

From Rhetoric to Action: Bringing the Voice of Bulgarian Roma Communities to Europe

**EPHA Recommendations | Bulgaria |
October 2017**

Contribution to the public consultation on the evaluation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020

**Roma Health and Early Childhood
Development (ECD)**

european public health alliance





From Rhetoric to Action: Bringing the voice of Bulgarian Roma communities to Europe

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Roma Health: Explanatory analysis of policy commitments	2
Preliminary conclusions of the scoping survey in Health.....	3
Recommendations to improve the implementation of the health dimension of the strategy at local and regional level.....	4
Early childhood development: Explanatory analysis of policy commitments.....	4
Preliminary conclusions of the scoping survey on Early Childhood Development (ECD).....	5
Recommendations to improve the implementation of the early childhood development dimension of the strategy at local and regional level.....	6



Introduction

These preliminary recommendations focus on the health and early childhood development of Roma in Bulgaria, formulated to the European Commission Public Consultation on the Evaluation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies¹ up to 2020. They are based on an **explanatory analysis ('Rhetoric')** which was carried out to map the policy instruments and the commitments that they contain in Bulgaria, and a **scoping survey ('Action')** designed to facilitate evaluation how the rhetorical elements were actually implemented in practice, based on a structured interview process with 17 Bulgarian local and regional Roma and pro Roma NGOs and Roma professionals working in the structures of local and regional public authorities.

Roma Health: Explanatory analysis of policy commitments

Health in the Bulgarian National Roma Integration Strategy

The Bulgarian strategy mentions care for mothers, pregnant women and young children, including these among the key goals. The Bulgarian strategy lists healthcare for mothers and children among their key tasks, focusing upon access to ante- and post-natal care, as well as sexual and reproductive healthcare and guidance (**Bulgarian NRIS, 2012: 23**).²

NRIS PROVISIONS RELATING TO ANTE- AND POST-NATAL CARE	
BG	“Task 1: preventative care for mothers and children’ (p23) [Here the Bulgarian Action Plan, not available in English, should be compared]
NRIS PROVISIONS RELATING TO VACCINATION	
BG	‘N/A [Bulgarian Action Plan not available in English]

The Commission’s assessment of Bulgaria’s actions to improve Roma health is very clear in its conclusion that the biggest challenge faced is in ensuring universal access to health insurance coverage. Though similar issues in other countries have been raised in the European Semester, Bulgaria has yet to receive a CSR on this topic.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/consultations/public-consultation-evaluation-eu-framework-national-roma-integration-strategies-2020_en

² **Bulgarian NRIS (2012)** National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2012-2020, available online at http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_bulgaria_strategy_en.pdf [accessed October 2017].



Preliminary conclusions of the scoping survey in Health

Results of the implementation of the Bulgarian NRIS in the area of health

5.88% of the respondents declared that the Bulgarian National Roma Integration Strategy (Bulgarian NRIS) has been successfully implemented at local and regional level as a national level health mediator system has been successfully implemented and covered by the state/government.

Moreover, the following **positive changes** have been observed at community level:

- Increased number of Health mediators as part of the institutionalized structures; being paid by the Bulgarian government;
- Food baby stations funded from the local budget;
- Campaign - free blood tests.

However, 94.12% of the respondents declared that the Bulgarian NRIS has not been successfully implemented due to the following reasons:

- The National Government does not involve the Roma NGOs in implementing the activities as it is mentioned in the National Strategy for Roma;
- No significant improvement in the Health System since most of the Roma communities' members are not paying the insurance;
- Health is not the weakest point of the National Roma Strategies, but housing is the weakest point of the current strategy;
- The National Strategy for Roma is under funding and the Roma health status is worse than before;
- Roma are facing lack of hygiene, poor nutrition and sometimes they refuse to get their children vaccinated based on some certain options based on lack of information on the importance of immunization;
- Lack of health infrastructure in marginalized communities;
- The Strategy is not implemented at local and regional level.

In addition to that, many **difficulties** have been identified which may prevent Roma ensuring a good health status

- Roma community members are not insured;
- Poor living conditions;
- Lack of health prevention campaigns supported by the state;
- Lack of dialogue between public institutions;
- Lack of tolerance and trust in public institutions;
- Limited information on healthy lifestyles;
- Discrimination and lack of understanding by the majority population;
- Negative attitudes towards Roma from the medical profession when they ask for medical advice or different medical information;
- Many Roma are not registered with family doctors.



