

“Roma access to quality and affordable housing in Bulgaria”

Case Studies 2023

Introduction

Integro Association is a civil organization led by representatives of the Roma community in Bulgaria. It is composed of 12 local Roma civil society organizations from different parts of the country, united by their common cause to achieve an equal and respected position of the Roma community among the other members of Bulgarian society. Integro strives to make visible the problems and needs of the Roma from the remote settlements of Bulgaria. The organization's activities are aimed at community mobilization, creating an active Roma leadership capable of challenging the passivity of both Roma and public authorities, so that they can share the responsibility for overcoming inequality, social exclusion and poverty among Roma, and for achieving cohesion and prosperity at the local level and in society as a whole. The Association's guiding principles are the enforcement of human rights, democratic procedures, transparency, partnership and trust in the community and society.

Methods and tools used for the research

For the purposes of this research, we conducted a desk review and analysis of various documents - statistical data, analyzes and studies of institutions and non-governmental organizations in relation to the situation of the Roma in terms of housing security. We also analyzed information from the specific case studies researching successful local practices of the municipalities of Botevgrad, Yablanica and Byala Slatina for addressing housing issues of Roma living in these municipalities¹. In addition, we held semi-structured interviews with the mayor and secretary of the municipality of Yablanitsa as well as with six representatives of Roma communities from the municipalities of Botevgrad and Peshtera.

Brief overview of the socio-economic situation of the Roma in Bulgaria

Despite provided policy for Roma integration and social inclusion in Bulgaria, many Roma's lives continue to be marked by extreme poverty, unemployment, low or poor quality education, inadequate housing, poor health and welfare. According to the study of incomes and living conditions (NSI, BG-SILC), the relative share of Roma at risk of poverty in 2022, is 63.2%, while the part of Roma at risk of poverty and social exclusion is 81.6% compared to 25% for the persons from the Bulgarian ethnic group.

In 2022, the relative share of children from the Roma ethnic group with material deprivation (deprived of at least one of 13 indicators) is 76.2%. About 69.4% of Roma children with material deprivation also live at risk of poverty. None of the children's needs (restrictions for all 13 indicators) could be met for 9.0% of the children from Roma ethnic group compared to 1.2% for the children from Bulgarian ethnic group and 0.8% for the children from Turkish ethnic group.

¹ The case studies were conducted within the joint European Commission and Council of Europe ROMACT Programme, which is administered by Integro Association in Bulgaria - <https://www.coe-romact.org/>

Data from a large-scale survey conducted in 2020 as part of the project ‘Novel Approaches to Generating Data on hard-to-reach populations at risk of violation of their rights’² show that 43.5% of Roma live in poor housing conditions, 76.9% live in overcrowded housing, 34.7% live in housing without a toilet and bathroom inside the home. The share of Roma children living in poor housing conditions (more than 70%) is much higher than the share of Bulgarian children in the same situation (less than 10%). More than half of the children in Bulgaria live in overcrowded housing (compared to an average of 34.8% of the population as a whole) The proportion of children living in overcrowded conditions is particularly high among the Roma population (almost 85%). The employment rate among Roma remains the lowest - only 47.2%.

The low level of education of the Roma community is determined by the low proportion of Roma children attending kindergarten (27.7% of Roma children aged 0-4 years attend kindergarten or nursery); dropping out of school (86.2% of Roma children aged 7-15 years are enrolled in school and 13.8% do not study); early leaving the education system (68.0% of Roma aged 20-24 have left education and training early and only 28% have completed at least secondary education); educational segregation, which is a major factor limiting access to quality education (63.5% of Roma children aged 6-15 attend schools where all or most of their classmates are Roma).

Access to health care for many Roma of working age (18-64) is difficult due to the high proportion of Roma population with unpaid health insurance contributions, which excludes them from receiving medical care and preventive health activities from general practitioners and specialist doctors in the hospital and outpatient system. Many Roma lack access to qualified medical care due to a lack of doctors and nurses in remote settlements and large urban Roma neighborhoods. Access to emergency medical care for Roma is often compromised due to poor road infrastructure in Roma neighborhoods, which makes it difficult for ambulances to access.

Aims of the case study: Why is affordable and quality housing important for Roma inclusion?

With this case study, we aim to analyze the situation of the Roma in Bulgaria in terms of access to affordable and quality housing and to identify the main barriers of a different nature (systemic, circumstantial and personal) that prevent this access. The report will contribute to the definition of specific recommendations to improve the Roma's access to quality housing, as well as raise the awareness of the relevant stakeholders in the implementation of Roma equality, inclusion and participation policies at national and European level.

