

## **Bulgaria**

an analysis of the public discourse on Roma housing

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*This reports aims to illustrate the housing situation of Bulgarian Roma as it is reflected in written sources, mainly reports and media coverage, and to comment on a range of official documents regarding national and local policies that are available for the international public. The paper is produced within the project SPAREX and aims to provide relevant elements for comparing the general situation of Roma housing in some European countries as it is reflected in policy documents and the media in the recent years, including the last updates from the months of 2013.*

Bulgaria shares many features with Romania in terms of relationship among the majority and the minority, the general percentage of Roma within the total population, the policies for improving their situation and many of the discriminatory practices and discourses. They also share the problem of informal migrant Roma camps in France, which led to forced evictions and the subsequent political scandal between the former French president Sarkozy and the European Commissioner on Human Rights, Viviane Reding. Roma related problems are regarded as a major obstacle for both Romania and Bulgaria in order to be integrated in the Schengen zone.

There are a number of structural differences that have to be listed:

- Bulgarian ghettos are much larger. This is the result of the former communist policies.
- The Roma are mostly associated with Muslim faith and related to the Bulgarian Turks so there is an overlap of discrimination policies and attitudes<sup>1</sup> (Vassilev, 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> *Rossen Vassilev, The Roma of Bulgaria: A Pariah Minority in* The Global Review of Ethnopolitics, Vol. 3, no. 2, January 2004, 40-51

- The mobility of Bulgarian Roma is reduced in comparison with the Romanians and slightly differently oriented within European space. For example in France, despite the common perception induced by the media that illegal settlements are a problem related somehow symmetrical to Romania and Bulgaria, only around 5% of the dwellers are of Bulgarian origin. Many more of them would prefer Spain and there is also a number of Bulgarian Roma involved in small trade businesses in Poland, Slovakia or the Czech Republic.
- Anti-Gypsism is more opened and better organised in Bulgaria, the members of Ataka party holding demonstrations against Roma, there are arson attacks (see Plovdiv case) and even a murder case. This is not to say that in Romania there is less violence, it's just to highlight that anti-Roma feelings are more openly expressed and tend to be embedded in the political discourse.

Evictions are frequent and brutal (COHRE) with the prospect to change as a result of the recent order of the European Court of Human Rights to change the law (the Batalova Vodenitsa case). Housing conditions are of a very low standard, according to the latest RAXEN report only 29.8% of Romani dwellings have sewerage, 4.1 % have running warm water, and 10.5 % have indoor toilet.

The legal framework and the national plans follow the general development of the Roma Decade perspective, OSCE recommendations and EU vision. Their application suffers the same failures as in Romania and the rest of East Europe: lack of financing and budgeting, lack of institutions to implement and monitor the plans, strong opposition and harsh criticism from the majority, a visible development of political clientele, inefficiency, etc. In an article published by the Russian newspaper Pravda we can find Boyko Borisov, the Bulgarian prime minister, claiming that “it was the communists who drove the Gypsies in special ghettos where they could live without work and just do nothing. The actual Bulgarian authorities only have to reap the fruit of that for 20 years, he said.” This might be a fact but also an illustration of a common legerity in the discourse practiced by high level politicians in the entire region in regards with the Roma. This easiness in labelling an entire population as lazy and worthless is based on, and further nourishes the societal perception of Roma which is largely negative and didn't change in the last decade (IRBC, 2009). Roma are regarded as lazy and unwilling to work, most of them as part of criminal gangs and their poverty as being not really deep, “people living in a shack but with a Mercedes in front of it”. The ghettos are generally feared by the majority and regarded as “no-go” areas, places where you might be robbed or murdered. This perception is further nurtured by the media who tends to reflect only the negative aspects of life in Romani neighbourhoods. The few positive images are equally stereotypical, small success stories of dedicated people that made a change usually with foreign aid.

The paper mainly is based on material collected on the Internet and divided into x chapters; the first one list the most important policy documents at the national level and then brings in some available examples from the regional and city level; the second chapter is based on a collection of articles and aims to illustrate the themes that are drawing the attention of the Bulgarian media towards the Roma Ghettos; third chapter deals with NGO documents, some of them being political statements, some other research literature whilst in the case of international bodies we have reports that combine, to a various degree, the both. The fourth chapter is an overview of some case studies, including one that might be one of the most important outbreaks in the European eviction jurisprudence, the Batalova Vodenitsa case..

## 1. Policy documents

National level

### 1. National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012 - 2020)

The document opens by stating that it „is a policy framework document, laying down the guidelines for the implementation of the social integration policy of the Roma people”. The introductory part enumerates all the major European documents, lists the principles and defines the way of work of the Strategy. Second chapter is about the situation of the Roma in Bulgaria. This is the way the housing situation is presented:

#### Residential segregation

„ A serious problem facing the Roma is the increasing spatial isolation of their community. The concentration of Roma in isolated neighborhoods has increased during the last fifteen years both in the urban and rural areas. This concentration in separate neighbourhoods usually results in the social isolation of their residents, deterioration of their living conditions, problems with the construction and maintenance of the infrastructure and cleanliness, transport problems and difficulties in service provision. One of the most serious consequences is the deterioration of the opportunities for the young generations to be prepared for involvement in the formal economy, hence the increasing difficulties they encounter in seeking and finding jobs.”

Carefully avoiding the words segregation and ghetto, the paragraph introduces a strong observation about the exclusion process, stating that „the concentration of Roma increased in insolated neighbourhoods” and that this is a recent phenomenon. We will see that there are no provisions to fight this reality – of the formation and raise of segregated areas – other then improving the quality of housing and infrastructure.

