

**FINAL REPORT:**

**QUALITATIVE SURVEY (FOCUS GROUPS)**

**ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ROMA**

**IN BULGARIA**

**JULY, 2005**

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# I. Background and objectives

In February 2005, eight central European states<sup>1</sup> and a number of international institutions such as the World Bank and The Open Society Institute launched a “Decade of Roma Inclusion.” The goal of the effort is to change prejudicial attitudes and develop support for government programs, aimed at bettering the lives of Roma through better employment opportunities, access to education, health and housing.

In order to develop this support, it is first essential to understand the drivers of these attitudes and perceptions among the general population. In addition, it is crucial to develop a more systematic and deeper understanding of the Roma population in these countries so that efforts are appropriately designed and targeted.

With this purpose in mind, the World Bank has commissioned a qualitative public opinion study in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania to Balkan British Social Surveys AD (BBSS), an independent research firm based in Sofia, Bulgaria. BBSS provided overall methodological guidance, operational coordination and quality control on this project, as well as fieldwork in Bulgaria. Fieldwork and reporting in Romania and the Czech Republic were assigned by BBSS, respectively, to CSOP, an associate company of BBSS based in Bucharest, and to Factum Invenio, an established opinion and market research agency based in Prague.

The qualitative survey has been carried out through conducting 8 focus groups in each of the three countries concerned. Research set out to answer the following questions:

- Develop an understanding of why people think the way they do about the Roma (not just what they think about the Roma).
- Determine how to change the minds, behaviors and attitudes of people toward the Roma, and how to build support for government policies meant to support the Roma.
- Identify the obstacles that exist to acceptance of government efforts to improve the lives of Roma.
- Identify the risks and opportunities associated with different aspects of reform.
- Identify opportunities to change the views of the general public toward Roma.
- Identify the messages that resonate most with populations to change their perceptions and views.

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia

- Identify the ‘ambassadors of change’ – those elites who can be trusted by the general public and who can act as messengers for critical messages related to Roma policy.
- Identify target audiences whose attitudes may shift more easily than others, and who may lead the way to help change perceptions.

A presentation of the findings from the group discussions carried out under this project in Bulgaria follows.

## II. Methodology

- **Focus Groups**
  - 5 Focus Groups with Non-Roma citizens
  - 2 Focus Groups with Roma citizens
  - 1 Focus Group with Roma NGO Leaders
- **Sample recruitment criteria:**

### Non-Roma respondents

- Mix of Age: within the range 18 – 60 years
- Mix of Gender: approximately 50% female and 50% male respondents
- Mix of Educational level according to the Bulgarian demographic quotas
- Mix of Representatives of different income levels
- 8 respondents in each group

### Roma respondents

- Mix of Age: within the range 18 – 60 years
- Mix of Gender: approximately 50% female and 50% male respondents
- 8 respondents in each group

- **Timing of fieldworks: June 1st-June 14th**

### Location:

- **Sofia** (1 Roma NGO FG, 1 non-Roma FG)
- **Sliven** (1 Roma FG, 1 non-Roma FG)
- **Kurjali** (1 non-Roma FGs)
- **Vidin** (1 RomaFG, 1 Non-Roma FG)
- **Mechka** (1 Non-Roma FG)

## Comments

No problems were encountered with recruitment. Group demographic composition has been achieved as planned.

Both Roma and non Roma, were animated by the issues related to the social status of the Roma population, and actively joined in the discussions.

The findings in all the groups are similar, the only exception was the non Roma group in Mechka, where a prolonged intense conflict between the Bulgarian inhabitants, and a Roma community, distinguished by an exceptionally high incidence of crime, provoke

animosity and prejudice, bordering on racism. This is the reason why this group will be analysed separately in the main report.

### III. Executive summary

#### 1. Introduction

Throughout the last decade, the position of Roma within the Bulgarian society has compelled attention, at all levels of the public space, as one of the most topical issues. It permeates – in varying forms and contexts – everyday chats and press coverage; it is continuously tackled and analyzed in the scientific circles and by the political milieu. Notwithstanding this persistent and heightened awareness, however, these variegated discourses lack a point of intersection, which would serve as the basis of a cohesive, legitimate policy on the place of the Roma ethnos in the Bulgarian society.

Today, less than 2 years before this country's full accession to the EU and on the eve of parliamentary elections (which will most likely be marked by a precedent - an extreme nationalistic party, whose pre-election campaign has been broadly based on anti-Roma propaganda, will probably qualify for Parliament), we cannot overstate the paramount need of a realistic, adequately detailed snapshot of public attitudes to the Roma ethnos and its inherent problems.

This summary is far from exhaustive, but the employed research tools and sample guarantee that the issue's general framework is outlined sufficiently punctually and veraciously.

Groups of Roma characterized by widely varying cultural specificities, socio-economic features and extent of inclusion in the Bulgarian society reside in the different towns, where the field survey was carried out. These specificities will be considered in greater detail in the final report. This text aims to outline the general tendencies in the interaction between the Bulgarian and the Roma ethnic groups, since such an analysis would serve as a sound basis for the development of adequate policies targeted at the specific Roma problems and, furthermore, for these policies' efficient implementation.

Before we present the general public attitudes toward the Roma, we ought to specify that, apart from Sofia, group discussions were also held in the towns Kurdjali, Vidin and Sliven<sup>2</sup> – communities characterized by low living standard and high unemployment. For this reason, these towns are typified by markedly lower tolerance to the social programs exclusively focused on the Roma, as compared to the capital.

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<sup>2</sup> The village of Mechka group shall be analyzed subsequently, separately from the remaining discussion groups. This group is strikingly different from the rest in typological terms. Thence, it is sooner indicative of the escalation of tension at times of open interethnic conflicts.

## 2. General public attitudes toward the Roma and underlying rationales and emotions

Respondents in all non-Roma discussion groups identified tolerance as one of the most pronounced traits of the Bulgarian national character. Historical facts were pointed out as evidence – the conservation of the Turkish mosques, the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews, the working ethnic model established between Turks and Bulgarians in present-day Bulgaria. However, the thin red line of “excessive tolerance” exhibited by Bulgarians to the Roma ran through all the group discussions. The first and foremost problem, which hinders the interaction of Bulgarians and Roma is

### o The Roma sense of privilege towards the Bulgarian population

The decline of planned economy, concomitant with the introduction of free market conditions in the Bulgarian society, brought about a palpable impact on a vast part of the population previously belonging to the middle class – it was declassed and, before long, fell below the threshold of neediness. In addition to the strictly economic dimensions of this social cataclysm, the victims of this process suffered a profound loss of values when they had to give up their (frequently, high) status for a clearly denigrated position, in the name of mere physical survival:” *My older sister’s boyfriend is a university graduate – something to do with aquatic life. Now he packages fish fillet at Billa. And my sis takes the phone calls at a pizza restaurant, regardless of her master degree and the fact that she graduated the French college, too*<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike the Bulgarians, Roma – the rule-of-thumb under-qualified workers in the service and industry spheres - were pressed by a myriad of factors (such as inadequate qualification, labour discrimination and others, which we consider below) and, consequently, reacted to the disintegration of the planned economy by lasting marginalization, whence the permanent reliance on the social security network. The lasting marginalization of the entire Roma community led, quite logically, to the vicious practices of criminalization, isolation and declassment reproduced in the next generation.

The situation, in which non-Roma perceive themselves as abandoned by the state, hurled into the free-market chaos – unlike the Roma, whose lifestyle they enviously view as a carefree existence under the wing of the government – engenders frustration and exacerbates the existing negative attitudes to the Roma community.

With respondents of comparatively higher social status – those in Sofia and, to a lesser extent, in Vidin – the mind-set of Bulgarians with regard to the Roma is perceptibly influenced by the official talk of proper attitude to the minorities. In their case, frustration is mellowed down to a patronizing stance. In their perception, Roma are, rather, a part of the Bulgarian society, whose disparity is a direct consequence of an unfortunate historical and cultural development. However, even these respondents exhibit inadequate willingness to support a purposeful government effort to help the Roma.

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<sup>3</sup> Sofia, non-Roma



The unwillingness to probe deep into the real problems of the Roma, which directly reflects into negativistic sentiments, presents a serious problem which calls for earnest, thorough consideration, since this gamut of public attitudes would certainly pose a stumbling block before any policy meant to support the Roma community.

An elucidation is in place before we delve into the staunch stereotypes of Bulgarians with regard to the Roma: attitude to the Roma is coloured by two key factors: personal experience and media. Positive impressions are acquired mainly through personal experience, but steadfast stereotypes are, to a very high extent, based on tone set by the media.

These are the main staunch concepts about the Roma:

- **The Roma as a homogenous group**

The tendency for generalization and the lack of ability to discern between the (frequently heterogeneous) components is typical of the Bulgarian viewpoint of the Roma minority and its inherent problems. This is particularly valid of the differentiation of Roma in subgroups by ethnic, cultural, religious or socio-economic principle.

Generally taken, Bulgarians find it difficult to differentiate between the various Roma groups in this country. There exists a blanket perception of Roma as a *homogenous group, which shares uniform socio-cultural characteristics and identical problems: "Gypsies are no-good all over the world, that's for sure. Only conditions differ. As I told you, I've been in Czechia, too. They'd also put them in housing estates, to the same effect – they were using the parquet floor for firewood and what not"*<sup>4</sup>

Personal interaction with Roma is the single source of differentiated attitude to the problem, but in these cases representatives of the ethnos are viewed as exceptions to the general rule. This is especially valid of towns as Sliven and Kurdjali, where two different Roma groups are settled in the same place. In Sliven, Vidin and Kurdjali alike, one could hear musings along the lines of *"Our Gypsies are better behaved, unlike the ones all over Bulgaria that hit the headlines"*.

Any differentiated attitude to the socio-economic divergences in the Roma community is altogether missing, as well. The dismal living conditions, the piles of refuse and the lack of sewerage – but, equally so, the posh cars and sumptuous houses – are readily ascribed as specific characteristics of the entire Roma community, according to the particular thesis corroborated, as found convenient.

- **Roma as a capsulated community existing in parallel to the Bulgarian society**

Bulgarians perceive Roma as a capsulated community, with its peculiar cultural rules and characteristics, which are starkly different from the ones accepted in the Bulgarian society. In the mind of respondents, the main reason for this is that, in most cases, Roma live separately from the Bulgarians in compact districts/ neighbourhoods, frequently located in the outskirts - or completely out - of town.

What strikes us is the steadfastness of the mental picture of Roma as a fully marginalized, capsulated community, unable to integrate in the societal structures on an equal footing with Bulgarians. The fact that this deeply rooted notion was formed barely 15 years back (earlier, the Roma were part of the economic system) is

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<sup>4</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

amazing: *“They were fully integrated in those years, when the enterprises were functioning. They built their homes back then...they had something to rely on, it seems... they had their place in society, which is lost nowadays.”*<sup>5</sup>

The groove of division running between Roma and Bulgarians seems to bear the following characteristics:

○ **Adherence to rules/ honouring of obligations to society**

Roma’s neglectful attitude to law and socio-economic norms, coupled with the state institutions’ stance of resignation to this non-commitment, is the strongest source of frustration and exacerbated ethnic intolerance. Usually, when this point of the discussion is reached, even the more tolerant respondents tend to radicalize their views. Examples furnished most frequently are the refusal to pay electricity bills, the failure to pay fines for using the public transport without a ticket, the non-payment of taxes, the unregistered business: *“This is counter-discrimination. They sponge on us. They do not pay for their electricity, so we’re charged double prices”*.<sup>6</sup>

The double standard of law enforcement for Roma and Bulgarians is an exceptionally touchy point. It is perceived as discrimination of the non-Roma. The increasingly heavy free market-engendered responsibility which is pinned on the Bulgarian citizen by state and private institutions (such as the National Electricity Board, the water companies, the tax authorities, etc.) is in stark contrast with the happy-go-lucky Roma attitude: *“Say, if I’m 2 days in arrears on my electricity bill, they cut me off, sometimes for as little as 5 leva. I remember, my icebox was packed with food once, had to throw everything away, was about to sue the electricity company. And the Gypsies get all kinds of help and support...I’m a seasonal worker. But I never apply for social security. See, it happens to be unemployed for as long as 6-7 months at a time. So I go there and they say – Do you have your own flat? Yes, sir. Well, you don’t qualify for benefits, then. It is largely on this basis that negative attitude to all these ‘Roma privilege’ programs is formed.”*<sup>7</sup>

○ **Existence reliant on social security, child benefits and pensions**

The Bulgarians, left to cope on their own in the new free-market environment, categorically refuse to come to terms with the Roma state-reliant attitude:

*“We share identical problems, with the only difference that we, Bulgarians, are typified by the evident willingness to tackle these problems, while they lean on minority privileges. Some Bulgarians are much needier than the Roma”*,<sup>8</sup>

Social benefits are viewed as a factor de-motivating the Roma from searching employment: *“Last year, when my firewood was cut, I decided to go find someone to stack it. Well, none of them agreed to do the job for 5 leva per cubic meter. So why work – even if they’re offered choice, they’d shy away from work and go for the benefits.”*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vidin, non-Roma

<sup>6</sup> Vidin, non-Roma

<sup>7</sup> Kurdjali, non-Roma

<sup>8</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

<sup>9</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

- **Low education/ level of qualification**

The lack of professional qualification and the underestimated importance of education are perceived as another main stumbling block, rendering impossible the cohabitation of a common social space by the Bulgarian and Roma. Bulgarians usually identify the lack of educational tradition within the Roma community as a key reason for the ethnos' under-qualification. Nevertheless, opinions do vary with the respondents' attitude to Roma and run the entire gamut from inborn, genetically low IQ to discrimination by the majority.

- **Crime**

Some of the staunchest stereotypes with regard to the Roma are related with crime. The vast majority of non-Roma respondents believe that theft and burglary are typical characteristics of the Roma ethnos in general. Explanations usually vary from an inborn penchant for vice, which is intrinsically rooted in the Roma culture (as a livelihood taught from generation to generation), through the waning of state and corruption of law-enforcement authorities, to factors such as high unemployment and economic crisis, which impacts most heavily on the under-qualified workers. "Roma" criminality is perceived as petty, largely related to theft of livestock and agricultural produce, pick-pocketing and burglary. However, a new tendency is on the rise – Roma are included in the organized crime structures and, more particularly, in the drug trade and tax (VAT) frauds.

- **Discrimination**

Bulgarians are altogether unwilling to accept that Roma in this country are discriminated against (Pls. refer to 'Adherence to rules, honouring of obligations to society'). As regards education, respondents substantiate their stance by underlining the fact that all children enjoy equal (free) secondary-education opportunities. *"No one has prevented him from studying simply for being Roma. They're exploiting the issue, as if we'd treated them as slaves or something."*<sup>10</sup> The unequal employment opportunities for Roma and the fact that Roma are the first to be made redundant are justified by the Bulgarians with natural market mechanisms – their lower qualification.

