects for the construction of social housing. It should be emphasized that this measure was funded by the Regions in Growth operational programme and had no ethnic focus. Although the word “Roma” is not present in any form, negative public reactions are caused precisely by the expectation that Roma, orphans, and other vulnerable groups will be accommodated in such social housing. The lack of a proper communication strategy and activities to create a supportive social environment on the part of the respective municipalities and the central government is one of the main reasons for the cessation of the projects in these municipalities. It should also be emphasized that the projects under Component 1, financed under the investment priority and explicitly targeting marginalized communities such as the Roma, did not cause such a negative reaction anywhere and were not stopped in any municipality for such a reason. It is obvious that the nature of the activities envisaged, and not so much the presence of the word “Roma”, leads or does not lead to resistance from the majority. The so-called “soft measures” are relatively easily accepted by the majority, even when they are explicitly targeted at vulnerable groups and the Roma, where they are not done in an exclusive way. The “hard measures” are a serious challenge, even if they are well planned and not explicitly targeted at the Roma. The presence of negative attitudes towards the Roma community and the rise of anti-Gypsyism can fail even the best-conceived projects if not preceded by activities to create a favourable social environment.

Looking at the New Programming Period

The process of drafting the new regulations of the European funds and the new operational programmes is already in full swing. There are still many unknowns, but some of the important things are, more or less, certain.

At European level, it is clear that the existing funds will continue to function during the new programming period. The European Social Fund is being transformed into an ESF +. Its funding for Bulgaria is expected to increase significantly.

Roma integration remains an important priority for the European Commission and for the ESF +. On 14 January 2020, the European Commission published the Strong Social Europe through Just Transitions communication. Overcoming Roma exclusion is one of the priorities explicitly outlined in the Social Protection and Inclusion section of the communication. The European Commission's initiatives for the current and upcoming years are also outlined, with the European Commission planning

to announce its new Roma Equality and Inclusion initiative for the fourth quarter of 2020. This is the document that will continue the current European Union Framework for National Roma Strategies. The Commission has been discussing this initiative since 2019, and it is clear that it will ask all EU Member States to develop their Roma integration strategies for the next 10-year period. In addition to the four fields currently in place (education, health, employment, and housing), the Commission will recommend the inclusion of activities to overcome anti-Gypsyism, as well as a more adequate inclusion of the issues of Roma women and children. It is expected that the Member States will be recommended to use more European funds to implement their Roma integration policies, including the investment priority / specific objective for marginalized communities such as the Roma.

The draft regulation of the European Social Fund+ also keeps its focus on social inclusion and, in particular, on Roma integration. It requires the Member States to channel their funding towards some of the 11 specific

objectives proposed. The eighth objective is Promoting the Socio-Economic Integration of Third-Country Nationals and Marginalized Communities such as the Roma. Certainly, the representatives of the Directorate-General for Employment of the European Commission will insist that this specific objective be selected by at least five countries with a high concentration of Roma, and Bulgaria is one of them.

At national level, it is also clear that the European Social Fund will fund the Human Resources Development, the Science and Education, and the Good Governance operational programmes. The governing bodies have already formed working groups with the participation of the main institutions, social partners, and groups of non-governmental organizations. These working groups are expected to submit to the European Commission the first drafts of the new operational programmes by the end of March. This will only be the beginning of the process as the European Commission is an active negotiating party and many comments and new working drafts can be expected.

²*PROPOSAL FOR A REGULATION of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Social Fund plus (ESIF +) / COM (2018) 382 /.*

Available on:

<http://sf.mon.bg/?go=page&pageId=366>

³ <http://sf.mon.bg/?go=page&pageId=376>

<https://esf.bg/zasedanija-na-trg/>

Roma integration continues to be an important priority for European Commission and ESF +. The draft regulation of the European Social Fund + contains a specific objective 8 “Promoting the socio-economic integration of third-country nationals and marginalized communities, for example the Roma ”

No Roma Integration

Good teachers know that at the beginning of each new lesson, they must both greet the students present and check who is absent and understand why they are absent. Because absence is always a cause for concern!

