

PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts that were to erupt following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. PER conducts programs of high-level intervention and dialogue and serves as a neutral mediator in several major disputes in the region. PER also conducts programs of training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels.

PER is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with additional funding from the Starr Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Philip D. Reed Foundation, and the Council of Europe.

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R e p o r t

APRIL 24-25, 1998



LOM, BULGARIA

THE ROMA IN BULGARIA:
COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS
BETWEEN LOCAL AUTHORITIES
AND NONGOVERNMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS

BULGARIA

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PREFACE

The status of the Roma in Bulgaria is similar to the status of the Roma in many other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. All of the components that produce poverty and despair are prominently displayed. Unemployment in many Romani communities approaches 90 percent. Education beyond the grade-school level is a rarity. Adequate health-care and other basic services are virtually nonexistent.

In the face of these and other challenges, Bulgaria has undertaken measures to promote the integration of its large, impoverished, and historically ostracized Romani communities. Romani nongovernmental organizations, together with local authorities in the town of Lom, have undertaken to improve the quality of life in Romani neighborhoods. These cooperative efforts have targeted the underlying causes of the poverty in a substantive and comprehensive way. Through a combination of education, employment training and requalification programs, health-care initiatives, and steps to incorporate Romani neighborhoods into the system of municipal services, Lom has offered to its Romani population—and others in the region—a model for achieving concrete improvements in their standard of living.

In an effort both to learn from what has been accomplished and to encourage further progress, the Project on Ethnic Relations, together with the Council of Europe and the Roma-Lom Foundation, gathered a select group of Romani leaders, national and local government representatives, and Bulgarian and international experts in relevant fields to assess recent achievements and to exchange ideas on what the next steps might be. They met in Lom, on the banks of the Danube River, on April 24 and 25, 1998.

In many ways, the two days of discussion represented the ongoing debate, often tense and passionate, about who should provide desperately needed social services to those most in need, the government or private sector. Those in the government acknowledge its responsibility to address the needs of the Romani communities but argue that it does not have the necessary financial resources to do so. Those representing NGO's on the other hand, expressed a recurring frustration that the government expects the private sector to take over what is the government's fundamental responsibility—the provision of social services to its citizens in need. They argue that the level of need is so great that the government must assume a more prominent role in the public-private partnership to provide assistance.

From the discussion it became clear that the government can not expect NGOs to take over all of its functions. Rather, state and local governments will need to work in cooperation with Romani and other organizations to achieve sorely needed improvements in the quality of life for the Roma in Bulgaria. It is also clear that the time for direct and consolidated action is short before violence replaces dialogue.

The report that follows summarizes the two days of discussion. The complexity of the problems will be readily apparent. It is clear that progress has been made in Lom and that it has been the result of dedication, commitment, and cooperative efforts on the part of a remarkable coalition of the affected parties. Although the particulars of solutions elsewhere will differ with the circumstances, PER believes that the cooperation between the Roma and local authorities lies at the heart of the recent successes in Lom and warrants special attention.

The persistence of the bleak situation and lack of significant and immediate improvements for the Roma in Bulgaria and elsewhere however, threaten to unleash wide scale social unrest. Indeed, only one month after the PER meeting members of Lom's Romani community went on a hunger strike and one tried to set himself on fire to draw attention to their plight as victims of discrimination and to protest unpaid social benefits. Recurring challenges and expressions of discontent among the Roma in Lom serve only to underscore the urgency of finding—and applying—practical, and practicable, solutions.

The report was prepared by Lyudmila Atanasova of the Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives Foundation (CEGA). It was edited by Warren R. Haffar of PER's Princeton staff and Robert A. Feldmesser, PER's senior editor. As always, the remarks of the participants are reported without named attributions, in order to encourage frank discussion. However, a list of the participants is appended. The participants have not reviewed the text, for which PER assumes full responsibility.

Livia B. Plaks, *Executive Director*
Princeton, New Jersey
August 1998

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this report, as in past reports, the Project on Ethnic Relations has adopted the practice of using the term *Roma* to refer to the ethnic group often called “Gypsies” (or, in parts of Europe, the several variants of “Tsigan”), and to the members of that group. Many members of the group consider “Gypsies” (and “Tsigan”) to be pejorative names. A single member of the group is called a *Rom*, the adjective for the group, as well as the term for its language and culture, is *Romani*.



Nikolai Kirilov and Bogomil Kolchev at the meeting.

INTRODUCTION

The meeting was opened by the executive director of the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER), who welcomed the participants and pointed out that the purpose of the meeting was to learn how the Lom authorities and the Roma have been able to cooperate and obtain results that are beneficial for the Roma in the area. It is very encouraging, she said, to see that where there is political will and constructive dialogue, creative and positive results can emerge. PER's experience working on the international, national, and local levels on Romani issues in Europe indicates that local solutions to these issues are often the most effective ones. The cooperative efforts between the local authorities and the Roma in Lom could become a model of how such relations should be handled.

The mayor of Lom also welcomed the participants and reiterated that the measures that have been taken in Lom may well become a model for cooperation between ethnic minorities and local authorities. He said that in Lom the local authorities and the Romani population have very good relations, and he was pleasantly surprised that some of the initiatives that were started in Lom two and a half years ago are reflected in current proposals for reform.

The president of the Roma-Lom Foundation added his welcome to the participants, on behalf of all the Romani people and the town of Lom. He expressed his thanks to the participants for coming to share their knowledge and experience and to explore additional avenues for improving the conditions of the Roma in Lom.

The coordinator of activities for Roma at the Council of Europe joined the others in welcoming the participants, adding that it was with great pleasure that the Council was able to serve as one of the sponsors of the meeting. He said that ethnic relations have become one of the Council's priorities in recent years and that a main achievement in that area is the new Framework Convention on National Minorities, recently ratified by Bulgaria. The Council believes that it is necessary to give particular attention to the situation of the Roma. It has created a Specialist Group on the Roma, with whose help the Council assists governments in Central and Eastern Europe in the development of policies for the improvement of the situation of the Romani populations.

