



YOUTH MOVEMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE RURAL AREAS IN BULGARIA

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Take my hand!



STATEMENT

on the social inclusion of the Roma Youth in the rural areas of Bulgaria

prepared by the participants in training course "Take my hand!"

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CONTEXT

The social exclusion and isolation of the Roma Youth in the rural areas of Bulgaria are indisputable. Furthermore there are interethnic tensions and the initiatives for interaction are often facing reluctance by the different ethnic communities. There is a lack of communication and dialogue which results in deep social divisions between the youngsters at local level. Furthermore in recent years their relations often lead into hatred and acts of aggression are appearing.

We, the participants of the training “Take my hand!” believe, that this rather negative situation must and can be changed!

As active European citizens we identified the problems in the rural areas and we would like to contribute for improvement solution. With this Statement we are representing our position on key areas for all “Bulgarian” and “Roma” youngsters in our region — Botevgrad, Pravets and Etropole. We consider that the most important topics for the social inclusion of the Roma community in the rural areas are: Education, Family upbringing, Employability, Interethnic relations and Youth participation. On each of these topics we have described the relevant problems of the young Roma people and also the changes that need to take place. We consider that the society, community, institutions and the young people have to take actions together to improve the current situation.

1. EDUCATION

Problems of the young Roma people:

- **Relatively low educational status** – traditionally the educational level in the Roma community is lower, comparatively to the other ethnic groups;
- **Huge difference in the gender’s educational status** – illiterate Roma women are two times more than men;
- **Premature school drop out** – the percentage of the Roma school drop outs is strongly outlined. The Roma are over 20 % of all students in the first grade and only 1 % in the last secondary school year;
- **Segregated schools (and/or classes)** – the Roma students in them are often up to 100 %. The levels of discipline and education are lower than in the common schools. The integration between youngsters at school age is difficult as there is minimal or lack of contacts with students from other ethnic groups;
- **Gaps in the educational system** – the official curriculum does not consider the Roma culture. There is no cooperation with the parents and if any measures are taken they are punitive and not proactive and stimulating;
- **Language barrier** – some of the Roma youngsters do not speak and understand Bulgarian language well, as in their isolated communities (outside school) they are encouraged to communicate in their mother tongue, which is not official in school and it is an obstacle in the educational process.

Our proposals:

- **Quality education in mixed schools** – the integration in these schools is faster and easier. There the social environment is more productive and provides opportunity for the Roma youngsters to get out of the “ghetto” and to be in touch with youngsters from other ethnicities;
- **Obligatory education until 16 years** – in order to decrease the percentage of the earlier school drop outs and the level of illiteracy;
- **Common work with the parents and children** – the Roma parents must be informed and persuaded to take their children to kindergarten, where various educational courses (in Bulgarian language for example) have to take place;
- **Encouragement and promotion of the good Roma practices** – the thorough Roma students can be motivated with non financial stimulus and successful Roma initiatives and examples must be promoted;
- **Individualized approach in the Education** – it is necessary the teachers to work extra with the Roma students, when they have obvious need to catch up;
- **Swapping the roles in class** – once a week the Roma students can prepare and deliver the lessons. This will give also a proper and authentic feedback to the teachers.



II. FAMILY UPBRINGING

Problems of the young Roma people:

- **Early marriages** – often the Roma youngsters are forced by their families to get married, even before coming to age;
- **Early and high rate of child births** – 51 % of the young Roma women are giving birth before their 18 years, whereas 3,6 % of them are under 14. Comparatively a Roma woman has 2.77 children and the average Bulgarian woman - 1 child;
- **Bad or lack of family education** – many Roma families are surviving “day to day” and in the same time there are many bad habits which are part of the daily life – abuse of alcohol, smoking, malnutrition and others;
- **Deep patriarchal dependency** – the Roma community is very conservative and usually the youngsters cannot decide for themselves and for their future;
- **Living in isolated “ghettos”** – in the ghetto the level of the crimes is higher, the laws are not respected, the violation of the human rights is higher. Crimes are often left without punishment and this gives bad example to the youngsters.

Our proposals:

- **Human Rights Education and Education for Social Responsibilities** – for great part of the Roma youth these topics are completely unknown and distant. This affects their comprehension of these concepts which is often incorrect and misunderstood;
- **Working laws and justice** – there is an utter need for obeying and considering the law and respect the equality in front of it. All people (regardless of their ethnic origin) should have equal rights and equal social responsibilities;
- **Proactive measures** – the institutions should work more intensive and proactive on prevention with the Roma communities, rather than to try to deal with the consequences;
- **Sexual and gender education** – most of the Roma youngsters start their first intimate relations at the age of 13-14 years so it is essential to have the basics of the sexual education;
- **Good personal examples from the daily life** – the promotion and increasing the recognition of those examples inside the Roma communities will naturally improve the youngster’s attitudes.



