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# EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND EUROPEAN UNION JOINT PROGRAMME 'ROMED'

## CASE STUDY BYALA SLATINA

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**ROMED**  
Médiation pour les Roms  
Mediation for Roma

## BULGARIA, Byala Slatina Municipality

*Byala Slatina is a case about the challenges of the local cooperative process launched by ROMED2/ROMACT in a municipality with political will for Roma inclusion and open to a consultative process with the Roma community in the long term, but lacking funding opportunities for the implementation of policies related to Roma. The Community Action Group (CAG) consisting mostly of committed women went through ups and downs, going from initial high motivation to reduced trust due to interruption of the process and the frequent change of ROMED2 facilitators. The group has been re-energised by the support for a project for a Roma women's community-based centre and is discussing continuing its work through reactivation of a previously successful local Roma organisation.*

### The Context: problems and opportunities

Byala Slatina is situated in the district of Vratsa, north-western Bulgaria. It consists of the town of Byala Slatina and 14 surrounding villages. According to the 2011 census, it has a population of 24,606 inhabitants, out of which 2,544 people (12%) have identified themselves as Roma. This data is probably incomplete, since over 15% of the population who participated in the 2011 census did not answer the question on self-determination for the ethnic community. From the point of view of religious beliefs, the majority of the Roma are Muslim, with some smaller groups of Adventists, Orthodox and Evangelists.

The labour market in Byala Slatina municipality is characterised by high unemployment, resulting from both insufficient job opportunities and a mismatch between demanded and available qualifications and specific skills. The unemployment rate for the municipality reached 38.1% in 2013, almost double the average for the district and almost three times the national average. The alternative for Roma in Byala Slatina is to seek employment outside of Bulgaria, which results in increased migration to Western Europe.

Despite the challenges, there are many local assets and opportunities that can be mobilised for an effective Roma inclusion process. Byala Slatina is one of the municipalities where the educational level of the Roma community is much higher than the national average. There are many young Roma university graduates, however their professional prospects are not good since employment opportunities are very limited. Another opportunity is the high representation of the Roma community in the Municipal Council. At present there are four Roma Councillors and the new Deputy Mayor is also Roma. There are five NGOs in the municipalities working on different aspects of social integration of Roma, but most of them are not that active and cooperation among them is fragmented. The local administration has a good tradition of cooperation with all Roma NGOs in the municipality over the years.

### The Community Action Group (CAG)

The Community Action Group (CAG) was established as part of the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme at the end of January 2014. At the beginning of the Programme, the group consisted of more than 15 people but, after several changes of facilitators and interruptions of the Programme, it currently has only seven members, the majority of whom are women (five). The CAG is organised around the health and labour mediators working in the municipality. Its meetings are sometimes attended by the newly elected Deputy Mayor of Roma origin. The local administration has supported the CAG by providing one of its rooms for meetings for a symbolic rent of 6 EUR per month. The members of the group are from the city of Byala Slatina and there are no representatives from the neighbouring villages.

The main motivation for participation in the group has been the strong desire of each of the members to change the situation of Roma in the municipality so that there are more opportunities for their educational and professional development. The CAG is well-rooted in the Roma community of Byala

Slatina, since the members themselves are part of this community. However, members do not communicate actively with the Roma communities in the surrounding villages as the CAG has no means of support for travel outside the city.

The CAG members explained that, at the beginning of the ROMED2 process, their involvement in the group gave them the confidence to actively participate in the formulation and implementation of local policies. The ambitious start of the CAG also created high expectations within the Roma community. The group developed a Community Action Plan and presented it at the round table on improving the situation of Roma in the municipality. Together with the local administration, the CAG developed a Joint Action Plan adopted by the local council on 10 December 2014 and included in the Municipal Plan for Roma Integration.

Unfortunately, two factors led to the reduced motivation of the CAG and decreased the trust of the community. The first factor was the limitations of the municipality in attracting funds for the implementation of promised projects due to the fact that Byala Slatina was not a priority region for the previous financing period of the Operational Programmes in Bulgaria. A second negative factor was the interruption of the Programme related to the frequent change in external facilitators working in the municipality. As reported by the CAG, there were months of silence and no contact with the Programme, as well as a lack of clarity on the questions raised.

An impulse for re-energising the group was the recent help provided by the ROMED2/ROMACT National Support Organisation "Integro". In the framework of another of Integro's programmes, women who are the core active part of the CAG were supported in starting a project to create a community centre providing services for Roma mothers.

The CAG also started to discuss how to become institutionalised as an NGO. Instead of creating a new organisation, one possibility is to reactivate the Roma association "Alternative – BS", a local NGO that generated in the past a number of successful community-based initiatives in the field of Roma education and employment and has cooperated closely with local authorities. The CAG members believe that, if they are organised in a legally-registered NGO, this will increase their legitimacy as a partner of local government and create additional opportunities to attract funding for the implementation of some of the initiatives in the Joint Action Plan.

#### Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

The municipality administration has a long tradition of working together with representatives of the Roma community and they have worked well in the past with all local Roma NGOs in the town.