#### Overcrowding:

„Data of NSI from the last population and housing census of 2011 shows that the ethnic Bulgarians have an average of housing space of 23.2 m.sq. per person, while the Roma have only 10.6 m.sq.”

Being a policy document there are not enough statistical data but it is to be expected that the situation for many of the inhabitants of poverty neighborhoods is much worse. The paragraph point not really to the situation but to the inequality embedded in it.

#### Exposure to hazard and precarious living conditions

„A significant part of the Roma residing in the cities, inhabit overpopulated neighborhoods, frequently outside the regulated outskirts of the city, located at places

that do not have water and sewer systems, or even if they have ones – they are in a very poor condition, where the electricity supply is quite often done illegally or is nonexistent at all. The rural areas in the country are in general with either underdeveloped sewer systems or none at all, which fact determines the much worse housing conditions of the majority of Turks, Bulgarian Moslems and almost half of the Roma citizens. Two fifths of the Roma still live in houses without water supply, taking water from outside/street taps and wells, three fifths of the Roma houses are not connected to the central sewer system, and four fifths have no bathrooms inside.”

A fair and well supported by figures image of the living conditions of Roma that would apply also to other countries in the region, it also highlights the religious division that seconds the line of economic division in Bulgaria.

Third chapter, the vision is a brief but comprehensive phrase:

„The integration of the Roma and of the Bulgarian citizens in a vulnerable situation, belonging to other ethnic groups, is a pro-active two-way process, aimed at overcoming the existing negative social economic characteristics of these groups and building prosperity of the society.”

The phrase shows clearly the way that Roma are perceived, as having negative characteristics that have to be overcome, a manner of leaving aside the aspects of current discrimination or the historical role of the state. Even in a soft form, the embedded racism and the „blame the victim” game can be perceived in an attitude that is based on the popular idea that Roma are born/raised the way they are and must be civilised. A big question arises from this periphrastic expression on the negative characteristics: do ethnic groups have economic characteristics, or is it that the more powerful groups keep them captive in a minor economic realm? In this respect, the document fails to take into consideration and address structural inequalities. The „two-way process” is the usual way to point at the responsibility of the excluded to participate in the inclusion process.

Housing improvement

*„Operational objective: Improving the housing conditions and of the technical infrastructure*

1. Improving the housing conditions in neighbourhoods with compact Roma population, aimed at ensuring modern housing environment.
2. Providing new plots for house construction allowing deconcentrating (sic) the compact Roma neighbourhoods.
3. Continuing the process of devising cadastre registers to cover the zones with compact Roma population and the newly designated zones for housing construction.

4. Updating/creating detailed spatial development plans of existing and newly designated land plots.
5. Designing and building technical infrastructure – water and sewer networks, streets, public works, etc.
6. Building and providing social housing.
7. Ensuring appropriate housing for Roma persons moved out of illegally occupied houses or evacuated in case of danger for their safety and health.
8. Improving and closing the lapses in the housing legislation.
9. Building/reconstructing the social infrastructure for the purposes of education, culture, etc.
10. Forming an attitude of responsibility and diligence in the Roma people when giving them the right to use real estate. Attracting NGOs and prominent local community leaders in creating modern patterns of behaviour.

The measures for achievement of the objectives are laid down in the Action Plan for implementation of the Strategy.”

Desegregation is here „deconcentration”, not exactly an equivalent, presumably more of an attempt to lower the density of the areas with no goal to create social and ethnical mix. The general vision of all official documents is that the Roma are poor and vulnerable, building though equivalence between the two categories and so ethnicising poverty. There is a strong accent on urban regulations, which is an indication of the lack of current policies and practices to legalize the informality cases, a common attitude of all central authorities in the region, unwilling to operate major changes in the legislation and leaving the problem to local authorities to be solved within the current framework. The problem is that the existing regulations are always in favour of demolishing informal settlements. Building social houses is a logical attempt to regain the control of the state over a part of the housing stock, Bulgaria being one of the top countries in terms of private ownership at around 97%. An interesting observation is that the Bulgarian media, Romanian media likewise, is claiming that Bulgaria has the highest percentage of private housing in the world. Just browsing through different sources we can find Romania, Albania, Lithuania or Estonia fighting for the same position. Whatever the truth is, it shows that the disappearance of social housing in these countries is perceived as a major problem and, for some, even as a tragedy.

The tenth point is an illustration of a colonial attitude: „Forming an attitude of responsibility and diligence in the Roma people when giving them the right to use real estate.” is not about equal opportunity, housing rights of the poor or access to property but about again about the charity of the more powerful and civilised figure that detains „modern patterns of behaviour”. We should acknowledge the fact that the interwar

Bulgarian Constitution was not giving the Roma the right to have properties and this „giving them the right to use real estate” is precisely a reminder of that period.

## **2. National Action Plan Roma Inclusion Decade 2005-2015**

The Bulgarian action plan regarding Roma follows the general EU framework that divides the issues that have to be addresses into four chapters: health, education, housing and employment. The Roma Decade meetings managed somehow to homogenise the language and the declared goals of the member states but produced little progress in practical terms. The plan is a sorrow exercise in which all the member states of the Decade had to fill in a template that would connect the goals of the Decade with the actors of change, with a budget, a timeframe and list of indicators that would help controlling the progress. What makes it a purely rhetorical exercise is the lack of money in the budget line. With the notable exception of several mobile healthcare units (paraclinic equipment), actually an expression of the collapse of the main healthcare system, which figures with some five million Euros and was completed between 2006-2008, of a primary schools textbook delivery that costs 1,14 millions and of a business training programme of 220.000 E (2003-2006) that took place within a Phare Project Urbanisation and Social Development of areas with disadvantaged minority populations, the rest of the table is blank, with some rare exceptions of financial support for minor programmes in the range of 1000 to 3000 E. Of course, it can be argued that the money will be mentioned only after the various national and local budget lines are approved by law but nevertheless, this shows the real limits of the political will. The term “urbanisation” itself is an eponym of development that further addresses underdevelopment of minorities living in rural areas, a condition of structural disadvantage that is, within a conservative political framework, considered a natural condition that can only be surpassed by imposing a top-down development scheme.

