



Local Engagement for Roma Inclusion

(LERI) Project

Community Summary

Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

This community summary forms part of FRA’s **Local Engagement for Roma Inclusion** (LERI) project. LERI is a qualitative action research project under [FRA’s multi-annual Roma Programme](#). It was developed in response to the [European Commission’s Communication on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020](#). LERI brings together local authorities and residents, in particular Roma, to investigate how they can best be involved in Roma integration actions, and identify which aspects of these actions work, which do not, and why. The aim of the project is to facilitate the engagement of all local stakeholders, including Roma, in joint efforts to enable Roma inclusion. The experience gained and the lessons learned during the process will help improve the design, implementation and monitoring of Roma integration policies and actions at the local level.

LERI is the first FRA project to test participatory action research methodology. By identifying the key factors that lead to the success or failure of local integration activities, the project is helping to improve the planning of effective integration programmes for the future. At the same time, facilitating engagement at local level empowers all those involved, building their capacity to participate as equal partners with local administrations and civil society, and enabling a shared understanding of which measures need to be taken and how their implementation can be monitored. The project is being carried out in 21 localities across 11 EU Member States (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom).

LOCALITIES

Pavlikeni,	Bulgaria
Stara Zagora,	Bulgaria
Brno,	Czech Republic
Sokolov,	Czech Republic
Helsinki,	Finland
Jyväskylä,	Finland
Lille Metropole,	France
Strasbourg,	France
Aghia Varvara,	Greece
Megara,	Greece
Besence,	Hungary
Mátraverebély,	Hungary
Mantova,	Italy
Bologna,	Italy
Aiud,	Romania
Cluj-Napoca,	Romania
Hrabušice,	Slovakia
Rakytník,	Slovakia
Cordoba,	Spain
Madrid,	Spain
Medway,	UK

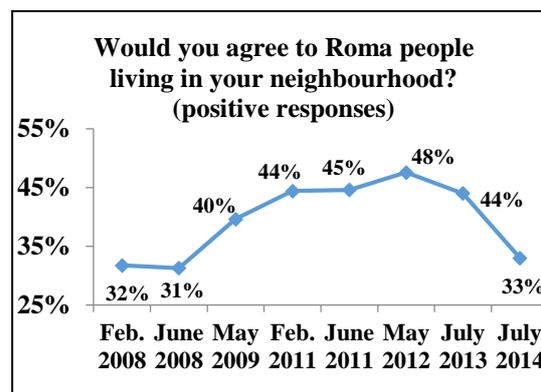
Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

Overview of the country context

Roma constitute the second-largest minority group in Bulgaria after the Turkish minority. According to data from the 2011 Census, Roma comprise almost 5% of the total population or approximately 325,000.¹ However, unofficial sources estimate a figure of 700-800,000 Roma, which is around 10% of the total population.² Most Roma live in segregated residential areas labelled as “Gypsy quarters” despite the fact that in most cases the population in these neighbourhoods does not identify as Roma but as Turks, Millet, Wallachians or Bulgarians.

The association of Roma people with poor ghettoized areas is reflected in the negative attitudes of non-Roma toward their Roma neighbours. Although attitudes towards Roma improved between 2008 and 2012 (see Figure 1), the recent political crisis reversed this positive trend. Since 2012, the percentage of those who feel positive about living in the same neighbourhood with Roma has decreased to the same level as noted in the time of the 2008 economic crisis.

Negative perceptions of Roma often translate into prejudice and discrimination, particularly in the area of education, healthcare, employment and housing.



Open Society Institute (2014)

Locality background information

According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the district of Stara Zagora is 333,265 people and the population of Roma comprises 7.8%.³ The Roma community faces multiple forms of discrimination and social exclusion. Stara Zagora has four segregated neighborhoods and two segregated schools. Nevertheless, a number of well-placed, recognised and very active community NGOs exist and a regional strategy for Roma integration has been adopted. With these two elements in place, there is now potential for dialogue to take place.