Poor housing conditions and the lack of basic services and infrastructure in the separate Roma neighborhoods lead to problems related to the health, education, employment and social realization of the population in these neighborhoods and deepen poverty and marginalization. Illegal housing in these, most often segregated neighborhoods, besides being often unsafe to live in, also leads to risks related to the rapid spread of epidemics, fires, and

² The project ‘Novel approaches to generating data on hard-to-reach populations at risk of violation of their rights’ was funded under the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2014 – 2021 (EEA FM) under call BGLD-3.001, programme ‘Local development, poverty reduction and enhanced inclusion of vulnerable groups’: <https://www.noveleea.bg/documents/reports/>

the inability to access and secure assistance. Inadequate housing conditions are a central problem that necessitates the development of quality housing policies aimed at overcoming social inequalities and improving the standard of living of vulnerable population groups. Such an approach benefits the entire Bulgarian society.

Roma access to quality and affordable housing in Bulgaria

✓ Where do most Roma in your country live

According to data from the latest census in 2021, there are 266,720³ individuals that identify themselves as Roma in Bulgaria. This amount deviates significantly from expert estimates, according to which the Roma in Bulgaria are over 500,000. The difference likely stems from the amount of people - nearly 80,000 - that cannot or do not wish to define their ethnicity, as well as the number of people - 467,682, who were not properly counted and whose data was retrieved administratively instead⁴ (from the NSI census in 2021). The different data on the amount of Roma people makes it difficult to properly define what the share of Roma in the entire population is, as well as other statistical estimates. According to expert assessments, Roma are evenly distributed in both the cities and villages of Bulgaria with the percentage of those in the cities being slightly higher at 54%.

Generally, Roma prefer to live in houses, but in larger cities a significant amount of them live in apartments in large apartment blocks. However, regardless of whether they live in villages or cities, most Roma live in parts of the city or neighborhood that are separated from the residential areas most other citizens inhabit. Residential segregation and the ever-growing separation of Roma neighborhoods are noted as an extremely serious problem in various studies and national documents related to the integration of the Roma population. This growing separation and segregation not only stems from the continuous process for social exclusion of the Roma people, but circles back around to further escalate these processes and their subsequent issues.

It is difficult to assess the legitimate ownership of houses which the Roma inhabit in these segregated neighborhoods. Many Roma are not certain that they own the homes they live in, due to a lack of ownership documents, and the amount of houses with an undetermined status of legality is also significant. There are no accurate statistics on the amount of illegal dwellings in Roma neighborhoods. According to some studies, they account for more than a quarter of the housing in Roma neighborhoods, while according to others the percentage is significantly higher. As a result of illegal construction and additions to houses, many of the dwellings end up in areas which are not determined to be residential, which, in turn, prohibits the procurement of necessary construction documents (such as permits) and completely prevents any investments for improving the infrastructure within these neighborhoods. While there isn't any statistical data on the amount of Roma that rent out their housing, the overall share percentage-wise is considered to be a lot smaller.

³ National Institute of Statistics - Census 2021 Results

⁴ National Institute of Statistics - Census 2021 Results

✓ **Roma exposure to homelessness**

If the issue of homelessness is boiled down to whether people have housing - in the sense of a roof over their heads - it can be said that the amount of Roma, as well as the amount of people in Bulgaria in general that are considered homeless, i.e., who live outside without shelter or are sheltered in places for emergency accommodation, is not large. However, this may not be the case if homelessness is assessed according to FEANTSA's (European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless) typology of homelessness and housing exclusion, called ETHOS. In this typology, there are three conceptual areas or categories that define whether a specific dwelling can be considered a "home", with the absences of any one of them being considered an equivalent to some state of homelessness. Two of these categories are related to the adequacy and security of the dwelling and are mostly related to individuals living in houses that have been threatened with eviction and violence, as well as those living in temporary or unconventional structures and those inhabiting inadequate or overcrowded dwellings. The categories cover multiple factors such as security of tenure; adequate lighting, heating and ventilation conditions; basic infrastructure and amenities such as water supply, sewage/waste disposal and domestic waste management, adequate environmental quality, etc. The amount of Roma living in dwellings that do not meet the conditions covered in these categories is very large.