People often get the impression, continued this participant, that the problems of the Roma are extremely difficult to solve, if not altogether

insoluble. The Council is keen to correct that impression by disseminating information about positive experiences, such as those in Lom.

The chairman of the Project on Ethnic Relations Romani Advisory Council (PERRAC) said that he had not often seen a situation similar to the one in Lom where there is a combination of resources and concerted efforts to mobilize them on behalf of the Roma. As an organization that tries to look at problems and find solutions, PERRAC is interested in learning more about what has been accomplished in Lom.

The mayor of Lom pointed out that the municipality has a population of 45,507, of whom 36,000 live in Lom proper and the rest in nine surrounding villages. An estimated 12,000 Roma live in Lom. "They are our fellow-citizens and our friends," he said. But it is a fact that 86 percent of those 12,000 Roma are unemployed. This is the result of the policies of different governments, low education levels, lack of professional skills, poor living standards, and low social status.

What has the municipal authority done to address these issues, he asked? A representative of the Roma is a member of the municipal council, and three sessions of the municipal council have been dedicated specifically to the problems of the Roma. One of the first steps taken was the construction of sewers along Timok Street, one of the major streets in a Romani neighborhood. A second step was to launch a program for providing agricultural land to the Roma. It was very difficult to get this program under way, because the Roma of Lom had no tradition of cultivating the land. Nevertheless, the land program has been successful and has now been continued for a second year. The municipality also has joint activities for cleaning and sanitation. Preschool facilities for children up to six years old have been established, and free bus service to these facilities from one of the three Romani neighborhoods is provided.

The municipal authority is striving to promote the self-confidence and equality of rights of the Romani population. A particular problem here is that many of the Roma had previously worked in the state-owned plants. After the fall of Communism, production at these plants was reduced to a minimum, and large numbers of the workers were dismissed. Many Roma, along with other Bulgarians, lost their jobs. That is one reason for the high unemployment rate, probably one of the highest in Bulgaria. But according to the law, local authorities cannot intervene in the activities of the formerly state-owned plants.

The mayor closed by saying that he was grateful, both personally and in his capacity as mayor, to the Romani and non-Romani nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have been working in these difficult circumstances. The city of Lom has been able to achieve significant results only through joint efforts with these organizations.

The president of the Roma-Lom Foundation described the current status of the Romani population in Lom. The Roma live in four neighborhoods, each inhabited by a different group of Roma and each at a different level of development. The majority of the Roma worked in the big industrial plants until 1989, when they were closed. After they were closed, 94 percent of the Roma became unemployed. The Roma have reduced employment opportunities because of their low qualifications. Many Romani children drop out of school, and this has an impact on their prospects in the labor market.

The low living standard of the Roma has a destructive influence on their health, he continued. The mortality rate has been rising in recent years. Only 5 percent of the Roma reach retirement age, whereas for the rest of the population the corresponding figure is 35 percent. One of the most serious problems is tuberculosis. Recently, the Roma-Lom Foundation tested seventy children from one of the neighborhoods for tuberculosis; forty of them tested positive.

The Roma are trapped in poverty, he continued. The basic occupation of this population now is gathering scrap iron—a resource that is itself in short supply. The other “occupations” are petty larceny and begging. Those who are qualified seek jobs elsewhere, more often than not with little success.

The Roma-Lom Foundation was established in November 1996 to design and implement activities for meeting the needs of the Roma. A survey that it conducted found that the Roma in Lom believed that their three biggest problems were unemployment, low educational level and low levels of school attendance, and the poor condition of the infrastructure in the neighborhoods. The foundation has adopted an increase in educational levels as its priority goal.

In order to effectively accomplish these higher education levels, the foundation needs partners that share its views. The most appropriate partner in Lom is the local government. Its willingness to seriously address the problems of the Roma is illustrated by the creation of an official position

of “expert on contacts with the minorities.” This happened before Bulgaria signed the Framework Convention on Minorities. The municipality has also provided the Roma-Lom Foundation with free office space.

Among other things, the foundation provides free consultations to the citizens. To date, about seven thousand applications for assistance have been filed with the Social Welfare Department and the Labor Bureau.

Another result of cooperation with the municipality, as already mentioned, is the initiation of a one-year project to install a sewage system on a major street in a Romani neighborhood. The foundation purchased the necessary materials and the municipality took responsibility for the construction. As part of this project, the electric cables in two neighborhoods, originally installed in 1960, were replaced. The municipality has also furnished the foundation with land free of charge; the foundation is committed to securing funds for the cultivation of this land and to distributing it to landless Romani families.

In 1997, the foundation, together with the Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives Foundation (CEGA), began a program that has enabled two hundred children to return to school. The program provides free breakfasts and pays half of the kindergarten fees for the children.

Another program sponsored fifty Romani families to enter into agriculture—an indication of an important change of attitude in this traditionally urban group. After the farming season ends and after completion of the land redistribution, the families will be able to buy the redistributed land with installment payments over a long period.

This year, the municipal government provided the Mladenovo neighborhood with land on which to plant vegetables. The foundation provided seedlings and funds to start the cultivation. The residents of the neighborhood will invest their money and labor and in turn will receive the crops and learn how to generate income.

The local authorities have initiated the procedure for bringing legal status to the Humata neighborhood, where thirty-five hundred Roma live. The residents had been without drinking water for six months. In negotiations with the local water-supply company, the municipality stood by the neighborhood and the problem was resolved.

