



Mobilisation and empowerment of Roma communities in Bulgaria

Can Roma communities resolve their own problems? One of Spolu's long-term partner organisations, called Integro from the city of Razgrad in northeastern Bulgaria, looked for the answer to this question in two Roma communities in Bulgaria. One of the villages, Seslav in the northeast of Bulgaria, was beforehand defined as better organised and thus with greater capacity to achieve community objectives. The other community, the nearby town of Senovo, was defined as having weaker organisational abilities. Both communities number about 500 'horohane Roma' and live 30 kilometres apart.

Community development

According to the majority of the Roma inhabitants of Seslav, the most significant fact in their community development was the construction of the present-day Roma quarter. Initially, this quarter was situated in a ravine, two kilometres away from the village. The Roma lived here until the fifties of the last century, when one of them, the teacher Ramadan, decided to build a new house close to the other inhabitants of the village. Civil servants at the town hall wanted to give him a site in the Roma quarter. He refused and decided to find another solution. This man wanted to have running water, and to live in the village and not outside it. He decided to buy a plot from a Bulgarian, who was selling his vineyards around the village. The Roma teacher built his home, and in the following year, five other Roma families bought plots of land next to his. Within ten years, all the Roma from the ravine moved into the village, abandoning even newly built houses in the old quarter. They built themselves nice dwellings, manufacturing the bricks and roof tiles by themselves. They went to the town hall to ask to regulate the streets and a site for a square. They were also active when electricity and running water were built. Today their quarter is neat and clean.

In Senovo, there are no clear memories about a common community action. Two old men in this town only remember that in 1950 the men gathered in the mahala to discuss whether to become members of the state-owned cooperative farm. In that year, eight Roma met with the Chairman of the newly established state-owned farm. They told him that they were ready to become members of the new structure. As they didn't have any property to invest in the cooperative, they agreed to repay the bank loans with their labour. After 1989, the two representatives of the Roma community who were directly involved in this event felt disappointment, because after the disintegration of the state-owned farm, they didn't get any share of the capital, because they didn't succeed to prove that they had made their instalments when they joined the cooperative.

Both examples show community initiatives dating back from the mid-20th century. In Seslav, however, the initiative involved the whole community, while in Senovo, despite initiated at a common meeting in the quarter, only eight persons became involved.

During later years, there were more community initiatives in the Seslav Roma community. Examples are the refurbishment of the local school, which was on the brink

of being closed down. Also, the health care unit and the mosque were refurbished and a small church was built for the small Christian community (mainly aged Bulgarians). These activities were initiated by the village mayor during that period, who was a Roma. He organised a common meeting of the people in the quarter. All of them decided that they, the Roma, do the work to show that they were capable of taking care not only of their quarter but of the whole village as well.

In Senovo, in later years, there are no examples of community initiatives originating from the community itself. There were a few initiatives, but they were implemented at the influence of Association Integro, within the framework of a community development project. Supported by a community worker, the people were encouraged to identify an important priority issue – an unregulated garbage depot close to the Roma dwellings. Although a large part of the community took part in the decision-making to clean it, many people didn't participate in the cleaning and the very few who became involved didn't feel satisfaction because the ones that didn't participate mocked at them telling them that they were "fools".

Income generating activities

As far as income generation activities are concerned, most Roma from Seslav show a drive to create permanent occupations. Almost 2/3 of the families keep some kind of livestock, and 25% have been breeding livestock for more than five years. About 60 families have been farming agricultural land since 2002, another ten families have been traditionally engaged in lime production.

In Senovo, 50 families breed some livestock, but it is characteristic that they are all the time changing the type of animals, looking for ways to make more money more quickly. Only two families have been engaged in livestock breeding for more than five years. Eleven families have land, one of which has bought it with their own savings and the others have received it from the government land fund.

In Senovo, with the exception of two or three families, targeted investment in income generation activities is absent. The strive is to engage in activities that give immediate income. Some of the families were selling their animals to buy old cars which they disassembled and sold the parts as waste materials. Others sold their animals to go abroad where they hoped to find better paid jobs with quicker profits. After the old cars were sold and the people came back from abroad, these families bought animals again, mainly goats and calves, to make a living.

In Seslav there are also many young families who have left their homes and work abroad but usually their parents, apart from looking after their children, take care of their farms. Some 30 families show the stable tendency to engage in farming or another income generating activity and seek ways to expand their activity, which indicates that there are people in this community who are thinking in a longer-term perspective.

In Seslav, more people explain that they save for new investments in agricultural activities, to have a stable source of income. In Senovo, the people also want to have income generating businesses, and are inclined this business to be in the sphere of agriculture but indicate that it is not enough to ensure a family income and that is why they are seeking new activities to supplement the family budget. Most prefer to invest in activities, which will immediately bring them good profit.

Education

With respect to investing in their children's education, in Seslav only two out of 75 Roma children didn't attend school, because of family reasons. The total number of children who regularly go to secondary schools is eight, and one community member who is older than 18 years is a long-distance secondary school pupil. Another community member is a regular university student. 28 children go to kindergarten.