A very small group of Bulgarians, from Sofia and Vidin predominantly, admit that Roma are professionally discriminated: *"What is that supposed to mean – I know this family, with three kids, their son keeps getting turned down everywhere. He applies for a job and gets rebuffed for the mere fact that he's a Gypsy. If you ask me, discrimination abounds – that's why crime rate is so high amongst the Roma."*<sup>11</sup>

- **"Ghettovization" of the Roma**

For part of the respondents, the most serious problem before the Roma inclusion lies with the isolated Roma ghettos, which altogether deprive members of the ethnos of the modernizing influence of society; in these ghettos, vicious practices such as refusal of education, marginalization and criminalization are reproduced time and again: *"The biggest mistake – at that, a government-policy lapse with regard to the Gypsies - lies with the fact that, in the bigger cities, Roma were left to themselves in*

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<sup>10</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

<sup>11</sup> Sofia, non-Roma

*the ghettos... the ghetto takes any chance away, they shouldn't live there, education is not accepted as a value, they get married at 13.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sofia, non-Roma

- **Manner of living**

The idea, that Roma dwell decrepit houses, without water-mains or sewerage, that refuse is disposed straight in the street, that their hygiene standards are virtually non-existent, prevails: „*They have no bathrooms. They sleep next to their horses*”<sup>13</sup> Bulgarians do not believe that the physical transfer of Roma into new residential conditions would change their living style and conditions.

- **Demographic characteristics**

The early marriages and numerous children in the Roma family are the main features, drawing a line of distinction between Roma and non-Roma. The big number of kids born in the family is viewed as socially irresponsible, a direct result of poor sexual awareness. Respondents, who gather around a more extreme stance, believe that Roma use their offspring as a means to get social benefits. The steep growth of the Roma population is perceived as a threat to Bulgarian national identity.

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<sup>13</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

### 3. Roma perceptions of the problems they are faced with

Bulgarian Roma envisage problems their ethnos is faced with at two distinct levels. The first one is related to the issues of individual survival encountered in daily life and visible to all of them, regardless of social status within the community and in the larger society.

The second level of problems before the Roma community is rationalized mostly by Roma, whose educational status, degree of civil activity and extent of inclusion in the Bulgarian society are higher, and also by the representatives of Roma NGOs. It pertains to the issues of self-identification, cultural belonging and political representation of the Roma.

**The first level** embraces the vicious circle **Unemployment- Discrimination- Restricted Access to Education**, together with the ensuing problems – reproduction of negative stereotypes among the Bulgarians and capsulation of the Roma community outside the societal modernization processes:

- **Unemployment**

Roma perceive their marginalized economic position in society and the utter lack of any prospects for change of these dire circumstances as a crux of their problems. The lack of the most basic means of subsistence is universally used to explain the Roma children's hindered access to education, the high degree of criminalization among the Roma, their willful non-compliance with social norms. To some extent, they are willing to justify this state of affairs with the natural market mechanisms, which brought about the redundancy of the (as a rule) under-qualified Roma workers when the big industrial enterprises were closed down. At the same time, however, discrimination – including that on the historical and educational plane – is rationalized as *the* fundamental impediment, frustrating any new employment chances.

- **Discrimination**

Discrimination is perceived by the Roma as one of the most significant barriers hindering any efforts to overcome their socio-economic difficulties. It is active on all levels:

- school
  - inferior quality of education at 'Roma' schools in general
  - lower academic requirements to the Roma kids in mixed classes
- health care system
  - refused medical care, by reason of missing NHS payments
  - refusal to prescribe free medicines
  - poor treatment of Roma patients
  - separate rooms allocated for Roma patients

- employment opportunities
  - ethnic criteria applied to redundancy
  - ethnic criteria applied to vacancies
  - appointment to positions inadequate to the respective level of qualification

- **Restricted access to education**

As a whole, Roma are aware of the definitive social role of education. Problems related to education are perceived both as both an underlying cause and an effect of the difficult economic status of the Roma and the discrimination by non-Roma. The wretchedly low levels of education of Roma children are habitually explained by:

- The financial inadequacy of parents to provide the means needed for education – school aids, fees, clothes
- Curricula which fail to take into account the specific needs of Roma children
- De-motivation as a consequence of the systematic labour discrimination, even of better educated Roma
- Socio-cultural factors, such as the failure to recognize the value of education

- **Reproduction of negative stereotypes**

Roma are strongly affected by the generation, and reproduction, of negative stereotypes amidst the Bulgarians upon shaping their children's views and, most importantly, through the media. The inclusion, of the ethnonym "Gypsy" or "Roma" in the media accounts of crimes, kindles negative associations and tars with the same brush the entire ethnic minority.

- **Cultural peculiarities at odds with the society's agenda**

Roma regard some of their ethnic group's cultural peculiarities, such as:

- The large number of kids born in the family regardless of the fact that parents can't provide means for their normal upbringing
- The traditional 'livelihood' of some Roma groups – pick-pocketing, theft of agricultural produce and farm animals as outdated and – to an extent – incompatible with the current, contemporary lifestyle.

**The second level** of problems before the Roma ethnos are visible mostly for the educated Roma, which are involved in tackling the issues posed before the community in general and in the latter's longer-term development:

- **Cultural assimilation**

Cultural assimilation is perceived as problem yet to be included in the agenda, which nevertheless poses a serious threat to Roma identity in a longer-term perspective. There are two aspects – interior and exterior – to the problem itself:

- the exterior aspect of the cultural-assimilation issue lies with the "Bulgarian" notion of Roma inclusion. Roma share the view that it entails obliteration of the Roma cultural identity and aims to 'train' Roma into living Bulgarian-style and adopting the non-Roma values, language and traditions.

- The interior aspect of cultural assimilation is predominantly related to representatives of the Roma minority who had acquired good education, achieved good professional realization and consequently left the community to melt into the Bulgarian society. These examples of individual prosperity are identified as a dangerous, vicious trend; these highly-qualified specialists' commitment to the Roma problems is perceived as a duty.

- **Lack of political representation**

This problem is, once again, identified by the better educated Roma, and most typically, by NGO representatives. In the view of this group, political will is the basic factor, which would be able to trigger change of the Roma unprivileged socio-economic status. Ever since the democratic changes in 1989, the Roma role in the Bulgarian political system has been limited to that of an electorate, not a bearer or exponent of policies targeted at the community's issues. Unlike ethnic Turks, Roma have never had their own party in Parliament. In the words of NGO leaders, this inadequacy is aggravated further by the fact that none of the Bulgarian political parties has undertaken to consistently uphold the community's interests.



#### 4. Government policies to help the Roma: the views of non-Roma respondents

Non-Roma respondents in general reach a consensus on the point that a consistent government policy is needed, to bring about change in the current Roma socio-economic status. The main factors motivating support for the allocation of significant financial resources<sup>14</sup> in this direction are as follows:

##### ○ Economic arguments

- At present, Roma subsist on benefits; they scrape a living from the taxes paid by working Bulgarians: *“They feed off our backs, they’d be lost without us. They consume, and we foot the bill.”*<sup>15</sup>
- Petty crime among the Roma is largely due to the lower living standard and higher unemployment within the community: *“All Roma problems, in their entirety, backfire on us – be it poverty or lack of hygiene, thefts and burglaries – we are the sufferers. That’s why we should get involved in bettering our living standard together”*<sup>16</sup>

##### ○ Political arguments

- Capsulation of Roma in the ghettos may subsequently lead to an ever-increasing cultural alienation between Roma and non-Roma and, logically, to a serious escalation of interethnic conflicts (the Yugoslavian example is a frequently quoted argument)
- The European Union would not accept this country, unless the Roma inequality problem is tackled successfully. In the usual case, a purely egoistical motivation is detected behind this stance: *“They would live quite happily without our Roma, so they won’t let us join the Union before we integrate them in this country”*.<sup>17</sup>

In the view of non-Roma, the main directions in which the government would be well-advised to allocate resources for a Roma inclusion policy are as follows:

##### ○ Education

Roma education is a cause, which commands the unreserved approval of Bulgarians. As a rule, this is the first spontaneous response to the question “What kind of help should be rendered to the Roma community?” Bulgarian respondents believe that the government would intervene most effectively by initiating change in the Roma community through the education and upbringing of children. In the name of this change, they state not merely readiness to support allocation of budget resources, but also clear willingness to let their kids attend mixed classes and to accept the inclusion of Roma-culture elements in the school curriculum.

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<sup>14</sup> At testing the amounts which should be allocated to the Roma, even sums of BGN 10-20 million (Euro 5-10 million) were defined as an inadequate pittance

<sup>15</sup> Vidin, non-Roma

<sup>16</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

<sup>17</sup> Sliven, non-Roma

The practice to bind social benefits to a kid's school attendance is viewed positively. However, other respondents reckon that money can stimulate attendance, but not active involvement in the learning process.

Nevertheless, respondents share the view that if efforts are limited to the educational sphere and Roma fail to be included at other levels, the effect will probably be ignorable: *"Before they start studying together, they should get to live together. Otherwise, we would vainly hope that we are changing their lives by getting them out of their environment for 4 hours a day, then putting them back in their usual setting..."*<sup>18</sup>

- **Opening of new working places**

There is a tendency to resort to ready recipes from the past when the Roma unemployment issue is approached. Ideas have been aired to re-open the defunct state enterprises, where Roma used to work. Still, many people are well-aware of this idea's impracticability and rely on the future development of the private businesses.

Bulgarians level criticism at the government temporary-employment programs, which habitually provide jobs to the Roma. The former perceive these programs as a palliative – as opposed to radically effective - measure. Roma are employed as menial workers under these programs and are thus fully prevented from obtaining any useful qualification for the real employment market. Their prospects of finding a rewarding permanent job and professional specialization remain stagnant.

- **Qualification courses**

The professional qualification courses also seem to be an important step towards overcoming the unemployment and declassment of Roma. However, they should be tied down with a real employment opportunity immediately after completion of the course, since, in the conditions of high unemployment and frequent labour discrimination, Roma will hardly stand a good chance at the employment market, if left to fend for themselves.

- **Strict law enforcement**

Quite a few non-Roma believe that Roma inclusion in the Bulgarian society would be brought about more effectively by their stricter observance of rules and obligations, and not by the provision of further rights. If the right to social benefits or pensions is taken from those who abuse it, they would be made to work for a living. This measure, however, would also call for stricter police control, to prevent an eventual outburst of Roma criminal activity: *"And again we reach the conclusion that a strict law would be the main means of help! Because law is unable to prevent certain harmful social phenomena and this frustrates their motivation to strive for intellectual betterment and education. Why study and work, when things achieved by the Bulgarians are there to be taken?"*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Vidin, non-Roma

<sup>19</sup> Vidin, non-Roma

- **Improvement of living conditions**

A minority of respondents believe that the national government's most significant task is to get Roma out of their vicious environment in the ghettos and 'plant' them among the Bulgarians.

This purely mechanical approach to Roma inclusion, however, is usually rebuffed with examples of similar, inevitably failed attempts. *"You do get some Roma in mixed housing estates ...they made us live together years ago... willing or not, you interact with them. So they came and they harnessed their horse on the terrace. There was such a case in Block 96... And they bred cows in Block 56, too..."*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kurdjali, non-Roma

## 5. Roma views on how the lives of Roma may be improved

Roma relate hopes for improving the life of their community only with an active government involvement. The NGO practice of implementing short-term, uncoordinated efforts and the general opinion that NGOs are corrupt has led to the incredulity of ordinary Roma and NGO leaders alike. The main hopes for government policies are related to:

- **Securing employment opportunities**

For Roma participants in the focus group discussions, the only means for solving the Roma problems is the securing of permanent, well-paid jobs. Roma rely predominantly on the government on this point. More specifically, they stake high hopes on reopening of the closed-down enterprises where they have been employed before 1989.

- **Education**

Roma also share the belief that their kids' education is the key to a lasting change of the minority's socio-economic status. However, Roma point out their poor financial status and high unemployment as a major obstacle impeding their access to education

- **Political involvement at all government levels**

In the view of Roma NGO leaders, the only way to effective solution of Roma problems is the full involvement of Roma experts at all government levels. They should be genuinely committed to the Roma inclusion cause *per se*, and not use it as a stepping stone to personal gains.

## 6. The Decade of the Roma as seen by non-Roma and Roma

### Decade of the Roma awareness

As a whole, Bulgarians are characterized by an exceptionally low level of awareness of the DR (Decade of the Roma) effort. Some of the respondents share some vague recollections of the event's media coverage, but fail to recall any specific aims or priorities. The DR is hardly told apart from the vast multitude of other NGO efforts targeted at the Roma.

A more substantial number of Roma respondents have heard of the DR but - far from being familiarized with its specific content - are only aware of the effort's general framework. The registered extremely low level of trust in the DR is due to the utter lack of any real "signs of life" of the effort. Respondents go as far as claiming that the DR is a merely a pre-election trick of the government: "*The idea behind the whole ado was to throw dust into our eyes... it left the unpleasant aftertaste of election pep-talk... I haven't heard anything about this Decade for quite a while already*".<sup>21</sup>

The Ngo leaders group makes the only exception – they are comparatively well-aware of the effort's objectives and priorities. Some of them have actually taken part in the development of the DR Action Plan. Nevertheless, even they are markedly pessimistic when it comes to the practical implementation and actual effects of the DR. In their view, the key problem continuingly lies with their isolation from the real policy-making process, with the resultant inertia of a government, unwilling to dedicate resources to the Roma problems.

### Attitude to the Decade of the Roma

#### Bulgarians

When respondents were acquainted with the DR priorities and with some of its specific objectives, their spontaneous reactions were closely similar, regardless of their pre-stated attitude to Roma and the problems they face. We could affirm fairly positively that respondents embrace – unanimously and unreservedly – the effort's tasks and objectives. Nevertheless, they react in strongly negative terms to the effort's ethnic orientation:

*"The concept as such is very, very good, but why restrict it to the Roma? They are better off than us."*<sup>22</sup>,

*"The greatest nonsense is that they concentrate efforts on the Roma, where they should target socially disadvantaged folks in general."*<sup>23</sup>,

*"Should only Roma of dire financial status be aided? Of course not, everybody needs help. These efforts are a fundamental source of ethnic tension in Bulgaria – remember what happened with the Bulgarian Muslims? These efforts are disconnected from reality"*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sliven, Roma

<sup>22</sup> Kurdjali, Bulgarians

<sup>23</sup> Sliven, Bulgarians

<sup>24</sup> Sofia, Bulgarians

*“Certain resources should be allocated to people who are completely dissocialized – there are such Bulgarians, as well. The effort should not be focused on the Roma alone, as this would mean turning backs on the other folks and this is not good.”<sup>25</sup>*

As demonstrated by the above quotes, the effort’s exclusive focus on the Roma minority gets fully rejected in all groups

The presentation of some of the effort’s more specific objectives in the educational, health and employment spheres radicalizes even the stance of the more tolerant respondents.