According to the large-scale study and report "Key social inclusion and fundamental rights indicators in Bulgaria", funded through a project within the framework of the program "Local Development, Poverty Reduction and Enhanced Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups" organized by the European Economic Area and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, almost two-thirds of Roma households - 65.8%, live in conditions that force deprivations for household needs, compared to 18.7% on average for the country and 11.7% for ethnic Bulgarians⁵. The "household deprivation" indicator estimates the proportion of people living in dwellings that are too dark (with insufficient daylight coming through the windows), have a leaking roof and/or damp walls or floors, lack a shower or bath on the premises, or do not contain a toilet in the dwelling. Taking into account the number of illegal dwellings or those in an unclear legal state, it can be concluded that a very large part of the Roma in a vulnerable situation live in some state of homelessness. A greater share of the migrants on the territory of Bulgaria from other countries can also be defined as living in a state of homelessness. However, their amount is not large, as Bulgaria is not an attractive destination for migrants. The homelessness issue in Bulgaria concerns mainly Bulgarian citizens, a large number of which are Roma in a vulnerable situation.

✓ **What are the living conditions of Roma**

The general conclusion that the majority of Roma households are living in poor conditions is supported by data on the various aspects of housing conditions. According to the aforementioned survey, almost a fifth of those who identify themselves as Roma do not have running water in their homes. Almost half of them lack a bathtub, shower or indoor toilet in their dwelling. In addition, it should be noted that the sample is address-based and does not

³ The data comes from the Thematic Report on the situation of Roma, carried out in the framework of the "New approaches for data collection on hard-to-reach population groups at risk of violation of their rights", https://www.noveleea.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Thematic_report_Roma_BG_22-04-26.pdf

include people that are living in some form of informal housing that lacks address registration or the truly homeless. According to the authors of this study, this could indicate that the situation of the Roma is even worse than the results provided initially by the study. Nearly every fourth Roma household - 23.5% - lives in a home with a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundations, or have rotting flooring which can pose a real threat to their health and wellbeing. Every second Roma household - 49% - lives in a polluted area, which leads to them being much more prone to sickness: particularly various pulmonary diseases such as bronchitis, bronchial asthma and other allergies among children; and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) among adults. These can be exacerbated in the future and become risk factors for cardiovascular diseases and premature death. Seven out of every ten Roma – 71.5% - live in overcrowded dwellings or housing conditions.

Children in segregated neighborhoods are particularly affected - the majority of them live in overcrowded conditions with all the negative consequences that come from their living situation, particularly when it comes to their health or educational opportunities. According to Eurostat data from 2019, the average amount of rooms per each person in Bulgaria was 1.1 in large cities, 1.3 in small towns and in the suburbs and 1.4 in rural areas. At the same time, in the segregated Roma neighborhoods, there are large households - with six or more members - living in dwellings consisting of a maximum total of 2-3 rooms. Children in these households do not have a room of their own, nor do they have any personal space. In some of the ghettos in smaller settlements, there are cases of households living in houses in which there is about 1 sq. m. for each member of the family. Within such homes, not only does each person have zero personal space, but they also have to even sleep in shifts. These aren't isolated cases – they were identified in various municipalities during the study survey process for the ROMACT program.

✓ **Spatial segregation and informal settlements**

As mentioned above, a significant portion of the Roma live in segregated neighborhoods both in cities and in small villages. It cannot be said that there are settlements consisting of only Roma inhabitants, but the demographic trends for the aging populace of the larger Bulgarian ethnicity and the growing trend for young Bulgarians to migrate to larger cities within the country could, in the near future, lead to the establishment of settlements – primarily villages – inhabited only by Roma individuals. There are currently no settlements in Bulgaria which consist only of dwellings with an unclear legal state – however, in various cities and villages among all regions within the country, there are parts of neighborhoods or entire neighborhoods that are informal when it comes to their legality and permissibility for creation and construction.

These neighborhoods are generally situated outside of the regulatory plans for the settlements, so the dwellings constructed within them are not provided with the necessary building permits or documentation. These types of neighborhoods came into existence as early as the 19th century, with their development generally being associated with policies for resettling Roma to the outskirts of settlements during the various periods of the country's history. The development and growth of these segregated neighborhoods became much more significant after 1989 – following a process of economic restructuring, during which the Roma were the first to drop out of the labor market, many who previously lived in the general

residential areas were forced to abandon their homes due to the lacking income and instead had to resettle in these segregated neighborhoods.

According to existing studies, in 1980 about 49% of the Roma lived in these segregated neighborhoods; by the first decade of the 21st century, that amount had grown to about three-quarters of the Roma population instead. The isolated nature of these neighborhoods drastically reduces access to social and health services and further impacts the quality of education in schools located within the Roma neighborhoods, which further exacerbates societal issues such as unemployment and poverty in the long term. The situation has only gotten worse during the last 20 years, with growing issues and tendencies such as poor or missing infrastructure, poor public transport organization, insufficient access to public amenities (electricity, water supply, sewage, street lighting, waste disposal), lack of development plans and opportunities for legalizing construction and inability to take actions toward building and improving the necessary technical and social infrastructure.