In Senovo, from 81 Roma children of obligatory school age, nine dropped out. To date, four children study in secondary schools and one is university student. 20 Roma children are enrolled at the kindergarten.

All eighteen interviewed parents in Seslav answered that they were sending their children to school because they insist on their literacy and education. Twelve replied that they were interested how their children do at school. Fourteen of the respondent parents in Senovo send their children regularly to school because they have to go to school both to become literate and not to stop their social allowance, nine are interested how their children do at school.

From our general impressions and discussions with the children we found out that the majority of the Roma children in Seslav have a higher self-esteem, they feel the school as their own and share that their parents ask them how they do at school. The majority of Senovo children show lower self-esteem, alienation from the school and very few, predominantly the youngest ones from the primary grades share that their parents are interested in their achievements at school.

In summary we have to emphasise that mentality is the characteristic feature that is hardest to influence. The way of thinking defines our attitude towards the others, towards ourselves and towards the institutions in society and this attitude predetermines our actions and behaviour.

External networks

A source of strength may be not only what you know but who you know as well. In Seslav, where the Roma community has elected the village mayor and has activists as well as educated representatives working in various spheres of society, the establishment of links with authorities, institutions and business is relatively easy.

Quite a few Roma encounter difficulties in their individual contacts with various services outside the village, only because they are Roma. A group of women explained us how the employment office and other departments treat them during individual visits to resolve particular problems. "We dress well, we behave quietly and speak Turkish to avoid problems with the civil servants. But their attitude always shows that they think we are not on their level and they treat us as second-grade people."

According to Seslav leaders, municipal authorities used to attempt to mislead them during negotiations on various community occasions, but they take them seriously nowadays and respect their opinion in making decisions concerning not only the Roma but the whole village as well.

It seems that in Seslav there are a few leaders who succeed to establish strategic alliances with outside persons and organisations. One of them maintains relationships with local and regional authorities' representatives as well as with Bulgarian and foreign

businessmen. In the course of his personal relationships with these important persons he also establishes relationships concerning various community problems. For example, he used his business relationships to contact an organisation abroad, which was interested to implement a project in the municipality for the improvement of the Roma housing conditions. Another leader, who has business contacts with certain municipal services, used these relationships to create employment for people from the community in the forestry.

In Senovo the situation is different. There are much fewer people who are capable of building equal links with non-Roma, either with authorities or institutions, or even with their own neighbours.

Half of the enquired Roma answered that they have daily contacts with non-Roma. They meet them at the store, town hall, school or in the neighbourhood of their homes. According to most of them, these relationships do not satisfy them. The number of families who exchange visits with non-Roma families on the basis of friendly relationships is limited. From 45 interviewed persons, only three families shared that they have non-Roma friends with whom they exchange visits. A large percentage of the people shared that they experience a negative attitude from the non-Roma.

Most Roma seem to prefer to keep their contacts inside the mahala. Communicating with non-Roma is done because of necessity: these are relationships within the structures of the society and the state, inevitable to escape from.

The relations of the active Roma with authorities and institutions in Senovo are undergoing changes as a result from the community mobilisation project. While three years ago it was difficult for activists to arrange meetings with the village and municipal mayors, now this is possible without many obstacles. The presence of a local Roma NGO has an impact on such relationships. When visiting authorities and institutions on behalf of the NGO, the Roma get more attention from the civil servants or the mayors than if they go there individually. Although the village and municipal mayors are more open and accept the Roma representatives, still many employees at the municipality accept them with profound reticence.

Agreements between Roma activists from Senovo and the mayors during the past few years were reached mainly with the NGOs' lobby efforts. The activists from the mahala said that the mayors observe the engagements assumed for the community. In discussions with the village and municipal mayors they shared that they look very seriously at their commitments to the Roma community, especially the ones formulated within the framework of reached agreements with them, but often representatives of the community do not perform the agreed engagements.

Conclusion

The experiences in Seslav and Senovo show that mobilisation and empowerment of local Roma communities is possible, but it is a long-term process. The earlier you start, the better. This is made clear by the inhabitants of Seslav: already in the fifties of the last century, they moved their mahala from an outside location to inside the city, in this way improving the possibilities for integration and cooperation. The people in Seslav in general seem to be more dedicated to integrate into mainstream society and organise their lives accordingly; they concentrate on sustainable jobs, on the education of their Roma children, and they know how to use their contacts with important decision makers

and business people. In Senovo, the distance between the Roma and the mainstream society is bigger. School attendance, the labour situation and contacts with the local authority in this place are less developed than in Soslav. There is hope, however, for the future. With the help of a community worker and a community development plan, set up with coaching by Integro, the inhabitants of the Roma community in Senovo are now also making progress. This shows, that mobilisation and empowerment of Roma in Bulgaria is possible, either by the Roma themselves, or with the support of Integro.

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