The only more acceptable objectives of the DR were the introduction of counter-discrimination principles and vaccination for all children (at which point the definition “Roma” was met with scorn, once again)

### **Roma**

The DR objectives were perceived by Roma as fully concurrent with their actual problems. Notwithstanding this fact, however, they approached the effort with a great amount of distrust engendered by their belief that this is (yet another) loudly proclaimed program, which will yield no tangible results: *“An absolute lie. Look, the meeting was held in February, right, and it’s June already. Nothing has changed in the meantime. We haven’t as much as heard of anything being done anywhere.”<sup>26</sup>*

Program objectives are approved, but their exclusive focus on the Roma is, again, met with the same degree of disapproval as the one already shown by non-Roma respondents. This reaction is usually motivated by the negative past experience with similar efforts: *“I’m also against it... it should benefit all poor people, not only the Roma... What if a Bulgarian kid goes and says “I also want some of this food”? What will they say – “Well, sorry, but it’s only for Gypsies?”<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Vidin, Bulgarians

<sup>26</sup> Vidin, Roma

<sup>27</sup> Vidin, Roma

## 7. Elements of communications strategy to build support for government policies helping the Roma

### 7.1. Message concepts

Communications offered for discussion in the groups were rejected by the majority of both Roma and non-Roma participants.

#### **Bulgarians**

In the case of Bulgarians, the bulk of messages get turned down as divorced from reality, because of the included 'Roma discrimination' motif. As already explained above, Bulgarians are rather inclined to believe that Roma enjoy much more privileges than non-Roma. Hence, the discrimination tune rings completely false to them. Statements, which contain the notion of Roma discrimination, in one form or another, and offer counter-measures (**Table 1, Statements 1,2,6 and 7**) get an average rating of 1.3 up to 3.3 out of 10.

Bulgarian respondents are much more inclined to accept the statements implying equal opportunities and access to public benefits for everybody, instead of privileges for given ethnic group/s (**Table 1, statements 5 and 8**) – average ratings 4.1 and 8.3 respectively.

Still, insofar as Bulgarians are convinced that change of the unfavourable socio-economic status of the Roma ethnos should start with the educational aspect (as already mentioned above), relatively high support is given to Statement 4, interpreted as an equal chance for education and development to the Roma children (**Table 1, Statement 4**).

Table 1.<sup>28</sup>

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Sofia</b>	<b>Sliven</b>	<b>Vidin</b>	<b>Kurjali</b>	<b>Mechka</b>	<b>Average</b>
1. In order to become a real part of Europe, we must take care of the people in our country who have been most discriminated against. It is a true sign of a modern country.	3.1	5.9	1.4	2.2	2.6	<b>3</b>
2. Helping the Roma advance and integrate is, quite simply, the right thing to do. This is an issue of human rights. We are an unjust society if we continue to treat them in the way that they've been treated here.	2.5	3.1	6.1	3.7	1.0	<b>3.3</b>
3. Helping the Roma is a matter of simple economics. All taxpayers will continue to pay more in the future if we don't do something now to truly help educate the Roma and move them out of lives of poverty, it will cost us and our children more in the long run.	4.6	4.2	6.1	3.3	1.1	<b>3.9</b>
4. If there's one thing we must do, it is to help the Roma children so that they will have the opportunities to prosper in a way that our own children have	5.5	4.4	3.0	8.1	2.1	<b>4.6</b>
5. Helping the Roma is really about giving every person in our country the opportunity to achieve his/her potential. This is the true meaning of freedom and the fall of the wall.	5.5	4.4	3.9	5.4	1	<b>4.1</b>
6. The way the Roma have been treated in this country is simply wrong. It makes me ashamed and I want it to change	2.0	1.6	1.1	1	1	<b>1.3</b>
7. Having a large minority population like the Roma living in such abject poverty and experiencing constant discrimination reflects badly on our country. I think our country can do better	2.8	2.6	2.4	2.8	1.6	<b>2.4</b>
8. Our country is on the road to prosperity. We must make sure that this prosperity is shared by all	8.0	7.2	9.3	9.8	7.1	<b>8.3</b>
<b>Average per city :</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>2.2</b>	

<sup>28</sup> Even though the Village of Mechka discussion is to be analyzed separately from the rest, it is included in this table, since it provides a good illustration of the widely differing ways, in which a minority policy is perceived in normal conditions on one hand, and at times of ethnic trouble on the other.



## **Roma**

The lack of trust in the government's commitment to - and involvement in -specific efforts targeted at improving life of the Roma under the DR, coupled with the lack of political representation of the Bulgarian Roma, naturally results in an extremely poor rating of the statement highlighting the government's active commitment (Table 2, Statement 1).

As regards serious commitment to the DR, Roma obviously find the World Bank and the Open Society more unconditionally trustworthy than the national

government. NGOs are perceived as a more reliable guarantor of the effort's success – the rating of this statement stands at 3.6 on average (Table 2, Statement 2).

Still, Roma respondents are able to relate most closely to the third statement, which calls for an active involvement in the DR effort of the widest possible circle of Roma, at all levels – from the general plane of politics down to each individual household. (Table 2, Statement 3).

Table 2.

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Sofia</b>	<b>Sliven</b>	<b>Vidin</b>	<b>Average</b>
1. I believe the Decade of Roma effort will have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria because governments have committed real resources. It's not just 'talk	1.3	2.1	4.5	<b>2.7</b>
2. I believe the Decade of Roma effort will have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria because of the involvement of organizations like the World Bank and the Open Society Institute	3.7	1.6	5.4	<b>3.6</b>
3. If the Decade of Roma effort is to have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria, we Roma will have to play a prominent role in ensuring that the goals are achieved	9.7	6.6	9.8	<b>8.7</b>
<b>Average per city</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>6.5</b>	

## 7.2. The 'Ambassadors for Change'

By reason of the dispersed-ness of the Roma community in this country and for lack of Roma political subjects, the question of Roma leaders who would be able to become DR ambassadors did not find its answer amongst non-Roma and Roma alike. The few more popular Roma leaders, as Tsar Kiro and Tsvetelin Kanchev, are not perceived as legitimate champions of the Roma interest – again, by non-Roma and Roma alike.

Popular public figures of Roma descent, who won the respect of both Roma and non-Roma with their talent and abilities, are identified as more deserving DR ambassadors. Such are:

- **Ivo Papazov - Ibriyama** - a Roma clarinet player whose popularity rose to new heights recently, when he won the BBC award
- **Azis (Vassil Boyanov)** – one of the trendiest pop-folk singers, famous for his outrageous stage behaviour
- **Sophie Marinova** – a well-loved Bulgarian pop-folk singer, she performs both Bulgarian and Roma hits
- **Professor Chirkov** – widely acclaimed as the best cardiac surgeon in this country, director of the St. Ekaterina Cardiac Center. The problem with him is that he refuses to identify with the Roma ethnos.

The only Bulgarian name mentioned is that of **Yordan Lechkov** – a celebrated football national and current Mayor of Sliven. Nominated because of his commitment to Roma problems locally.

- **Target audiences**

In the course of the 7 discussions groups held, a few profiles of people characterized by heightened sensitivity/ awareness of the Roma problems and greater inclination to support policies targeted at these problems were clearly outlined.

- Persons of higher educational status

These people usually adopt a multi-faceted approach to problems related to the Roma minority; they try to explain their occurrence and to provide rational solutions. In general, these persons have acquired broader social experience, they are aware of the basic features of the contemporary society in terms of fundamental human and civil rights and are less vulnerable to extreme nationalistic and anti-ethnic ideas. They stay better informed by reading the periodicals, they are also more mobile and more familiar with public voicing of ethnic problems – they echo the positions thus-aired to an extent. For this type of people, the inclusion of minorities is an irrevocable, topical objective of the Bulgarian society. To them, efforts in this respect are of pivotal significance.

- People who have personal experience/ interaction with Roma

The majority of Bulgarian respondents who empathize with the Roma inclusion processes and are inclined to support the respective policies usually rationalize their tolerance by positive personal experience with representatives of the Roma minority. Interactions which lead to such a positive stance usually happen at the workplace, with neighbours, friends, classmates, etc. The positive personal experience with

Roma does not necessarily result in positive attitude to the Roma in general, but it certainly prevents people from forming extremely negative opinions. Furthermore, such people frequently retort to any 'easy' negative generalizations by providing good examples based on personal experience.

Undoubtedly, least suited to familiarization with this type of policies are Bulgarians living in regions of constant interethnic tension, or the ones who altogether lack positive experience with Roma. The latter's thinking is strongly prejudiced, burdened with negative stereotypes. Respondents of this type reject all suggested programs or efforts (that target the problems of minorities) without a second thought. Special efforts would be needed to expand these people's minds and win them over for the cause.

## IV. Narrative description of results

### 1. Context: How are things going?

#### 1.1 The direction of the country today

The spontaneous respondents' reactions to this standard introductory topic fall into **two opposite categories**. On the one hand, **strongly pessimistic attitudes** emerge toward the internal economic and political situation, in which Bulgaria currently finds itself, and on the other hand, **optimistic expectations** are inspired by the prospects of the country's accession to the European Union.

*"Over these 15 years [of transition] there are no great changes in Bulgaria, except that there is freedom of speech, ... but otherwise people are becoming poorer. Unemployment is high. The foreign policy alone perhaps marks some [positive] development, they are about to admit us shortly into the EU." (Sliven, Roma)*

The tension between these two opposite poles tends to generate a **high level of frustration** concerning personal fortunes among the respondents, who observe the unprecedented and highly visible prosperity of a small fraction of the populace, which reaps the benefits of the market economy, denied to the great majority.

*"Bulgaria is sliding down for people, who like ourselves are out of job and do live on swindle or crime... But there are people who are doing fine. Over these years great chasms emerged in the society, the more enterprising persons embezzled the national wealth left from communist times" (Sliven, Roma)*

One of the main reasons for pessimism mentioned by respondents is the perceived inefficiency of state institutions in Bulgaria. Other reasons also mentioned are the failures of the privatization process, collapsed industries, high unemployment, the exodus of young people to the big cities and especially abroad.

*"The education is in a state of collapse, the public health services – in a state of collapse. The state institutions – pro forma. The police does not do its job, ... , they only write about it ... crimes are being uncovered ... murders are committed everyday. No one gets caught, though. The judicial system is on the skids ..." (Kurdjali, Non-roma)*

*"Not only in the villages, it is basically that way everywhere, in Bulgaria, in general, the situation is so bad in any aspect. Not to mention the severe unemployment, not to mention the low level of education acquired by our children" (Mechka, Non-Roma).*

*"They say unemployment is disappearing, but that is not true...In fact, it is the population that is disappearing from Bulgaria, everybody is keen to escape from here some place."(Vidin, Roma)*

*"Well, there is no idea in Bulgaria, the young people free out of the country." (Kurdjali, Non-Roma).*

Still, respondents tend to perceive that the overall direction of events in Bulgaria (democracy, the market and membership in the EU) is right, and it is a matter of time when this development brings tangible benefits, if not to the present generation, then at least to the next.

*“In my view we are definitely going in the right direction. This will bring a better life to our children” (Sliven, Non-Roma).*

*“I think we have already reached bottom, and have started slowly, almost unperceptedly to rise.” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

*“In my opinion, the situation in the country is improving. This means that we are currently overcoming the negativism of the first 10 years of the transition.” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

This is particularly true of respondents in Sofia, who evidently benefit from the more boisterous economic performance of the capital compared to the rest of the country.

*„I think that this is the right and true way, it is difficult, but step by step things will start clicking into place... Both my sons are working now, the youngest one is thinking about what she should study and what will happen later; still, I think that younger people have more chances. Grown-ups do not trust anyone. My oldest son has even two jobs....My children, both my son and my daughter, they both have jobs and have more self-confidence in themselves.“ (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

## **1.2 What are you most optimistic about**

Spontaneous mentions of optimistic trends were practically absent, but probing by the moderator usually produced references to such positively perceived development in the wake of the fall of the communist regime as the improved international standing of the country, the democratic political system and the free market.

*“We are free, the dictatorship does not exist any more. We take our decisions for ourselves, and not other people...Ranking of values. I used to work as assistant professor in information technologies, now I work as a programmer, and – in financial terms – it is much more difficult now. Nevertheless, I think that I am free. Opportunities for individual initiative, of course.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

Another often mentioned, by Roma and Non-Roma respondents alike, window of opportunity, opened up by the democratic transition, is the freedom to travel in search of employment.<sup>29</sup>:

*“Yes, they want to escape, especially the young people...hoping to earn and save some money there, and then come back here to start in some modest business of their own. (Vidin, Roma)*

## **1.3 What brings about these positive trends**

The main sources of optimism are the relative economic stability maintained over the recent 8 years, after the economic turmoils which accompanied the first stage of transition; the curtailing of inflation, the lack of inter-ethnic conflicts (in contrast to the wars in former Yugoslavia, and last but not least – the prospects for accession to the EU.

## **1.4 The greatest problems**

The two top of the mind mentions of the biggest problems made by non-Roma are **unemployment** and **corruption in government**. The closure of big industrial enterprises in the cities and the dissolution of the cooperative farms triggered massive

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<sup>29</sup> Official statistics estimate the number of Bulgarians who have emigrated abroad during 1985-2001 at about 700 000, and in the last three years at 120 000.

unemployment, while the emergence of the market economy was tarred by sleazy privatisation deals, the emergence of large-scale criminal business in drugs, prostitution and smuggling, and money laundering. The locations outside Sofia where discussions were held belong to the regions most affected by these crises.

*“There is no money because in the privatization of enterprises, a large part of them, were sold out dirt-cheap, It is bad everywhere, talking about Pleven<sup>30</sup>, ‘cause I’ve been kind of staying there for a longer time – almost nothing functions there. Only some garment companies, with working hours which should be prohibited by the law, incredible overtime...The large enterprises are absolutely ... dead, in any aspect. One cannot make any progress in the private companies either, because the owners want to take all the profit for themselves only ... they do not pay any social insurance contributions for the employees, thus causing retirement problems later on...”, (Mechka, Non-Roma)”.*

*“In a city like ours where people had jobs in industries, 99 per cent of all enterprises were closed”. (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

*“(The corruption begins) at the lowest level – the traffic police, you pay BGN 20 and get away. We can only guess what happens on the higher levels where larger deals are involved. They never find any evidence [of corruption], though.” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*„A friend of mine – she was told even before she stepped in [the doctor’s cabinet] that she has to come up with BGN 200 in order to have an operation. On the date, when the operation is scheduled, if you want to be operated on by the professor, you have to come up with BGN 500.“, (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

The remaining grave problems faced by the country are perceived as consequent on these two basic vices, which affect Bulgarian society: deteriorated education and healthcare, blocked and inefficient judiciary, violent crime

*“To my mind, it [the greatest problem] is the judiciary system...Criminals are constantly shooting each other out, and remain unpunished...” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

For Roma respondents, unemployment is the greatest problem they are faced with. The collapse of state industries and cooperative farming, which under communism guaranteed full employment, albeit at unskilled and low paid jobs, deprived the Roma population from the main employment opportunities, for which they were fit. On the other hand, Roma job-seekers are practically denied access, or are gravely disadvantaged in trying to integrate in the market economy, which initially operates in an environment of high unemployment, and of unmitigated job discrimination by the newly emerging class of entrepreneurs, who consider themselves free from any social concerns, including any constraints on discrimination by ethnicity. Endemic unemployment, combined with the dismantlement of the former state social support policies and programmes, which pushes the Roma to the very margins of physical survival, has aggravated poverty, mortality, disease, and illiteracy, and provoked the spread of crime among the Roma population.