At the end of the first year of cooperative efforts, the local government adopted a long-term program that focuses on the most critical problems of the Roma. As part of this program, school children in the Romani

community will be taught the Bulgarian language, to help them prepare for integration into the educational system. There will be qualified teachers, and they will have assistants of Romani origin. The municipality will also provide free transportation for children from one of the Romani neighborhoods.

Finally, the Roma-Lom Foundation has created a database of part-time and temporary job opportunities for the Roma. The municipality assisted in establishing contacts with agricultural cooperatives, private companies, and craftsmen.

This participant closed by saying that a great deal has been achieved in a relatively short period. The Roma-Lom Foundation believes that it has found the proper approach to solving the problems of the Roma: cooperation and communication with the local authorities and state institutions, as has been the case in Lom.

The representative from the Lom Police Department cited the figure that 45 percent of the criminals in the region are of Romani origin. The picture is quite similar in other regions, he said. The reason lies in the problems that the Roma have to face. Last year, the Roma-Lom Foundation proposed that special efforts be made to safeguard land that had been planted with corn, and the police accepted the proposal. As a result, crops were gathered without any losses.

The police cooperate with Romani organizations on a number of other projects, such as the establishment of self-defense and volunteer groups in the neighborhoods. To reduce juvenile delinquency and increase school attendance, the police have started holding meetings with parents and teachers. Unfortunately, little interest has been shown by the relevant institutions, but the police have found the NGOs to be good partners.

PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

The representative from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy commented that between 50 and 60 percent of Bulgarian citizens receiving public assistance are Romani. In Lom, the figure is 75 percent. Obviously, the low educational level of the Roma is an obstacle to their employment. But in addition, the Roma have some traditional characteristics that need to be taken into account. For example, there is a large number of single mothers among the Romani population.

Last year, a new regulation on social support was adopted, with special

provisions for children, including Romani children. The obligatory allowances called for under the decree for birth promotion had not been paid for years, but in December 1997, all government debts from 1995 and 1996 were paid. For the most part, however, this money has not been used in the way intended—to meet primary needs—not only in Lom but everywhere in the country. People often sell the goods that are provided, especially coal.

The new social support law, continued this participant, should lead to improvements in the social welfare departments. It establishes higher educational requirements for social workers who work with minority groups. There is also a provision in the law that NGOs, as well as other institutions, have the right to offer social services. Issues such as these concern not only the Roma but all Bulgarians. Finally, it must be understood that, while the government will stand by its commitments to children and to those who are disabled, diseased, or elderly, all who are healthy and able to work must do so and not rely on the government.

Responding to this point, the chairman of PERRAC said that, although people keep mentioning that more than 90 percent of Roma are unemployed, being unemployed is not their choice. To say to them, “Help yourselves!” when there are no jobs and no employment opportunities does not make good policy.

The representative from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy pointed out that one of the government’s commitments is to develop employment programs in regions with high unemployment. A social investment fund, supported by the World Bank, is in the process of being set up, she said, and job-creation programs will be financed through this fund. She added that the government does not refuse help to people who have no income. Education in Bulgaria is free and compulsory. The labor bureaus organize retraining courses and have programs to help people find temporary employment.

A representative from the office of the president of Bulgaria said that what has been done during the past year by the Lom municipal authority and the Roma-Lom Foundation is impressive. They set very ambitious goals, and they have achieved them. It would be very interesting to hear about the relationship between the local authorities and NGOs in other places. People know best about the problems of their own communities, and they know the best ways to solve them. More efforts must be made to increase cooperation between the local governments and

NGOs. PER can also help us to see what the possibilities are and what practices in other countries can be applied here. Judging from a recent report from PER about a meeting in Hungary, the problems of the Roma there are very similar to the problems here. The Romani organizations in Hungary work well with the local authorities, and this type of working relationship must be applied in Bulgaria.

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The participant from the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Problems (NCEDP) of the Council of Ministers said that the agency he represented was created on December 4, 1997. It is based on the premise that no one individual or organization can offer a clear

“recipe” for solving the problems of ethnic minorities. The challenge, he said, is to overcome deep-rooted ethnic prejudices. These prejudices have existed for centuries, so they cannot be eliminated in two or three years.

The modus operandi of the NCEDP is to draw up agreements that are binding on those who sign them. These agreements remain open for the involvement of other organizations that might eventually decide that some particular agreement is beneficial to them. The NCEDP has already had its first agreement adopted. The first item of this agreement calls for the establishment of a Working Group on Romani Issues, which will function as an interministerial consultative body.

The coordinator for Rromani CRISS said that the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe had approved two resolutions concerning the role and responsibilities of local authorities dealing with the Roma and their contribution to greater interethnic tolerance in Europe. In the appendices of these resolutions, a number of steps are recommended in the areas of employment, education, and health care. One point emphasized in these resolutions is that there must be cooperation between local authorities and Romani organizations in devising a more comprehensive approach to social, economic, and cultural issues.

There are not many instances in which these recommendations have been followed, he continued. Since the local authorities in Lom and the Romani organizations have achieved a remarkable level of cooperation, their relationships should be formalized in an agreement that would give

greater visibility to the Roma-Lom Foundation and would be prestigious for the local authority. It would serve as a positive example, and positive examples attract resources.

The president of the Roma-Lom Foundation said that he would like to thank the deputy minister of labor and social policy on behalf of the entire Romani population in the Lom region for the allowances that have been paid, after a delay of more than two years. It was a substantial sum of money, badly needed by the Romani families, many of whom had debts in almost every food store in Lom. These debts have now been largely repaid.

Returning to the matter of the coal that was mentioned earlier, the representative from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy said that there were problems with Toplivo, the private company that supplied the coal. These problems should have been resolved prior to signing the contract, but unfortunately that was not done. If a family had the right to two tons of coal, for example, they had to pay twenty-four thousand leva for weighing and loading, and then thirty thousand leva more for transport to the Romani neighborhoods, a distance of four or five kilometers. So it turned out that it was more profitable for people to sell the coal than to have it brought to their homes.

