

# **FRAMEWORK PROGRAM FOR EQUAL INTEGRATION OF ROMA IN BULGARIAN SOCIETY**

## **PART ONE**

The Framework program for equal integration of Roma in Bulgarian society which is an outcome of the dialogue between the Roma community and the Bulgarian government, contains the core principles of a comprehensive state strategy for accomplishment of real equality of the Roma people in Bulgaria. The basis of this framework document are the “Program For Equal Participation of Roma in the Public Life of Bulgaria” and the program documents of the government.

The integration of Roma in Bulgarian society is directly linked to the creation of conditions for respect of the individual civil rights. The strategic goal of this Program is the elimination of the unequal treatment of Roma in Bulgarian society. Discrimination against Roma in society preconditions the problems of the community in the socio-economic, educational and cultural field. The successful integration of Roma is possible only after the emancipation of the Roma community. Emancipation can be achieved through the establishment and effective implementation of mechanisms to neutralize the consequences of previous discrimination. In this respect the Program highlights the goal of eliminating discrimination towards Roma as one of the main political priorities of the Bulgarian State.

In compliance to the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, ratified by Bulgaria, this Program outlines the mid-term schedule of activities to be undertaken by the state towards establishment of real political, economic and cultural guarantees for the integration of Roma in society. The Program recognizes that for the accomplishment of positive results from the state policy towards Roma it is a condition sine qua non that Roma themselves be involved all levels of the state administration. Roma people should not be a passive object of influence but an active subject in the public sphere.

The development of concrete mechanisms and means for the accomplishment of the main principles in this document will be assigned to groups of experts, representatives of the Roma community, as well as to representatives of the state administration.

These strategic guidelines are approved for a period of 10 years, after which, depending on the results, the activities will be continued, updated or changed.

## **PART TWO**

Roma in Bulgaria are the group, which occupies the lowest level in the social hierarchy. They are not adequately represented in the political life and the government of the country. In the socio-economic aspect as a whole, the status of the Roma is dramatically lower than the Bulgarian average: high unemployment rate, deplorable living conditions, bad health, high illiteracy rate, etc. These stable characteristics in the situation of the Roma community are external manifestations and direct consequences and out of discriminatory treatment.

The elimination of discrimination towards Roma should become one of the main political priorities of the Bulgarian State. The solution of this main goal is the object of all the specific proposals for the state policy in the different spheres of public life that are stated below.

## **I. Protection from discrimination**

The United Nation Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination makes explicit that ethnic discrimination is tantamount to racial discrimination (Art. 1, par. 1). The Convention requires effective protection against acts of racial discrimination not only from the courts but also from other state institutions (Art. 6). Unfortunately, Bulgaria is among the few countries, which have not set up special bodies for protection from discrimination. Such bodies should be established.

### **1. Legislation changes for protection from discrimination**

A number of laws should be amended by special clauses, which provide protection against discrimination. In particular, the Bulgarian Penal Code should exhaustively define the aggravating and extenuating circumstances of the offense. The discriminatory motivation should be necessarily included as an aggravating circumstance. For a number of crimes such as murder, body injuries, rape, etc. there should be a higher punishment for racial motivation. Special anti-discrimination clauses should be introduced in the laws on education, health care, territorial development and sports.

### **2. Establishment of a state committee for prevention of discrimination**

The specifics of interethnic relations and the social problems related to them require the establishment of a specialized state body.

The state committee (commission for ethnic equality, commissioner on the ethnic issues, or another name) should be established by a law and approved by the Parliament; its activities should be public; it should have structures according to the administrative division of the country and their composition should be proportionate to the ethnic composition of the respective regions.

The prerogatives of this committee should include: investigation and punishment of illegal actions (or failure to act) on ethnic basis committed by physical and juridical entities; participation as a representative of the state in litigation on cases of discriminatory treatment; and formulation of obligatory recommendations about non-discriminatory treatment to state bodies and non-governmental organizations, as well as to other juridical entities.

The state committee for prevention of discrimination will exert control over the actions of the police officers as well. It should have a central body with local branches according to the administrative division of the country. The member of the committee should represent proportionately the ethnic composition of the respective region and should be independent from the organs of the Ministry of Interior. The prerogatives of the committee related too the control over the acts of the police should include: investigation and punishment of illegal actions of police officers according to the

Administrative Violations and Punishments Act; submission of signals to the prosecutorial organs, which are obliged to respond about the results of the investigation; appealing of prosecutorial and judicial acts; participation in the penal procedure as Public Prosecutor; submission of obligatory recommendations to the respective organs for just remedying of the victims.