*“Unemployment is the first problem; the second is the education of children, the third is that the Roma cannot pay for common public utilities like electricity and water. The companies which offer jobs never announce “We want no Gypsies”, but once you show up, you have no chance...” (Vidin, Roma)*

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<sup>30</sup> The big city close to Mechka

*“The Roma are not competitive in the job market... In the past the parents had jobs, they could provide the living for the children while they completed school... But now the parents are unemployed, and it is a daily struggle to survive on meager social benefits.”*

It is noteworthy that among the main problems faced in daily lives, **inter-ethnic conflicts or tensions got no mentions**, from either Roma or Non-Roma respondents.

### **1.5 Who or what is responsible**

Regardless of ethnicity, most respondents put the blame for their problems on the politicians, who have governed or are currently governing the country. Instead of serving the interests of the people who have elected them, they are perceived to give priority to their self-serving pecuniary interests.

*“It is our own fault because we have voted them into office... While people are starving, those at the top are piling up millions..” (Sliven, Non-Roma).*

*“Well, [those responsible are] all those ministers and members of parliament, who are promising everything, now that we have elections coming.”(Sofia, Non-Roma)*

### **1.6 Thoughts on joining the European Union**

The accession of Bulgaria to the European Union is widely mentioned as evidence that the country is going in the right direction. But some concerns are also evident about the risks this entails of curtailing the economic independence of the country, and diluting the Bulgarian national identity. The recent crisis in the EU over the European Constitution has obviously fueled such concerns.

*“The rejection [of the constitution] by referendums in France and Holland means this [the accession] is not going to be as easy as it seemed. We had hoped that after getting into the EU, we would have enjoyed the same standard of living that they have, but now we see that many Europeans, including the majorities in France and Holland are disappointed with membership in the EU.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

*“The fact that we will accede to Europe does not make me happy at all. Because they will start giving us orders from abroad...”(Kardjali, Non-Roma)*

*“It will become worse, because the gap in living standards between rich and poor will widen. The Dutch and the French have rejected the [European] constitution, that means it is not so nice being inside the EU.” (Sliven, Roma)*

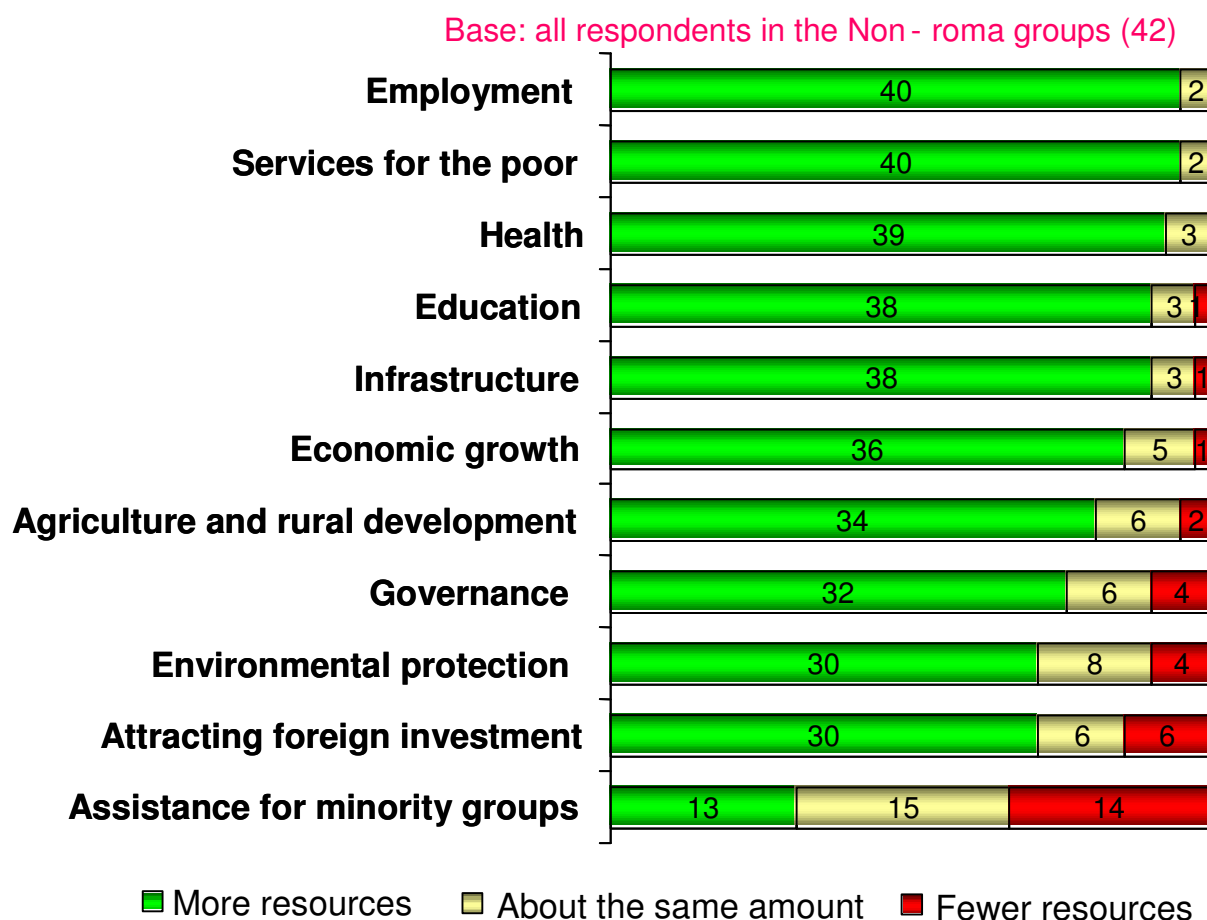
## **2. Government policies and the country’s resources**

Before the start of discussions, respondents in non-Roma groups were asked to fill in a response sheet indicating their preferences concerning the distribution of government spending.

### **2.1. How should the government spend the state resources?**

Almost without exception non-Roma respondents favoured government spending policies of left-wing type, with the major share of government spending dedicated to resolving unemployment, and for relieving the plight of the poorest segments of the population (see Figure 1). The social spheres of healthcare and education rank next in the order of priorities.

Figure 1



Summing up, one may conclude that respondents' expectations are reflect longings for government spending and intervention policies of socialist type, rather than the acceptance of the realities of a liberal market economy. The state is expected to provide employment by promoting new industries, and to take care of the socially disadvantaged strata of the population, instead of focusing on novel priorities like **Attracting foreign investment** and **Environmental protection**.

The most striking result however is the categorical rejection of increased spending for assistance to minority groups, and the equally categorical preference for cutting allocations for such assistance. This attitude is quite revealing in conjunction with the high willingness to increase assistance to poor people in general, indicating that the singling out of ethnic minorities as the privileged beneficiaries of social support programmes is strongly resented as an additional instance of the unfair distribution of public wealth, from which the great majority of Bulgarians consider to be suffering in the free market environment.



## 2.2 Do you benefit fairly from government spending

The main issues which were came to light in the discussion of the distribution of government spending were as follows:

- **The misuse of state funds for personal benefit by government officials, their families and ‘friends’** – bribes, kickbacks on contracts for public works, high salaries and expense accounts, siphoning public funds into election campaigns.

*“I wonder where all this money goes! The country is hit by floods, and they are squandering millions on this an election lottery!<sup>31</sup>” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

*“They have probably spent the surplus on the government budget to buy new official limousines, or for ‘business’ travel abroad.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

- **Taxation practices, which provide all sorts of loopholes for the rich while placing an unfair burden on lower-income families**

*“I am very dissatisfied, the state is collecting taxes from people like me, while there is simply no way the tax office can take money from the rich.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

- **Social support policies, which single out minorities at the expense of the poor in general**

The solution is seen above all in the strengthening of control over how public funds are spent, in the eradication of corruption and crime, rather than in changing the government economic policies to have more intervention, or to become more liberal.

*“No, Bulgaria is not poor. The state has the money, but the money is simply not distributed properly...A large part of it is lost, disappears...The state must have more power in terms of control....” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

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<sup>31</sup> The respondent refers to the controversial lottery ran by the government to stimulate higher voter participation in the recent general parliamentary elections.

### 3. Perceptions of ethnicity

When the topic of ethnicity is broached, Bulgarian respondents typically tend to think of the Bulgarian ethnos as all-embracing, identical to the entire Bulgarian nation. Probing was normally required to evoke the awareness that there are other, distinct from Bulgarian, ethnic components that make up the totality of the population.

#### 3.1 What does it mean to be a Bulgarian? What makes us different from others?

**Inventiveness, industriousness, stamina, intelligence, studiousness, patience and individualism** were the features most often mentioned by Bulgarian respondents as typical national characteristics. These qualities, usually associated with high adaptability to changing circumstances, and with the capacity to survive under conditions of adversity, are widely believed to have been forged during the centuries of foreign domination and oppression under the Ottoman Empire.

*“I don't think we are different (from the Europeans). Moreover, there are many gifted Bulgarians. I am proud to be Bulgarian, there are so many famous Bulgarians. We are smart people, wherever we go, there are gifted people.”(Kurdjali, Bulgarian)*

*„But we have very clever people, we even have very young hackers, who leave the country because they are not granted a field for self-realization. Otherwise we are very fine people...The tremendous individualism we have and talk about – if we manage to put it in harness, we could move mountains. „We have lived through an awful lot and that is why we are competent in many spheres.“ (Sofia, Bulgarian)*

Among negative traits, it is **disorderliness, pushiness and timidity** that come to respondents' minds, as opposed to the temperamental and cultural characteristics perceived to be typical for West European nations.

*“Bulgarians do not accept order, Bulgarians always try to act more candidly and outpace others, that is what I mean. It is not so important how much money you have, but how many laws you disregard.” (Sofia, Bulgaria)*

*“That's the point – we are obstinate, patient, and we carry the yoke they have put on our neck.*

*Yes, exactly, we tolerate them, and each of us hopes that the next ones [people in government], let's wait for the current ones to go away and for the next ones to come and see what will happen, and everything goes on the same way. And now we started to let them get their turn once again.”, (Mechka, Bulgarians)*

The Roma respondents, for their part, rather tended to define their ethnic characteristics in juxtaposition with Bulgarians, and in that respect, it is illiteracy and the **lack of work ethics** come to the fore.

*“To be a Roma in Bulgaria means to be unemployed... We are an illiterate lot, uncompetitive... (Sliven, Roma)*

*“Bulgarians are better at business. They are industrious, with sharp minds. There are Roma people with sharp minds too, but from early infancy Bulgarians are made aware that they must go to school and graduate, to get educated for a job, that they would have to work for a living...” (Vidin, Roma)*

### **3.2 Is our nation tolerant**

The prevailing self-appraisal that emerged in the discussions is that **ethnic tolerance** is a national virtue inherent to the Bulgarians. Apart from arguments rooted in the past (Bulgaria as cross-roads of civilizations, with centuries-long history of co-existence of different nations and faiths), the peaceful evolution of relations between the Bulgarian majority and the Ethnic Turk minority after the democratic opening of society is usually mentioned, in contrast with the devastating inter-ethnic violence which erupted in former Yugoslavia. There are even claims that xenophobia, of the type which is affecting some Western nations, would not be possible in Bulgaria.

*“In my opinion, we live well, at least here, in Kurdjali – Armenians, Jews, Turks, Bulgarians, and gypsies. I think we live well. And we are also tolerant.” (Kurdjali, Bulgarians)*

*„The fact that there was no violence in Bulgaria, unlike Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina ... Absolutely, a lot of mosques were destroyed in Greece after the Balkan war, while the mosques in Bulgaria are still standing ... Yes, compared to the French and the Germans, for instance, who would have much less tolerance to foreigners - yes, we are much more tolerant.” (Sofia, Bulgarians)*

*“We are tolerant to the foreigners. A Bulgarian would never know experience xenophobia – but that is before he enters the door to his own home. The Bulgarian is tolerant, but he becomes the master within his own courtyard. We are tolerant to all ethnic communities, to our own ethnic communities.” (Sofia, Bulgarians)*

It is noteworthy that tolerance is not universally nor unreservedly, perceived as virtue: excessive tolerance (and who's to say how much is too much?) is seen as sacrificing the interests of one's own ethnos in favour of the 'others'.

Asked to rate Bulgarians on tolerance, the Roma tend to avoid generalizations, insisting that this greatly varies depending on the individual and on personal experience.

*“Many among Bulgarians have worked with Gypsies, live among Gypsies, make no difference between Bulgarians and Gypsies. But there are others who have bad attitudes [toward the Roma]. Usually these are the Bulgarians who have had no contact with Gypsies, have no idea about us. And usually those are the people who are most intolerant toward us.” (Vidin, Roma)*

*“Bulgarians are famous as hospitable and friendly people. That's the way they are in our region... They would never let you starve. But since recently, especially the last 10-15 years, just hearing about Gypsies makes them fret.” (Vidin, Roma)*

## 4. Attitudes toward the Roma

It is worthy of note that, having just laid claims on tolerance as value, inherent to their national character, Bulgarian respondents were not at all constrained or handicapped in giving vent to negative feelings and perceptions, once their attitudes on the Roma were probed, in introducing the next topic of the discussions.

It is also striking how much the abstract, generally negative attitudes toward the Roma they tended to express, diverged from their experiences of personal contact with individual Roma which they were asked to share.

### 4.1 The greatest challenges/problems faced by Roma

Bulgarian respondents perceive the Roma as an ethnic group which, though it forms part of the Bulgarian nation, carries on a sort of **parallel existence, as an autonomous substratum of society as a whole, governed by rules and regulations peculiar to itself.**

The Roma, in the abstract, are considered **illiterate, unskilled, lazy, ill-suited to fit and or obey** the generally accepted norms and rules of social behaviour. An attitude of condescension, based on the perception of Roma as a socially underdeveloped and socially handicapped community, for whom **the best scenario for a better future is to evolve to the higher level, already enjoyed by Bulgarians.**

On the positive side, which comes to light when personal experiences with the Roma are probed, Bulgarian respondents tend to perceive the Roma as honest, cohesive, good parents, good friends and neighbours, carefree, artistic.

The biggest issue of particular concern to Bulgarians with respect to the Roma however is their perceived privileged position as recipients of social welfare benefits. Particularly resented are such 'rights' enjoyed by the Roma in Bulgaria, as the universal failure to pay the bills for electric power and water supply, as well as the fares in public transport.

*"Always – they are a minority, have to be taken care of, although many among them live much better than us..... For example – if I am 2 days late paying to the electrical company, even if my bill is a mere 5 BGN, they would cut the power supply. But never to the Roma, they don't dare to do it, because the whole Roma quarter would riot and chase away the wardens... "(Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*"They [Roma] came on Easter to beg, and I gave them a bread and 2 jars with stewed fruit. I went out a little later, we had pipes, the neighbor had left them, the pipes were stolen, the jars were left there. This means they are not hungry. Another [Roma] came to beg for money, and children's clothes. I said I would give, if she would clean. She refused. She does not want to work. They like getting things without any efforts." "(Kurdjali, Non-roma)*

On the other hand, Bulgarians are well aware of the real problems, faced by the Roma community – the extreme poverty and illiteracy, which combined with unemployment

entrench their social marginalization – and recognize the fact that resolving these problems would be to the benefit of society as a whole.