It was mentioned that education is free and accessible to all, he continued. This is true in the sense that there are no tuition fees. But education requires more than that. Children need textbooks, notebooks, pens and pencils, crayons, and paintbrushes. There is one Romani neighborhood, six kilometers from Lom, where the poorest people live. Under recent regulations that are part of the reform in the education system, the local school there will be closed down. So education is not so cheap for these people; it won't even be accessible.

The ministry has observed, he concluded, that the members of one ethnic group are not aware of the “cultural code” of other groups, and that impedes their understanding of one another. Unfortunately, the gap between ethnic Bulgarians and the Roma is growing.

NGO INITIATIVES

The representative of the Roma-Lom Foundation said that his organization does not divide people into Roma, Turks, and so on. Rather, people are divided into those who are socially disadvantaged and those who are not. The foundation's programs are not intended for the Roma only. When children are to be fed, they are not separated into Bulgarians and

Roma; all the children who need it are fed. When the foundation distributes land, it does so not only for the Roma, but for all of the landless and socially disadvantaged people. When a Bulgarian enters the foundation's office, he is not turned away; he is offered help. This is how good ethnic relations are created.

The representative from the Romani Bureau Foundation–Sofia entered the discussion by congratulating the city of Lom on its achievements.

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The people who are best acquainted with the situation in the communities, he said, are those who live and work there. The Romani Bureau Sofia works with 120,000 Roma who live in four neighborhoods. The official figure for unemployment in Bulgaria is about 16 or 17

percent, but among the Roma in Bulgaria it is around 85 percent. In some neighborhoods, it reaches 100 percent.

More than half of Romani children drop out of school between the first and the eighth grades, this participant continued. It is tempting to explain this by saying that these children are lazy, they marry early, and so on. But the language problem must not be overlooked. Romani children begin their studies with textbooks in Bulgarian, a language that is unfamiliar to more than half of them. Then they are tested at the end of the year and are pronounced to be backward and mentally retarded. The illiteracy rate for Bulgaria as a whole is 2-3 percent, but for the Roma it is 25 percent. Among the Roma in Sofia, it is 32 percent. About 55 percent of the Roma there have only an elementary education, and less than 1 percent have a higher education.

The general conclusion from these figures, he said in closing, is that the Bulgarian state does not take care of the nation's Roma. Many commissions and councils are created, but none of them have had any success, because none of them have any Romani representation. Government officials need to listen carefully to the Romani organizations. Each of the organizations represented here can say what the situation in its town is. Some kind of common solution to their common problems should be sought. This conference will be effective only if concrete results are produced.

In response to a question about the relationship between the Romani Bureau Foundation–Sofia and the municipality of Sofia, the representa-

tive from the foundation said that not a single problem that had been raised at the level of the municipality has been resolved favorably. For example, some of the Roma with large families have not received a place to live. The municipality chooses not to deal with such problems. On the other hand, the foundation has been working very well with the Sofia districts—for instance, Krasna, Polyana, and Lyulin.

The representative from the Romani Self-Help Bureau–Sliven expressed his disagreement with earlier comments that there was a lack of professional skills among the Roma. Regarding opportunities for cooperation between NGOs and the local government, he continued, the latter's willingness to participate in such efforts

is suspect. There are many documents at the Romani Bureau, coming from different state agencies that say, "to serve as proof before the Romani Bureau." But the Romani Bureau is not a judicial institution. Seeing that the NGOs can find ways of solving various social problems, and that they can raise funds from Bulgarian and international

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agencies, the government is inclined to say, "Let the Roma alone, they will manage by themselves." Thus, the link between the two sides is broken, and constructive dialogue becomes impossible.

The participant from the Romani Public Council–Sofia gave a brief description of his organization and its purpose and strategies. Registered in December 1997, the Council is engaged in humanitarian aid. It has good working contacts with the local governments in Sofia and in Doupnitsa. The municipality of Sofia provided a building for the Romani Cultural and Information Center, and the municipality of Doupnitsa provided a building for an orphanage that will be opened in May 1998.

In Vrubnitsa, a neighborhood in Sofia, the Council has been working on the problems of education. With the help of the municipality, the school board, and the general public, efforts are being made to increase the number of children attending school, and also to feed them and provide them with clothes. But there are difficulties. Many parents do not let their children go to school because drugs are being sold in the schoolyard.

The current attitudes toward the Roma in Bulgaria, he continued, are negative, formed over the course of many years. When these attitudes become more positive, it will be easier to get assistance from the non-governmental sector. Examples of this are the Roma-Lom Foundation and similar organizations operating in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, and Sofia. Thus, the government must develop serious and meaningful programs to change attitudes—not only the attitudes of Bulgarians toward the Roma but also the attitudes of the Roma themselves. The Roma do not make the most of the opportunities that are available to them. They are used to waiting for someone else to take care of the problems, for this is how they have been treated for many years. Changing these attitudes is one of the purposes of the Romani Cultural and Information Center. It will collect and store information for all Bulgarian and foreign agencies and organizations.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

The representative from the Lom Labor Bureau outlined that office's responsibilities. The bureau provides services to forty-four residential districts in a single region, each with its own economic, ethnic, and geographic characteristics. It is an agricultural region whose population includes a large number of Roma. Unemployment in the region is probably around 50 percent. Most of the unemployed lack educational and vocational qualifications and have been clients of the Lom Labor Bureau for between one and five years. Finding jobs for such people is a very difficult process, especially with the current economic stagnation in the country. The private sector is still not providing work for the people dismissed from the state enterprises as a result of the structural reform.