In one year after the endorsement of the Framework Program the Council of Ministers of Republic Bulgaria will make a draft law for the functions of the State Committee for Prevention of Discrimination. Over this period with an act of the Council of Ministers a temporary structure within the National Council for the Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCEDI) will be established (Specialist Group). The Chair of NCEDI will head it and its members will include representatives from the President's Office, National Assembly, the judicial system and non-governmental organizations of minority groups. The Chair of the NCEDI will approve the regulations for the functioning of the temporary structure. Due to the fact that the temporary structure cannot have the prerogatives of the State Committee for Prevention of Discrimination without a special law and amendments in other laws, its functions will be reduced too the functions of the state institutions represented in it. The Specialist Group will have to work out the bill for the establishment and functioning of the state committee for prevention of discrimination.

### **2.1 Establishment of a special sub-committee for Roma at the Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights.**

## **II. Economic Development**

Roma people in Bulgaria are deprived of the opportunity to enjoy their right to an adequate standard of living. There are objectively measurable indicators ranking the standard of living of the Roma degrees below the average for the country.

### **1. Employment**

The high unemployment rate among Roma in Bulgaria is one of the most serious factors contributing to the social isolation of the group. Urgent actions are necessary for providing employment to the Roma.

One of the steps to be taken here is the development and implementation of training and employment programs in correspondence with the needs of the labor market and the particularities of some traditional working and vocational attitudes in the respective groups of Roma. It should be noted that the "rescue operations" of the type of alternative and temporary programs for employment, although appropriate at the given moment, are not enough as a perspective for the future development.

In order to guarantee employment of the Roma, it is necessary to create a special state fund. This fund must grant preferential loans and require their use for employment of Roma. Professionally competent people should do the management of the fund, and a large number of Roma with the respective qualification must be represented in it. Its activity should be public and there should be an effective public control mechanism.

It is necessary too organize efficient information tools to educate the Roma community about the main legal principles related to the labor.

## **2. Social support**

The Social Welfare Act should be amended by introduction of a special subcategory “vulnerable ethnic minorities” within the general category of the socially vulnerable groups. The social workers dealing with these groups should pass a special training. The role of the civil control over the application of the Act, through Roma organizations and other NGOs, should be considerably enhanced.

## **3. 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.

## **III. Health Care**

In order to accomplish a satisfactory level of health condition for Roma people, it is necessary to:

- increase the sanitary control over the basic parameters of the Roma housing spots;
- intensify the programs for health education and stimulate the active involvement of Roma in them.

## **IV. 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.

## **V. Education**

There still exists the system, inherited from the previous regime, of factual segregation of Roma children in the so-called 'Gypsy schools' with an emphasis on vocational-type education, which more recently is being transferred into the formation of segregated Roma classes within the normal schools. The low quality of the education received by Roma children in these conditions, the poverty, the lack of active programs compensating the insufficient command of Bulgarian, and the ethno-cultural differences, lead to a critical increase of the number of Roma children who do not attend school or drop out before finishing their high school education.

In order to overcome the disadvantaged position of Roma children in the system of education, the following measures should be undertaken:

### **1. Desegregation of Roma schools**

The solution of this problem requires a long-term strategy for the total disintegration of the segregated schools in the Roma neighborhoods; efficient measures for providing free access of Roma children to 'normal' schools; and prevention of the segregation of Roma children into separated classes.

With the awareness that the desegregation of the 'Gypsy schools' is a long process, we propose that in the meantime the Ministry of Education should intervene to improve the quality of education in these schools.

The following actions should be undertaken to this effect:

- support and stimulation to the introduction of preparatory classes for Roma children who do not know Bulgarian language;

- introduction of unified general education programs in Roma schools and total abolition of early vocational and labor education.

- stimulation of the employment of teachers with adequate qualification and specialization and elimination of the practice to send "irregular" teachers, i.e. teachers who do not have necessary qualifications, to the schools with prevailing number of Roma children;

- introduction in the system of education of the position of the so called

- “Assistant teachers” from the Roma community, who will help in the process

- of teaching of the Roma children;

- facilitation of the access to information and enhancing the consultation of

Roma families with low income and living in bad conditions, to ensure that they receive food, teaching materials and other school materials from the respective schools.

## **2. Elimination of the Practice to Send Normal Roma Children to Special Schools for Mentally Retarded**

A large percent of the Roma children are sent to “special” schools for mentally retarded children and are included in “special” programs after being categorized as incapable to command the regular school programs. Thus the Roma children are denied the right to equal opportunities in education. The mechanism, which allows that the cultural specifics of Roma children and their unequal status in society be defined as mental incapacity, is deeply discriminatory. An urgent tasks to be accomplished by the government is to terminate these habits of social exclusion.