#### 4.2 Experiences of interactive situations with Roma

A majority of the Bulgarian respondents in the groups had contacts with the Roma in their day-to-day lives. It is striking, that when asked to share their personal experiences of such contacts, most of them tended to see these encounters in a positive light, however almost invariably accompanied by the proviso that the Roma from that particular town/neighborhood/block of apartments, **“our Roma” are different from the “other Roma” as reported on TV and in the press.**

This ambivalent perception of the Roma (negative attitudes coming to the fore when talking about Roma in general, and positive traits prevailing when sharing personal experiences) was made particularly manifest by the results of a written exercise, performed by the Bulgarian respondents, who were asked to describe their views of the Roma.

**FIGURE 232**

	Description of the Roma community	Description of the Roma they know
R1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor</li> <li>• Uneducated</li> <li>• Illiterate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrious</li> <li>• Poor</li> <li>• Honest</li> </ul>
R2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illiterate</li> <li>• Uncleanly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrious</li> <li>• Honest</li> </ul>
R3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Careless</li> <li>• Purposeless</li> <li>• Slovenly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As any other people</li> <li>• Good friends</li> <li>• Sometimes mistrustful</li> </ul>
R4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cunning and insolent</li> <li>• Always looking for the “easy way”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good friends</li> <li>• Often don’t live up to promises</li> <li>• Never think of tomorrow</li> </ul>
R5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uneducated</li> <li>• Uncultured</li> <li>• No respect toward others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong communal spirit</li> <li>• Helping each other</li> <li>• Respect each other</li> </ul>
R6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have a bad view of them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not bad people at all</li> </ul>
R7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pampered</li> <li>• Illiterate</li> <li>• Insolent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of them are industrious</li> <li>• Unfortunate in their way of life</li> </ul>

The majority of encounters with Roma mentioned take place in the street or in public transport, less frequently at the workplace. The presence of Roma in the public places of towns and cities tends to be perceived as “disconcerting”, and “the good old times”,

32 Mentions written in by respondents in Kardjali, Sofia and Vidin

when the Roma did not dare maintain a presence in the central urban areas, are often nostalgically mentioned.

*“The Gypsies are everywhere. I used to live in a boarding house...And there were Gypsies living on the first floor...After the first three months of co-habitation, spent in the effort to impose the rules of behavior – we got presents from them... Everyone must respect the others, there is no other way.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*„I am a musician and have worked with other musicians, who are Gypsies, and I accept them. There is one such person I know, who has a small child, and, in order to make a living for his family, he is playing in the evening at pubs, after having worked during the day as a security guard. That means there are nice people among them too.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“Sometimes I have to make deliveries in the Roma quarter, and people there are quite responsive and nice to me, in contrast to some Bulgarians...They are friendly to strangers, this is my personal experience.” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

Quite a distinct picture emerged from the focus group conducted in the village of Mechka (near the city of Pleven). That village is the focal point of acute tensions between Bulgarian inhabitants and the local Roma community, and the ensuing discussion can be considered as **exemplary of the radicalization of negative attitudes produced by inter-ethnic conflict.**

The specificity of the Mechka case is provoked to a great extent by the particular features of the Roma tribe, which has settled there. Scholars differ about the origins of that tribe, but the prevailing view is that they are descendants of Roma from Kurdistan, a Roma subgroup which has no peers elsewhere in Bulgaria, and is distinct and isolated from the remaining Roma communities in the country.

*“There are different kinds of gypsies, ours are not gypsies – these are typical Indian Gypsies, horse thieves. They are neither Turk, they claim to be Turks, but they are not Turks, they are not gypsies either, because I used to live in Bukovak, they have a distinct kind of gypsies there, call them Bulgarian gypsies, they are totally different, they study, even graduate from higher schools, they are absolutely different as mentality, as culture...,” (Mechka, Non-Roma)*

Inter-ethnic tensions in Mechka peaked in 2000, when a group of Roma cattle-rustlers murdered a Bulgarian who tried to interfere with them. Since then thefts and burglaries multiplied, and there were also more cases of rape and murder. The Bulgarian populace lives in fear of the Roma, increasingly resenting the perceived passivity and acquiescence of the police, and of authorities in general, in the face of crime. The consequences of this situation are made evident by the results of the written exercise described above, as performed by the Bulgarian respondents from Mechka:

**FIGURE 3**

	Description of the Roma community	Description of the Roma they know
R1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lazy</li> <li>• Uneducated</li> <li>• Impudent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thieving locusts</li> <li>• Impudent destructors</li> <li>• Merciless brutes</li> </ul>
R2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thieves</li> <li>• Insolent</li> <li>• Stinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inferior beings</li> <li>• Impudent murderers</li> <li>• Thieves par excellence</li> </ul>
R3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intolerable</li> <li>• Murderers</li> <li>• Insolent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fearful locusts</li> <li>• Disgusting</li> <li>• Repulsive</li> </ul>
R4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thieves</li> <li>• Uneducated</li> <li>• Parasites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lazy locusts</li> <li>• Illiterate savages</li> <li>• Insolent and impudent</li> </ul>

Continued coexistence with the local Roma has become, for the Bulgarian inhabitants of Mechka, an unacceptable and almost unthinkable long-term prospect, impelling their thinking in the direction of extreme and violent solutions.

*“In my realistic opinion, they [the Roma should be forcefully ejected from Mechka. Everyone should know one’s place. You see, we are Bulgarians, and if they cannot live together with us, and resist any authority, then they should better leave for where they came from.”(Mechka, Non-Roma)*

*It is some consolation that even in that extreme situation there emerges a differentiated view of different Roma subgroups:*

*“The place where I work, there are gypsies there as well, but they are totally different from those. They are is always ready to do you a favor, you can count on them, they are from Yassen [a suburb of the city of Pleven], two small women, but they really have nothing in common with those here. ”(Mechka, Non-Roma)*

#### **4.3. Underlying attitudes toward Roma integration**

The perception of Roma as the ‘privileged minority’ fuels strong opposition among Bulgarians against any assistance programmes, targeted at the Roma community, which are viewed as tending to discriminate against the rest of the population, the majority Bulgarians included. Conversely, there is wide-spread recognition that unless the inadequate education and unemployment, plaguing the Roma community are remedied, in the longer term the society as a whole in Bulgaria would be faced with aggravating problems.

*“The separation of Roma is detrimental for society; the problem is that the so called integration is not carried out properly...Integration should start somehow, by giving them a chance to work together [with Bulgarians] in some enterprise. The inadequate attempts [at integration] so far should not mislead us into abandoning the effort altogether, there is no alternative solution...(Vidin, Non-Roma)*

*“All their problems boomerang against us – bad hygiene, poverty, theft, in the end we all suffer, That is why we must together work to raise our living standards.” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

Perceiving “integration” as a process of Roma adaptation of the ways and norms of life practiced by the majority, Bulgarian respondents expect the Roma **to conform** with the generally prevailing rules and regulations. This primarily implies that the Roma need to assuming certain obligations, which in the current context they have tended largely to disregard. The idea of any form of **positive discrimination** to help Roma overcome their backwardness is totally unacceptable.

*“The Law should be applied equally to all, That’s the starting point. Because over the recent 15 years it seemed that some people were exempt from obligations. I myself know of a luxurious house in the Gypsy quarter, and the family who own it owing 8-9 thousands BGN to the power company, because they use electric power for heating, while we at home shiver at barely 13 degrees Centigrade, trying to save on the electricity bill. Until the authorities make them pay their power bill, there will be no equality between these people and ourselves.” (Viding, Non-Roma)*

*The prospects for Roma integration are considered possible in the longer term - for future, rather than for the current Roma generations, primarily by way of improved, adequate education and professional qualification of Roma children.*

*“It is because the Roma live in an isolated environment within their own community, education has no value among them, children are not sent to school, and so on.. There is nothing we could to ask from them, while they stick to living in clans.”(Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“I think that the state must work to raise their level through education, there is no other way”(Sliven, Non-Roma)*

*“The way you treat your own children at home, we should not make distinction between Roma and Bulgarian children – they are all ours. What they need is help.”(Sofia, Non-Roma)*

#### **4.3.1. Do you have anything in common with the Roma?**

Among the most evident, and perhaps most negative prevalent stereotypes about the Roma, which make them perceived as different from the other ethnic groups, are their distinctive personal appearance, hygiene, culture and way of life.

*“They are different in the way they look. And the smell is different.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“There is a block of flats in Kazanluk, and the trains pass nearby, and I have seen from the train a horse climbed up to the fourth or the fifth floor of it. Garbage piled up around it, up to the second floor, obscuring the first floor. That’s the way they are used to live.”(Sliven, Bon-Roma)*

*“Some of them are accommodated in municipal blocks of flats...So one comes and parks his horse in the balcony...In No. 56 they even had cows...”(Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

Roma attitudes on values such as education, work ethics are also seen as making them different.



*"[Roma] Parents send children to school for the sole purpose to qualify for social benefits<sup>33</sup>. Even this is not enough of an incentive for many. Last week the school bus broke down, and none of them [Roma children] went to school, because they would have to walk a mile or two on foot."*

Respondents also award to Roma some characteristics common with Bulgarians; and quite often these are nice little traits, which are believed to distinguish nations in the Balkans from the people in Western Europe.

*"When it is time to celebrate something, we are always together."*

*"As we have already said, we do not like order, they do not like it as well, they would even listen to a person of authority; we, Bulgarians, likewise hate to have bosses."*

*"The values of the Christian family and morals are very strong among Gypsies."*

*"The "Chalga" (a currently popular kind of Bulgarian folk-pop music)"*

### **4.3.2 Roma compared to other minorities**

Compared to the other ethnic minorities, which inhabit Bulgaria (Ethnic Turks, Armenians, Jews), the Roma are unanimously rated by Bulgarian respondents as the minority with the worst reputation. This is particularly relevant in the comparison with the other, more numerous than the Roma, but similarly socially handicapped minority of ethnic Turks, who are perceived as industrious workers (even more than Bulgarians themselves), honest, clean and dignified

*"The source of the problems [of Roma backwardness] basically lies with them, the Roma, everywhere... It is no like that in the case of Turkish minority. These people [ethnic Turks] are not like that. They are like us, the only difference is the religion. Otherwise, they are human beings just like us, who like to work"(Mechka, Non-Roma)*

### **4.3.3 Do Roma want to integrate more?**

The majority of Bulgarian respondents are skeptical about the wish of the Roma to integrate; they believe that the Roma would rather maintain the status quo, in which they carry on an easy existence supported by social benefits, with the bill paid by the Bulgarian taxpayer.

*"They feel better the way things are. Only a minority of the Roma, some 30% at most, are socially aware and eager to advance. The remaining 70% don't want to integrate, that's their mentality, they want to keep on living the easy way, without work. Why should they work, if we are feeding them?" (Viding, Non-Roma)*

### **4.3.4 The moral angle: are Roma treated fairly?**

The prevailing view among Bulgarian respondents is that the Roma in Bulgaria have absolutely the same rights and freedoms as the rest of the population, and there is spontaneous indignation when limited opportunities or deprived rights of the Roma are mentioned. The Constitutional proclamation of the equal right in employment and equal access to education, that is formal legal equality are considered sufficient. The factual handicaps faced by the Roma to enjoy these rights is usually explained by deficiencies,

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<sup>33</sup> Parents whose children do not attend school are disqualified from social assistance

entrenched in the culture and mentality of the Roma themselves – lack of initiative, laziness, inadequate work ethics.

*“ In the West they want to integrate the minorities. In my opinion, here there is no discrimination against them at all. That’s the way they prefer to be. It is impossible to force someone to join the others.” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

Still some respondents realize that at least some part of the responsibility for the disadvantaged state of the Roma lies with inadequate state policies, and with the discriminatory attitudes of society as a whole.

*“Perhaps it is not the lack of skills only [on part of the Roma]; maybe simply we do not allow them to get jobs. These people simply should be given the chance to work... They do not go to school because they know that after that, when they start looking for a job, and nobody will take them, that is the root of the problem.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

#### **4.4 More integration, or ‘separate but equal’ approach?**

There is a prevailing understanding among Bulgarians that Roma should not be confined to separate ghettos on the outskirts of urban and rural communities, inside which those traits and traditions, which hold back their social advancement, keep reproducing. This understanding is generally prompted by the concern about the risk that should the Roma community, which increases in size because of its higher birth rate, were let to maintain its current customs and ways, in the longer term it would inevitably erupt from its ghettos to endanger law and order, stability and prosperity of the nation as a whole.

*“A huge problem is looming ahead, though it has not exploded yet: confrontation between Bulgarians and the Roma. They have exorbitant claims, we carry them on our backs; they don’t pay for electricity, we pay double prices for electric power. Their aggression is fueled by poverty, but perhaps also because of the ill-conceived privileged rights which are given to them. (Vidin. Non-Roma)*

*“It is better to get them integrated, than to get involved in civil war here”(Sliven, Non-Roma)*

Roma integration is conceived as a sort of ‘domestication’ and in more general terms – assimilation. Apart being considered ineffective and likely to conserve Roma backwardness, the “separate but equal” policy provokes fears, evoking the separatist scenarios which devastated former Yugoslavia.

*“Then let us divide everything in two – Romania and Bulgaria – this would be absurd. This will create unimaginable problems.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“This would mean the establishing “a state within the state”. This may lead to confrontation. And besides, without us they would be nowhere, with this mentality they are like some sort of leaches, sorry to say that.”( Vidin, Non-Roma)*

*“Separate they would never move ahead, only through integration they can achieve something” (Sliven, Non-roma)*

At the same time, respondents see specific limits to the “acceptable” extent of integration and co-existence with the Roma.

*OK, integration, but we would not like to have Roma in our residential block, right? Under the current circumstances we shall not be comfortable to have many of them around us, close to us. (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

## 5. Roma views on greater integration

### 5.1 The problems faced by Roma

Bulgarian Roma envisage problems their ethnos is faced with at **two distinct levels**. The first one is related to the issues of **individual survival encountered in daily life** and visible to all of them, **regardless of social status** within the community and in the larger society.

The **second level** of problems before the Roma community is rationalized mostly by Roma, **whose educational status, degree of civil activity and extent of inclusion in the Bulgarian society are higher**, and also by the representatives of Roma NGOs. It pertains to the issues of **self-identification, cultural belonging** and **political representation** of the Roma.

Among the **issues of personal survival in daily life** the most prominent are **unemployment, discrimination, inadequate education**.

*“They [the Roma] need to study, that’s the remedy. Above all study. And they also need programmes and initiatives, for example EU programmes to create jobs. That’s how they would have permanent income.” (Sliven, Roma)*

*“I am a seamstress, with a secondary education, but when I went to register at the employment office they send me to sweep streets, because I am Roma.”(Vidin, Roma)*

The increasingly emerging public image of the Roma **as criminal ethnos** is perceived by the Roma as a particularly dangerous development. The mass media are seen as bearing the major blame for propagating this image.

*“It says in the newspaper that a Gypsy has stolen something worth 200 Leva, why don’t they say that a Bulgarian has stolen so and so many Leva?” (Sliven, Roma)*

*“Why in the media, when they mention the boxing champion Boris Georgiev they don’t refer to him as the Gypsy boxer, but instead always say “the Bulgarian boxer Boris Georgiev”. But if a Gypsy happens to steal, they always mention the ethnicity’ (Vidin, Roma)*

Going to a level of generalization, the main problems of their community defined by the Roma are **the threat of cultural assimilation**, as well as being exploited in national politics, because of an **inadequate political representation of the Roma by pressure groups of their own**.

