

Roma mother centres in Bulgaria and Albania

This is a study of so-called mother centres (MCs) in Bulgaria and Albania, where two of Spolu`s most active members operate: Integro from Bulgaria and Roma Active from Albania. The establishment of mother centres began in these countries in 2006. In Bulgaria and Albania, five mother centres are existing. Here, we focus on three of them.

Mother centres do not only exist in Bulgaria and Albania. In other countries where Spolu is active, in Slovakia and Bosnia-Herzegovina for instance, mother centres also exist. In recent years, Spolu organised a number of international exchanges, in order to inform Roma women from other countries about the concept of mother centres.

Originally, the concept of a mother centre comes from Mother centres can be characterised as open spaces for young women, where they can discuss about common problems, usually in the areas of relationships, family, child care, raising up children, etc. The centres are controlled by the mothers themselves.

Simitli, Bulgaria: “A place for preservation and spreading of the Roma culture”

Simitli is a small town in South Bulgaria, some 40 kilometres away from Sandanski. The Roma constitute about 10% of the population here. Most of the houses are big and nice, the streets are asphalted and the majority of the Roma are employed or have their own business.

In 2005 a Roma woman, employed at the municipal administration as an expert in ethnic and demographic issues, contacted Association Integro and announced her willingness to create Roma social structure in her town.

In July 2006 she and another Roma woman took part in an exchange visit to Zavidovtsi in Bosnia, where a mother centre functions. Upon their return, both women were so motivated to establish a Roma mother centre, that immediately after they came back they met with the mayor, acquainted him with their idea and succeeded to persuade him to provide them a municipal premise for free. Guided by Integro, they began to share their ideas and their impressions from Bosnia with other Roma women. Thus, within a month, they succeeded to attract another ten Roma, mainly well-educated women, and formed an initiative group for the establishment of mother centre “Mother’s love”. As far as they already had ensured a premise – a small room downtown, they divided the tasks connected with the refurbishment and furnishing and within a month had successfully completed these tasks.

In October 2006, the centre opened and the women elaborated their first action plan. At the core of this plan were activities targeted towards children and young Roma. An important characteristic of this plan was that it envisaged self-organised activities, which gather together Bulgarians and Roma.

The first event of mother centre “Mother’s love” was the organising of an all-town celebration on the occasion of New Year Day. The women organised a New Year party for mothers and children. Many Roma and Bulgarian women came to it, together with their children. All of them liked the initiative, but the Roma women were the happiest because it was the first time when they organised a city celebration by themselves.

Sticking to their belief that their children should be together with Bulgarian children in everything, they encouraged the formation of a mixed group of Bulgarian and Roma youths, who began to gather at the MC, to discuss urgent topics from the local social life. Thereafter, with the assistance of a Peace Corps volunteer, the youngsters began to publish the youth magazine "Crazy", in which they depicted events from the life of the local communities and showed their critical opinion on various aspects of the local life. Thanks to their work, many Roma youths grow up with the self-esteem of equal participants in the local society and develop their critical thinking and attitude towards important issues for their community.

Besides this group, the mothers from the MC in Simitli attracted children and young Roma to a dance group for Roma traditional dances. For them it is very important that Roma show their culture to the local society. They collect money to sew traditional Roma costumes for the children, they help the children to create different dances, tell them about the Roma traditions and support the organising of Roma celebrations and events.

The deputy mayor, Mrs. Evgeniya Georgieva also highly appreciates the contribution of the Roma women for organising various town events. She said: "We are always together here, we have never divided, and the MC, although created by Roma women, is open to all women in town. We think that this is a good initiative and have not given up looking for a larger premise, so that the centre can perform all the functions which are envisaged. It would be great to have such centres also in the villages, where we have large Roma communities. This will attract them to the mainstream society."

Provadiya, Bulgaria: "A starting point for social change in the local community"

The mother centre in Provadiya is named "Hope for Provadiya". It was established by a large group of Roma women of various ages, all of them being housewives. Before the mother centre came into existence, these women had been gathering regularly at their homes and had their informal women's group in which they shared experiences connected with the raising of their children, family relationships and supported each other in moments of family crisis.

After they came back from an exchange visit to the Bosnian MC, they decided to establish their own MC. There weren't any highly educated woman among them, with skills for social activities and contacts outside the Roma quarter. This was very challenging for them as they did not know from where and how to begin.

As we assessed that their motivation to create a MC was strong but their capacity rather low, Integro elaborated a detailed plan for the support of these women. Integro's coordinator visited them many times to teach them how to organise common meetings, to take minutes, to make decisions in a group, to make contacts with the local authorities and to advocate for their interests. Following all these preparations and trainings, the women finally gained courage and decided to visit the mayor to acquaint him with their idea and request a premise for the MC. They will never forget this first visit to the municipality, because despite that they followed all the steps for the establishment of a dialogue with the local authorities, the mayor only reluctantly accepted them and listened to them.

Then a period of encapsulating of the group followed. When the women saw that they wouldn't be able to satisfy Integro's requirement to ensure a municipal premise by advocacy actions, they stopped calling us and in practice gave up our assistance. Three months later Integro decided to contact them and see whether we could motivate them again to continue their efforts for the establishment of a MC. We were surprised to learn that in fact they have created their MC! After the meeting with the mayor, the women had gathered and decided to have their centre anyway. After lengthy discussions finally they decided to use an empty

premise, designed for a garage, of Siyana's family. They convinced their husbands to help them to refurbish the garage, because it was not painted and it was without a door and windows. After that they gathered old furniture, collected children toys, found a stove, wood and brought all these to the MC. When we looked for them in January 2007, we found them in this garage which they called their MC. They found an old sewing machine and struggled to sew costumes for the children's party from their old wedding dresses. While we thought that they have lost their motivation for the establishment of a MC, they had in fact been strongly self-motivating themselves and had done their best to realise their ideas. They have established order in the MC; divided responsibilities for its maintenance, they adopted their code of conduct in order to regulate relationships between them. They have visited each house in the Roma quarter to acquaint the people with what they planned to do and to ask for permission the parents to let their children come to the MC. They also attracted two Roma students from their quarter to help the children – one of the students with the dances, and the other one with their lessons.