In recent decades, the administration and authorities on both the general and local levels have not implemented adequate policies to address the illegal construction issues within Roma neighborhoods and the ever-deepening problem of segregation. There aren't any appropriate instruments for solving these problems in the existing legal framework – there isn't a mechanism for legalizing existing dwellings, the procedures for new construction are very burdensome and generally too expensive for a majority of the population, the amount of new plots offered to the public for construction is insufficient and there is a definite lack of funds provided for the adaptation of development plans and regulation measures for the territory. At this point, even the limited possibilities provided by the legislation to address the problems related to illegal construction are not being used by the inhabitants of the segregated Roma neighborhoods, due to their insufficient legal culture and knowledge regarding the necessary procedures. The problem is further exacerbated by the lack of preparation on behalf of the local authorities to provide assistance to the Roma community in the process of going through legal procedures and in the identification of opportunities to legalize the dwellings that the Roma are inhabiting.

✓ **Affordability of adequate housing**

When it comes to the Roma's access to suitable housing, we must keep in mind some of the intricacies of the housing market in the country. Bulgaria is one of the countries with a very sizeable housing stock and is also characterized with a high level of home ownership for the population. On the other hand, however, this housing stock is also fairly outdated and depreciated – particularly when it comes to dwellings in smaller towns. Put simply, a large part of the existing dwellings do not meet the current requirements to be considered a modern home. The economic restructuring process has led to an increased demand for housing in larger cities and a corresponding rise of uninhabited dwellings in small towns and villages. This has caused a wide discrepancy in the pricing of housing options in the various regions. Generally, most housing options in the larger cities are unaffordable for a large part of the population, particularly those from vulnerable communities. Ultimately, for individuals in such troubled situations – which many of the Roma find themselves in – their only solution is to remain in housing conditions that do not meet any construction or hygiene requirements and, in most cases, have an unclear legal status.

On the other hand, the lack of permanent reliable income makes it difficult for Roma households to cover their daily necessities, with a large part of their income being spent on foods and bills (in the case of households that do have access to amenities like electricity and water supply). This means that the families cannot allocate or set aside any resources toward improving their homes. According to studies on the state of Roma communities in a vulnerable situation in more than 20 municipalities within the framework of the ROMACT program, more than 80% of the households were determined to have an income that only allows them to cover their household bills and food. Over 20% cannot regularly cover their electricity and/or water bill and thus have had their access to the electricity or water supply suspended. Bulgaria does not yet have a proper definition for energy poverty. There is currently a working definition, according to which a household is considered to be 'energy poor' when, after energy expenditures, each member of the household is left with an individual sum for their needs that falls below the official poverty line – BGN 504 per person for 2023. Taking this definition into account, a significant portion of the Roma can be considered 'energy poor', with 100% of all Roma families in a vulnerable position falling under this category. According to Eurostat, more than 40% of the Bulgarian population are unable to sufficiently heat their homes during the heating season, whereas when it comes to the Roma households only, that percentage rises to over 75% instead.

✓ **Housing-associated bureaucracy and red tape**

One of the most important problems related to the home ownership of Roma in vulnerable situations is the many dwellings that exist in an unclear legal status. As stated above, this issue has been prevalent for a while. The reasons for this problem's persistence are multifold – economic, political, discriminatory when it comes to the stereotypes and attitudes society has towards the Roma, an outdated and inadequate legal framework, etc. The Roma community in Bulgaria is technically the youngest in comparison to the other ethnic communities – the percentage of young Roma people is significantly higher than their equivalents in other ethnicities. Generally, vulnerable Roma households tend to have more children on average, which in turn makes it necessary to expand living spaces and seek out new housing as they come of age. However, the procedures for permitting additional construction on the premises of homes are very cumbersome and require an extensive knowledge of the various laws and requirements that must be fulfilled, along with various documents that must be requested and acquired beforehand – a process that requires both a lot of time and financial resources.

At the same time, representatives of the vulnerable Roma communities do not have access to the information or funds that would be necessary for these processes. The already prevalent discriminatory bias and attitude towards the Roma community from the representatives of various institutions also leads to the Roma preferring not to communicate with them – this makes it even more difficult to access financial resources from institutions such as banks, as the conditions for obtaining loans are infeasible for struggling, impoverished people. That further exacerbates the illegal construction issue and leads to conditions for the emergence and expansion of many new informal buildings and additions in neighborhoods. As of this moment, there is no adequate legal framework to handle the legalization of housing.

