



OMBUDSMAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

# **RIGHTS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY CAMPAIGNS**

**REVIEW OF EVENTS 2019 - 2024**

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

## Rights of access to healthcare

- To support Roma communities' access to healthcare, the following measures are recommended by Ombudsman Diana Kovatcheva in 2019:
  - Speed up the adoption of an ordinance on the requirements for the work of **health mediators** to increase the possibility for a more effective prevention among vulnerable population groups, especially children.
  - Take urgent measures to update the Information System for births which contains information in real time about the scope of pregnant women and children with prophylactic examinations and information about premature births. The system has not been functional since the beginning of 2019 and no adequate actions have been taken yet to eliminate the problem.
  - Take adequate measures to update the obsolete regulatory framework for the work of medical offices at kindergartens and schools.
  - Urgently develop and adopt a standard of obstetrics and gynaecology; one has not been adopted since 2017.

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

- **Rights of Roma children and Roma families**
- Based on inquiries carried out on complaints and policy monitoring, **the Ombudsman notes the lack of a targeted family policy and the effectiveness of social payments for Roma communities.**
- Access to social benefits is often difficult for Roma families due to the lack of knowledge and information, heavy administrative barriers, restrictive conditions and guidelines.
- Discriminatory societal attitudes, stigma and unequal treatment of vulnerable groups of children lead to their further exclusion. Following the introduction of distance learning in e-learning environment, the Ombudsman found that access to education for Roma children was very limited.
- **In the opinion of the Ombudsman, targeted action is needed to improve the implementation and effectiveness of Roma inclusion measures, their participation in decision-making and inclusion, which will significantly improve the environment in which children live and develop.**
- Special attention should be paid to issues of marginalization, social exclusion and poverty, especially young Roma men and women.

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

- Rights of Roma children in the context of COVID-19 lockdown
  - In the beginning of 2021, the Ombudsman prepared a special report Children and COVID. Impact of the Crisis on the Rights and Interests of Children. The report analyses the state of the rights of children and the impact of the emergency measures on them. The study identifies risk groups of children who are visibly subject to a negative impact from the measures or the pandemic itself.
  - Three key topics were identified which were presented in detail in view of the data analyses:
    - Isolation imposed on children by the services of residential care and the institutions for children living in Roma quarters;
    - Limitations of distance learning for children who live in separation from their families and children whose families do not provide the necessary conditions and support for studies at home;
    - Access to social support, protection and services for vulnerable families and children in the context of the restriction measures.

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

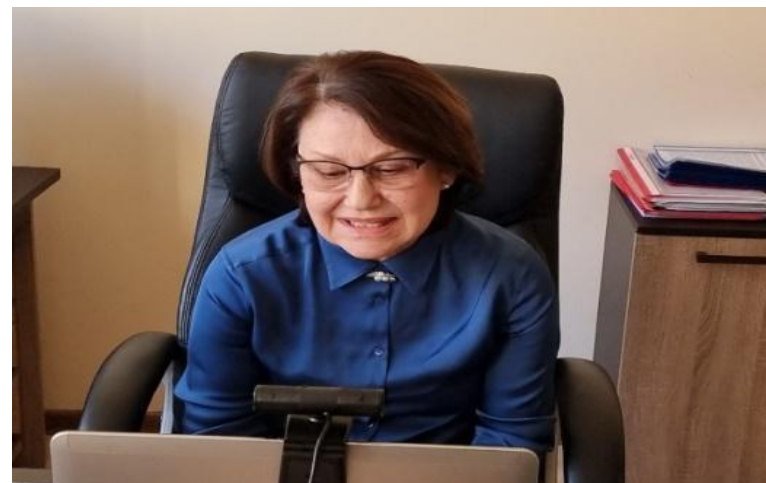
## Rights of Roma women

- Another important topic the Ombudsman focuses on are the rights of Roma women and their participation in the social and economic life.
- The Ombudsman notes **several problem areas in relation to the protection of the rights of Roma women:**
  - low level of education and early school leaving,
  - early marriage,
  - poverty and unemployment,
  - as well as a high level of domestic violence due to a significant number of stereotypes and prejudice.
- According to the Ombudsman, an integrated and decentralised approach is needed to resolve these problems successfully, especially with respect to Roma girls and women, which will have a sustainable impact on their lives and will contribute to their social inclusion, equal opportunities and access to universal rights.

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

Ombudsman Prof. Dr. Diana Kovacheva participated online in the **Discussion Forum “Policies for equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma: an investment in the better future of Bulgaria”**, organised by the Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance.

At the end of February, Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva and Deputy Ombudsman Elena Cherneva-Markova participated in the final conference of the Justrom programme in several consecutive days. The programme is a joint project of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, which aims to improve access to justice for Roma women. The project is implemented in 4 European countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Italy and Greece.



# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

- National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2022-2030)
  - In the Annual Activity Report of the Ombudsman for 2021, **the Ombudsman notes that an important political sign** for the integration process is for **the National Strategy to be** brought to the attention of the National Assembly and **approved by an act of the legislative body**.
  - The Ombudsman shares the objections of the Roma organisations and recommends that they be actively included in the process of preparing important strategic documents and in the implementation of the planned measures and activities.
  - However, the strategy was only approved by a decision of the Council of Ministers, which, as noted by Roma organizations that actively participated in the process of drafting the strategy, is a setback and does not give a clear sign that a political consensus has been reached on the subject.

