



**AMALIPE CENTER FOR INTERETHNIC DIALOGUE AND
TOLERANCE**

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**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NRIS IN BULGARIA IN 2015: STAGNATION
WITH LIMITED POSSIBILITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Assessment of AMALIPE Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance

On March 1, 2012 Bulgarian Parliament approved National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration (NRIS) answering the request of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. Thus for first time political document for Roma integration was approved with legislative act.

The present paper evaluates the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration in 2015. It is done by AMALIPE Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance as contribution to the annual assessment of the NRISs carried out by DG Justice of European Commission. The paper complements the evaluation template required by DG Justice.

Overall assessment:

The year 2015 marked stagnation in the Roma integration policy in Bulgaria. No significant political attention was paid to the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration besides the efforts of European Commission and pro-Roma civil society to foster political engagement of the new Bulgarian government as well as to re-establish the policy dialogue around Roma integration. No developments were undertaken to reform the ineffective institutional set-up for Roma integration and no progress was achieved. Regarding the 6 NRIS priority fields, deterioration occurred in 3 of them (housing, health care, anti-discrimination), the situation remained the same in 2 others (employment and culture) while improvement was observed only in the field of education. The overall public environment also deteriorated: 2015 marked significant raise of anti-Roma rhetoric and stereotypes as well as anti-Roma clashes that were not properly met by Bulgarian institutions. Unfavorable (for the social inclusion in general) mainstream developments in the fields of healthcare and education formed significant additional challenge that would disturb the Roma integration policy in the near future.

The biggest success factor in 2015 was the engagement of two ESF co-funded programs (Science and Education for Smart Growth OP and Human Resources Development OP) as well as of EEA Grants and Swiss Contribution with funding the NRIS implementation. It brings possibilities for fostering NRIS implementation at local level and for engaging broader set of stakeholders. Nevertheless, much more success factors are necessary to overcome the stagnation in Roma integration policy.

Assessment per fields

Education: *Slight improvement of the state of policy for Roma educational integration was observed in 2015. It is linked mainly with the support of Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Program for Roma integration targeted operation ensured during the year since it provides possibilities for advance in the policy implementation at local level. The improvement is also linked with the approval of new / updated Strategy for Educational Integration that re-confirms the political commitment of Ministry of Education: at least at the level of political intentions*

As important steps we can outline:

1. The Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities was renewed in June 2015. It was designed with participation of all stakeholders: representatives of Ministry of Education, universities, the biggest NGOs that work for educational integration. The Strategy was approved also with Action Plan.

Nevertheless, it repeated key weaknesses from the previous Strategy: low administrative status (approved with decision of the minister), no administrative structure at national and local level for implementing it. No additional specific budget was defined except the budget of the Center for Educational Integration that was minimal and was not increased.

Thus, the renewed Strategy is good sign that the political attention to Roma integration remains but it does not change the poor state with Strategy implementation. It is hardly to expect that it will bring a change;

2. Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Program announced its first calls for proposals for supporting educational integration. Two Roma / minority targeted calls were announced in September and 3 more were approved by Monitoring Committee in October. This was important financial and political support for the efforts of schools/kindergartens, municipalities and NGOs that could bring a change at municipal level.

Opening Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Program for supporting Roma integration could be outlined as the main strength in the field of Roma education during the entire reported year. In 2015 the Monitoring Committee of this program approved 5 Roma targeted operations. Two of them were opened in September as call for proposals. Three new Roma / minorities targeted operations were approved by the Monitoring Committee in October. More information about these operations could be found at:

<http://www.amalipe.com/index.php?nav=news&id=2397&lang=2>

Through announcing Roma targeted operations within Science and Education OP for first time relatively huge financial resource was dedicated for Roma integration covering pre-school, school, high school and adults education. These calls guaranteed the engagement of diverse stakeholders - schools, municipalities, NGOs, universities.

The Roma NGO representatives took active part in designing these operations;

3. New Public Education Act was approved by the Parliament in September 2015: it was important step for modernizing Bulgarian educational system since the old law was from the beginning of 1990s.

The process of preparing new Public Education Act started in 2009. Owing to the advocacy efforts undertaken by Center Amalipe, SEGA Foundation and other Roma and pro-Roma NGOs the approved law contained several important points that would foster the educational integration: it creates State standard for Civic and Intercultural education, outlaws segregated classes, requires every school to prepare School program for preventing early school leaving and School program for equal opportunities, possibilities for additional financing for implementing these programs, etc.