To date, the working group under the new Human Resources Development operational programme is already discussing the first working draft. Raw ideas were also presented to the group preparing the new Science and Education operational programme. The absence of specific objective 8 proposed by the European Commission and related to the promotion of the socio-economic inclusion of marginalized communities, including the Roma, can be immediately seen.

The reason for such absence is not natural; it is not rooted in the needs of the labour market, Bulgarian education, social inclusion, and the needs of the Bulgarian society as a whole. On the contrary, it goes against these needs. For the last seven years, Roma integration has achieved some results but in no case can it be said that Roma are

integrated into the education system and the labour market to an extent where no further efforts are needed. Two consecutive World Bank reports indicated that almost a quarter of the young people who are about to enter the labour market are of Roma origin. If they are well educated, qualified, and included in the labour market, they will become the necessary labour force for the leap of the Bulgarian economy. The European Social Fund investments are one of the best funds in this regard.

The reason for the absence is not a changed EU policy towards the Roma. Quite the opposite: as I stated above, the European Commission continues to require that the Member States develop their own national strategies for Roma inclusion and recommends the specific Roma targeting objective in the new European Social Fund regulation.

The absence has not been caused by failures in the current programming period either, where both key operational programmes co-financed by the European Social Fund

The real reason for the reluctance of Bulgarian institutions to include the targeted specific target of marginalized communities, including Roma, in the new operational programs, is likely to be the unprecedented rise in anti-Gypsyism and hate speech against Roma in recent years.

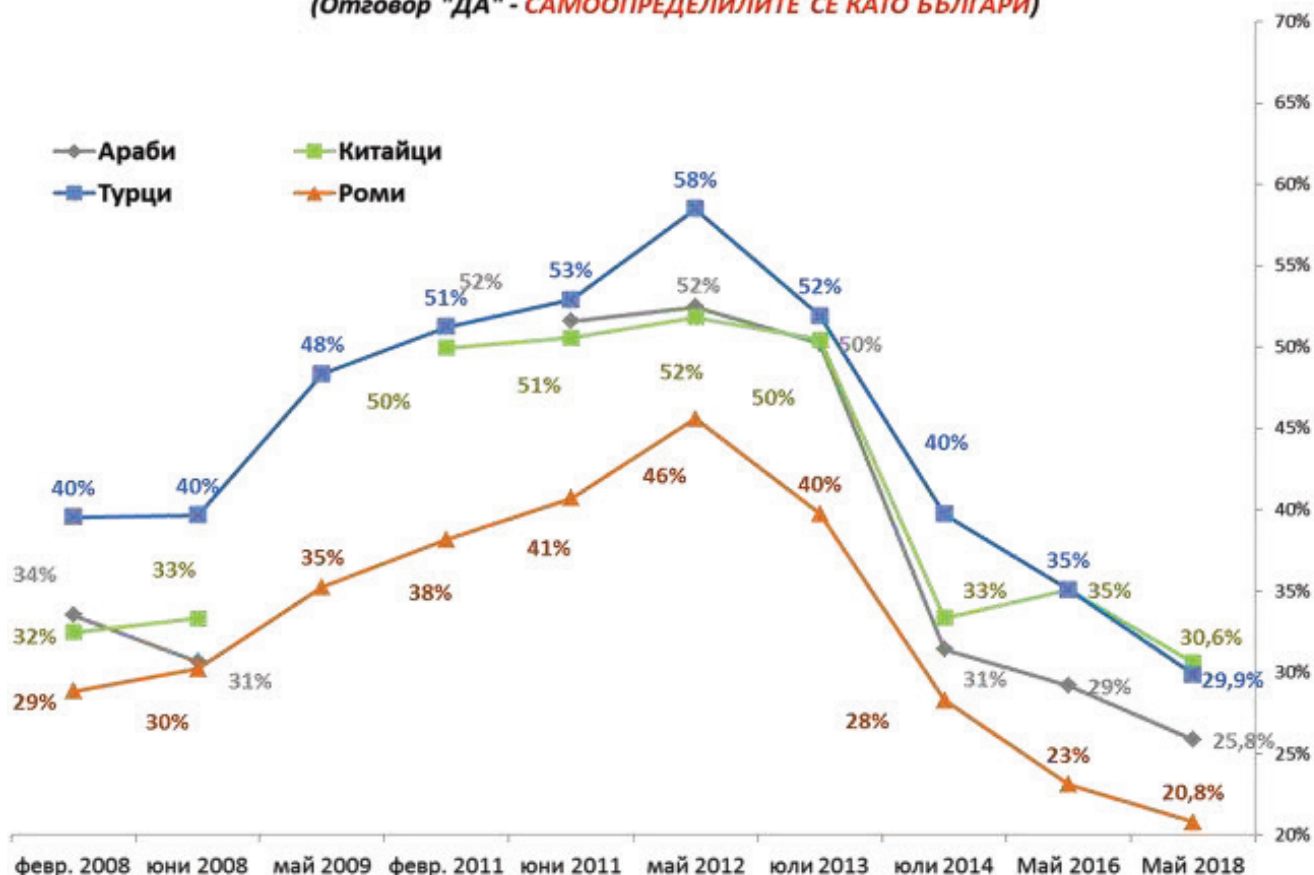
contain the specific investment priority for the socio-economic integration of marginalized communities such as the Roma. As I mentioned above, this priority financed successful programmes to support not only the Roma but also other vulnerable groups and the entire society. There are certainly many problems there, but this is true for all other investment priorities. And issues should not be resolved by following the famous Stalin's No Man - No Problem principle.