Initially the other Roma did not have very high opinions about their initiative. Doubts started spreading about their aims, and what they want to obtain for themselves. That is why few children came in the beginning. Over time, however, some began to see that children who visited the mother center, began to take hold better and to understand better their parents.

The Bulgarian neighbours also looked suspiciously at the MC. Siyana told us something interesting: "When we opened the centre in our garage, and we are the only Roma family on this street, the Bulgarian neighbours began to drop by and to ask: "What is this, a Roma school?" and to shake their heads with mistrust. After, when our Roma children began to come here, they were a bit noisy on the street, and the Bulgarian neighbours reprimanded them. In order to win them and not to be afraid of our children, one day we gathered the children and made them clean and sweep the street. The people liked this very much because the grown-ups appreciate such things. Gradually thereafter they started treating the children with sweets and to give them seedlings of flowers to plant in flower pots at home...'

In June 2007, with Integro's support, the women equipped their centre with a computer, printer, a new sewing machine and a TV set. Slowly and gradually they realise that they have to learn how to use the computer and internet.

Also in June 2007, after long consultations, guidance and support, they succeeded to create their own NGO. They succeeded to include a Bulgarian woman in their Board, a teacher, because they realised that they have to attract also women from other ethnic groups, in order to be able to expand their influence.

With the support of the women from the other MCs and during the practical training in July 2007, they again visited the municipality and represented their MC and organisation. This time they succeeded to reach an agreement with the mayor and to obtain a written consent from him that after a public building is constructed in the Roma quarter, they will receive premises for their MC there.

Tirana: "A uniting structure, changing the status quo".

In Tirana in Albania, the group of women behind the mother centre is mixed: the Roma women are joined by some Albanian women-activists. Most of the women in Tirana were attracted to the MC by the opportunity to learn something new, to participate in various initiatives, to gain experience that might help them to find work. That, what Susanna shared with us, summarizes the opinion of all women: "I like that we discuss different problems, connected with the children, husbands and families. That we do something for ourselves and the children to change our lives for the better. We, the Roma, are discriminated and there are many prejudices about us. Even the authorities have negative opinions about us. They just

say “They are Roma” and that’s it. Here, in the MC, we are all equal and learn together how to resolve various problems, and this makes us stronger”.

With the help of “Roma Active Albania”, the women were encouraged to take part in various trainings and exchanges; they received guidance and consultations with respect to management, organisation, planning, sharing of responsibilities and how to work with authorities and institutions. In the mother centre, the women often have discussions not only about the difficulties in their families, but also about the difficulties that the Roma community faces as a whole. They try to reveal the reasons for the rejection and inacceptance of the Roma. Thinking that the low educational level is the reason for this status, they decided to help the Roma children from their quarter, as some of the women are committed to work with them and help them to prepare their lessons in the MC.

An interesting case that was initiated through the mother centre was the case when the Roma women decided to open a standing exhibition of Roma folklore costumes in the National museum of Albania. It all started, when five or six Roma women prepared several tablecloths and mini models of Roma wedding costumes to exhibit them during an exchange visit to mother centres in Bratislava, Slovakia. When they saw how amazed the other women were with these mini models of Roma wedding costumes, after their return to Albania they shared this with the other women and decided to sew real size costumes. But they didn’t have a real plan what to do with the costumes and that is why RAA was initially sceptical about their ideas.

According to RAA’s coordinator Bona Dervishi, it took some time, before the Roma women understood that the costumes they made were part of their culture and that it is important for them that their culture is seen and appreciated by others. Bona Dervishi: “Initially the women said that they just want to do it. But at a certain moment, during a workshop, when the women were together with other local groups with which RAA works, they shared their idea with the others. All workshop participants liked the idea of exhibiting the costumes. We then asked them why they want to do this. Among the Roma women there was a woman from Lakatun, well educated and with a clear vision about that what happens with the Roma. She summarized the wish of all by explaining that the costumes are part of their culture and that it is important to be preserved. At this moment for us it became clear that this is the point, which will mobilize the Roma and we must support it”.

After that, numerous visits to the communities followed. RAA discussed with the Roma women why they wanted to create models of Roma costumes, why this is so important for them, and to whom they will show them. Many people said that this was an opportunity to become noticed, to appreciate that Roma have beautiful things and thus to begin to respect them. Also, for them it was important for their children to see the costumes in another light so that not to be ashamed that they were Roma.

When finally the costumes were prepared, another discussion started – where to exhibit them so that as many people as possible would be able to see them. RAA suggested the women to turn to the Ethnography museum, but the women refused. They wanted their costumes to find their place in the National museum of Albania. According to them, the national museum is bigger and is in the centre of Tirana. More people go there. After their decision to focus on the national museum, 30 Roma women from different parts of Albania organised themselves and went to negotiate with the Director of the National museum of Albania. During the negotiations, they didn’t allow the director to talk about other issues or to give empty promises. In the end, they managed to convince the Director of the need of such an exhibition of traditional Roma costumes. In 2008, the exhibition was opened by Albanian the Prime Minister. It is the biggest victory of the mother centre in Tirana so far.

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