**Figure 4: List of problems mentioned**

<b>The greatest challenges / problems of Roma</b>
Unemployment
Discrimination
Low education level
Negative stereotypes among the majority population
Assimilation and loss of cultural identity
Lack of political representation of the Roma

### **5.1.2 Are they different from the problems of other minorities, the poor in general?**

On the whole the Roma see themselves as the group relegated to the worst situation compared with all the other disadvantaged strata of the population in Bulgaria. The other big minority – ethnic Turks – is seen by the Roma as enjoying a relatively privileged position due to the strong political representation and the protection the Turk population has from the Movement of Rights and Freedoms<sup>34</sup>.

### **5.1.3 Have things for Roma gotten better or worse in recent years?**

Roma respondents are unanimous that the status of their community has deteriorated during the period of transition. The trend that has hit them worst is unemployment, which has pushed many to crime, mendacity etc

*“Do you remember any problems in the past about electricity bills? All had jobs and everybody paid their bills. Whatever improvements we have in our quarter were made during communism. Everyone had a job, got a salary, and that was the way we lived. But things have turned upside down. The industries got privatized, but most of them closed down, and jobs disappeared.”(Vidin, Roma)*

*“There was less discrimination in the past, because the goal was to assimilate the Gypsies, though then we were denied participation in the government. It is still the same... to advance a Roma must definitely be two heads above the Bulgarian”. (Sliven, Roma)*

### **5.1.4 What are the obstacles to improvement?**

In addition to the general economic problems faced by Bulgaria, like the **insufficiency of jobs** and the low standard of living, the Roma see as the main obstacles to the

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<sup>34</sup> The political party representing the Bulgarian ethnic Turks, which by shrewd political maneuvering has managed to keep the balance of power in parliament, and so form part of governing majorities over many of the 15 years since the democratic transition.

improvement of their lives, peculiar to the Roma community **job discrimination, inadequate skills and qualifications**, as well as **the lack of a tradition in education and similar cultural traits**.

*“Another problem is the early marriages- getting married at school age, and then dropping out of school...And so, young parents don’t realize the importance of education, they likewise would let **their children** drop out of school too.” (Vidin, Roma)*

### 5.1.5 Your expectations for the next Roma generation

Pessimistic expectations for the future among Roma respondents prevail.

*“Our children will be more illiterate than we are. In this neighborhood most families in the past had secondary, and many university education, but nowadays the majority are unemployed, and hardly manage to survive from day to day... When one has to go on hungry, so that there is some food for the kids, there is no money for schoolbooks, forge it...” (Sliven, Roma)*

Some respondent though see encouraging rays of light in the tunnel, which promise better fortunes for future Roma generations.

*“In recent years our children started going to school, like the Bulgarian kids. Children should be pressed to attend school. I have had only elementary education, that’s not enough, so I am pressing my kids to study – to secondary education, and above, if I would have that opportunity...”(Vidin, Roma)*

It is noteworthy, that in either case – both in the pessimistic, and in the optimistic scenarios – the key factor, which tips the balance either way, is **accessibility of education**.

## 5.2 Attitudes to integration

Without exception the Roma respondents are favourably disposed toward integration, perceived as the process of achieving adequate education, working skills and qualifications and political participation, on the basis of equality and mutual respect, regardless of ethnicity. Particular sensitivity and resentment are manifest, with regard to what are perceived as superior attitudes among the Bulgarians, based on the presumption that to integrate Roma should abandon cultural traditions, imitate the ways of the majority, and ultimately blend into it, losing their ethnic identity .

*“Integration means that we both, me and you, enjoy equal status..There is progress in integrating, when in an office Bulgarians and Roma work together, and everybody is doing his job without minding what is the ethnicity of the other.”(Vidin, Roma)*

There is some evidence of rejection of social engineering notions about organized resettlement of Roma into **mixed housing** communities.

*“...Living in the [Roma] quarter I have friends who would help me and defend me in need, and the [Roma] guy living among Bulgarians must keep to himself. The Gypsies settled in town among Bulgarians have to conform. And they do conform, but life is dull for them. In the ghetto there is music and celebration all the time, and they miss that.*

*Your mentality is altogether different. In our case, among 15 000 Gypsies everybody knows everybody else. With you, nobody knows even his neighbor next door....” (Vidin, Roma)*

Conversely, there exists strong support for enrolling Roma children in **mixed classes** with Bulgarian students at school.

*“ There, my kid is enrolled in a class with Bulgarian kids, and there are just two Gypsy kids in the class, and my kid sat next to the other Roma kid. When I asked the teacher why there were just two, she said it was best for maintaining discipline that there are fewer Roma children per class. So I asked the teacher to move my child next to a Bulgarian student, so that he can learn from the example of the Bulgarian. (Vidin, Roma)*

### **5.2.2 Obstacles to integration and to equal access**

The vicious circle made up of poverty–illiteracy–unemployment–poverty emerges in the discussions as the major obstacle to integration, and the most effective policy to break this circle is seen in remedial government policies, geared to overcome discrimination.

*“The discrimination is very perfidious – impossible to nail down. They don’t say [at the Employment Office] “You are a Gypsy, get lost!”, they are very polite, but the result is the same, they never call you back to offer a job. (Vidin, Roma)*

Particular emphasis is once again placed on ensuring equal access to education for Roma children.

*“The [Roma and Bulgarian] children should get an opportunity to be together at school, because our kids would get a chance to get out of the ghetto, to socialize with Bulgarian children, and vice versa, and they all would realize that they do not differ so much from each other.” (Vidin, Roma)*

### **5.4.2 Would greater integration be welcome among non-Roma**

The Roma are skeptical about the willingness of the majority population to accept greater integration of Roma. The greatest obstacle to such acceptance are generation-old prejudices toward the Roma (which in part reflect real fears of deviant Roma behaviour like thieving, mendacity), which since recently have been fomented by mass media reporting.

*“So what does integration mean? Tell every Bulgarian that Roma are good, nice people? There always has existed a distance between Gypsies and Bulgarians. There, I myself have been in school together with Bulgarians, and always got excellent grades, never inferior to the best Bulgarian students, so what? There always existed a distance between me and them. And this will never be changed, no programmes or projects can alter that fact. I have many times heard Bulgarians warn their kids “Take care, dear, these are Gypsies!” How can one, after that, convince those kids that we are equal? There now, the young [Roma] go to school, want to socialize with their Bulgarian peers, but they are rejected.” (Vidin, Roma)*

### **5.4.3 Integration of Roma compared with other minority groups**

On the whole, the Roma see themselves as the most disadvantaged ethnic minority in Bulgaria. There is however a dissenting view:

*“In our region we have equal status with the other ethnic communities. We know that the situation is worse elsewhere. But here in Vidin we are fine, because our Roma are better educated, have better manners, and better adapted to Bulgarian ways, compared to other cities, where the Roma communities are more confined, and more constrained in moving about town. Our youth are more open to novelty, to the life outside the community.” (Vidin, Roma)*



## **6. The government and the Roma**

### **6.1 Would society benefit from helping Roma**

Despite their resentment of presumed Roma sponging on social benefits, Bulgarian respondents strongly come out in favour of an active government policy aimed at resolving the problems of the Roma community. The reasoning is purely pragmatic: continued benefit payments to the Roma population, combined with the costs of fighting Roma crime, would place an increasing burden on the public purse. On the other hand, there is rising awareness that the plight of the Roma in Bulgaria is detrimental to the country's international reputation, particularly with regard to its eligibility for accession to the EU.

*„Absolutely (the authorities should make dedicated efforts)! Without these efforts there will be enormous problems between Bulgarians and this community. Nothing is being done at the moment.“ (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

### **6.2 Who should be responsible for helping Roma**

There is awareness that helping improve the lives of Roma would be a long and complex process. The initial impetus for action should come from central government level.

*“The start should be made from the top, from the legislative process. Laws should be applied equally to all. Yes, things should start moving at the national level, and then on the local level.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

### **6.3 How generous should government help be**

Reluctance to accept additional government outlays to help Roma integration dwindles when respondents come to terms with the awareness of the potential costs of imminent inter-ethnic conflict in the future if the poverty of Roma is not alleviated, on the condition, however, that Roma are not singled out, and all similarly handicapped poor people benefit from such help.

*„I am in favour of a bigger allocation, on the order of 10-20 million BGN - thus the public will know that the money is spent not just on the Roma, but on all the poor. This is not that much money, compared to what is being spent now for the elections. It is worth investing in children. Even if they allocate more – there will be no problem, provided the formula covers all disadvantaged people.“ (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*„Here is a perfect approach – OK, you [the Roma] will get some assistance, if your children attend school. There still be some [Roma] people who will not let their children to school, but I agree to have the taxes I pay used for such a purpose. That is different from the approach under communism, when the Roma had a quota of a certain per cent of places reserved for them at the universities.“(Sofia, Non-Roma)*

#### **6.4 Should the government help Roma more than others in need**

This indeed proved to be the most sensitive issue: the notion of assisting disadvantaged on the basis of ethnicity was categorically rejected. Its injection in the discussions invariably escalated anti-Roma sentiments among the respondents.

*“Of course, there should be a general policy dedicated to the poor, otherwise could violence could erupt. If five children in a Roma family attend school for the sole purpose of ensuring that that family gets social benefits, without caring at all if they get educated or not, this makes no sense, especially if at the same time a Bulgarian child may be left without schooling because the family is equally poor – then we would have a system of assistance to the Roma provided at the cost of help to the other poor. Children must be treated in one and the same way. If a child, regardless of whether he or she is Bulgarian of Roma, is talented in any sphere, that this child must receive every incentive available.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“They are citizens of this state, the law is the same for everyone. Why should they be treated in a special way?” (Kardjali, Non-Roma)*

#### **6.5 What about the duty of non-Roma community to help**

The prevailing view that Roma problems should be dealt with by the institutions and agencies of government, and that ordinary people cannot do anything meaningful to help, except by adopting treating the Roma fairly in their personal dealings.

*“The ordinary person can help integration in the first place by his or her personal attitude to the Gypsies”. (Vidin, Non-Roma).*

#### **6.6 And what about Roma self-help**

Most Bulgarian respondents hold the Roma themselves largely responsible for their disadvantaged condition.

*“They have nobody but themselves to blame for that. No one would employ them, for the simple reason that they are lazy. They are not deliberately discriminated against in any way.. It is not because of race or culture, it is for the mere reason that they are lazy..“ (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

## **7. Roma views on helping improve their lives**

### **7.1 Should the government help the Roma...how generously?**

Roma respondents are convinced that only decisive and vigorous government intervention can break the vicious circle of reproductive poverty which conserves their backwardness.

*“The Roma problem could be resolved only by the state. None of the other players is capable of that unless the state, as represented by the government and the National Assembly demonstrates its political will.”(Sofia, Roma NGO)*

### **7.2 The obstacles to more government help**

The major obstacles to more effective government help mentioned in the discussions are neglect of the Roma plight by politicians, whose electoral promises and programmes remain on paper. These policies of ‘benign neglect’ are encouraged by the negative attitudes toward the Roma prevailing among the general public, and facilitated by the inadequate political representation of the Roma community in elected bodies and office.

*“Now during the election campaign they [the politicians] come, and court us, and buy our votes, as they are used to, at the price of a beer and a snack. And the dumb Gypsies go and vote for them. And when elections are over, our problems once again remain in the lowest order of priority.” (Vidin, Roma)*

*“The laws they adopt in parliament should not remain in paper only, or having some limited action that benefits just a small group of people, as it has happened with all assistance programmes adopted so far. “ (Vidin, Roma)*

There is also serious concern among the Roma about eventual resentment on the part of the Bulgarian majority concerning government help targeted only at the Roma.

*“The government must intervene [to help the Roma], but Bulgarians will resent it. They would strongly oppose special programmes to help the Roma. The programmes should have comprehensive coverage, including Bulgarians too” (Vidin, Roma)*

*“It would not be fair to give privileged access to a single ethnos. There was a time when the ethnic Turks and the Gypsies had privileged enrollment. To my mind this was unfair.” (Sliven, Roma)*

### **7.3 What help Roma expect from the national government**

The Roma expect help from the national government above all in ensuring stable employment, as the mainstay of ensuring to them decent living standards. Having stable jobs and incomes, respondents believe, would enable them to help themselves in providing better education to their children, and in improving relations with the majority population.

*“These millions [of government funds to help the Roma] should be invested in the areas with highest unemployment. The state must not relinquish responsibility for creating jobs. Another part of the funding should go to stimulate entrepreneurship, so that people could start in business. (Sliven, Roma)*

*“The biggest obstacle o integration is unemployment. If we had jobs, we would get integrated by ourselves... we’d be mixing and socializing on the job with the Bulgarians..”. (Vidin, Roma)*

*“If I could ask the Prime Minister for just one thing, I would ask him to get me a job. A decently paid job. And I would also propose to the President to impose higher tax rates on businesses which do not employ Roma.” (Sliven, Roma)*

#### **7.4 Roma expectations of help from the local authorities**

Local authorities are mainly expected to resolve specific problems of infrastructure, public transport and other similar problems of local nature. There is a general view that local government budgets provide little, if any funds for the such projects in Roma neighborhoods.

#### **7.5 Expectations of self-help by the Roma community**

There is a general view that in their disadvantaged condition the Roma can do little to help themselves. Some respondents tell of disappointing and discouraging experiences their own efforts in this regard have suffered.

*“We had elaborated a very good programme for stimulating Roma business initiative in the region, for job creation, for legal assistance. It was a fine programme, but we had to abandon it. We did not manage to get any funding for it, neither form the local government, nor from the Ministry of Finance in Sofia. ” (Sliven, Roma)*

#### **7.6 Respondents’ advice to their own community**

The most frequent advice to their own community by Roma respondents is to focus on the goal of ensuring adequate education and qualifications for the next generation.

*“Make their children study more. If they don’t go to school, there is no chance of getting a decent job. Things now are different from the past, when, whether you went to school, or dropped out, you could go and get a proper job at the factory. You now need education and skills for any job.” (Vidin, Roma)*

#### **7.7 What role for Roma leaders**

Most Roma leaders and NGOs have made for themselves bad reputations by poor performance, mismanagement of community self-help programmes and misappropriation of funds.

*“They [Roma leaders from Sliven] have all fled to the capital. They don’t help the community at all, thinking and acting for personal benefit only, each and everyone working privately, by himself, in secret from the rest...” (Sliven, Roma)*

For their part, representatives of Roma NGOs insist that Roma leaders could have a meaningful role in promoting the interests of their community only if and when they achieve adequate political representation, meaning being voted in, or appointed to positions of responsibility in central and local government.