One of the most pressing issues is that of informal housing. During the last decade, almost 350 Roma households have settled on private land and in a public park. This has resulted in constant tension between the Roma community on one hand and the municipal Council and private land owners on the other. It has also led to the demolition of more than 50 illegal dwellings on July 21-22, 2014 in Lozenetz, the largest segregated neighbourhood in the city.

¹ National Statistical Institute, *Population and housing census in the Republic of Bulgaria 2011 – Main results*, p.3, available at: www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/Census2011final_en.pdf (All hyperlinks were accessed on 23 February 2016)

² Pamporov, A. (2009), 'Roma/Gypsies in Bulgaria' in: Schleinstejn, N., Sucker, D., Wenninger, A. & Wilde, A. (eds.), *Social Sciences Eastern Europe: Roma in Central and Eastern Europe*, Berlin, GESIS

Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, pp.27-32, available at: www.gesis.org/fileadmin/upload/dienstleistung/fachinformationen/series_ssee_01/Roma_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe.pdf

³ National Statistical Institute, *Population and housing census in the Republic of Bulgaria 2011 – Main results*, p.24, available at: www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/Census2011final_en.pdf



The picture shows the outcome of the first round of evictions in Lozenetz. The houses in the upper left-hand corner were later demolished as well (December 2014).

A series of additional evictions were planned and carried out. One followed in May 2015 and another one is planned for 2016. The map below illustrates the four areas of municipal intervention. The red zone represents the area affected by the first demolition plan. The orange zone illustrates the area cleared in May 2015, while the yellow shows the area to be cleared in 2016.

The blue zone represents the area allotted for the construction of the new houses for Roma, according to municipal planning. However, a definitive municipal decision that would allow the Roma to build there has not yet been taken. Furthermore, there is no final decision about the institution that would be responsible for constructing the new houses. One of the main reasons for this are the protests of citizens residing in the neighbourhood, who disagree with the expansion of Lozenetz to the western part of the city.



Map of the four areas of municipal intervention (i.e. evictions).

Objectives and thematic focus of the LERI project in Stara Zagora

The overall objective of LERI is to empower the local community by increasing their participation in concrete, local level decision making processes that have direct impact on their lives. Given the specific circumstances in Stara Zagora, the project will focus primarily on housing policy, which is an area considered highly important by both Roma and non-Roma. In particular, the project will support the municipality in mapping the needs of the evicted families and use participatory methodology to develop the municipality's plans for the provision of construction plots. It will also identify initiatives that could award financial support for the plans.

Activities implemented and actors involved in the needs assessment phase

In order to achieve the project's objectives, the LERI team has planned a number of research activities:

- **Face to face interviews** will be conducted with the heads of the households residing in all three districts (those already affected by the eviction plan, as well as the district still to be cleared)
- **Focus groups** with the participation of the Roma affected or to be affected by the eviction plan
- **Focus group** with non-Roma living in neighbouring area in which Roma housing is foreseen.
- **Consensus conference** with the participation of the three Roma groups living in the area, neighbouring non-Roma, municipal officers and human rights experts.

The following people will be involved in the needs assessment phase:

- Roma families
- Bulgarian families
- Regional governor's office
- The mayor's office
- Municipal council

- Town planning experts
- Human rights experts
- NGO ‘World Without Borders’
- Local media outlets

Expected outcomes of the participatory action research

The local Roma community will provide a detailed list of people who should be asked to take part in the research. To this end, the LERI project team will train people from the community in basic data collection techniques. Students from

social work and sociology departments of the local university who work in the neighbourhood will be also involved in the data collection and data analysis. With the support of the NGO “World Without Borders”, these students will conduct the focus groups and play an important role in the consensus conference.

By using participatory action research, it is expected that a consensus will be achieved regarding the eviction plan, the area in which the Roma will be settled, and appropriate living conditions for them in their current and future homes.

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