The bureau has been involved in joint work with the Roma-Lom Foundation ever since the foundation was established. Their first joint activity was the Literacy Program, a pilot project in Lom and Sliven. The program was structured around three modules: literacy courses, upgrading of qualifications, and employment. Fifty-four Roma completed the literacy courses and thirty-three continued with the qualifications courses. Forty-one Roma were placed in jobs. One of the conditions for participating in the program was that the participants send their children to school on a regular basis.

In cooperation with the mayor's office and the Roma-Lom Foundation, the Lom Labor Bureau has also worked to provide agricultural land to

Romani families. The bureau made a list of the most destitute people and tried to stimulate them to start cultivating the land.

A program called "From Social Care to Employment" is being developed in cooperation with a team from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Bulgarian National Employment Office. The program is aimed at meeting the needs of people who have hitherto relied on social benefits. After participating in courses to improve their qualifications, they are given jobs and have the opportunity to provide for themselves. More than 60 percent of the people taking part in this program are Roma. Another collaborative project is the Program for Alternative Employment, which is directed toward people completely without education or qualifications. Here, too, more than 60 percent of the participants are Roma. Methodological assistance in the organization of courses, selection of participants and trainers, and design and preparation of plans for suitable training programs are provided.

The Lom Labor Bureau has very good specialists capable of providing a full range of services to its clients. One of these specialists is of Romani origin. The bureau is currently discussing the possibility of opening an education center, whose function would be to provide motivation and offer practical advice to make the unemployed competitive in the labor market. The bureau is also discussing the establishment of an employment association in cooperation with the municipality, the state government, private companies, and the Roma-Lom Foundation. There are many Romani businessmen in Lom, but they are not organized into any sort of association or union of Romani employers. Such an association would surely be helpful.

A participant from the labor bureau in Plovdiv said that the labor bureaus in the country have two basic policy approaches, one passive and one active. The passive approach involves making payments to people who become unemployed. In the active approach, the bureau tries to find a balance between demand and supply in the labor market. The staff of the bureaus are not simply administrators in this process; they are mediators implementing governmental policies for overcoming unemployment and encouraging employment.

The Labor Bureau in Plovdiv, she continued, is the largest in the country. It is also the first bureau to work with the U.S. Labor Department. In 1992, it began a Program for Qualification, Literacy, and Employment in Regions with Mixed Ethnic Populations. This program was approved

by the Council of Ministers in 1993, and pilot efforts were undertaken in the Stolipinovo neighborhood in Plovdiv soon afterward.

LAND REFORM AND OTHER INITIATIVES

A participant from the Hebros Foundation declared that for many Romani families, the only viable course of action at the present time is cultivating the land. Immediate measures must be taken to lend the Roma money for land purchase from municipal and state land funds; the loans can be paid back over a period of time. Many of the Roma are willing to cultivate the land but lack the financial resources with which to begin.

As far as education is concerned, he paid tribute to the work of the Open Society Fund and the CEGA Foundation. The payment of kindergarten fees and the feeding of the children proved to be successful in increasing school enrollment. But this is only a temporary program; it will end in

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May. Perhaps the government should reconsider the matter of kindergarten fees. Kindergarten is the place where children learn how to communicate in Bulgarian.

The representative from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy commented that the fact that

NGOs are doing more and more is a good thing. This is what “civic society” is and should be. NGOs are able to do things without all the bureaucratic requirements that state agencies have to observe. Bulgarian society is undergoing a radical process of decentralization, in which the state does less and delegates more of its responsibilities to NGOs.

The government would rather create jobs than simply provide social allowances. This does not mean that the government will stop paying the allowances. In the process of restructuring and privatization, the government will use its funds to mitigate the unfavorable consequences of decentralization.

The representative from Rromani CRISS commented that, from the point of view of a foreigner coming from Romania, which faces similar problems, the discussion had become too focused on unemployment and on provisions for finding jobs for the Roma. In Romania, a portion of the Roma did not work even before 1989, but that was by choice. They

rejected being “employed” in the ordinary sense—having regular working hours and receiving regular paychecks. These people, however, worked and provided for themselves and their families. They were entrepreneurs in an economy strongly dominated by the state. Often, they were forced to work on the black market. Now, in the transition economy, they have the chance to legalize their activities.

The Roma, he continued, have forced those of us at Rromani CRISS to change our perceptions of what “employment” and “unemployment” mean. In all the formerly socialist countries, people were raised to be dependent on the state for jobs, salaries, and social protection. It appears that in Bulgaria, as in Romania, there is a certain degree of nostalgia for a system that provided everything, so now everyone wants the NGOs to perform these same functions.

What should be the goals for the future of the Roma—to make them dependent on social benefits provided by others or to enable them to help themselves and to be competitive in the labor market? From the discussion, it seems as though many people believe that a constant stream of resources must be directed toward the Roma. But programs that encourage self-help are what are needed—although this is not to say that the government has no responsibility to provide in some way for its Romani citizens.

The representative from the CEGA Foundation put forth the idea that the choice was between survival and development. This meeting would be more useful if the focus was on how to invest in the future so that there will be generations of children who will be able to go to school and parents who will be able to go to work.

The participant from the Lom Municipal Social Welfare Department said that he was concerned not only about the Roma but also about all the socially disadvantaged people in the city. People come to the Social Welfare Department seeking jobs. It is true that many jobs have disappeared, but there are still some possibilities. For example, a great part of the land in this region has not been cultivated for years. At the present time, there are no mechanisms for helping unemployed people find work. Because of their long dependence on social allowances, the population is no longer able to earn a living by working. A new regulation, which will probably start being implemented within a month, will require that people receiving social allowances have to work for five days at a job designated by the municipality.

These jobs will include tending livestock and growing vegetables and other crops on land donated by the municipality. There is also a bakery, constructed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy two years ago. A near-term objective is to open food stores in low-income neighborhoods. They will be supplied with the products from the supplementary agricultural activities mentioned before. Residents in these neighborhoods will be able to buy what they need at lower prices in these stores.