III. EMPLOYABILITY

Problems of the young Roma people:

- **High level of the Roma unemployment** – roughly 28 % of the Roma people are employed, as this percentage is lower for the young Roma;
- **Discrimination in job application** – under other equal conditions, a Roma youngster will be disclaimed only on ethnical basis;
- **Work in the “Grey economy” without any social insurance** – 24 % of the Roma employees are working without contracts and in a way are forced to work without any social rights;
- **Unqualified and low paid occupation** – due the lack of good education, usually the young Roma are being hired as labourers in construction work, communal services, agriculture, porters, retail and other;
- **Occupation “Socially inept”** – for a great percentage of the Roma youngsters the social allowance is considered for granted and is a main financial resource, which decreases their motivation to look for a job. This contributes to their incompatibility with the labor market requirements. On the other hand the social allowances are minimal and they foredoom the youngsters to poverty, misery and social exclusion.

Our proposals:

- **Reinforcing the employability of the Roma youth** – internships and voluntarism are great opportunity for the development of the youngsters. The active and excellent students can be shortlisted and promoted and those lists can be distributed to the employers so that they can crosscheck the candidates opinion, motivation, talents and enthusiasm;
- **Entrepreneurship encouragement** – it is necessary to stimulate the Roma youngsters to be innovative and initiative, rather than wait someone to make the things happen and take care of them;
- **Rural economy development** – the institutions and business have to work diligent for improving the local economy and for generating new jobs and positions, which should be accessible for youngsters;
- **Building up proper financial and consumer’s behavior** – those skills will help young Roma to become more competitive and will improve the budget management in their daily life;
- **Innovations in the social assistance** – unemployed can support the social development with community service and should receive salaries for it at market levels.



INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

Problems of the young Roma people:

- **Lack of communication between different ethnic and religious communities** - and unfortunately the social distance towards Roma is biggest and increasing among the young people in rural areas of Bulgaria;
- **Accumulated bilateral malice and hatred** - they are caused mainly due to historical reasons and past interpersonal conflicts;
- **Stereotypes and Prejudices** - the rest of the ethnic groups in Bulgaria have a negative perception and attitude towards the Roma. They are considered loud, impulsive, wild, aggressive, primitive, dishonest, manipulative, vindictive, malicious, vicious;
- **Encapsulation of the Roma community** - as a defense mechanism Roma also look suspicious to the other ethnicities and are avoiding contacts with them;
- **Avoiding mixed marriages** - the other ethnic groups do not agree their children to marry Roma;
- **Dissemination of the model of "learned helplessness"** - it leads to deviant behavior, which in turn enhances the anti-Roma attitudes and increases the social distance.

Our proposals:

- **The young people have to make informed choices** - to cultivate in young people (Bulgarians and Roma) capacity to demand and receive adequate information and to interpret properly as well as to express and promote their personal position;
- **Responsible Management** - the various governments are using the Roma mainly during elections and do not actually work to improve the most valuable Roma asset - their human potential;
- **Classes on Tolerance and Unity** - from early age (both Bulgarians and Roma) should be educated in tolerance and acceptance of each individual, respecting his/her peculiarities and differences;
- **Revisit of the values** - the current thinking have to be changed on both sides;
- **Work with the media to break down prejudices** - to show not only bad but mostly good examples of successful social inclusion of Roma youth. This will influence more people of all ethnicities.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Problems of the young Roma people:

- **Lack of dedicated youth structures and organizations** - in the Bulgarian villages there are no common youth clubs or NGO's, and even less Roma youth organizations;
- **Need of Roma youth leaders** - there is a need for capable, knowledgeable and enterprising youngsters, which could work from "the inside" of the Roma community rather than waiting for "outside" intervention;
- **Lack of youth motivation for active social participation** - the typical young person is socially inert, inactive and uninvolved;
- **Shortage of political representation** - huge part of the Roma youngsters are not involved in the decision making. Furthermore most of them are not politically active and often they "sell" their votes;
- **Missing concrete and practical youth policies** - this is more tangible on local level. The youngsters are not supported by the authorities and they are left single-handed.

Our proposals:

- **Youth centers** - establishment of local youth organizations and structures (clubs, movements, informal groups) which will organize common interethnic events and initiatives;
- **Political participation** - involvement of the young people (both Bulgarians and Roma) in the decision making at all levels and also in the development of alternative innovations for social inclusion of the youth;
- **Training for leadership competences of Roma youth** - those youngsters will be multipliers of good practices, will activate the integration processes inside the Roma community and they can act as mediators between the different ethnic groups;
- **Promotion and reinforcement of the voluntarism** - the voluntary activities would improve the contacts between the two ethnic groups and will give a good example to the other people;
- **Non-formal education** - in the Bulgarian rural areas the non formal education is not well known and practically missing among the Roma Youth. Organizing joint activities, trainings, meetings, campaigns, sports and fun activities and other would be effective for the social inclusion;
- **Decreasing the migration towards the urban areas and stimulating the young people to remain in the villages** - pessimism and criticism are common for the Bulgarian society. Young people are bound to change that and to be more positive by finding a way to live together in peace in the villages!

** In the Statement we use statistics from the Information Guide "Roma in Bulgaria" of the Open Society Institute - Sofia, 2008.*

This Statement is addressed to all people to reflect, act and promote the social inclusion of Roma Youth.

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