The tree table does not lack a synthetic quality, being an illustration of some former policy failures like activity “1.2.3. Desegregation of the detached kindergartens and schools through: Moving the children out of the Roma quarters and closing the segregated schools and kindergartens. The necessary transportation will be provided taking into consideration the parents’ preferences.” which is a reparatory measure that tries to tackle the effects of the former choices for an ethnical oriented education. With the new EU constrains now arrives the need to develop a „timetable for desegregation of schools and kindergartens in the detached Roma quarters.” Acknowledging the effects of ghettoisation, though in an indirect form is a general step forward produced by the Decade.

Another ghetto related problem, this time found in the health section can be spotted under 1.1.3. „Provision of possibilities for ambulance access to houses of women in labour for their timely transportation to the specialized medical institution.” This

further shows that reducing infant mortality is closely related to finding a way to deal with spatial segregation. Further on, there is a following measure aiming at buying ambulances with „high road abilities”. The syntagm „detached Roma neighbourhoods” is frequent, like in 4.1.2. „Organization and conduct of health and informational events at **detached Roma quarters** on specific issues.”

The housing area plan aims at improving living conditions by creating a better cooperation of the state authorities, national and local, with Roma NGO’s, keeping everybody informed about the plan that further consist of „Implementation of information and popularization programs for the opportunities for access to houses or/and housing credit among the Roma population” and „Providing of employment opportunities for Roma – short and long-term”. All housing policie issues are mainstreamed like in goal 1 „1.Providing of opportunities for access to houses *in compliance with the state standards* in areas with predominant Roma population” which indicates no flexibility in creating any sort of alternative dwelling solutions, eventually inspired from the self-built environments and adressing specific needs of large families with little education and low income.

Legalizing informal settlements can be found under 1.3.2. „Finding of solutions to the land ownership and illegal construction issues in areas with high concentration of Roma population based on the amendments in the respective legislation.” A formula that neither describes properly the problem, nor indicates a possible solution but shows a general and presumably positive attitude that can only be materialised under the condition that the laws will change. We can fairly interpret it as a *no* to the land ownership and urban regulation problem of the Roma ghettos. There is no budget indication in the housing section, the state budget being expected to cover the actions in which Roma will know how to access credits that together with the „information and educational campaigns among the Roma population on the opportunities for access to good quality houses” would improve their living conditions.

Overall, we can assess that this form of the Decade plan is a prudent rhetorical exercise aiming at finding discursive formulas that are as less binding as possible in a structure that, leaving aside the fact that is formally expressed as a tree table, is also non hierarchical in the respect that is a mix of minor and secondary problems that are to be addressed only within the current legal and administrative framework.

### **3. National Programme for Improving the Housing Conditions of the Roma in Bulgaria (2005-2015)**

The National Programme is a complex document that resulted from a cooperation of numerous central institutions and NGO’s as a follow up of different political documents, mainly the Roma Decade initiative, and following general principles like

cost-effectiveness, equal access and a general participatory approach. The institution in charge is the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues.

The analysis is research based (probably UNDP) and provides an overview of the housing situation in Bulgaria and of the situation and needs of Roma communities and families.

„During the last 15 years the living conditions of increased number of Roma have permanently deteriorated. The prevailing part of the buildings has been constructed with available materials, illegally, in violation of the organizational plans (where such plans exist), the street network and the public utility infrastructure are in bad condition and this turns the Roma districts in ghettos. The overcrowded dwellings and the increase of the density of the population put a pressure on the servicing systems, which themselves are insufficient and provide services to only 46 % of the population in the Roma districts, and this entails the bad hygiene conditions and health risks for the population, as well as social tension.”

„Overcrowded dwellings in case of extended households (such households, where families from several generations live together) cause extremely high social stress. The families living together declare need in separate housing for each family. Young Roma families have especially great need in separate housing. Many of the new families prefer living separately from the big household. The studies show that about 25% of the dwellings in the Roma districts are illegal. There are no updated cadastral maps with precise registration of the lots in the Roma districts.”

The plan has a number of investment measures, including the construction of 30.000 social dwellings, support measures, proposals for the amendment of the legislation and detailed budgeting

#### **4. Framework Programme For Integration Of Roma In The Bulgarian Society (2010-2020)**

The Framework is a document that is based on a different philosophy than the others, one in which discrimination is highlighted and general proposals are addressed. It is unclear what role does it have in relationship with the other documents, it is short paper, obviously originating from the civil society, using the human rights vocabulary and exposing a critical attitude towards the existing situation.

According to Rumyan Russinov in an article published by ERRC<sup>2</sup> „On April 7, 1999, representatives of the Romani community signed an agreement with the Bulgarian government over the Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.errc.org/article/the-bulgarian-framework-programme-for-equal-integration-of-roma-participation-in-the-policy-making-process/1729>

Bulgarian Society. The agreement was endorsed by more than 70 Romani organisations throughout the country and by the then-Chair of the governmental National Council for the Ethnic and Demographic Issues and the Vice Prime Minister of Bulgaria. Several weeks after this agreement, on April 22, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers adopted the Framework Programme by resolution.