At the same time certain mainstream points could deteriorate the educational status of the most vulnerable groups. For example, the Act de-facto decreases the age of compulsory education through moving the end of primary education (that is obligatory) from 8th to 7th grade making the earlier school leaving legal. Most probably this will increase significantly the number of school dropouts, will close many schools in the rural areas and will deteriorate the quality of education in them. School segregation is not prohibited (only segregated classes are outlawed but not the segregated schools). As a whole, the Act could not be defined as inclusive;

4. Certain civil society projects continued in 2015. According to information collected through the official ADMIN system of Ministry of education two of these projects are implemented in big number of schools and kindergartens all over Bulgaria. They could be described rather as national programs than as projects:

4.1. Decreasing the dropout rate of Roma children “Every Student Can be a Winner” implemented by AMALIPE Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance: The program achieved strong results: the number of dropouts in the participating schools decreased from 2,4 % to 0,6 % (that is much below the average of the country), the percentage of Roma students who continue in gymnasiums increase from 38 to 79 %, etc. Independent evaluation of the program carried out by two sociological agencies proved these results and outlined that for the same period the early school leaving in similar schools that were not included in the program dramatically increased. The evaluation could be seen at: [http://amalipe.com/files/publications/Amalipe TSA evaluation sum2.pdf](http://amalipe.com/files/publications/Amalipe_TSA_evaluation_sum2.pdf)

4.2. Springboard for School Readiness “Ready for the School” financed and coordinated by Trust for Social Achievement

The lack of governmental support for the successful NGO initiatives for educational integration appeared as significant challenge since years. Although these initiatives proved their success on the field and were recognized by Ministry of Education, there is no governmental support for them and no mechanisms for such support. It appears as one of the biggest challenges before the implementation of the policy for Roma educational integration.

Health care: *Deterioration of the state of policy for improving the health status of Roma was observed in 2015. It is linked with the practical end of the implementation of Health Strategy*

for Vulnerable Persons Belonging to Ethnic Minorities since its Action Plan ended and new one was not prepared and financed. It is also linked with the amendments in the Health Insurance Act that deteriorated the conditions for the poorest citizens.

The implementation of Health Strategy for Integration continued in a way similar to the previous years. The main developments in 2015 were as follow:

1. Action Plan for implementation of Health Strategy for Integration approved by Council of Ministers on July 27, 2011 envisaged 1091000 BGN (559487 euro) from the state budget for implementation of Health Strategy for 2015. They had to support the work of Mobile cabinets for free gynecological and other examinations, preparatory courses for medical universities and others. Nevertheless, even this modest amount was not fully provided and only part of the activities was implemented.

Although the Action Plan finished in 2015, no efforts were undertaken for preparing new one. Thus since January 2016 no funds are providing for the activities described above.

2. The National Program for AIDS and TB Prevention (it contains components for Roma community) worked in limited scope covering less regions and activities compared to the previous years. The main reason for this was linked with the end of Global fund financing and the lack of national financing ensured. Thus in 2015 the AIDS prevention part continued with savings from the previous years and TB prevention part continued in limited extend.

The National Program had very positive impact in Bulgaria and particularly in Roma community. It not only prevented the key socially significant diseases but also invested in the capacity of NGOs to work in vulnerable communities. The decrease of the National Program could put into menace both strengths.

3. Changes in Public Health Insurance Act were voted by the Parliament in June (coming into force since December 28). They make the re-entry in the health insurance system more difficult increasing the years with paid health insurance fees one should have in order to re-enter the system from 3 to 5 years. Most probably this will affect the poorest citizens (many of whom are Roma) limiting additionally their access to quality health services.

It should be stressed that the citizens with interrupted health insurance status in Bulgaria are between 1 and 2 million people. They cannot use the full range of healthcare services but only the emergency ones. In Roma community this problem is severe: community monitoring carried out by Center Amalipe in 9 municipalities showed that between 54 % and 63 % of Roma women in these municipalities are with interrupted health insurance rights.

The main reasons for the big number of health not-insured people are social ones: the poorest people cannot pay their health insurance fees especially when they are unemployed. The lack of confidence to the health insurance system – widely shared among many citizens – also contributes. It is difficult to expect that the changes in Health Insurance Act will cope with these problems. Most probably the situation will deteriorate additionally.

