

## **Case Studies 2024**

### **“Roma access to decent and sustainable employment in Bulgaria”**

#### **I. Introduction**

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Integro Association is a civil organization led by representatives of the Roma community in Bulgaria. It is composed of 12 local Roma civil society organizations from different parts of the country, united by their common cause to achieve an equal and respected position of the Roma community among the other members of Bulgarian society. Integro strives to make visible the problems and needs of the Roma from the remote settlements of Bulgaria. The organization's activities are aimed at community mobilization, creating an active Roma leadership capable of challenging the passivity of both Roma and public authorities, so that they can share the responsibility for overcoming inequality, social exclusion and poverty among Roma, and for achieving cohesion and prosperity at the local level and in society as a whole. The Association's guiding principles are the enforcement of human rights, democratic procedures, transparency, partnership and trust in the community and society.

#### **✓ *Methodology used for the research, and the geographical scope***

For the purposes of this research, we conducted a desk review and analysis of various documents - statistical data, analyses, and studies from institutions and non-governmental organizations related to the situation of the Roma in terms of sustainable employment. Information collected by Integro through a survey conducted within the framework of ROMACT in more than 20 municipalities across the country was analyzed, with a focus on assessing the situation in Roma neighborhoods concerning Roma employment and unemployment. The survey was accompanied by the collection of additional information through focus groups within the community, as well as individual interviews with community leaders and representatives of local authorities and institutions. These analyses also highlighted the connection between the limited access of Roma to the labor market and the risk of poverty for Roma families.

✓ **Brief overview of the socio-economic situation of the Roma in Bulgaria**

The Roma in Bulgaria are one of the most marginalized communities, often living in poverty and social isolation. Many lack access to quality education and healthcare, significantly limiting their opportunities for professional development and personal growth. Unemployment among the Roma is high, and those who do work often hold low-paid and unstable positions. The risk of falling into poverty is very high for a large portion of the Roma population. According to the study of incomes and living conditions (NSI, BG-SILC), the relative share of Roma at risk of poverty in 2022 is 63.2%, while the part of Roma at risk of poverty and social exclusion is 81.6% compared to 25% for persons from the Bulgarian ethnic group.

The housing conditions in marginalized Roma neighborhoods are extremely poor, with a lack of infrastructure and basic services exacerbating their situation. Data from a large-scale survey conducted in 2020 as part of the project 'Novel Approaches to Generating Data on hard-to-reach populations at risk of violation of their rights' show that 43.5% of Roma live in poor housing conditions, 76.9% live in overcrowded housing, and 34.7% live in housing without a toilet and bathroom inside the home. The share of Roma children living in poor housing conditions (more than 70%) is much higher than the share of Bulgarian children in the same situation (less than 10%)<sup>1</sup>. The lack of employment and income limits access to healthcare for many working-age Roma (18-64 years old) due to insufficient funds to pay for health insurance contributions, excluding them from receiving medical care and preventive health services from general practitioners and specialists. Widespread stereotypes and discrimination still hinder the integration of the Roma into society and the economy.

Decent and sustainable employment is a key factor for the inclusion of Roma, as it not only ensures the financial stability of their families but also supports their social integration. By providing stable work, Roma can improve their living conditions, gain access to better education and healthcare, and actively participate in public life. Moreover, sustainable employment helps to overcome prejudices and discrimination by demonstrating that Roma can be full and valuable members of society. This will lead to greater social cohesion and can reduce tensions between different ethnic groups.

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<sup>1</sup> The project 'Novel approaches to generating data on hard-to-reach populations at risk of violation of their rights' was funded under the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2014 – 2021 (EEA FM) under call BGLD-3.001, programme 'Local development, poverty reduction and enhanced inclusion of vulnerable groups': <https://www.noveleea.bg/documents/reports/>

## II. Roma access to decent and sustainable employment in Bulgaria

### ✓ *Where do the Roma work?*

The Roma in Bulgaria are one of the most vulnerable groups in the labor market, with high unemployment rates and low employment levels. Data from a summary report of a large-scale study conducted within the project "Novel Approaches to Generating Data on Hard-to-Reach Populations at Risk of Violation of Their Rights" show that the share of Roma aged 15-29 who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) is 53.6%, compared to 11.7% of ethnic Bulgarians and 22.5% of ethnic Turks. Significant gender disparities exist in this area: 69.8% of young Roma women are NEETs compared to 39.5% of young Roma men.

The majority of Roma aged 20-64 (52.8%) are still unemployed or have dropped out of the labor market despite relatively low unemployment rates in the country and the recently reported labor shortages, including a shortage of low-skilled workers. By comparison, the share of ethnic Bulgarians in the same age group (20-64) who are not in paid work or out of the labor market is 19.8%, and among Turks, it is 34.9%. The employment gap between men and women is particularly large among Roma, with a 32.2 percentage point difference compared to 6.7 and 18.1 percentage points among Bulgarians and Turks, respectively. Studies indicate that unemployment among Roma is significantly higher than the national average, ranging around 50-60% depending on the region and demographic characteristics<sup>2</sup>.

Low education levels are a major factor contributing to high unemployment. Most Roma have only primary or lower education, limiting them to unskilled and low-paid jobs. A large portion of the Roma population works mainly in sectors such as construction, primarily as unskilled laborers; agriculture, often as seasonal workers engaged in harvest collection; and services, mostly as cleaners, janitors, and support staff in hotels and restaurants. A small percentage of Roma engage in market trading and street vending.