## **3. Counteraction against the manifestations of racism in the classroom**

There are many and various means by which Roma children are being subjected to inhuman, degrading and humiliating treatment in school. The negative attitudes of both teachers and students are among the factors, which contribute to the absenteeism of Roma from school. The Ministry of education should develop and implement programs for training teachers in intercultural communication and ethnic tolerance. At all levels of the school process there should be organized such training in order to fight racism at school. Manifestations of racism should be sanctioned.

## **4. Securing the opportunity of Roma children to study their mother tongue at school.**

The study of one's mother tongue is a fundamental human right. It is also guaranteed by the Bulgarian Constitution. With regard to the Roma, however, this right is being systematically violated. Introducing the mother tongue as an 'optional' subject' and not as a part of the obligatory school curriculum invalidates the practical realization of the right to study one's mother tongue.

One of the main obstacles to the teaching of Romany language is the absence of teachers who should be both implementers and driving forces to this process. The preparation of such teachers must be done in the higher education pedagogical schools where the major subject of 'Romany Language and Culture' should be introduced. There is a pressing need for the introduction of such a major first of all in the University of Sofia where there will be the possibility to train specialists also in other areas related to Roma.

## **5. Training of specialists with university education.**

The old policy of segregating the Roma in schools and of depriving them of the opportunity to have a high school education equal to that of the other citizens has led to the lack of highly qualified specialists of different professions among the Roma community. The percentage of Roma having B.A. and M.A. degrees is insignificant. In order to overcome these negative results of the discrimination of the Roma in the sphere of education, it is necessary that the state continue to encourage the preparation of

specialists from the Roma community through the introduction of preferential admittance of Roma into Bulgarian universities.

## **6. Development and Implementation of Programs for Education and Qualification of Adult Roma.**

### **VI. Protection of the Ethnic Specifics and Culture of Roma in Bulgaria.**

During the recent decades, the opportunities for a public manifestation of the Roma culture have been restricted. This fact, apart from being a violation of the cultural rights of the Roma, contributes to the isolation of the Roma community as alien and unknown to the rest of the society. The development of the Roma culture as a specific ethnic culture and in the same time as a part of the Bulgarian culture must be guaranteed and encouraged by the Bulgarian State. In relation to this, it is necessary to secure the fulfillment of the following objectives:

- the theme of the Roma history and culture should be present in the textbooks for the primary, secondary, and high school education, presented within the general context of the Bulgarian history and culture;
- the cultural centers in the Roma neighborhoods should be restored, maintained and supported;
- the Roma must have the opportunity to take equal part in the national and regional folklore festivals;
- the Roma should receive support for the development of their authentic folklore through support for their music festivals, production and circulation of audio- and video products with this folklore and ensuring the access of Roma folklore to the national media;
- the Roma theater should be restored and its existence should be supported by the state;
- the Roma printed periodical and non-periodical literature should be supported.

### **VII. Presence of the Roma in the National Media.**

The representatives of the Roma community are deprived of the possibility to have equal access to the national media, both the electronic ones and the press. This fact, as well as the constant negative and often derogatory tone of the media in the years after 1989, is a favorable ground for the increase of hostility towards the Roma community. The impossibility to have access to the public sphere through the media puts the Roma in an unequal position with regard to the majority and leaves the development of negative social attitudes without alternative.

The Bulgarian State must guarantee the participation of Roma in the Bulgarian National Television and the National Radio. This participation must include both the transmission of Roma programs and the participation of Roma journalists in other programs of the television and the radio.

## **VIII. The Roma Woman**

It is necessary to promote culture of equality among Roma women for an adequate individual, social and economic participation in public life. For this purpose:

- it is necessary to increase the direct participation of the Roma woman in educational projects in order to gradually overcome discrimination;
- it is necessary to stimulate the access of Roma women to high and higher education through special activities on part of the social workers and pedagogic teams;
- it is necessary to implement programs for information and professional orientation of the Roma women in order to increase their opportunities for finding jobs;
- there should be a preferential regime in the employment contracts for the Roma women or there should be additional benefits for them;
- it is necessary to implement programs for consultancy of Roma women, who are entrepreneurs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The cooperation between the state and the Roma community has a crucial importance for the effective implementation of this program. The experience so far, and not only in Bulgaria, has demonstrated that any program, which is not developed and implemented by the large participation of Roma, is doomed to a failure. The active position of members of the Roma community at all levels of the state administration that is responsible for the implementation of this program, is an obligatory condition for its success.