Recommendations to improve the implementation of the health dimension of the strategy at local and regional level

- Roma participation in implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy at local and regional level;
- Development of social clinics for Roma to ensure at least one free preventive medical check-up for Roma without insurance;
- Greater participation of Roma in local and regional level in decision making processes affecting their lives and communities;
- Measures to facilitate access to drug prescription and medicines for members of the Roma community;
- Reduce taxation for vulnerable groups;
- Increase the number of employed health mediators;
- Measures and programmes to increase the number of insured Roma people;
- Measures and programmes to improve the infrastructure for Roma health facilities.

Early childhood development: Explanatory analysis of policy commitments

Early childhood development in the Bulgarian National Roma Integration Strategy

Following the structure laid out in the EU Framework, the strategies developed in Bulgaria address ECD under the heading 'education'. The dominant theme is increasing access to and enrolment at kindergarten or pre-school. The Bulgarian strategy takes the broadest approach – addressing the quality of Early Childhood Development (ECD), the need for ethnically mixed kindergartens, the importance of ECD based on non-discrimination and tolerance, and the right of children to education. Such an encompassing approach can only be successful when supported by appropriate concrete actions but analysis here is limited by language constraints.

The introduction of mandatory pre-school attendance is in place or underway in Bulgaria. More fundamentally, whilst the initiatives being taken so far are laudable, the Commission assessments call for a scaling up of funding, capacity and ambition, particularly as concerns the provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).



Most of the measures taken at national level have been small or pilot projects – what is now needed is an extension of these programmes and their integration into wider policy frameworks. Bulgaria has received a Country Specific Recommendation (CSR) pertaining to improving Roma access to education every year since 2013; the 2014 Commission assessment of its progress under this heading notes that access to good quality ECEC is hampered by insufficient staff and ‘capacities’.

Preliminary conclusions of the scoping survey on Early Childhood Development (ECD)

5.88% of the respondents declared that the Bulgarian NRIS has been successfully implemented at local and regional level as most of the children are following nursery or kindergarten activities

As positive changes, the following elements were recognised:

- Recognition of the added value of the health mediation system for the Roma communities at all levels as part of public institutions;
- Mandatory enrolment in kindergartens for children from 4 years old, providing more Roma children the opportunity to benefit from a new educational environment.

However, 94.12% of the respondents declared that the National Roma Integration Strategy has not been successfully implemented at local and regional level, because of the following reasons:

- Most Roma children (3 to 4 year olds) are not enrolled in kindergarten;
- The Strategy does not touch upon ECD very much;
- The current strategy lacks adequate financial resources;
- Segregation and discrimination might also lead to unsuccessful implementation of the Strategy.

There are also **some difficulties** preventing improvements in the development of Roma babies and children in Bulgaria:

- Lack of access to mainstream ECD facilities;
- Poverty;
- Lack of infrastructure;
- Parental illiteracy;
- Lack of parental advice on healthy nutrition and lifestyles of their children;
- Lack of financial resources for the implementation of the Bulgarian National Roma Integration Strategy.



Recommendations to improve the implementation of the early childhood development dimension of the strategy at local and regional level

- All kindergartens should be free of charge with no hidden costs;
- Training for parents to help overcome barriers in accessing kindergartens;
- Improving the quality of teaching in kindergartens;
- Addressing discrimination based on ethnicity and socio-economic status in the strategy;
- Mandatory vaccination programmes;
- More Roma professionals involved in delivering ECD services;
- Encourage the Bulgarian government to change education legislation;
- Work with and involve Roma NGOs in the implementation of the strategy;
- increase financial resources for implementation of the strategy;
- Free access to ECD services;
- Introduction of a child-friendly curriculum.

About EPHA

EPHA is a change agent – Europe’s leading NGO advocating for better health. We are a dynamic member-led organisation, made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups working together to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe. EPHA is a member of, among others, the Social Platform, SDG Watch Europe, and the Semester Alliance.

EPHA’s Transparency register number is 18941013532-08.

Further reading

Joint Statement – November 2016 – Remove systemic barriers to tackle the Roma public health emergency >> [read more](#)

EPHA Briefing – November 2016 – The European Semester and Roma Health >> [read more](#)

EPHA Roma Health and Early Childhood Development Fellowship 2017 – 2019 >> [read more](#)



european public health alliance
www.eph.org

Rue de Trèves 49-51
1040 Brussels
BELGIUM

TEL: +32 (0) 2 230 30 56
FAX: +32 (0) 2 233 38 80
MAIL: epha@epha.org