In the course of the evaluation, a meeting was organised in the office of the Mayor of Byala Slatina, attended by the Mayor, the newly-appointed Deputy Mayor of Roma origin, and representatives of the departments on integration and project development. All demonstrated commitment to working to solve the problems of the Roma community. Furthermore, they explained that they benefited from working with the CAG in the preparation of the Local Strategy and Plan for Development 2014-2020. All proposals made by the group in the Joint Action Plan were subsequently accepted in the Local Strategy and Plan.

Representatives from local administration consider that the CAG was very helpful in solving specific problems of the Roma community in Byala Slatina. The active role of the CAG was appreciated as a basic prerequisite for overcoming the accumulated stress and tension between the Roma community and the local electric company in developing a project for a new power supply in the Roma neighbourhood.

A major problem outlined by the local administration was that the municipal budget is insufficient and it is very difficult to earmark the necessary resources to implement planned measures for Roma integration. The municipality needs to rely on external sources of funding, but it had limited

opportunities to access the Operational Programmes. Although Byala Slatina has already been included in the priority regions for these programmes in the new financial period (which was not the case before), due to a delay in the opening of the different funding lines, the municipality could not provide timely and concrete commitments for the implementation of the adopted Municipal Action Plan. This also affected the part of the plan related to the strategy for Roma integration. The municipality continues to look for support for different projects to address different problems of the community.

A sign of recognition of the CAG is that, despite its own limited budget, the municipality allocates funds for small joint activities with the CAG, mainly in supporting the organisation of traditional and cultural celebrations.

The local government explained that the creation of the CAG is extremely important and useful to them for several reasons. Firstly, cooperation with the group allows them to plan programmes based on the real needs of the people in the Roma community. Secondly, through its interaction with the CAG, the local administration verifies and legitimises their policies related to the Roma community. The representatives of the administration indicated that they had been the proactive party in this interaction, with the CAG more passive but nevertheless responsive.

#### Results and impact in the communities

The main result of the interaction between the local government and the CAG is the joint development of the Local Strategy and Plan for Development 2014-2020. The section of the strategy that relates to the Roma community has been prepared entirely through the collaboration between representatives of the local administration and the CAG. The strategy is a good basis for addressing Roma inclusion in a consistent way, by using the opportunities of national programmes when available.

Following the priority given to education in the strategy, the municipal project for early childhood development "Me and my family", supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, has resulted in a renovated and refurbished building that will be used by 2,825 children and 630 parents.

A visible success of the cooperation between the CAG and local administration was the complete replacement of the electrical transmission network in the Roma neighbourhood in Byala Slatina. Before changing the network voltage, there had been serious conflict between the representatives of the Roma community and the local electric company. With the help of the CAG and the local government, the conflict was resolved and the entire electrical transmission network replaced.

Another success story is the initiation of the process of drawing up detailed plans of Roma settlements as a first step in the legalisation of illegal houses in Roma neighbourhoods. The cooperation of the municipality with the CAG also resulted in small improvements in the Roma neighbourhood's infrastructure such as the installation of street lights or speed bumps on the street to protect children.

#### Lessons forward

The ROMED2/ROMACT process in Byala Slatina municipality can be considered successful. The presence of many well-educated Roma together with well-intentioned and open local authorities is a guarantee for achieving better results in the future. Another source of optimism is the fact that Byala Slatina is already among the priority municipalities in the new financing period of the Operational Programmes in the country.

The development of the CAG has been hindered by the irregular support provided by the Programme relating to the frequent changes in national facilitators. This has resulted in difficulties to preserve the levels of motivation, increase the capacity of the CAG members and maintain the active relationship between the CAG, the local authorities and the representatives of the Roma community.

An important lesson for the CAG and the local government is not to create expectations within the Roma community that cannot be met. All discussions and planning must comply with the opportunities provided by either the Operational Programmes or other feasible sources of funding. Otherwise, with no possibility of support, suggested measures from the local budget will remain just an empty promise that will reduce the trust of the community in both the local authorities and the CAG itself.

In order not to lose the momentum of the local process, especially in municipalities where there are no opportunities for attracting EU funds, ***a small fund to support joint initiatives of the local government and CAG can serve as an engine for empowerment of community members.*** Without such a resource, the CAG will not be able to meet the created expectations and this will lead to demotivation of the representatives from both the Roma community and the representatives of the institutions. This will also help to gradually create capacity for the development of projects, initiatives and looking for funding from other sources.

There is a need for continued support for the CAG to fully develop its potential and capacities, as well for the local authorities, in order to benefit from the expected opportunities during the new programming period. The CAG has recently launched a new project related to the problems of Roma women and has started to re-activate the Roma association "Alternative" which has a good history of cooperation with local authorities. This positive development towards institutionalisation will need support from the national facilitators and indeed the Programme as a whole. The members of the CAG consider that, if they are representative of a formally-registered civic organisation which is recognised positively locally, this will increase their legitimacy with local authorities and with the community. The plan is to continue working with diverse interest groups inside the community, especially young women and mothers, thus practising the participatory principles that were the basis of the establishment of the CAG.