The reasons are beyond the current needs, context, and positive experience already gained. The official response of the managing authority rejecting the NGO proposal for the inclusion of specific objective 8 reads: "The managing authority of the HRDOP finds that the undertaking of a mainstreaming approach for the 2021-2027 programming period towards the marginalized society, incl. the Roma, will be a much faster, more successful, and even more effective way to achieve the objectives and results desired". This contradicts a number of European-level documents, including such signed by Bulgaria, which foresee the use of a targeted approach - combined with a common one - in relation to Roma integration. As

early as in 2009, the European Council approved 10 basic principles of Roma inclusion, which were subsequently included in the Roma Integration National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria. The second principle is Explicit but Not Exclusive Targeting, and the fourth principle is Aiming for the Mainstream. Thus, the highest authority of the European Union requires the use of a targeted approach that does not exclude other vulnerable groups but is specifically targeted at the Roma. This has been confirmed and extended through the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. The second paragraph of the document is entitled A Need for a Targeted Approach: An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies"

The experience from the implementation of the 2007-2013 HRDOP also shows that the use of the targeted approach is significantly more efficient and leads to the achievement of the objectives and indicators set. This cannot be said for the axes where only the mainstreaming approach was used.

**Бихте ли се съгласили да живеят във Вашия КВАРТАЛ:
(Отговор "ДА" - САМООПРЕДЕЛИЛИТЕ СЕ КАТО БЪЛГАРИ)**



Minority social distances in the period 2008 - 2018 according to a survey by the Open Society Institute - Sofia

⁴ An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies by 2020, p. 3.
Available on: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legacomol-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1444910104414&uri=CELEX:52011DC0173>

The final report on the implementation of the operational programme clearly indicates this - “Priority axis 4 includes the highest number of persons from vulnerable groups... This is due both to the total high number of persons involved in this axis and to the fact that a whole area of intervention targeted at persons from vulnerable groups was implemented within it. For example, over 80% of all Roma included were involved in activities under this particular priority axis.” The implementation of the indicators in the Areas of Action Regarding the Roma Community chapter also proved the effectiveness of the targeted approach. Only the indicators under Priority Axis 4, under which multiple targeting schemes were announced, were almost 100% performed. For the remaining priority axes, the performance of the indicators was between 10 and 20%.