✓ Antigypsyism in housing

Results from the “Key social inclusion and fundamental rights indicators in Bulgaria” study seem to show that “7.4% of the population of Bulgaria has felt discriminated based on discernible external criteria (skin color, ethnicity, religious view, etc.) when trying to find a solution to an existing housing issue or need”. As for the Roma, about 17.7% of them reported feeling discriminated when trying to find housing accommodations to buy or rent out⁶. This suggests the Roma face discrimination in the context of seeking housing solutions nearly three times more often in comparison to the average, with the Roma from vulnerable communities or families likely being faced with even more discrimination. The Protection Against Discrimination Act, adopted in Bulgaria in 2004, provides a legal definition for the concepts of both direct and indirect discrimination and prohibits any form of discrimination in many legal areas; unfortunately, although as defined this stands in direct opposition to the requirements posed by Directive 2000/43/EC, the right to housing is not expressly included in the act’s current definition.

Results from other studies show that a significant portion of people from the general populace would not want to live in close proximity with Roma people, nor have their children study in the same class or even the same school as Roma children or even work in the same workplace with Roma. This applies especially to representatives of the general majority who have never had close contact with Roma people. A vast majority of landlords also do not wish to rent out their properties to Roma, especially if they are considered to be from poorer, more vulnerable groups. A large portion of the Roma themselves, having faced discriminatory biases and attitudes, also do not wish to live in neighborhoods that primarily consist of residents from the general population. Roma often face discrimination in a large portion of official institutions, as well as the private and banking sectors.

Within the framework of the Protection Against Discrimination Act, a special institution was established on a central and regional level – the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD), which is supposed to monitor the application of the act’s regulations and laws. Unfortunately, its efforts are generally insufficient and ineffective and they do not contribute significantly to the prevention of such discriminatory actions and biases. One of the reasons for its inefficiency is that the members are elected on a quota basis by the political parties in the National Assembly. This means that members of the CPD can be elected from extreme nationalist parties, in which case they can actively hinder and even block the commission’s work and prevent the adoption of adequate anti-discriminatory measures and sanctions. Worse yet, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of cases of violence in Roma neighborhoods instigated or provoked by politicians and their actions.

Efforts from the judicial system are also insufficient to effectively counteract these acts of discrimination. Those affected by discrimination do not trust institutions and in most cases do not seek out their assistance. On the other hand, vulnerable communities often lack any information on the opportunities they might have to counteract acts of discrimination. In a

⁶ The data comes from the Thematic Report on the situation of Roma, carried out in the framework of the "New approaches for data collection on hard-to-reach population groups at risk of violation of their rights", https://www.noveleea.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Thematic_report_Roma_BG_22-04-26.pdf

recently conducted survey on the attitudes of the general majority towards the Roma in two municipalities – those of Sungulare and Antonovo – within the framework of a project that Integro participates in, it was found that only 40% of respondents would not mind living in close proximity to Roma families; over 10% of respondents believe that Roma should be completely expelled from the settlements and even from Bulgaria as a whole. This also applies to residents of smaller settlements, where discriminatory attitudes and biases are less evident.

✓ **Forced evictions**

As of the current moment, Roma living in illegal dwellings continue to do so under the threat of having their homes destroyed and being left on the streets. There is a recent decline in the number of illegal Roma houses being demolished, but this isn't caused by a better awareness of the problem and specific efforts to solve it – rather, it's a result of the fact that people which are left homeless go on to create additional problems for local authorities regarding their housing situation and eventual accommodation. The period 2019-2020 can be considered the peak of the Roma housing demolition trend, as this was when hundreds of Roma - including children, elderly and the disabled – were evicted from their dwellings without being provided with alternative accommodations beforehand.

As a formal reason for taking such extreme measures, the local authorities usually point to the fact that the dwellings are illegal and do not have the necessary construction documents and permits, although a very large part of these dwellings were built a long time ago - 30 or more years ago. However, the specific occasion is very often dictated by antigypsyism and a negative attitude on the part of the majority. Most often, such occasions were incidents between Roma and non-Roma, leading to death or serious bodily injuries as a result of car accidents, mass fights, etc. After such incidents, an increase in inter-ethnic tensions and an increase in anti-Roma sentiments and manifestations of radical groups from the majority are usually noticed.

Measures to demolish illegal Roma houses are usually taken to reduce inter-ethnic tensions, but are very often linked to upcoming local government elections and attempts by candidates in these elections to attract the votes of the more radical groups in society. As a result of domestic incidents, the decisions of local authorities to forcibly evict Roma in some of the most significant and significant cases, such as in the village of Vojvodino, the village of Katunitsa, etc. In general, local authorities follow the procedure of sending warning letters and subsequent house demolition orders to people who are about to be evicted, but due to ignorance of the regulations, a very large number of Roma whose houses are about to be demolished do not benefit from the possibilities of appealing the prescriptions and orders received within the legally established terms. Thus, they remain unprotected by the law.