4. Certain positive developments also occurred in 2015. For example, positive development was that at the end of 2014 and in 2015 financing from the Health component of EEA / Norwegian Grants (managed by Ministry of Health) was provided for Roma Health

Scholarship Program (financed since 2009 by Roma Education Fund and OSF). Nevertheless, many bureaucratic obstacles decreased the quality of the support provided.

Another positive fact was the increased number of health mediators. Nevertheless, it is still much below the needs and mediation is only one of the elements of the efforts for improving the health status of Roma: the other elements are missing

Employment: *The situation in this field did not change in 2015*

No significant initiatives that could raise the employment rate of Roma were implemented in 2015. The main developments were as follow:

1. Human Resources Development OP financed Youth employment and certain subsidized employment programs that reached some Roma beneficiaries among the others. Nevertheless, these mainstream programs were not designed to help the implementation of National Roma Integration Strategy and did not contribute in this direction. The lack of political will for targeted initiatives and for national initiatives (beyond subsidized employment) that could improve the employment rate in Roma community is obvious. No significant advance could be achieved without changing this factor.

2. The number of Roma labor mediators decreased to 56. No will of Ministry of Labor to raise this number and to strengthen the position was marked. Traditionally, the National Employment Plan (implemented with subsidy from the state budget) included the program "Activation of inactive people" which financed the position of Roma labor mediators. The budget in 2015 was increased from 488669 euro (2014) to 655712 euro (2015). Nevertheless, it was not used for employing more Roma labor mediators. Among the newly employed Youth mediators there were few Roma.

Living conditions: *The situation in this field significantly deteriorated in 2015. Demolishment of Roma houses in several municipalities, ethnic clashes and raise of ethnic tensions marked 2015 regarding Roma neighborhoods*

The main developments in this field could be summarized as follow:

1. Several municipalities destroyed illegal Roma houses without ensuring social housing for the vulnerable groups (children, people with disabilities). This started in Garmen and continued in Varna and other municipalities.

The demolishment happened after small criminal conflicts and under strong pressure of ultra-nationalists. Broadly shared anti-Roma stereotypes, lack of public support for Roma integration and upcoming municipal elections formed favorable environment for the demolishment.

As a whole the government did not react properly. The Ministry of Interior and police stopped the clashes and prevented their expanding. At the same time the Ministry of Regional Development did not stop the process of demolishment. The National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues did not react in any way.

European Human Rights Court appeared as the only institution that defends the rights of the vulnerable families and in some of the cases stopped the demolitions. No legislative changes were introduced to apply the recommendations of European Human Rights Court or to solve

the problem with illegal housing in systematic way. This leaves the menace for new demolitions open.

2. The integrated social housing project (supported by Regional Development OP and Human Resources Development OP) that started in 2011-12 in Devnya, Dupnitsa and Vidin was successfully finished although it met significant problems. At the same time the efforts to include new municipalities in 2014-15 failed. The example of Varna when reaction of nationalists combined with lack of strong political will by the side of municipal authorities (that was similar to the case of Burgas) stopped the project is disturbing. This tendency could continue in the other urban municipalities which included social housing in their Integrated Plans for Urban Rehabilitation and Development.

3. Reaction of nationalists made municipal authorities to stop the project for social housing in Varna. There was no response to this disturbing tendency by the Managing Authority of Regional Development OP or the national government.

The lack of political will for targeted initiatives for improving the situation in Roma ghettos is the biggest challenge since decades. Although there is available funding within Regions in Growth OP and partly within Rural Areas Development Program, they would remain unused because authorities at municipal and national level do not initiate activities in Roma neighborhoods.

This challenge is linked with the lack of public support. Obviously, any intervention in this area should be preceded by public awareness and activities for forming supportive public environment and tolerance. It should be also linked with investment in improving the environment in the surrounding areas.

After 2009 the state budget stopped investing in the National Program for Improving the Living Conditions of Roma. That is why the only modest investment during 2015 were the integrated social housing project in Devnya, Vidin and Dupnitsa. The only funds available at present are within Regions in Growth OP (ERDF co-funded program that was named Regional Development OP during the period 2007 - 2013) and partly within Rural Areas Development Program. The funds available are very modest and the commitment of the Managing Authorities (especially Ministry of Agriculture) is problematic. It is necessary to have stronger NGO advocacy and stronger commitment by DG REGIO and DG AGRI for compensating the challenges at national level.