During the next stage, the department would like to provide land for purchase by people who have acquired agricultural skills. People must begin to understand that it is not enough to want things; something must be given as well. What the department is developing is not a commune or cooperative, but a supplementary municipal enterprise. Money cannot be offered, because there is none. However, there may be in-kind compensations. At least something is being offered: a chance for survival.

The representative from the Roma-Lom Foundation commented that it was unclear if this program will help people. As far as the supplementary economic activities are concerned, things are constantly changing, and some of the forms used in the past have proven to be failures. The cooperative was one of them. There are Roma who used to work in the former agricultural cooperatives, but they never felt that they were owners of what they produced. The first thing that must be done now is to make people feel that this land is their own; and in this way they will not see the program as yet another obligation but as something they have to be invested in. Experience has shown that the moment disadvantaged people feel they are forced to do something and they do not see the program as their own, they resist with all their will.

The representative from the Plovdiv Labor Bureau said that the municipal administration is responsible for organizing people to take part in the municipal labor programs. The other important thing is to use the NGOs as civil structures to clarify the ideas and activities of the five days, and to explain that this is a step taken by the government that will be useful to everyone. All of the Romani leaders need to work with their fellow citizens and explain these things.

The employment associations that were set up in Madan, Zlatograd, and Smolyan in the Plovdiv region were established in municipalities with unemployment rates of more than 12 percent, and they have proven to be a good way of supporting municipal efforts to increase the number of jobs. Financial resources come from the Professional

Qualification and Unemployment Fund of the National Employment Office and from the business founders and NGOs. The associations are not-for-profit organizations.

The first task of the employment associations concentrates on qualification and literacy courses and the acquisition of professional skills. The second task is to provide help in the creation of jobs. The third task is the development and enhancement of small and medium-size businesses. Other types of support are less popular, especially the agricultural programs: bee-keeping, silkworm breeding, beet cultivation, and forestry.

Another approach is working with NGOs on the format and structure of part-time employment and on motivating youth organizations to take part in youth brigades. Special attention should also be paid to unemployment among women, an area in which the Plovdiv Labor Bureau has considerable experience.

In 1993, the Plovdiv Labor Bureau opened a branch office in Stolipinovo, to bring services as close to its clients as possible. It was the first bureau to open an office in a neighborhood with a minority population. Some of the people working in this office are Roma from the neighborhood.

The participant suggested that the Lom Bureau should use advertising materials for professional orientation and the organization of vocational training. An information exchange needs to be developed, so that the self-help bureaus can receive information on job openings, on the measures proposed by the labor bureaus, and on possibilities for work outside the community. The Plovdiv Labor Bureau collects information about the labor markets in the whole region. Each municipality has a different market situation and different methods of working. The unemployment rate in Plovdiv itself is very low, varying from 3.5 to 7 percent.

The representative from the Roma-Lom Foundation said that the situation in Lom hinders the implementation of certain programs. The Lom Labor Bureau and the Social Welfare Department do provide the foundation with current information, but the town simply does not offer the opportunities available in the big cities. It would be considered a great success to find work for ten people in Lom.

Midway through the conference, participants traveled to the Momin Brod, Humata, and Mladenovo neighborhoods in and around Lom to witness at first hand the difficulties among the Roma that had been discussed during the meeting

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Having seen the Roma neighborhoods, the representative from Rromani CRISS said that the first thought that came to mind was, "If I had a lot of money, I would give it to these people right away." But experience shows that humanitarian aid for a quick fix is not the best way to solve a problem. Large sums of money can be as destructive as the lack of any

...experience shows that humanitarian aid for a quick fix is not the best way to solve a problem.

money. It is much more useful to show people the need to work. Perhaps this should be called the "Lom model for problem-solving."

To this, the representative from the Roma-Lom Foundation replied that this model was also being tried in Sofia, Plovdiv, and Sliven, and Montana and Pazardzhik are beginning. This program is being developed not for the sake of distributing social allowances but to organize people from the community and to give them skills that will help them to organize themselves and to help each other. The Roma-Lom Foundation, he continued, has found that one must think not in terms of the disadvantaged Roma but in terms of socially disadvantaged people in general. People from different ethnic groups participate in these programs and work in the same environment, so that they learn more about each other and start respecting the cultural values and traditions of other ethnic groups. That is the new model.

The executive director of PER pointed out that, if Bulgaria wants to become a member of the European Union, one of the requirements for membership, outlined in the Agenda 2000, is that a country must make specific improvements in the situation of the Romani population on its territory. The government should not expect NGOs to take over all of its functions. From the discussion here, it is clear that it is possible for state and local governments to work in cooperation with Romani and other organizations to achieve these improvements. At the same time it is clear that the time for direct and consolidated action is short. Tangible improvements must be made in the living conditions of the Roma. The number of young, disenfranchised Roma is growing and can no longer be hidden from view. This is a recipe for certain conflict that will explode in violence if not dealt with. One day soon the Roma will take the law into their own hands when they realize they have nothing to lose.

The representative from Rromani CRISS commented that one of the

positive results of a conference such as this is that certain realities are acknowledged. The existence of the Humata neighborhood is a fact. Yesterday it was mentioned that the mayor and other responsible officials are working to bring legal status to this neighborhood. The very survival of these people depends on the legalization of their houses and on building the infrastructure necessary for maintaining these houses. The integration of neighborhoods such as this one into the city is of great importance for the development of good relationships among the various ethnic groups.