The programme addresses the following housing issues:

**Land distribution** It is necessary that the procedure becomes simplified and that the state activates and stimulates the process of acquisition of land from the state and municipal agricultural land distribution funds by Roma with little or no property, as this process is not related to the receiving of social welfare. The appropriate legal framework should be created for the inscription of Roma in the existing cooperatives as well as for the creation of independent Roma cooperatives.

**Territorial structure of the Roma neighborhoods** The separated Roma neighborhoods, most of which are not in the respective city plans and do not have adequate infrastructure, are one of the most serious socio-economic problems of the community.

It is necessary to make amendments to the Territorial Development Act in order to abolish the sophisticated bureaucratic procedure of house legalization. Then, it is urgent to start legalizing the illegal construction on the basis of the principle of minimum interference with the existing situation. The goal is to legalize a large part of the illegal construction in its existing forms and amounts and to provide owners with ownership documents within the shortest possible terms. Together with this, the housing resources should be improved, not so much by building expensive new houses but through different forms of support (by financial credit, materials, land spots etc.) to the people who desire to improve their housing conditions.

For the purposes of achieving larger variety in the opportunities for housing for Roma people, it is appropriate to create effective financial mechanisms in the municipal budgets for relocation of Roma families through the use of additional financial resources and control over the existing ones.

The proposals are by far better balanced and properly ranked than in the National Action Plan.

#### **5. Interagency Working Group for Resource Provision of Roma Integration with EU funds<sup>3</sup>**

The newly established body that wears its mission statement on its sleeve is an NGO initiative that will help the Government in the implementation of the Action Plan.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://amalipe.com/index.php?nav=news&id=1275&lang=2>

„By Order R-193/02.08.2012 of the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov Interagency Working Group for Resource Provision of Roma Integration with EU funds is established. The group is chaired by the Minister on management of EU funds Tomislav Donchev. It involves the heads of the Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies of OP "Human Resources Development", OP "Regional Development" and Rural Areas Development Programme as well as representatives of organizations working on Roma integration. The latter were determined following the procedure of choice, held in May and include: Deyan Kolev (Amalipe) Gancho Iliev ("World Without Borders") Rumyan Sechkov (Foundation SEGA) Spaska Mikhailova (Association "New Road"), Dr. Stefan Panayotov (Foundation "Health of the Roma"), Prof. Ivailo Turnev (Foundation "Health problems of minorities") and Stella Kostova (Roma Academy of Culture and Education). Deputies are Dimitar Dimitrov, Teodora Koleva, Nikolay Kirilov, Julia Grigorova and Petya Ivanova.

The Interdepartmental Working Group has the obligation to plan resourced and integrated interventions to implement policies for Roma and the National Strategy for Roma Integration. It will also facilitate coordination of integrated interventions that involve two or more programs. The group will develop an opinion on the financial resources that is needed for the process of Roma integration in the period 2014 - 2020.

The creation of the Interagency Group on the political level to ensure Roma integration was proposed by Amalipe, "World Without Borders", The "New Road" Foundation "Roma - Lom" and Roma Academy of Culture and Education in October 2011 after series of regional conferences and meetings in connection with the preparation of the National Roma Strategy. Subsequently, this request was included in the Action Plan to the National Strategy for Roma Integration. ”

#### **6. National Programme for Improving the Living Conditions of Disadvantaged Ethnic Minorities in Urban Areas<sup>4</sup> (UNDP)**

Even though the material can be classified as a report it is the output of a „policy and programming advisory service undertaken by UNDP Bulgaria for the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria over the period from November 2004 to February 2005” therefore it is a part of a national level policy. The four chapters and eight annexes are describing the situation, introducing general principles of intervention and a methodology and listing statistics, legal provisions and examples. The methodology has a strong focus on financial issues, aims to target housing rather than going straight for the integrated approach (which is not disconsidered but seen as improbable because of the scale of the issues) and aims primarily for improving living conditions rather than for planning new residential areas.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.undp.bg/publications.php?id=1498>

## 1.2 Regional level

### Sliven<sup>5</sup>

The strategy addresses an entire region that has a strong presence of minorities, mainly Turks and Roma.

„A special attention should be paid to the urgent need of territorial and spatial-planning sketches of the territories densely populated with Roma /Sliven, Nova Zagora, Tvarditsa, Shivachevo, etc./ The urban development projecting of these territories is not possible without changing the legislature in the sphere of spatial planning and development and creating specific norms and regulations which would consider the character of dwelling and building of the residential areas with Roma population.”

It is again a stress on the otherness of Roma, a call for creating a different environment for different people.

Some ideas are also listed under *Measure 1.2.3.2 Integrating the Roma population and other socially excluded minorities*;

„The integration of the Roma population is demanded not only in pursuance of the requirements of the EU membership criteria (the so called Copenhagen criteria) but also because of the demographic characteristic of Sliven district. That part of our society continues living in poverty, which considerably exceeds the poverty rate in the country, often in isolated residential areas with poor living condition; the illiteracy rate is extremely high among them as well as the unemployment rate. The consequences are: illiteracy, lack of rudimentary administrative and general knowledge, low qualification, poor participation at the labour market, social assistance benefits dependency, lack of knowledge on family planning, withdrawal within the group and finding ways to survive which are often not complying with the legal and commonly accepted rules of behaviour.”

The description of the results of segregation is contradictory to the first idea, that of developing specific dwelling strategies for Roma residential areas. The measure ends with a list of some possible activities out of which two are housing related issues:

- Giving land to the landless ethnic minority families;
- Improving the living conditions in the settlements and residential areas, inhabited by ethnic minority population;

Like usual, the only integration tool that is taken into consideration by strategists is education. There is a lack of connection between the analysis of the consequences of spatial segregation and the idea of planning for ethnically inhabited areas.