The National Roma Contact Point and the administrative infrastructure for Roma integration

The Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues is the National Roma Contact Point according to NRIS. In 2015 the human resources of NRCP continued to be very limited and much below the needs: only 4 experts. This pre-defined the limited role played by the NRCP: only to prepare reports and to take part in events but not to contribute for the coordination and consultation around NRIS implementation. No one of the experts employed in the NRCP was Roma.

According to its Regulations, the Secretariat serves technically the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues to fulfill its coordination and consulting role. Officially, the National Council is structured at political level: composed by deputy ministers from the key ministries and chaired by Deputy Prime Minister. NGOs are also members of the Council. In reality, deputy ministers seldom participate in the work of the Council: they delegate this task to experts from the respective institutions.

The NCCEII is 'coordination and consultation body' according to art. 1 from its Regulations (approved with Decree of the Council of Ministers). This means that it coordinates the efforts of the institutions of executive power for minority integration and organizes consultation with civil society. Its real responsibilities are limited. The Council approves two annual reports: about the state of inter-ethnic relations and the NRIS implementation: based on contributions from all institutions.

Its Secretariat (that is NRCP) supports the work of the Council and technically facilitates it. In addition, it prepares drafts for presentations, information and positions that Bulgarian government should provide as part of its obligations before UN, CoE, EC.

Besides its official responsibilities, the Council (and its Secretariat) has never effectively played this role because of a set of administrative restrictions and political reasons. There is need of profound institutional reform that is one of the main claims of Roma NGOs

Municipal participation

The NRIS requires all municipalities to prepare annual Municipal Roma Integration Plans. Answering this requirement, during the second half of 2014 and in 2015 more than 160 municipalities approved Municipal Roma Integration Plans 2014 - 2020. The number of Plans 2014 - 2020 was significantly smaller compared to the Plans 2012-2013 (they were 220). The requirement for such a Plan was included in the first targeted calls announced within Science and Education OP and will be included in the call "Integration" within Human Resources Development OP: thus the number of approved Municipal Plans will increase.

The existence of Municipal Roma Integration Plans is a positive sign for political commitment. Nevertheless, it still does not bring added value for implementing the Roma integration policy because of two reasons:

1. Lack of special financing: in most of the cases the Municipal Plans summarized activities without financing or relied only on financing from EU funds and other donors. The engagement of municipal budget was limited.

Most probably this problem could be partly solved with EU financing. Planning financial resources for the implementation of Municipal Roma Integration Plans was the biggest success in 2015. The first two Roma targeted calls announced within Science and Education OP in September 2015, the call "Integration" within Human Resources Development OP (as well as the Roma targeted operations financed by World Bank, Swiss Contribution and EEA Grants) support municipal projects for implementation of Municipal Roma Integration Plans. Nevertheless, in 2015 the call results were not published and the available funds were limited. It should be stressed that the funds planned would not be enough. In most of the cases the amount available per municipality will not exceed 200 000 euro for 2 years. There is no possibility for sustainability and for engaging the state budget.

2. The lack of public support for local Roma integration initiatives is the main challenge, especially in the big cities. Combined with the lack of strong political commitment by the side of municipal authorities, it results in cease of projects (like the social housing project in Varna), ethnic conflicts, demolition of illegal Roma houses, etc. The lack of public support could prevent the implementation of Municipal Roma Integration Plans even when they have financing.

In 2015 several municipalities participated in European initiatives - ROMACT, LERI, etc. In some of them the initiatives failed: for example in Varna ultranationalists stopped social housing project and Roma houses were demolished although the city took part in ROMACT Program

Roma participation and empowerment

The situation in this field slightly improved in 2015 mainly because of the possibilities for Roma NGO representatives to influence the decision-making process through the Monitoring Committees of key operational programs. At the same time the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues continued its deep crises and no efforts for its reform were undertaken.

The main developments in this field could be summarized as follow:

1. The specific mechanism for ensuring Roma participation in the decision-making process, namely the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, did not work and no efforts to re-establish and to make it effective were undertaken by Bulgarian government. The biggest Roma NGOs remained outside this structure after they left it in 2013 and since no response to Roma suggestions for reform was provided.