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

- **The Ombudsman in defence of the right of access to healthcare of pregnant Roma women**
- For years in Bulgaria there is a problem with the right of access to healthcare for uninsured women, whose pregnancies are not monitored by specialists, they give birth without being monitored during their pregnancy and without the necessary tests. The data provided show that every tenth woman in childbearing age does not have health insurance. Over 105,000 women in Bulgaria do not have health insurance and 40% of them or about 60,000 women are of Roma ethnic origin. Based on data from the National Health Insurance Fund, 75% (78,750) of these women did not have any tests during pregnancy.
- For the Ombudsman this data points to a serious problem, as uninsured women in Bulgaria cannot receive medical care and equal access to timely, quality and affordable healthcare.
- **Positive result** – upon Ombudsman's recommendation, pregnant women with no social insurance got access to medical care, including at least four examinations and basic tests in their package.



# PROBLEMS OF ROMA COMMUNITY

## • EVICTIONS

- The issuing and execution of orders for the demolition of illegal residential buildings particularly adversely and disproportionately affects mainly Roma families. The reasons given by the authorities for the forced removal of homes are mainly "that the buildings are illegal, dangerous to the lives and health of those living in them, illegal occupation of lands that are municipal property or property of other entities".
- Once again, the Ombudsman finds it necessary to recall his opinion that the authorities should not be influenced by the hostility of one group against another and their actions should not aim to satisfy the demands of only one party. It is imperative that every effort be made not to focus this problem on the ethnicity of the individuals affected.
- For another year, the ombudsman expresses her concern that the prepared amendments to the Law on State Property, the Law on Municipal Property and the Law on Territorial Planning, which aim to introduce the principle of proportionality in the demolition of illegal construction, have not been considered and adopted.

# PROBLEMS OF ROMA COMMUNITY

- **PERSONS WITHOUT ADDRESS REGISTRATION AND IDENTITY DOCUMENTS**
  - For another year, the ombudsman **draws as well the attention of the National Assembly to a serious problem** that has direct consequences for citizens affected by eviction, namely **leaving them without an up-to-date address registration** and, as a result, the **inability to possess identity documents**.
  - Regarding the problem raised, **the Ombudsman found that the current regime for address registration, regulated in the Civil Registration Act (CRA), creates a number of problems for citizens affected by eviction**. Legislation does not provide for exceptions for address registration of citizens who lost their home as a result of its removal due to illegality.
  - **The Ombudsman insists on finding a solution to the outlined problems, incl. and by means of legislative changes in the Civil Procedure Code and expresses confidence that the problems will be subjected to a careful analysis and legislative decisions will be made to protect the rights of citizens.**

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

## • THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ROMA

- In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, there is a deterioration in the situation of Roma communities and the likelihood that the economic and social consequences of the crisis will affect them most seriously and deepen existing inequalities. To a large extent, the COVID-19 crisis has had a disproportionately negative effect on minority children. They are subject to particular vulnerability, frequent lack of food, poor housing and living conditions, overcrowding, as well as limited access to digital devices and/or educational needs of the parents who should support them. During the declared state of emergency in the country, police checkpoints were placed at the entrances and exits of Roma neighborhoods in the cities of Sofia, Yambol, Sliven, Nova Zagora and Kazanlak. This also led to serious tension in the Roma neighborhoods.
- In this regard, the ombudsman emphasizes that, under certain circumstances, the negative consequences can escalate to the point of serious public tension and marginalization of large groups of citizens, giving impetus to xenophobia and intolerance.
- In this context, the ombudsman once again draws attention to the need to take special measures with regard to Roma girls in connection with their dropping out of the education system due to "arranged marriages", which limits their opportunities for development and social inclusion.

# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

- **Support for children of labor migrant**

- Ombudsman Diana Kovatcheva hosted a public discussion: “The child between labour migration, institutional standards and extended family”, organised jointly with the ROMACT Programme of the EC and the Council of Europe.

*“Every fourth child in Bulgaria is abandoned by their parents, or somewhere about 20-25% of the children in our country are practically without one or both of their parents who work abroad. In the Roma community, the percentage reaches 40%. These are children who are left in the care of their grandparents, their extended family. And when I say that one in four children is a Viber-child who only communicates with their parents via Viber, I’m actually quoting an old statistics, because the truth is that today we don’t know how many children are actually victims of this problem. Moreover, poverty among children from the Roma community is as well alarming, which, according to Eurostat data, is over 80%; ”*

The purpose of the forum was to raise public and institutional awareness and sensitivity to the vulnerability of children of labour migrants, especially children left behind in poor and marginalised communities, by parents who have gone to work abroad. The aim was to identify the needs of children and their extended families, as well as the need for integrated support and attention.

The forum set out the target to work for the effective inclusion of Roma children and children from vulnerable groups in education, adopting supportive measures aimed at preventing school drop-outs.



# PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

- **CAMPAIGN FOR KEEPING THE EDUCATIONAL MEDIATORS - RECOMMENDATION TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE**
  - On the occasion of the presented information about the termination of the program "Support of educational mediators and social workers" and the Project "Active inclusion in the system of preschool education", effective from July 1, 2023 by the Ministry of Education and Science, the ombudsman turned to the Minister of Education and Science for their continuation and for the **preservation of educational mediators**, without burdening the budgets of educational institutions.
  - During the Covid-19 pandemic, educational mediators have proven in practice that they have a full-fledged role in the educational environment for the integration of children and students from ethnic minorities, for changing the attitudes of their families towards education.
  - During the long-lasting distance learning, they made the connection between the school and families who do not have the opportunity to provide access to the Internet in their homes, distributed various educational materials and thus managed to include the children in the learning process, especially in small settlements.
  - **Positive result** – the "Support of educational mediators and social workers" got additional funding and is continued as a sustainable state policy.





## How to contact the National Ombudsman?



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