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This participant also expressed some confusion about the "politically correct" terms in Bulgaria for citizens of the state who are "needy" or "socially disadvantaged." The representative from the CEGA Foundation replied that it is unclear what the "politically correct" terms are. Most Bulgarians do not think that those who live in neighborhoods such as those just visited are citizens at all. They simply do not exist as far as the majority is concerned. The programs that are being discussed must be developed on two levels, she said. One of them is concerned with basic survival needs. The other level is much more difficult.

The people gathered here have different motivations. Some of them are interested in these problems because they live here, or they are members of parliament representing and defending the interests of the local people or the municipal council. What has been called the "Lom model" is really a "civil model." The Roma have the right to be citizens, and they are entitled to having the basic human needs for development satisfied. They have proved they could mobilize the internal resources available in the town. Would it be possible to lobby the parliament, the Council of Ministers, or particular ministries for a special regional program for Lom, and maybe one for Montana, a region which is usually forgotten? In order to develop such programs, the ideas and the experience of the people living there, of the relevant organizations, and of the local government should be used. They all have a lot to offer.

What are the resources in Europe that can be mobilized to support the development of the Roma? What specific commitments could be made for the survival of the people and for creating possibilities for them to

find jobs and to build the self-respect necessary for a normal life? Are there any European programs that can help?

As far as humanitarian aid is concerned, she concluded, cooperation and support from the existing humanitarian organizations should be explored further to provide people with the means for meeting their basic needs,

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such as medicine, clothing, and food. Humanitarian aid humiliates people, but this is a fight for their biological survival.

The representative from the Romani Foundation for Regional Development-Plovdiv discussed the

Stolipinovo neighborhood in that city. Stolipinovo has a population of some thirty thousand, and it has many problems similar to those mentioned in other Romani neighborhoods. For six months now, there has been no water and electricity in the eight-story tenement buildings. The same problems exist in the Nadezhda neighborhood in Sliven and in hundreds of other towns and villages in Bulgaria. It must be noted that the former Communist government bears much of the responsibility; it never had a general program for dealing with these problems.

For one year after the first Romani foundation in Bulgaria was registered in 1992, he continued, its main objective was to find donors of humanitarian aid. It succeeded, thanks to the representatives of the Presidency and the Council of Ministers who were responsible for ethnic issues. In Stolipinovo, tons of humanitarian aid were received, including shoes, clothing, and food. But after a year had passed, it was realized that the problems in the Romani communities could not be solved with temporary humanitarian aid, so the foundation designed a project aimed at raising the social and economic status of the Roma.

The foundation has worked since 1993 to redistribute land to landless Romani families. This very pragmatic project has definitely yielded fruit. In the Plovdiv region, about two hundred families got the opportunity to cultivate land. This is the way to integrate the Roma with the rest of the Bulgarian population. But, he added, as everyone present here would agree, positive results take time; they cannot be achieved in five or six months or even a year. Another long-term program is that a number of secondary-school students are being trained to continue their higher education.

Finally, he said, it must be pointed out that 90 percent of the residents of

Stolipinovo live in houses built on municipal land without the right of construction. Many of these houses are quite solid. They are illegal, but the Roma have lived and grown up in them and will not abandon them.

The representative from the Roma Public Council-Sofia asked whether the project for land redistribution could be developed on a larger scale and what could be done about the lack of resources for cultivating the land and about providing a market for the produce. Perhaps a chain of social-welfare stores could be established. Such problems must be dealt with on a national scale.

Several of the proposals discussed during the meeting in the areas of employment, housing, and education were summarized by the representative from Romani CRISS. Obviously, he said, the NGOs cannot do all this by themselves. Local and higher authorities must also be included. One of the positive accomplishments in Lom has been the signing of agreements of cooperation between the different institutions. It would be desirable to include the schools in these agreements as well. Some of the questions that must be answered are: How can the municipal council of Lom develop its cadastral plan for the development of the town? What funds are needed for the practical implementation of this program? Where can these funds be obtained? What type of urban plan for Lom would be supported by the Council of Europe? Can such a plan be supported by the Social Development Fund? Can the local representatives lobby to win the support of the National Assembly? How much of a financial contribution can the NGOs make to the development of such a plan? How can the residents of the Mladenovo and Humata neighborhoods be included in the development and implementation of such a plan?

PER's executive director cautioned that participants should not expect wonders from the West. The phenomenon of "donor's fatigue" has been observed. Nevertheless, PER, the Council of Europe, and the World Bank are working on the development of assistance programs that go beyond short-term solutions to address the underlying causes of poverty, unemployment, and discrimination in and against the Romani communities. There are also foundations, such as Autonomia in Hungary, that work in several countries in the region granting small, zero-interest loans for projects in Romani communities.

The chairman of PERRAC added that there is a specialist group in the Council of Europe to work with Romani issues. This group is supposed to make recommendations for ways of providing jobs for the Roma.

Unfortunately, concrete decisions have not yet been reached. In Slovakia, he went on, there are exactly the same difficulties with the employment of Roma as have been mentioned at this conference. The last government produced a report on the situation of the Roma in Slovakia—an analysis of conditions and the measures that the government intended to adopt in order to address the issues. In the first part of this report, the government stated that it intended to stop using the concept of “ethnic group” and instead talk about people who are needy. Consequently, the government of Slovakia decided that aid would not be distributed according to the principle of ethnic groups, as it used to be in socialist times.

The members of the government who prepared this report admitted that they had fallen into a trap, because it turned out that the largest part of the needy are actually from the Romani population. Social workers have to be trained to deal with the issues of Romani culture if they are to be useful in performing their functions. And although the principle of not distributing funds according to ethnicity is valid, funds have nevertheless been specially allocated for the Roma. Thus, although the government tried to be “politically correct,” it finally had to concede that there exists a Romani ethnic group that has its own unique problems.