*“ If we want to grow out of the expert level, and participate in government decision making, then the only way for us is to participate in the political mill as political players, otherwise could get together like this after 100 years have passed, we could talk, and talk, and talk – but nothing tangible would have happened.” (Sofia, Roma NGO)*

*“We have no leverage because we do not participate. You can have no leverage towards the use of this glass because you have not participated in the process of its manufacturing. You may be only a user of this glass, and as a user – what – if they give you a glass, you will drink water, and if they don’t give you a glass – then you don’t drink water. “(Sofia, Roma NGO)*

## **8. The Decade of the Roma**

### **8.1. Spontaneous and prompted awareness of the Decade**

#### **8.1.1. Spontaneous awareness**

As a whole, among Bulgarian respondents there is an exceptionally low level of awareness of the DR (Decade of the Roma) effort. Some of the respondents share some vague recollections of the event's media coverage, but fail to recall any specific aims or priorities. The DR is hardly told apart from the vast multitude of other NGO efforts targeted at the Roma.

A more substantial number of Roma respondents have heard of the DR but - far from being familiarized with its specific content - are only aware of the effort's general framework. The registered extremely low level of trust in the DR is due to the utter lack of any real "signs of life" of the effort. Respondents go as far as claiming that the DR is a merely a pre-election trick of the government:

*"The idea behind the whole ado was to throw dust into our eyes... it left the unpleasant aftertaste of election pep-talk... I haven't heard anything about this Decade for quite a while already". (Vidin, Roma)*

The NGO leaders group makes the only exception – they are comparatively well-aware of the effort's objectives and priorities. Some of them have actually taken part in the development of the DR Action Plan. Nevertheless, even they are markedly pessimistic when it comes to the practical implementation and actual effects of the DR. In their view, the key problem continuingly lies with their isolation from the real policy-making process, with the resultant inertia of a government, unwilling to dedicate resources to the Roma problems:

*"This is not a policy adopted by the government. This policy emerged thanks to ... and several domestic and external NGOs. As an idea, it is a wonderful program, but the Bulgarian government is participating solely as a pre-election demagoguery. Saxe Coburg-Gotha has invited here "decades", chiefs etc., but you should ask the Bulgarian government how much money it has allocated to this decade. They rely on the money from Soros and from the World Bank." (Sofia, Roma NGO)*

#### **8.1.2. Prompted awareness**

When respondents were acquainted with the DR priorities and with some of its specific objectives, their spontaneous reactions were closely similar, regardless of their pre-stated attitude to Roma and the problems they face. We could affirm fairly positively that respondents embrace – unanimously and unreservedly – the effort's tasks and objectives. Nevertheless, they react in strongly negative terms to the effort's ethnic orientation:

*"The concept as such is very, very good, but why restrict it to the Roma? They are better off than us." (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*"The greatest nonsense is that they concentrate efforts on the Roma, where they should target socially disadvantaged folks in general." (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

*"Should only Roma of dire financial status be aided? Of course not, everybody needs help. These efforts are a fundamental source of ethnic tension in Bulgaria – remember*

*what happened with the Bulgarian Muslims? These efforts are disconnected from reality*  
*” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“Certain resources should be allocated to people who are complete social outcasts – there are such people among Bulgarians as well. The effort should not be focused on the Roma alone, as this would mean turning backs on the other folks and this is not good.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

As demonstrated by the above quotes, the effort’s exclusive focus on the Roma minority gets fully rejected in all groups.

The only more acceptable objectives of the DR were the introduction of counter-discrimination principles and vaccination for all children (at which point the definition “Roma” was met with scorn, once again)

The DR objectives were perceived by Roma as fully consonant with their actual problems. Notwithstanding this fact, however, they approached the effort with a great amount of distrust engendered by their belief that this is (yet another) loudly proclaimed program, which will yield no tangible results:

*“An absolute lie. Look, the meeting was held in February, right, and it’s June already. Nothing has changed in the meantime. We haven’t as much as heard of anything being done anywhere.” (Vidin, Roma)*

Program objectives are approved, but their exclusive focus on the Roma is, again, met with the same degree of disapproval as the one already shown by non-Roma respondents. This reaction is usually motivated by the negative past experience with similar efforts:

*“I’m also against it... it should benefit all poor people, not only the Roma... What if a Bulgarian kid goes and says “I also want some of this food”? What will they say – “Well, sorry, but it’s only for Gypsies?” (Vidin, Roma)*

## **8.2 How will the non-Roma community react**

Targeting the Decade solely to assist the Roma, ignoring the plight of similarly disadvantaged members of the majority population, is absolutely unacceptable to Bulgarian respondents, and leads to the total rejection of the programme. In a simulated referendum, when the programme was presented to them as aimed to benefit all poor people, without exception (including editing out the ethnic element in the description of individual measures, i.e. replacing “Free vaccination of all **Roma** children” with “free vaccination of **all** children”), Bulgarians vote for the programme, but reverse their vote and turn against it when the presentation of the programme is not so edited.

*“So what is being proposed [in the Decade] is a good idea, the issue is to avoid singling out the Roma for assistance. But since the programme does single out the Roma, even by name, this provokes resentment. If it is meant to help only the Roma, this will have the opposite effect.” (Non-Roma, Vidin)*

*“Why nobody asks himself the question how and why other minorities have managed to integrate successfully? The more assistance programmes they [the Roma] get, the less they are willing to work!” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

Roma respondents anticipate the negative reactions of the majority population, and perceive this resentment as well founded and legitimate.

*"In Europe they make no difference about ethnicity in providing help to the socially handicapped people. Bulgarians will resent "free lunches at school for Roma students". These should be made available to all poor people, not just the Roma." (Roma, Vidin)*

*"Bulgarians will resent this badly, very badly. "Always doling out assistance only to Gypsies" they will say. There are many poor people among the Bulgarians too." (Sliven, Roma)*

### 8.3 Will something positive come out of it

While perceiving the proclaimed goals of the programme as beneficial for Bulgaria, most respondents, regardless of ethnicity, suspect that it will be confined to token measures of limited impact, and could be compromised by corruption.

*"Absolute humbug. There now, the decision [about the RD] was made in February, and now it is June. And nothing has happened yet, we have not even heard of anything being done, anywhere. The money will be spent, some of our Roma leaders will report some activities, will get something out of it for themselves too, and all will be forgotten." (Vidin, Roma)*

### 8.4 Willingness to support the Decade

As evident from the extract from one of the discussions quoted below, Bulgarian respondents show some willing to support certain "Roma-specific" objectives of the programme, like accepting mixed classes in school, and the adoption of anti-discrimination laws, but on the condition that the ethnic "irritant" is removed from the concept:

*M If this program were proposed for approval at a referendum, how would you vote?*

*R Against it.*

*R I would support it only if it was addressed to all, not only to the Roma... The program aims to make Kosovo happen in Bulgaria.*

*M Would you vote, if everything remains the way I read it to you?*

*R Definitely not.*

*M And if the ethnic element is removed, so that the program would be addressed to poor and uneducated in general?*

*R Yes. Absolutely.*

*R The program should not address any ethnic group in particular...." (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

**"Regular" Roma respondents** entertain a passive stance with respect to the programme, expecting their community leaders to take the lead, and suspecting that there again will occur misappropriation of funds.

*"Nobody's ever going to let you participate." (Sliven, Roma)*

*"Some of our Roma leaders will report some activities, they might get something out of it for themselves too, and all that's that." (Vidin, Roma)*



Not surprisingly, **the Roma NGO leaders**, for their part, do see a major role for themselves in implementing the programme of the Decade:

*“This government, and all other governments, has no other way out, but to accept these things. Besides, there is the government sector and several NGOs, which play a major role in the development of this society as they exert pressure on the Cabinet and which have a clear idea about things. You must be a genuine political player, you must be capable of setting policies in order to achieve the practical implementation, to reach the regular Roma in the Roma quarter, to be capable of retaining the Roma elite from flowing away to become assimilated and never to return back to carry the burden together with the rest of us.” (Sofia, Roma NGO)*

## **8.7 Attitudes to specific objectives**

When discussing specific objectives set for the Roma Decade, both Bulgarian and Roma respondents converged in reiterating their objections to the ethnic bias of the programme.

### **8.7.1 Education**

#### Reduced price for preschool programs/books/transport/school lunch for poor Roma children

The ethnic bias of this idea provoked most violent resentment among Bulgarian respondents.

*“Why, again this is discrimination. We do without certain things in order to provide for our child. Why don’t they [the Roma] do the same? Well, the other children will see the Roma children eating their lunch and having free textbooks, while their parents have given them mere 20 stotinki (cents) for a snack, as they could afford had no more?” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“This is irritating. Providing privileges to the Roma, while perhaps 60% of Bulgarians are no better off than the Roma!” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

*“This might become the source of ethnic tensions. This would be discrimination towards the rest of the communities in Bulgaria. If the same applies to Bulgarian children, that it is OK.” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

Roma respondent themselves have ambivalent feelings about this idea.

*“It is very nice to have free textbooks and lunches for schoolchildren, because this is a great expense. But this should apply to all poor, not just to Roma” (Vidin, Roma)*

#### Incorporation of elements of Roma culture into curricula for children

Some Bulgarian respondents, interpreting “culture” in its wider meaning of “upbringing” and “customs”, objected, but there were others who accepted its legitimacy.

*“The Roma culture, e.g. pick-pocketing? What does Roma culture mean? Let them have it, why not?” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“My God, this is absurd... teaching all children to steal?” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

*“The issue is not based on the ethnicity, the issue is related to the fact that they are people who obviously have neither culture nor religion – they pretend to be Turks, but they are not Turks.”(Mechka, Non-Roma)*

#### Loan and scholarship programs so Roma youth can attend University

Both Roma and Bulgarian respondents were skeptical about the feasibility of this idea, considering the high costs of university education, which make it prohibitive for the majority, regardless of ethnicity, and objections were raised too against the ethnic bias involved.

*“If one is gifted, let him/her win a scholarship – they have social stipendiums and scholarships for achievement...Special scholarships for the Roma only – I don’t get it. Let us pretend we are Roma then...This means, I will study hard to receive a scholarship, and he [the Roma] will get it without any effort. They’d better give them the diplomas right away”.(Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

### **8.7.2 Employment**

#### Micro-loans for Roma to start businesses

Typically Bulgarians perceived this notion as extravagant, considering the infamous non-payment by Roma of electricity and water bills, as well as their bad reputation as perpetrators of fake VAT reclaiming scheme and manufacture of counterfeit alcohol.

*“No comment, this funding will never be repaid. Come and see what will happen when they get those loans – gypsy fiestas for a couple of days, and then...” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“How do you imagine a person who has not even completed elementary school get a loan and start in business? The remedy is to create more jobs where Roma would be employed.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

There are more moderate Bulgarian views too:

*“In town there is a gypsy man who is an employer – he runs a pastry shop. But why should they [the Roma] be singled out – those who are inventive, they would manage to start in business.” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

Based on discouraging previous personal experience, Roma respondents are doubtful that the Decade would change the bad reputation of their creditworthiness.

*“We never have a chance to get a bank loan. Even mortgaging a house is impossible... Once they become aware that you come from the gypsy quarter, they turn you away at the bank.” (Vidin, Roma)*

#### Enacting very strict anti-discrimination laws that fine employers for hiring and promotion discrimination practices

This proposition is accepted without opposition as fair and appropriate by Bulgarian respondents.

*“That’s right. If one is gifted, he/she must be employed and get a chance to be promoted.” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“Now this is a good idea. If they have the qualifications, it wrong to deny them jobs.”  
(Sliven, Non-Roma)*

Roma respondents are naturally enthusiastic, but do not imagine how this measure could be made to work.

*“That would be fine, but how can one go about proving discrimination. Does one use a hidden camera, or what?” (Vidin, Roma)*

### **8.7.3 Health**

#### **Free vaccination of Roma children**

There is absolute support for this idea, although respondents point out that this is one benefit already enjoyed by children in Bulgaria, including the Roma.

*“This is good. Let them get vaccinated, because they don’t practice good hygiene anyway. This is humane....Well, but aren’t the vaccinations already free for all the children .... We already have them*

*“This is already available, and it is even compulsory, absolutely compulsory for all children and youth!” (Vidin, Roma)*

## 9. Voices to Trust

By reason of the dispersed-ness of the Roma community in this country and for lack of Roma political subjects, the question of Roma leaders who would be able to become DR ambassadors did not find its answer amongst non-Roma and Roma alike. The few better known Roma leaders, like Tsar Kiro and Tsvetelin Kanchev, have bad reputations and are not perceived as legitimate champions of the Roma interest – again, by non-Roma and Roma alike.

Popular public figures of Roma descent, who won the respect of both Roma and non-Roma with their talent and abilities, are identified as more deserving DR ambassadors. Such are:

**Ivo Papazov - Ibriyama** - a Roma clarinet player whose popularity rose to new heights recently, when he won the BBC award

**Azis (Vassil Boyanov)** – one of the trendiest pop-folk singers, famous for his outrageous stage behaviour

**Sophie Marinova** – a well-loved Bulgarian pop-folk singer, she performs both Bulgarian and Roma hits.

**Professor Chirkov** – widely acclaimed as the best cardiac surgeon in this country, director of the St. Ekaterina Cardiac Center. The problem with him is that he refuses to identify with the Roma ethnos.

**The only Bulgarian name** mentioned is that of **Yordan Lechkov** – a celebrated football national and current Mayor of Sliven. Nominated because of his commitment to Roma problems locally.

## 10. Message concepts

At the end of the groups the respondents were handed out sheets with some statements and asked to use the scale 1 – 10 and rate them, when 1 = a totally not persuasive statement and 10 = an extremely persuasive statement.

### 10.1 Figure 5 Messages targeted at non-Roma -

Statements <sup>35</sup>	Sofia	Sliven	Vidin	Kurdjali	Mechka	Average	Average <sup>36</sup> (except Mechka)
9. In order to become a real part of Europe, we must take care of the people in our country who have been most discriminated against. It is a true sign of a modern country.	3.1	5.9	1.4	2.2	2.6	3	3.2
10. Helping the Roma advance and integrate is, quite simply, the right thing to do. This is an issue of human rights. We are an unjust society if we continue to treat them in the way that they've been treated here.	2.5	3.1	6.1	3.7	1.0	3.3	3.9
11. Helping the Roma is a matter of simple economics. All taxpayers will continue to pay more in the future if we don't do something now to truly help educate the Roma and move them out of lives of poverty, it will cost us and our children more in the long run.	4.6	4.2	6.1	3.3	1.1	3.9	4.6
12. If there's one thing we must do, it is to help the Roma children so that they will have the opportunities to prosper in a way that our own children have	5.5	4.4	3.0	8.1	2.1	4.6	5.3
13. Helping the Roma is really about giving every person in our country the opportunity to achieve his/her potential. This is the true meaning of freedom and the fall of the wall.	5.5	4.4	3.9	5.4	1	4.1	4.8
14. The way the Roma have been treated in this country is simply wrong. It makes me ashamed and I want it to change	2.0	1.6	1.1	1	1	1.3	1.4
15. Having a large minority population like the Roma living in such abject poverty and experiencing constant discrimination reflects badly on our country. I think our country can do better	2.8	2.6	2.4	2.8	1.6	2.4	2.7
16. Our country is on the road to prosperity. We must make sure that this prosperity is shared by all	8.0	7.2	9.3	9.8	7.1	8.3	8.6
<b>Average per city :</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>2.2</b>		

<sup>35</sup> The shaded cells represent the statements with scores above the average score

<sup>36</sup> In this column is shown the average score of the statements apart of the results of Mechka village. Regarding the specific situation in that village, the score in the last column, with Mechka excluded, should be considered as more representative for the level of acceptance of the statements

Two of the first three statements with the highest ratings are statements implying equal opportunities and access to public benefits for everybody, instead of privileges for given ethnic group/s (Statements 5 and 8) – average ratings 4.1 and 8.3 respectively.