The real reason for the reluctance of the Bulgarian institutions to include the specific objective targeting marginalized communities, including the Roma, in the new operational programmes is likely to be the unprecedented rise in anti-Gypsyism and hate speech against Roma in recent years. The lack of a supportive social environment for the integration policies is combined with the indecisiveness and inability of the politicians to deal with this problem. As a result, the national institutions would rather not use the targeted approach, retreat from important achievements in this regard, and conflict with the European Commission and the major stakeholders at national level rather than find the courage to oppose hate speech.

In practice, there has been a serious rise in hate speech against Roma as well as in anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudices in the last seven years. The annual surveys of social distance from different minority groups carried out by the Open Society Institute research team have indicated that:

1. The Roma are the most unwanted minority that is most often subject to hate speech as well as most violent stereotypes and prejudices. For example, in the ten years of the Social Distance Survey, the percentage of ethnic Bulgarians who agreed to live in a Roma neighbourhood is the lowest compared to those who agreed to live in a neighbourhood with Turks, Arabs, and Chinese.

Only 23% of the ethnic Bulgarians in 2016 agreed to Roma living in their neighbourhood, while those to agree to live with Turks and Chinese were 35% and with Arabs - 29%. The percentages have changed over the years, but Roma have remained the most unwanted in the neighbourhood. In combination with the lack of a proper communication strategy, this can easily lead to the failure of the social housing topics under the Regions in Growth operational programme. The same were the attitudes to cohabitation in one and the same settlement, and the likelihood of marriage to a Roma man or woman was even more categorically rejected.⁸

2. There has been an extremely worrying trend towards deterioration of the attitude to Roma and an increase in the social distance:

a comparison of the results of the 2008 - 2018 surveys showed that until 2012 the Bulgarian society was gradually becoming more tolerant in its attitude towards the four minorities mentioned, including the Roma. Since 2012, there has been a sharp decline in those who agree to live, work, and study with representatives of the four minorities, especially the Roma. The trend is so negative that the levels in 2018 were lower than those in 2008.

Obviously, the preparation of the operational programmes during the current programming period took place in the years of relatively high levels of Roma acceptance and Roma integration. On the contrary, the current process coincides with the lowest levels in this direction as well as with the greatest social distances. This is probably the deep reason behind the reluctance of the national institutions to continue to use the targeted approach and to include the targeted specific objective.

⁵ Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Final Report on the Implementation of OIIPЧP 2007 - 2013 г., c. 15.

⁶ Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Final report on the implementation of the OIIPЧP 2007 - 2013 г., c. 24-27.

⁷ <http://opendata.osi.bg/opendata.php?q=3&i=802&t=2>

⁸ <http://opendata.osi.bg/opendata.php?q=3&i=803&t=2>

What can we expect?

The dilemma of any politician called to be a leader is whether to follow the public opinion or lead/change it. The third option is to perceive this dilemma not as an excluding disjunction, but rather as a dialectical connection and interaction.

In most cases in recent years, the practice has shown categorical following of the public attitudes, even if they are not the attitudes of the whole society, but of its most loud-voiced part. Examples are the rejection of the Istanbul Convention, the Strategy for the Rights of the Child, and a number of others.

Whether this will happen or not when preparing the new operational programmes is still too early to say. These types of technical documents requiring specific expertise rarely fall into the

eyes of the so-called haters. In their preparation, a wide range of stakeholders are involved that can influence the process. It is particularly important that such documents be coordinated between the relevant governing bodies and the European Commission. The experience so far has been that the European institutions are specific guarantors for the preservation of the fundamental democratic principles. The activity of the civil society and the other stakeholders, the position of the European Commission, and the ability of the national institutions to resist the growing anti-Gypsyism are the factors that would lead to the inclusion of specific objective 8 in the new operational programmes co-financed by the European Social Fund. The need for this and the strong added value are beyond doubt.



Снимка: pixabay.com