The second part of this report contained a list of measures the government intended to adopt. Here, the government acknowledged that issues relating to the Roma were some of the most important aspects of government policy. In other words, this had already become a political issue. There are regions in Slovakia where there is a high proportion of Roma and the unemployment rate is 80 or 90 percent. Just as in Bulgaria, these people used to work in large factories that have now been closed down. Special funds are allocated to these regions in order to rejuvenate them and create a vital business environment that will offer new job opportunities.

The representative from the Council of Europe commented that, for him, the meeting had been a source of many new ideas and a valuable experience. The Council of Europe can not wave a magic wand and solve all the problems in Central and Eastern Europe. However, there are a few small things the Council of Europe can do which sometimes people find useful. The specialist group on Roma has been working on employment and income generation, and housing questions have recently been added to its agenda. In other countries of the region, the Council has offered expert advice to the bodies responsible for ethnic questions. This could be done in Bulgaria, and it might be helpful to have discussions with

experts from elsewhere as well. If plans are drawn up for bringing legal status to neighborhoods that do not now have it, it would be important to know how much it is going to cost and how much of that could be raised locally and how much help would be needed from the outside.

In addition, the Confidence-Building Measures Programme makes small grants to assist various kinds of projects designed to create better interethnic relations. It would not be suitable for projects designed to improve the situation of the Roma, but it would be useful for projects seeking to build better relations between the Roma and other groups.

Finally, one Council of Europe body that has a significant amount of money available for financial help is the Social Development Fund. Bulgaria is a member of that fund, and so the government can put forward proposals for assistance. This fund makes loans, not grants, and the repayment of these loans must be guaranteed by the state, though the projects are carried out on the local level. Two of the fund’s priorities are the creation of job opportunities and the provision of housing. The process of obtaining these loans takes time, because the plans need to be worked out, presented, and approved.

The representative from the Montana region remarked that the manner of rendering assistance to the needy, the majority of whom are Roma, has so far been unsuccessful; the results in most cases have been negative. For over a year now, he said, approximately forty-six million leva in the form of money, clothing, and medicine have been brought in to Bulgaria from foundations and from the developed countries, without achieving the desired result. In March 1998, a group of sociologists began a study of four residential districts populated by Roma in the regions of Montana and Vidin, with the goal of developing a long-term program for helping these people. A number of experts from the Institute of Sociology in Sofia joined them. The intention was that the program would originate from the Roma themselves, rather than being a top-down decision. In only one of the four districts had the people actively been seeking jobs. This was in the village of Dolni Tzibur, whose entire population of two thousand consisted of Roma. Their education level is the highest in the Montana region, and the conditions there are favorable because of the availability of state-owned land.

But elsewhere, he said, everyone is convinced that these people are simply not capable of working. They have no trades, no work habits; it is all the

same to them whether it is day or night. They are not used to a normal way of existence. Even the Romani organizations cannot help. There are dozens of kindergartens and child-care establishments, but they are all empty.

There was agreement from the representative from the Roma-Lom Foundation that the Romani organizations could not deal with these problems. This foundation is the

Assistance efforts must be united because the problems do not involve only the Roma. only organization present in the Momin Brod neighborhood. Assistance efforts must be united, because the problems do not involve only the Roma. They are

problems that the whole of society must join to resolve.

Admittedly, at first the Roma-Lom Foundation had also forgotten the neighborhoods. But during the past eight months, the foundation has been working in Momin Brod, where it has enrolled twenty children from the neighborhood in a preparatory group. Everything is free of charge in this group. The foundation is also working with the municipality in the allocation of land that is near to the residential district and can be transformed into a vegetable garden. There, the people can work to ensure their subsistence for the winter, and they have expressed their readiness to do this. With these types of joint efforts, the problems can be solved.

The representative from Rromani CRISS said that the time has come for the government to take a serious attitude toward working out a plan of action. One possibility is a government report followed by the designation of institutions to implement the plans—Romani organizations and other NGOs. At the local level, a report could be written about the situation in Lom. It must be determined who can support the preparation and publication of the report. This report could become the basis for a continuation of the discussion that started here. Open dialogue and debate on these issues is just as important to the solution of the problems as is money.

In Romania, such a program is already under way. The European Commission recently granted two million ECU to the government in support of this program. What is now needed is a partner to help develop this program, together with the Department for National Minorities and the Office of Romani Issues. Here you will need to decide who

should take responsibility for such a program. State resources are a prerequisite for moving ahead.

The Autonomia Foundation, he continued, allocates small grants to Romani organizations that create opportunities for obtaining income from agriculture. In Hungary, three hundred projects have been financed with five to six thousand dollars each for breeding stock. In Romania, each project is granted one thousand dollars for the purchase of agricultural equipment. These resources are made available in the form of interest-free loans. Experience shows that these programs work. The needs are an organization to assume the responsibility and control the process, reliable partners, and resources. Such conditions already exist in Lom, where there is a Romani organization and land. This is something that could be quickly worked out together.

CONCLUSION

PER's executive director closed the meeting by thanking all of the participants. The fact that both local authorities and representatives of the national institutions were present for the meeting, she said, is very impressive and shows a willingness to work toward cooperative solutions. This is something that does not often happen, and it is a reason to be optimistic about the possibility of progress. Another reason for optimism is the programs that the Romani organizations are implementing in Lom, Sofia, and Plovdiv. These are the types of programs that give hope for positive change where it is needed most, in the Romani neighborhoods.

These efforts should continue and be expanded. The ideas and suggestions discussed during the last two days should not be forgotten. They are practical and informed solutions to the problems of some of the world's most desperate people. Assistance must be mobilized from the outside to implement some of these ideas. At the same time, the discussion has highlighted the fact that solutions depend on more than outside assistance. The success of any initiative depends on the local authorities, the local Romani organizations, and the national institutions.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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Nicolae Gheorghe (far right corner) and Anton Karagyozev (second from right) meet with local Romani villagers.

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