Further on there is *Specific objective 2.2 To develop a quality settlement environment guaranteeing a sustainable social and economic growth and worthy living standards* which mainly and explicitly addresses the Roma.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.sliven.government.bg/doc/EN\\_Strategy\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.sliven.government.bg/doc/EN_Strategy_Summary.pdf)

„Priority 2.2.1 Improving the urban surroundings

The lay-out plans of the settlements are obsolete and to a large extent outdated due to the restitution and privatization processes. The public buildings in the towns and villages are in poor condition. The industrial zones in the towns need new planning decisions. There are many illegal premises in the residential areas, inhabited by Roma population, which violate the street planning regulations and do not correspond to the urban development norms and requirements. That produces a number of obstacles for building the infrastructure in these areas. The wide reach of the accumulated problems in the urban areas determines the diverse measures that could be undertaken to solve them.

Measure 2.2.1.1 Working out urban development plans and cadastre plans of the urban territories

The vicious practice of making modifications of the obsolete existing plans will produce serious problems to the management of processes of the populated territories. The possible urgent activities in this sphere are:

- Working out a general urban development plan of the town of Sliven and the "Izgreve" settlement;
- Working out a street regulation plan of the "Izgreve" settlement /the Eastern exurb of the town of Sliven;
- Working out detailed urban development plans; Working out specialized cadastre maps /underground cadastre/;
- Working out detailed urban development plans for areas, inhabited mainly by the Roma population;
- Studying the vacant military sites with the purpose of changing their status.

There is no mention about one of the largest ghettos in Europe, Nadejda, inhabited by some 20000 Roma living in a squalid, overcrowded area.

### 1.3 Local level

#### Sofia

#### **Municipal Strategy Within The Decade Of Roma Inclusion In Sofia 2007 – 2013<sup>6</sup>**

The 44 pages document developed in partnership with 16 nongovernmental organisation starts its analysis with housing, and with a strong statement about the ghettos:

„ It is traditional for the Romany people to settle in the outskirts of the towns and villages. The naturally formed neighborhoods soon become densely populated ghettos

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[http://www.sofia.bg/en/display.asp?ime=STRATEGY\\_ROMA&title=STRATEGY%20ROMA%20IN%20SOFIA%202007%20%96%202013&pathtitle=%C0%EA%F2%F3%E0%EB%ED%E0%20%E8%ED%F4%EE%F0%EC%E0%F6%E8%FF](http://www.sofia.bg/en/display.asp?ime=STRATEGY_ROMA&title=STRATEGY%20ROMA%20IN%20SOFIA%202007%20%96%202013&pathtitle=%C0%EA%F2%F3%E0%EB%ED%E0%20%E8%ED%F4%EE%F0%EC%E0%F6%E8%FF)

without any infrastructure and without normal living conditions. The high rate of unemployment is the cause for many people to live below the poverty line. The Roma minority is the most marginalized group in Bulgarian society which also takes the least part in public life. It has limited access to the national, social, economic, and political resources for development which leads to the exclusion of the Roma community from public life.”

The assemblage of data and the variety of styles across the strategy shows a collaborative work of the NGO’s. The document follows a normal administrative scheme for a municipality of this size listing the departments in charge and the procedures for implementation and monitoring.

### **Sliven**

There is absolutely nothing in English on the City Hall website that would even indicate that a Roma community exists in the city and there are no plans related to the area of Nadejda, where 20.000 people live in substandard conditions.

### **Pazardzhik**

There is site called Izgrev (different from Sliven), that benefited in 1998 from a Pilot project “*Architectural urban development solution for poor citizens in Fakulteta - Sofia and Izgrev - of Pazardzhik*”, financed by OSF and implemented by the team of “Habitat for Everyone” Foundation.

## 2. Media

Various titles related to Roma housing issues published by Sofia Press Agency (Novinite), Pravda and Capital Bg.

### 1. Roma Families Evicted in Bulgaria's Haskovo

The article reports on five Roma families evicted after failing to pay the rent for the last 17 years. The largest amount was 3424 leva (1600E) and the total was 8000 leva. The article is just a note and a picture of poorly dressed people removing a worn mattress.

### 2. Scandal Breaks upon Deported Roma Arrival in Bulgaria's Varna

The story of an incident in which a taxi driver accused a recently returned Roma woman of stealing his wallet, later apologised realising he left his wallet at a gas station. The woman was just removed from another taxi because of having too many luggage.

### 3. Sofia City Hall Demolishes Illegal Roma Slum

A note on the demolition of Lyiulin, a place from where 76 families were moved to municipal housing while some others were „sent back to their hometowns”.

### 4. Roma Kids Set Ghetto on Fire in Bulgaria's Sofia

The children, named arsonists by the author, live in Orlandovtsi neighborhood in Sofia and „The fire fighters managed to stop the fire right before it engulfed the shantytown populated by the enormous Roma extended families inhabiting them.”

### 5. Police Officers Attacked amidst Brawl in Bulgarian Roma Ghetto

The report is about a violent incident that took place in "Iztok 2", the Roma-populated quarter of Dimitrovgrad. Four men were arrested and the article describes their acts of violence and mentions that they resisted the arrest and had criminal records.

### 6. 'Peaceful' Protest Leader Busted for Beating 2 Roma in Bulgaria

This is one of the last stages of the famous Katunitsa conflict, started with a killing of a 19 years old Bulgarian, followed by the burning of several Romani houses, the local conflict being about the beating of two Roma and by demonstrations and unrest. The article opens with a picture and its caption: „Residents of the Roma quarter of Predela in the southwestern city of Blagoevgrad pictured armed with axes and sticks Wednesday night, trying to avenge the beating of two Roma.” There article is actually about the beating of two Bulgarians by a Romani activist but the prosecutors refuse to take into account a revenge and claim pure hooliganism as the main cause.