According to data from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), more than 100 Roma were evicted from the village of Vojvodinovo in January 2019 after a fight between two Roma and an ethnic Bulgarian – a soldier that once served in the Special Forces. Most of the houses of the evicted Roma were demolished soon after the incident. Neither the demolition orders nor the subsequent legal proceedings of the Roma families that wanted to return to their homes took into account the necessity or proportionality of the measures taken by the local

authorities. On July 24th, 2019, about 20 “illegal” dwellings in the “Kolumka” neighborhood were demolished in the city of Burgas. The buildings consisted of large brick houses built on land that was designated for street infrastructure. In the last few years, the Municipality of Burgas has gone on to demolish over 400 illegal buildings in the Roma neighborhood of “Gorno Ezerovo”, as well as the “Pobeda” neighborhood and the Roma portion of the “Meden Rudnik” neighborhood. In many cases, these were the only living spaces that their inhabitants could call a home. As for the few cases of appeals against demolition orders, the courts have not properly assessed the proportionality of such interferences, nor considered the right to housing of these citizens. On September 12th, 2019, about 38 “illegal” buildings were demolished in the Roma neighborhood “Maksuda” in the city of Varna. Out of all affected residents, only one person with disabilities was relocated into a government institution.

On the 4th of August, 2020, the Municipality of Stara Zagora began the forced demolition of illegal buildings in the Roma neighborhood “Lozenets”. According to their inhabitants, these houses were built there more than twenty years ago. To date, there have been no legislative changes made that would introduce the concepts of necessity and proportionality for the forced eviction of people from their only homes. Such measures disproportionately affect Roma living in dwellings that are formally considered illegal. If there are no measures taken to legalize the existing Roma houses with strict control to prevent new illegal constructions or additions to premises in Roma neighborhoods, a large amount of Roma will continue to live under the constant threat of eviction and homelessness.

✓ **Environmental implications of Roma housing**

As a general rule, all informal dwellings and neighborhoods for poor Roma are located near unregulated landfills. Some of the neighborhoods were established from the very beginning near such urban landfills, which act as a sort of livelihood for the poorest, most vulnerable families. For other neighborhoods, such landfills only appeared later as the neighborhood grew. Due to the illegal status of these dwellings, they often lack the necessary infrastructure for proper access which leads to the inability of local authorities to provide adequate waste disposal services for these neighborhoods – therefore, as the neighborhood grows, so does the size of the illegal landfill that exists next to it. Such landfills not only pollute the environment and the air, but they are also a breeding ground for various pests and can be a source for various infections and diseases. Such dumping grounds are often set on fire as a form of disposal, which further pollutes the surrounding air and environment for a long time.

Another serious source of environmental pollution in Roma ghettos and neighborhoods stems from the aforementioned fact that a large part of Roma households is considered ‘energy poor’. In practice, such families do not have an ecologically-clean method to heat their homes during the winter period – at best, some of them may be able to acquire a portion of the firewood reserves necessary for heating their homes through the cold months. Generally, heating is irregular, with the main source of fuel to be burnt coming from waste collected from landfills or the remains of factory produce thrown out at the landfill. Burning this type of waste results in serious air pollution, as well as toxic particles and substances that further exacerbate health issues and the spreading of diseases. While the state does have a program for energy poor families, inhabitants of informal/illegal dwellings cannot benefit from them.

✓ Nomadic lifestyle and Travelers

Roma groups that have adapted a nomadic lifestyle mainly existed in Bulgaria until the middle of the last century. These groups were mainly the Roma basket-makers (Koshnichari) and tinsmiths (Kalaidzhi), which did not have permanent homes or places of residence. They used to travel around the country and stayed in various places, most often in the vicinity of cities, towns or villages. The main way they would provide for themselves would be by providing various services or making household items. In 1958, the socialist government at the time passed a decree, according to which “vagrancy and begging” were prohibited and all citizens were obliged to “engage in community service work and seek employment according their own strengths and capabilities”. This decree was aimed at solving all issues related to the Chergari Roma which did not have a permanent residence (with 14 000 people matching this condition noted at the time), and more specifically was aimed at providing them with a permanent residence, as well as settling their issues when it comes to employment and housing. Thus, for several years, any travelling groups were forced to settle down in the areas they were located at when the decree was enforced. This led to many informal settlements and neighborhoods being formed, within which the dwellings were absolutely not close to fulfilling the actual requirements and conditions a proper housing accommodation would need to implement to be considered a home.