### **Statement 8 (Av. Score 8,6)**

*In order to become a real part of Europe, we must take care of the people in our country who have been most discriminated against. It is a true sign of a modern country*

This statement got the highest approval ratings, even among respondents from Mechka village, plagued by Roma crime.

*“In this case, I agree There was a saying: “To everyone in accordance with his/her abilities” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

### **Statement 5 (Av. Score 4.8)**

*Helping the Roma is really about giving every person in our country the opportunity to achieve his/her potential. This is the true meaning of freedom and the fall of the wall.*

Similarly to statement 8, this concept gets some supported, but also provokes objections because of the implication that nowadays the Roma are subjected to some forms of discrimination, contrary to the widespread perception to the contrary among the Bulgarian majority.

*“What is discrimination? Give some examples. I fail to understand. What have we done to these people? They have more rights than we do!” (Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“Who prevents them from that? No one prevents them. If he has studied only 2 years in school – let him sweep streets. He couldn’t work on a computer...” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“All these statements are in contradiction with what we discussed earlier. No one prevents the Roma children from going to school, and there is no discrimination against the Roma at all, but all statements here suggest: “Let us change something”.(Kurdjali, Non-roma)*

### **Statement 4 (Av. Score 5.3)**

*If there’s one thing we must do, it is to help the Roma children so that they will have the opportunities to prosper in a way that our own children have*

Still, insofar as Bulgarians are convinced that change of the unfavorable socio-economic status of the Roma ethnos should start with the **educational aspect** (as already mentioned above), **relatively high support** is given to Statement 4, interpreted as **an equal chance for education and development to the Roma children**. However, still there are some respondents, arguing that the Roma children already have equal rights with the non-roma children so that this statement is not valid.

*“Yes, good for them. Let them study, if they wish to. They should have equal chances – there is no difference between the Turkish, Bulgarian and Roma children.(Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

### **Statement 3(Av. Score 4.6)**

*Helping the Roma is a matter of simple economics. All taxpayers will continue to pay more in the future if we don't do something now to truly help educate the Roma and move them out of lives of poverty, it will cost us and our children more in the long run.*

This statement gets a relatively high rating of approval, due to its pragmatic reasoning, combined with the popular notion of education.

*“Yes, this definitely makes sense. An investment must be made now. The longer it is postponed, the higher the costs will become.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

In the case of Bulgarians, the bulk of messages get turned down as divorced from reality, because of the included '**Roma discrimination**' motif. As already explained above, Bulgarians are **rather inclined to believe that Roma enjoy much more privileges than non-Roma**. Hence, the discrimination tune rings completely false to them. Statements, which contain the notion of Roma discrimination, in one form or another, and offer counter-measures (**Statements 1,2,6 and 7**) get an average rating of **1.3 up to 3.3** out of 10.

### **Statement 2 (Av. Score 3.9)**

*Helping the Roma advance and integrate is, quite simply, the right thing to do. This is an issue of human rights. We are an unjust society if we continue to treat them in the way that they've been treated here.*

The low rating of this statement is motivated by the unpopular proposition that Roma poverty is caused by discrimination, while the predominant view is that the overall inadequate state of the national economy, as well as Roma unwillingness to work for a change, are the major reasons.

*“Well, this “unfair treatment” also applies to Bulgarians and to all other ethnic groups too – they are all affected by unemployment.. It is not us who oppress the Roma, it is the system itself, the stagnation and the misery which oppress them.”(Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“There is a lot of injustice in our society now, and of inequality of rights. But I take exception to the notion of “unfair treatment” with regard to the Roma. Resentment against the Roma does exist, but it's caused by their being singled out as beneficiaries of social assistance. In fact, in this respect they are favoured at the expense of Bulgarians.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

### **Statement 1 (Av. Score 3.2)**

*In order to become a real part of Europe, we must take care of the people in our country who have been most discriminated against. It is a true sign of a modern country.*

The notion that the Roma are “the most discriminated group” is rejected outright as untrue.

*“These notions have been invented by people who have no idea about what is the situation in this country. Nobody prevents them from going to school or from working.*

*Nobody is preventing them from entering stores or theaters. They have suffered no discrimination.” Sofia, Non-Roma)*

*“In my opinion, there is no discrimination. In my opinion, this does not concern the Roma at all. There is discrimination against all the handicapped people in Bulgaria. “0” (zero), that’s what I would rate it.” (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“This is overdoing it! So why they have expelled them [Bulgarian Roma would-be emigrants] from Norway? They wanted a chance to get integrated in Norway, but were denied it. So that’s discrimination practiced in Western Europe? The truth is they want to confine the Roma to Bulgaria. They fear that after Bulgaria accedes to the European Union, there will be no stopping the Roma to go across to the west. That’s why they want us to integrate them here!” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*

### **Statement 7 (Av. Score 2.7)**

*Having a large minority population like the Roma living in such abject poverty and experiencing constant discrimination reflects badly on our country. I think our country can do better*

The reasons for disapproving this statement are identical to those in the case of Statement 1.

*“But Bulgarians equally suffer from poverty. If all Bulgarians prospered, that would have been true, but presently it does not apply” (Sliven, Non-Roma)*

### **Statement 6 (Av. Score 1.4)**

*The way the Roma have been treated in this country is simply wrong. It makes me ashamed and I want it to change*

This statement got the strongest disapproval, because respondents so no reason to be ashamed from their treatment of the Roma.

*“No, I am not ashamed of anything. Everyone deserves the position held by him/her. I am telling you, the purpose of these statements is to prove that there is discrimination against the Roma.. It is true that they live in misery, but this misery is not caused by us – the people living in better conditions and of different ethnicity. (Kurdjali, Non-Roma)*

*“Personally, I am not at all ashamed. They are treated equally with all Bulgarian citizens. In hospital they lie on beds in the same wards with Bulgarians, on busses seat next to us... We can even be proud that we do not have that infamous record of discrimination they have in the USA.” (Vidin, Non-Roma)*



## 10.2 Messages targeted at the Roma - Figure 6<sup>37</sup>

	Sofia	Sliven	Vidin	Average
4. I believe the Decade of Roma effort will have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria because governments have committed real resources. It's not just 'talk	1.3	2.1	4.5	<b>2.7</b>
5. I believe the Decade of Roma effort will have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria because of the involvement of organizations like the World Bank and the Open Society Institute	3.7	1.6	5.4	<b>3.6</b>
6. If the Decade of Roma effort is to have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria, we Roma will have to play a prominent role in ensuring that the goals are achieved	9.7	6.6	9.8	<b>8.7</b>
<b>Average per city</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>6.5</b>	

### Statement 3 (Av. Score 8.7)

*If the Decade of Roma effort is to have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria, we Roma will have to play a prominent role in ensuring that the goals are achieved*

Roma respondents are able to relate most closely to the third statement, which calls for an active involvement in the DR effort of the widest possible circle of Roma, at all levels – from the general plane of politics down to each individual household. However, as illustrated in the previous analysis, the Roma respondents have doubts that they will have access to the program:

### Statement 2 (Av. Score 3.6)

*I believe the Decade of Roma effort will have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria because of the involvement of organizations like the World Bank and the Open Society Institute*

As regards serious commitment to the DR, Roma obviously find the World Bank and the Open Society more unconditionally trustworthy than the national government. NGOs are perceived as a more reliable guarantor of the effort's success. However, the respondents have doubts on the way the funding will be used by the local authorities:

*"These organizations will provide the money, but will happen afterwards?...On the local level this money is likely to evaporate." (Vidin, Roma).*

<sup>37</sup> The shaded cells represent the statements with scores above the average score

**Statement 1 (Av. Score 2.7)**

*I believe the Decade of Roma effort will have a positive impact on the lives of Roma here in Bulgaria because governments have committed real resources. It's not just 'talk*

The lack of trust in the government's commitment to - and involvement in -specific efforts targeted at improving life of the Roma under the DR, coupled with the lack of political representation of the Bulgarian Roma, results in an extremely poor rating of the statement highlighting the government's active commitment:

*"Words, only words until now, just a PR exercise...Perhaps something will be done some place, but it will not reach us." (Vidin, Roma)*

## V. Appendices

### Appendix 1 Listings during the discussions

#### 1. The greatest problems we face here in Bulgaria according to non-Roma

<b>The greatest problems we face in Bulgaria</b>
Unemployment
Low Quality Educational system
Ethnic problems
Corruption
Poverty
Health care system
Unpredictable future
Criminality
Demographic problem

#### 2. The greatest problems we face here in Bulgaria according to Roma

<b>The greatest problems we face in Bulgaria</b>
Unemployment
Discrimination
Restricted access to education
Low living conditions
Reproduction of negative stereotypes among the majority population
Lack of political representation

**3. What are you most optimistic about in Bulgaria according to non-Roma**

<b>What is the most optimistic in Bulgaria?</b>
Political Freedom
Open borders
Emigration
Free market
Membership within EU

**4. What are you most optimistic about in Bulgaria according to Roma**

<b>What is the most optimistic in Bulgaria?</b>
Freedom
Free market
Free traveling
Better and wider opportunities for Roma children

**5. The greatest challenges / problems that the Roma face in Bulgaria according to non-Roma**

<b>The greatest challenges / problems of Roma</b>
Low educational level
Low qualification
High crime rate
Unwillingness for integration
Discrimination
Unemployment
High crime rate
Segregation – Roma Ghettos
Negative stereotypes among the majority population

**6. The greatest challenges / problems that the Roma face in Bulgaria according to Roma**

<b>The greatest challenges / problems of Roma</b>
Unemployment
Discrimination
Low education level
Negative stereotypes among the majority population
Assimilation and loss of cultural identity

**7. Who should be responsible for improving the lives of the Roma according to non-Roma**

<b>Responsibility for improving the lives of Roma</b>
Roma community itself
Government
The whole Bulgarian society
International organizations

**8. Prominent and respected Roma leaders**

<b>Prominent and respected Roma leaders</b>
Ivo Papazov - Ibriyama
Azis (Vassil Boyanov)
Sophie Marinova
Professor Chirkov

**9. Respected / trustworthy non-Roma leaders in our country**

<b>Respected non-Roma leaders</b>
Boyko Borisov
Georgi Parvanov

**10. Prominent leaders you do not trust**

<b>Prominent leaders you do not trust</b>
Tsvetelin Kanchev
Tzar Kiro

## Appendix 2

### Discussion group summary

Date:	01.06.2005			
Place:	Sofia			
Ethnicity:	Bulgarians			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	F	49	University education	Teacher
2.	F	45	University education	Real estate
3.	F	29	University education	Organizer
4.	F	26	Secondary education	Administration
5.	M	32	University education	Qualified worker
6.	M	50	University education	IT specialist
7.	M	28	Secondary education	Technician
8.	M	22	Secondary education	Student

Date:	02.06.2005			
Place:	Sliven			
Ethnicity:	Roma			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	F	43	University education	Unemployed
2.	M	22	Secondary education	Qualified worker
3.	F	20	Secondary education	Housekeeper
4.	M	47	University education	Administration
5.	M	60	Secondary education	Unemployed
6.	F	32	University education	Unemployed
7.	F	56	Secondary education	Pensioner
8.	M	27	Secondary education	Unemployed

Date:	02.06.2005			
Place:	Sliven			
Ethnicity:	Bulgarian			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	F	20	Secondary education	Student
2.	F	43	University education	Administration
3.	M	59	University education	Pensioner
4.	F	46	Secondary education	Administration
5.	F	23	Secondary education	Employee
6.	M	58	University education	Pensioner
7.	M	47	Secondary education	Qualified worker
8.	M	21	Secondary education	Unemployed
9.	M	54	Secondary education	Qualified worker

Date:	03.06.2005			
Place:	Karjali			
Ethnicity:	Bulgarians and Turks			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	F	18	Secondary education	Unemployed
2.	M	40	University education	Trader
3.	F	49	Secondary education	Trader
4.	M	33	University education	Student
5.	M	38	Secondary education	Qualified worker
6.	F	30	Primary education	Worker
7.	F	41	Secondary education	Unemployed
8.	M	60	Secondary education	Administration
9.	M	54	Secondary education	Qualified worker

Date:	3.06.2005			
Place:	Vidin			
Ethnicity:	Roma			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	F	44	Primary education	Unemployed
2.	M	54	Primary education	Pensioner
3.	F	37	Primary education	Worker
4.	F	25	Primary education	Unemployed
5.	F	45	Primary education	Unemployed
6.	M	52	Secondary education	Unemployed
7.	M	23	Secondary education	Unemployed
8.	F	25	Secondary education	Unemployed

Date:	3.06.2005			
Place:	Vidin			
Ethnicity:	Bulgarians			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	F	39	Secondary education	Unemployed
2.	F	53	Secondary education	Unemployed
3.	F	25	University education	Administration
4.	M	52	Secondary education	Unemployed
5.	F	47	Secondary education	Qualified worker
6.	F	48	University education	Trader
7.	M	49	University education	Administration
8.	F	59	University education	Pensioner



Date:	4.06.2005			
Place:	Mechka			
Ethnicity:	Bulgarians			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	M	27	Secondary education	Qualified worker
2.	M	27	Secondary education	Unemployed
3.	F	37	Secondary education	Administration
4.	M	56	Secondary education	Unemployed
5.	F	25	Primary education	Qualified worker
6.	M	23	Primary education	Qualified worker
7.	M	32	Secondary education	Unemployed
8.	F	33	Secondary education	Worker

Date:	14.06.2005			
Place:	Sofia			
Ethnicity:	Roma (NGO Leaders)			
	Sex	Age	Education	Profession
1.	M	29	Secondary education	NGO worker
2.	M	31	University education	NGO worker
3.	M	55	Secondary education	Administration
4.	M	45	Secondary education	NGO worker
5.	M	27	Primary education	NGO worker
6.	F	25	Primary education	NGO worker
7.	M	31	University education	NGO worker
8.	F	24	Secondary education	NGO worker

**Appendix 3**  
**Table on “Government spending”**

Do you think the government should spend *more* resources, *fewer* resources, or just about the same amount of resources on the following (choose only one per area of work):

**Please return to your moderator!**

	<b>More Resources</b>	<b>Fewer Resources</b>	<b>About the same amount</b>
1. Agriculture and rural development			
2. Health			
3. Infrastructure (roads, transport, bridges)			
4. Attracting foreign investment to our country			
5. Services for the poor			
6. Environmental protection			
7. Assistance for minority groups such as the Roma			
8. Education			
9. Governance (corruption)			
10. Economic growth			
11. Employment (particularly for our youth)			

## Appendix 4

### Table on “Your thoughts on the Roma community”

Please write down words that best describe for you the Roma community (no more than 3 words).

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Please write down a few words or phrases that best describe for you Roma that you know (no more than 3).

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_