### 7. NGO Advises Sofia Mayor against Demolishing Roma Ghettos

The NGO is the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and the article reproduces several statements in which Krasimir Kanev is asking the Mayor „**to abstain from demolishing Roma ghettos at random**”

There are few comments but they are typical to the opponents of Roam policies. This is a reaction from a similar article against Amnesty International’s comments on the announcement of the mayor that the slums of Sofia will be demolished.

Author: [Gleeky](#), 26 Jul 2012 12:39:02  
Bulgaria's Sofia Moves to Get Rid of Illegal Roma Squatters

Maybe Amnesty would like to use some of the £51million they made last year to re-house this "poor" oppressed minority - or do they just whinge about what others aren't doing? NIMBY, eh? ;)

#### 8. Bulgaria: Man dies as result of bombing of Euroroma office

The man was a candidate in the municipal elections in Sandanski, „the first town in history to have elected a 100 % Romani town council.” Four young people, belonging to a nationalist group were arrested.

#### 9. French Police Break Up Roma Camp in Villeurbanne

Roma women, smoking and picking their nose, surrounded by a lot of children illustrate the story from, Villeurbanne, a satellite of Lyon, where 80 people have been removed by the police. The history of their removal from other places in the city is mentioned without comments. The story is part of a series of articles related to the case of Bulgarian Roma in France

#### 10. Bulgarian gypsies: Rubbish for Europe<sup>7</sup>

The Russian newspaper Pravda has a constant interest in reflecting the situation in Bulgaria. This article is about the Katunitsa incident:

„The riots in Katunitsa continued for two days. The local residents gathered near the house of the Roma baron; up to 3,000 football fans from Plovdiv arrived in the village to help them. The people would set his cars ablaze and smash windows in other gypsy houses. The people had only one requirement. They wanted all gypsies to leave the village immediately. Three people were killed in the riots, several others were injured. Up to 800 people took direct participation in the pogroms; approximately 120 were arrested.”

„ Alexander Safonov, an expert for Bulgaria, a historian, told Pravda.Ru that...  
"The demographic problem in Bulgaria is extremely serious. One may say that Bulgaria is becoming extinct very fast. Bulgarian families usually have one child.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://english.pravda.ru/hotspots/conflicts/26-09-2011/119158-bulgaria\\_roma\\_gypsies-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/hotspots/conflicts/26-09-2011/119158-bulgaria_roma_gypsies-0/)

Turkish families have two or three children. The children in gypsy families are very hard to count. The country is simply not prepared for such a fast change of national balance.”

#### 11. Bulgarian Roma Ghetto's Water Supply Cut Off over Unpaid Bills

„Employees of a utility in the north-eastern Bulgarian city of Shumen have started to cut off the water supply of the local Roma ghetto, "Byalata Prast" ("White Soil"), because of the unpaid bills of its residents.”

Another short article that depicts the situation in the area, linking the situation with the unemployment people have to face.

#### 12. Fire Destroys Homes in Bulgarian Roma Ghetto

„Several homes burned down in the Roma ghetto in the southwestern Bulgarian city of Blagoevgrad, a shantytown with makeshift houses.” says the first phrase of the article but the picture above shows a typically normal mahala in the Balkans with some firefighters and a crowd near some regular houses. The article is sympathetic to the life conditions of Roma, deploring the ones who make a living by working in the garbage pit and providing a link to a videoreportage on the topic here.

### **Conclusions**

As the main news agency in Bulgaria, Novinite, the main provider for our examples, complies to international standards in regards with the sobriety of description and language. The local media is a different story, having a main focus on the rich Roma and criminal activities of the so called „Roma clans” and less on poverty and discrimination. Likewise the Romanian press, the Bulgarian media is an active contributor to the imposition of stereotypes. The comments that accompany the article published by the online editions are often discriminatory, sometimes offensive towards Roma and their peers.

### **3. NGO documents / Literature / Research papers / Reports**

1. Informing Policy Development on Roma Inclusion in Bulgaria and Slovakia  
Stocktaking of Good Practices with Roma Inclusion Interventions (OSI, June 2011)

Assuming the tasks of a body that tries to play a major political role is what distinguishes this late version of OSI actions in regards with Roma. In this respect they are part of the „good practices” recent trend that tries to build up in a positive manner on some of the results of the last years’ programmes. The study finds two types of practices, a set that can be reproduced on a large scale and others that are particular to a certain place. The first intervention presented is that from

Kyustendil, the construction of 27 single family houses build over a period of eight years.

„When selecting the newcomers, there prevails the opinion that not necessarily the most marginalized families are most suitable for accommodation in the new homes, but those who are more likely to follow the rules, i.e. to pay the rental regularly and to protect the property. This is one of the major limitations of the practice, which doesn't reach (and has no ambition to reach) to the most vulnerable ones.”

The analysis is fair and takes into consideration other shortcomings and limitations of the case. The document follows the general domain division scheme: housing, employment, health and education.

## 2. Review of the National Roma Strategy of Bulgaria (Integro, 2012)

This is an expert analysis of the National Integration Strategy for Roma done by Integro, a grassroots association of Roma NGO's working in the field of community development. A detailed overview of the Strategy with a list of shortcomings and very precise conclusions

The paper finds that the nongovernmental organisations role is more or less decorative:

„These mechanisms for participation of the civil organizations in the implementation of the Strategy assigned mainly consultative/advisory functions. They do not provide the NGOs with real powers for decision-making, monitoring and control of the implementation. On the other hand the participation of the NGOs in the NCCEII is not provided with resources and is not financially secured.”

and that the local authorities were not consulted properly during the elaboration of the Strategy:

„The level of involvement of the local authorities in the process of developing the Strategy and the Action plan was minimal and the Strategy was practically developed without their participation, indeed.”