Currently, a large part of these newly-formed neighborhoods continues to exist while having abhorrent living conditions. They continue to be unwanted by the general population and attempts are often made to have them displaced/demolished. As for the nomadic way of life, it is reflected in the frequent need for small groups of Roma to relocate and change their place of residence, often caused by their wishes to find better opportunities and livelihoods. These migrants are often looked down upon by the locals and are subject to constant pressure and discriminatory treatment. Unfortunately, in most places the local authorities take no action to resolve their housing situation and are often even unaware of the presence of migrant Roma groups on their local territories. At best, local authorities take advantage of these people by securing their votes through illicit measures for the election cycle.

Here’s an example: at the beginning of the sixties of the last century, in the village of Marchevo, Blagoevgrad, a group of Roma basket-makers were forced to resettle to the outskirts of the village. While they consisted of only a few families at first, as a result of the high birth rate and rapid development of the improvised settlement, by the end of the 20th century there were already over 500 people living in this area. The living conditions were completely unbearable – people living in dugouts and mudbrick cottages, with no access to electricity or water supply and no toilets. The children did not go to school, and their parents made a living with whatever they could find out and about. In order to not disturb the local population, the neighborhood was hidden using a fence. Because of the large amount of residents and in order to not influence the election process for the local authority in the village, these people were registered on a non-existent street not in the village, but in the neighboring municipal center of Garmen. It wasn’t until the new 21st century that some steps were taken toward solving the myriad problems of the neighborhood, but it still continues to exist in a very troubled state.

✓ **Implications of lacking a legal address**

With the amendments made to the Civil Registration Act, adopted in May 2011, restrictions and additional procedural requirements regarding the registration of permanent or current addresses of living were introduced in Bulgaria. These restrictions resulted in over 200 000 people – the majority of which were Roma – being unable to renew or obtain new identity documents (cards) due to their inability to prove their permanent residential address or lack of documents proving ownership, as well as the overcrowding of residences and other issues.

The lack of a legal address and the subsequent deprivation from identifying documents has had some very serious consequences. Generally speaking, individuals without an ID card practically do not exist – they are deprived of their civil rights and cannot access existing public services such as the usual communal services (electricity, water supply, sewage). They cannot use any health and social services, cannot receive assistance during emergencies or natural disaster situations, cannot take part in the labor market or have their children be included in the education system, etc. These people are effectively cut from society and remain completely marginalized.

✓ **Housing market – what can be done**

The housing market in Bulgaria is fairly dynamic, with the prices of residential properties seeing a significant increase in recent years – in some cases, up to a 100% mark-up. Additionally, there is a significant increase in the prices of fees and services that are related to new construction on premises or renovation of existing houses. This, in turn, results in a significant portion of the population with a low income being left out and unable to acquire a new property through the housing market. This also applies just as much to the majority of the Roma, particularly those in a more vulnerable situation. There is an alternative source that can provide access to normal housing conditions for these people – social housing. Though the amount of social housing available to municipalities has only shrunk during the last few years, there is still a significant enough amount of such houses left. While there are special programs aimed at housing Roma in such dwellings, the developments in this direction are mostly negative – the Roma that make use of these opportunities are far and few between.

The main reasons for this are, on the one hand, the prerequisites that must be fulfilled for accommodation which are untenable for most, and, on the other hand, the significant costs associated with renting out and inhabiting these dwellings. To this we can also add the lack of acceptance – which often borders on outright hostility – from the non-Roma toward Roma families in such housing arrangements. During the new program period, one of the priorities is the creation and adoption of conditions to ease access to normal housing. While there are funds planned to be set aside for this type of municipal housing, it is unlikely they will help solve the housing needs of marginalized Roma families specifically. Therefore, the vicious practice of illegal construction that does not meet any construction or hygiene requirements remains an ever-present issue, which then only goes on to deepen the housing separation and segregation issues that Roma face.

An example: during the past program period, a pilot program was implemented aimed at providing housing for vulnerable families. This program was supposed to be implemented in four municipalities. This program included activities for construction/renovation for the existing housing stock, settling and accommodating families in need and providing them with social assistance down the line. Unfortunately, the process of implementation was quickly met with obstacles from the start – in some municipalities such as Burgas and Varna, selected initially to be included in the program, a sudden rise in pressure from both the general population and various nationalist organizations caused these municipalities to suddenly refuse to participate in the program.