In January 2015 the Deputy Prime Minister (and Minister on Labor and Social Policy) Ivaylo Kalfin was defined for Chair of NCCEII. As late as December 2015 he did not organize meeting with Roma organizations that proposed reform in the Council and did not start dialogue with them. It should be outlined that the biggest Roma organizations that work at national and regional level (such as Amalipe, Integro, World Without Borders, New Road, LARGO and others) left the Council in 2013 and only relatively small organizations participate in its work. The Council is out of legitimacy and could serve the consultation with Roma civil society. The need of its deep reform is obvious.

2. At the same time, the Monitoring Committees of EU co-funded programs appeared as successful mechanism for empowering Roma organizations to take part in the decisions regarding the use of EU funds, including for Roma integration.

In 2014 Roma NGO representatives were elected as members of the Monitoring Committees of 3 operational programs that are crucial for Roma integration and of the Partnership Agreement. The election procedures were organized by the respective Managing Authorities:

2.1. Human Resources Development OP: Teodora Krumova (Amalipe) was elected for member, Mihajl Mihajlov (New Road Association), Stefan Panayotov (Integro) and Gancho Iliev (World without Borders Association) were elected for deputy members;

2.2. Science and Education for Smart Growth OP: Deyan Kolev (Amalipe) was elected for member, Milena Ilieva (World without Borders Association), Albena Kostadinova (Indi-Roma Association) and Teodora Koleva (Foundation for Social Development and Integration) were elected for deputy members;

2.3. Regions in Growth OP: Lili Makaveeva (Integro) was elected for representative and Daniela Mihajlova (proposed by Amalipe) – for deputy;

2.4. Partnership Agreement: Spaska Petrova (proposed by Amalipe) and Milen Milanov (proposed by Integro) were elected for co-members

In 2015 Roma NGO members of the Monitoring Committees succeeded in advocating for approval of 5 Roma targeted operations within Science and Education OP and 1 Roma targeted operation within Human Resources Development OP. The approved operations included the suggestions of Roma NGOs. They will bring significant financing for diverse set of Roma integration activities involving all stakeholders;

3. The political empowerment at municipal level slowly advanced after the local elections in October 2015. Although there is no available national data, it seems that the number of Roma elected as city councilors increased in many municipalities: because of the introduced "preference choice" possibility and other reasons.

The level of Roma participation is still significantly lower to the share of Roma population and the needs of Roma Integration. Deep reform in the NCCEII is needed. Introducing other mechanisms for ensuring Roma NGO participation in the work of the main institutions of executive power are necessary.

Funding Roma integration

Roma integration has been underfinanced since decades. Although Bulgaria has approved several political documents for Roma integration, their financing was insignificant. Even the National Strategy for Roma integration did change this negative trend. Although the Strategy was approved together with Action Plan, its added value was very limited: 71 out of 120 activities in the Plan were without any financing, the other 49 were backed up with the amount used for them before 2012 and the core financing came from EU and other donor mechanisms.

The year assessed – 2015 – did not bring significant change. The funding allocated or used for NRIS implementation was predominantly from ESF co-funded operational programs, EEA / Norwegian FM and SWISS Contribution as well as from private donors (Trust for Social Achievement and others). The engagement of State budget was insignificant.

At the same time, 2015 brought certain possibilities for more substantial financing and development of Roma integration. Since Human Resources Development OP and Science and Education for Smart Growth OP contain investment priority "Socio-economic integration of marginalized communities such as Roma" and Roma representatives are included in the Monitoring Committees being active and efficient, these programs approved 6 Roma targeted operations in 2015. Two of them were announced in September 2015, the others will be

launched in 2016. Their cumulative amount is more than 73 000 000 euro for the next 2 to 3 years. This will be significantly bigger investment compared to the ones during the previous years. At the same time, the investment planned is significantly smaller to cover the needs of Roma integration policy. It could foster the integration process, to test certain models and even to back up their scaling up. Nevertheless, state budget engagement is necessary for ensuring national-wide investment and sustainability.

In addition, the operations approved in 2015 contain significant weakness: they cover only the so-called “soft measures” (i.e. investment in education, employment, health and social services) but not measures for improving the living conditions and infrastructure. Until now Regions in Growth OP and Rural Areas Development are not supporting Roma integration through targeted operations. The engagement of these two programs is needed to ensure comprehensive multi-funded Roma integration interventions.