## 3. ERRC vs. Bulgaria

“On 18 October 2006 the Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights delivered a decision on the merits of a complaint against Bulgaria brought by the European Roma Rights centre, a non-governmental organisation. The Committee found, *inter alia*, that “the lack of legal security of tenure and the non-respect of the conditions accompanying eviction of Roma families from dwellings unlawfully occupied by them constitute[d] a violation of Article 16 of the Revised European Social Charter, taken together with Article E”. Article 16 concerns the right of families to “appropriate social, legal and economic protection” and Article E prohibits discrimination in the enjoyment of the rights set forth in the Charter.

...To reach its conclusion, the Committee found that the Bulgarian legislation allowing the legalisation of illegal constructions set conditions “too stringent to be useful in redressing the particularly urgent situation of the housing of Roma families”, a situation recognised by the Bulgarian Government. The Committee also considered that the authorities had tolerated the unlawful Roma settlements for long periods and were accordingly obliged to carefully balance town planning measures against “the right to housing and its corollary of not making individual[s] homeless”. The Committee further found that by failing to take into consideration the specificity of the living conditions of Roma and strictly applying the rules on legalisation of buildings to them, Bulgaria had discriminated against Roma families, whose situation differed not least as a consequence of State non-intervention over a certain period. Similarly, there was discrimination on account of the authorities’ failure to take into account that Roma families ran a higher risk of eviction, and the authorities’ failure systematically to find alternative accommodation for the evicted families.

75. On 5 September 2007 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution in the case in which it noted, *inter alia*, the Bulgarian delegation’s statement before it that Bulgaria intended to amend the Territorial Planning Act to allow for easier legalising of existing buildings and construction of social housing.

76. In its 2005 Recommendation on improving the housing conditions of Roma the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe called upon member States, *inter alia*, to use proportionate response to illegal Roma settlements and seek, where possible, solutions acceptable for all parties. Also, eviction measures should include consultation with the community or individual concerned, reasonable notice, provision of information, a guarantee that the eviction will be carried out in a reasonable manner and alternative housing measures. As to daily life in existing settlements, the authorities should provide the same level of services as to other groups of the population and should, beyond that, promote better management including adequate management of neighbourhood conflicts. Housing policies should be tailored to the specific situations of the Roma communities.”

#### 4. Periodic Review Concerning Bulgaria (COHRE and EOA, 2010)

The full title is „Written Comments of the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) and the Equal Opportunities Association to the Human Rights Committee’s Country Report Task Force at the Committee’s 100th Session on the occasion of the Periodic Review of Bulgaria” and after a general introduction about the historical conditions that led to the lack of property rights in Bulgaria there is a description of the cases of forced eviction in Bourgas and Peshtera. Following the general style of diplomatic documents

There is another report<sup>8</sup>, very similar to the first, issued by the same organisations.

#### 5. Review of EU Framework National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) OSI

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cohre.org/news/documents/bulgaria-submission-to-the-un-universal-periodic-review>

6. Policies Toward the Roma in Bulgaria (National Deliberative Poll, James Fishkin)

„Close to 400 thousand people live in the urban ghettos or, as we are used to call them, “gypsy slums”. These are large, separated neighborhoods with overpopulated shanties, without sewage system, running water, and electricity. The streets are unpaved, the houses often do not have an exit to a street, and there is no street lighting and telephone network. In the past 15 years due to internal migration of Roma from the poor rural regions to the bigger cities the phenomenon of “a ghetto within the ghetto” has emerged. About three fourths of those who live in the ghetto, however, have never left their place of birth.”

### 3.4 Reports

There are a large number of reports issued by various international bodies that mention the situation of housing in Bulgaria, many of them written in the diplomatic idiom, a language of internal use that self-reproduces and multiplies by inseminating smaller NGO bodies over years. From UNCHR<sup>9</sup> as a publisher for the Refugee Board of Canada to the Council of Europe and the Fundamental Rights Agency we can find an array of reports that would start with a very similar introduction about Roma in Bulgaria and then elaborate on a limited number of cases in order to introduce recommendations to the political bodies they address or to the member states that are the subject of the report. The language is highly standardised and the reports are only relevant as a series that builds a framework of understanding in time and also monitors the progress (or lack of it) in regards with a subject matter.

1. Report on Bulgaria, ECRI (European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance)
2. Country Report on Human Rights Practice for 2011 – Bulgaria, US Bureau of Democracy
3. Bulgaria: Situation of Roma, including access to employment, housing, health care, and education; state efforts to improve the conditions of Roma (2009-September 2012) and Responses to Information Requests (RIRs) Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2009
4. Fundamental Rights Agency Survey 2011
5. The Housing Situation of Roma Communities: Regional Roma Survey 2011 UNDP<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&category=&publisher=&type=&coi=BGR&rid=4562d8b62&docid=50a9eea32&skip=0>

<sup>10</sup> Perić, Tatjana. (2012). The Housing Situation of Roma Communities: Regional Roma Survey 2011. Roma Inclusion Working Papers. Bratislava: United Nations Development Programme.

6. Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, UN, OHCHR Human Rights Council, Raquel Rolnik 2012.

The case of *Yordanova and others vs. Bulgaria*<sup>11</sup> at the European Court of Human Rights is cited in the report in regards with the obligation to confer legal security of tenure, of protection against forced evictions and of the prevention of illegal evictions. The court recommended that the measures should be “proportional”. In the urban planning section the existing policies that have an impact on tenure security are based, among others, on the example of the Bulgarian moratorium on adverse possession of public land preventing Roma from legalizing their homes.