As for the territories where the program was implemented, it turned out that not only were the majority of the Roma families unwilling to live in the proposed housing conditions (in apartment blocks), but also not all those actually willing were able to meet all prerequisites and then cover the future costs for living in this housing. In one of the municipalities – Devnya – over 80 families, mainly Roma, were accommodated in a newly renovated apartment block. While initially the costs were covered by the program and everything went over smoothly, gradually Roma families began leaving their apartments due to their inability to cover the living costs. The main shortcomings of the program were that it was not tailored to the wishes and cultural needs of Roma families, as they prefer to live in proper separate homes together with their extended family. Some of the provided housing spaces were too luxuriously furnished and the costs needed to live in them were too high to cover.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As mentioned previously, the right of access to housing in Bulgaria is not yet explicitly mentioned in the normative documents on a national level. There is also a lack of a comprehensive national housing policy for the most impoverished and vulnerable communities. When it comes to the Roma community, the issue for housing conditions is addressed only in the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (NSRBEIPR, hereafter referred to as the Strategy, 2021-2030). Generally, the solution for the housing problems the Roma face is expected to be implemented through the Strategy and its corresponding Action Plan. This strategy has a special section regarding the housing conditions of the Roma community, with the major problems of segregated neighborhoods and the consequences of the people segregated in them having already been identified - there are, however, no specific measures aimed at addressing said problems as of the moment.

According to the “Civil Society Monitoring Report on Implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies in Bulgaria”, the following assessment was made regarding the analytical section of the strategy for the housing policy: “There is only one short paragraph (in the Strategy) describing the “problem of illegal construction” and mentioning the constant risk of evictions. Instead of improving housing conditions, the Strategy is focused on the need to map out segregation and spatial distribution. It’s an important urban planning approach, but it’s just an initial step, not a solution.”⁷

⁷ Roma Civil Monitor 2022 Bulgaria

The operational goal of the “Housing conditions” section of the strategy is “Improving housing conditions, including the adjacent technical infrastructure and public services infrastructure”. This section is focused on improving technical infrastructure, as well as the construction of healthcare and social infrastructure, introducing alternative models of social housing for households from areas with a concentration of poverty and the introduction of the principle of proportionality when issuing orders for demolishing illegal buildings, which are the only singular place of living for their inhabitants. There are, however, no goals or measures aimed at improving the housing conditions of the Roma. There are also no specific measures in the Action Plan regarding this issue. The Civil Society Monitoring Report cited above also includes the following: “In essence, the National Action Plan does not contain any specific measures meeting the goals set in the Strategy, except for the completion of social housing under the Operative Program “Regions in Growth” 2014-2020, for which there exists evidence that only a minimal number are being provided to Roma families.”⁸.

Due to the fact that a majority of the Roma live in these so-called “separate Roma neighborhoods”, where living and housing conditions are very unacceptable, it is necessary to take decisive measures in order to solve the complex problems in these neighborhoods. Practice shows that there is no universal approach or methods which can be applied to solve these issues, as if “with a wave of a magic wand” – instead, it is necessary to conduct a thorough analysis of the problem for each specific settlement or neighborhood and plan specific measures according to the identified issues and problems. This process must be done in close cooperation with all interested parties – the local government, local institutions and local community, as well as the mandatory participation of representatives from every vulnerable community.

The possible solutions regarding the housing and living conditions of the Roma population need to be integrated into wider national activities and legislative initiatives, which should include several important steps:

1. Preparation of a comprehensive analysis of the problem for the specific settlement and, in accordance with the identified problems, to plan specific measures. This process must necessarily be done in close cooperation between all interested parties - local government, local institutions, local community with the mandatory participation of representatives of vulnerable communities.
2. The planned measures should be focused mainly on regulating and improving Roma neighborhoods, as well as expanding the possibilities for families to build their own homes and providing the necessary resources and expert support they might need.
3. To provide further opportunities for inclusion in social housing accommodation programs for the most vulnerable families that are in extreme poverty, have a large number of children, have consistently sick/absent figures in the family, etc. In order to ensure the success of such programs, however, it’s important to not only provide a housing solution but to also determine and provide long-term social and psychological support for Roma families living in these housing accommodations.
4. Ensuring the necessary resource support for the municipalities which have a key role in the implementation of these programs.

⁸ Roma Civil Monitor 2022 Bulgaria

5. Carrying out explanatory activities among the majority in the settlements where social housing is provided, to increase the sensitivity and degree of acceptance of the measures taken

6. Combining pure housing policies with development policies and various measures to create opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship.

7. Development and implementation of schemes to increase administrative capacity in municipalities to attract and retain investors, as well as to support local entrepreneurship (including in the Roma community).

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