#### **4. Case studies**

1. Kyustendil – houses built by ADRA Foundation

The case that was chosen by OSI<sup>12</sup> as a good practice example consists of 27 houses realised during eight years, with the voluntary work of the beneficiaries in a neo-protestant community.

„ The selected newcomers are obliged to participate with their own labour when constructing the houses. The Neighbourhood council is committed to supervise also for the regular payment of the rental and protection of the buildings. The community pressure to “observe the rules” is strong, as evidenced by the fact that there are families who are forced to leave the inhabited house due to breach of the agreed conditions. ADRA Foundation strives to minimize these risks, while continuing to provide comprehensive support by various forms to the accommodated families.”

2. Batalova Vodenitsa (Sofia) – an attempt to evict an old slum sanctioned by the European Court for Human Rights

The case of *Batalova Vodenitsa*, a neighbourhood of Sofia that was threatened to be evicted starting with 2005 was judged by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012 and contains, besides the attempted eviction episode, also a thorough description of the history and state of the Roma settlement itself. The judges gave a special attention to the process of formation of the ghetto placing it into a more general framework that includes neighbourhoods’ complaints, public declarations, media coverage and legislative elements. In this respect, the document issued by the court is not only a juridical decision

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<sup>11</sup> On 24 April 2012 ECHR issued a final decision in relation with an eviction order from 2005 issued by Sophia Municipality in an attempt to clear the Roma neighbourhood of Batalova Vodenitsa. The document is to be found at [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-110449#{"itemid":\["001-110449"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-110449#{).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.osf.bg/downloads/File/2011\\_New/Good%20Practices%20Leaflet%202011%20EN.pdf](http://www.osf.bg/downloads/File/2011_New/Good%20Practices%20Leaflet%202011%20EN.pdf)

but also a fairly elaborated piece of social research and highlights some elements of discourse analysis in itself.

Thus, we find out about the community that: „They describe themselves as being of Roma origin. Unlike some other European countries, where the Roma often have an itinerant way of life, in Bulgaria, at least since the 1960s, the great majority of the Roma live a settled life. Typically, Bulgarian towns feature one or more predominantly Roma neighbourhoods in non-central areas. Some of the applicants or their parents and in some cases their grand-parents moved to Batalova Vodenitsa at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s. Others are more recent arrivals who settled there in the 1990s. In the 1960s land in the neighbourhood in question was expropriated by the State and cleared in the context of the authorities' housing construction policy. A number of blocks of flats were constructed there, but the plots currently inhabited by the applicants remained vacant, having been earmarked for a green area, which was never landscaped. The applicants' families built their homes on State land without any authorisation. The area thus gradually developed into a small Roma settlement. It appears that between 200 and 300 persons live there. Most of the buildings are single-storey houses. There is no sewage or plumbing. The inhabitants use water from two public fountains. Most applicants' registered addresses are at their homes in Batalova Vodenitsa. Many of them are registered at one and the same address although they live in separate buildings which do not figure on any official area plan. Most of the applicants live in their houses with their families, including young children or grandchildren. The applicants never sought to regularise the buildings they had constructed. This was in principle possible through applications for building permits and planning approval. According to the applicants, making such applications was difficult for them as they are poor and live their lives in the Roma community, isolated from the rest of society. It is undisputed by the parties that the applicants' homes do not meet the basic requirements of the relevant construction and safety regulations.”

It is also mentioned that the area is referred to as „ghetto” in the media and that: „Most complaints against the Roma inhabitants of Batalova Vodenitsa concerned sanitary risks and repulsive odours caused by the absence of sewage and the fact that the inhabitants kept animals (allegedly including sheep, pigs, hens and horses). Also, many non-Roma residents of the area believed that the Roma inhabitants were responsible for numerous offences, including physical assault, theft and damage to public and private property. The protesters also resented on aesthetic grounds the presence of unsightly shanty houses in the area.”

The eviction is described as a process that was initiated in the year 2000 and started as a legal procedure in 2005, then: „As a result of political pressure, mainly from members of the European Parliament, the authorities did not proceed with the eviction.” The political statements, media declarations and administrative actions are meticulously registered, also we find that, „Information about intentions to resettle the Batalova

Vodenitsa unlawful residents have met with strong opposition from inhabitants of neighbourhoods where such relocation was envisaged. It appears that no viable resettlement plan has ever been elaborated.”

The social and ethnical tensions are described by the Government using typical keywords as „urgent” or set phrases like “they should return to their native places”, that are attributed to the non-Roma inhabitants that are complaining “that the Roma disposed of their waste in various places, thus littering the area, kept animals, dried their laundry by hanging it out for everyone to see, engaged in stealing and disorderly and aggressive behaviour, drank and used drugs.” This common description can be found in numerous other cases around South-East European countries.

After summarizing the legal provisions of the domestic law, the general recommendations of the EC and the case of *ERRC vs. Bulgaria* the court judges the events in the light of inhuman and degrading treatment (Article 3) and of the violation of the right to respect for their homes (Article 8), lack of proportionality (Article 13) and discriminatory removal (Article 14).

After The Court describes in brief the case through a description of the actors through their typified discourses:

„The applicants alleged in essence that the removal order did not pursue a legitimate aim but was intended to benefit a private entrepreneur and to satisfy racist demands to free the area of an unwanted Roma settlement. The Government’s position was that the aim of the measure was to recover illegally occupied municipal land, realise plans for urban development and put an end to a situation involving safety and health risks which had given rise to complaints.”