Most Roma work on temporary or seasonal contracts, with permanent employment being rare. Atypical employment and work in the informal sector are common, with many Roma working without labor contracts and social protection. Working abroad is an alternative for many Roma seeking better conditions and pay, but they often face exploitation and insecurity, as they are compelled to perform unregulated activities that lack permanence and social protection. However, it should be noted that in recent years, more Roma have been taking jobs abroad with permanent labor contracts and the associated responsibilities and benefits. Lastly, it is worth noting that the unemployment rate among Roma in rural areas is significantly higher compared to those in urban areas due to a lack of job opportunities and limited training and development opportunities in small settlements.

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<sup>2</sup> The data comes from the Thematic Report on the situation of Roma, carried out in the framework of the "New approaches for data collection on hard-to-reach population groups at risk of violation of their rights", [https://www.noveleea.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Thematic\\_report\\_Roma\\_BG\\_22-04-26.pdf](https://www.noveleea.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Thematic_report_Roma_BG_22-04-26.pdf)

✓ ***Are the Roma adequately supported to access employment?***

In the Civil Monitoring Report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Bulgaria, it is noted that "Local employment offices are the only institutions in Bulgaria allowed to collect ethnically categorized data due to the specific nature of targeted integration and inclusion measures. These offices are also the primary institution created to support all those in need, including Roma, in accessing the labor market and employment. This is achieved through various national and regional programs and initiatives that primarily target members of the Roma community. This is due to the fact that the ratio of Roma among other at-risk groups—NEET youth, long-term unemployed adults, and young mothers without work experience—is several times higher than the proportion of Roma in the general population of the country. However, the support provided is often insufficient in scope and limited in effectiveness. The main reason for this is that most programs are inadequate, imposed from above, and do not always take into account local needs and specificities of local communities. Programs are often offered that are uninteresting to the people and do not contribute in any way to improving the situation of unemployed Roma in the labor market."<sup>3</sup>

Some programs offer integrated individualized pathways, including training, counseling, and services aimed at enhancing the qualifications and skills of the Roma. Unfortunately, many of these programs are inaccessible to many Roma due to formal requirements for certain education levels—for example, requirements for completing 6th, 8th, or 10th grade to enroll in courses for professions that do not necessarily require such education levels. As a result, uneducated Roma are only offered literacy courses, which are not acceptable to adult Roma, or they are pressured to accept any available job, regardless of quality and conditions. Refusal of such work results in strict punitive measures, forcing those who refuse to forgo employment office services and terminate their registration.

At best, Roma are included in temporary and unstable employment, which does not offer real opportunities for professional development and social integration. In addition, public employment services (employment offices) often lack the necessary resources to help all job seekers. Many offices do not have sufficient staff and the necessary training to provide individualized support to the Roma. This often leads to the offices focusing their efforts on supporting the most easily employable individuals (e.g., people with disabilities or those with higher education or work experience), leaving those furthest from the labor market, such as the Roma, without sufficient help and support. There is often a lack of coordination between different institutions and organizations, leading to fragmented and ineffective services.

In summary, Roma in Bulgaria face multiple challenges in accessing decent and sustainable employment, including high unemployment, low education levels, and limited opportunities for professional development. The support they receive is insufficient and often inadequate, further exacerbating their social and economic situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Roma Civil Monitor 2022 – Civil monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Bulgaria

**Example:**

***One of Integro's priorities is to assist vulnerable Roma in improving their situation by providing conditions for enhancing their skills and qualifications. In such activities, we managed to motivate Roma with low education and no qualifications to enroll in courses for various professions. We also provided funds to cover the necessary fees. Unfortunately, many of the identified Roma could not enroll in these courses due to absurd educational level requirements—at least 8th or 10th grade—despite the chosen professions being in fields like construction, services, and other low-skilled activities. When we asked why a master builder needs 6th grade education, we were told that modern technologies require computer skills. At the same time, the candidates for the course were people who practiced this profession and were in demand. The lack of a professional qualification certificate does not allow them to practice on their own, forcing them to work for others, often without labor contracts. The alternative for them was to return to school for 3-4 years and then enroll in a professional course or continue working in the informal sector—a choice that is easy to predict.***

✓ ***Can the Roma access income support while unemployed?***

The Roma in Bulgaria have the formal right to unemployment benefits and various types of social assistance, just like all other citizens of the country. Unfortunately, in practice, many Roma face serious obstacles in obtaining them. Unemployment benefits depend on registered employment, length of work experience, and payment of social security contributions. Many Roma who work in the informal sector without employment contracts and therefore without social security are unable to receive unemployment benefits. Others who work in temporary positions cannot meet the conditions for a minimum insurance period and are also excluded from unemployment benefits. In practice, most Roma can fall under social assistance programs, which provide minimal income for the unemployed and socially disadvantaged. However, administrative procedures for accessing these benefits often present barriers.

According to recent changes in the Regulations for the "Application of the Social Assistance Act," unemployed individuals of working age receiving monthly social assistance are required to perform four hours of daily community service for ten days, with the assistance amounting to approximately 75 euros per month. Additionally, recipients must maintain registration at employment offices and report monthly to sign in. The complicated procedures for receiving assistance, coupled with ongoing discrimination from institutional employees, are often demotivating for the Roma. Failure to meet requirements or provide necessary documents results in penalties and denial of assistance. Consequently, a large portion of the Roma voluntarily forgo social assistance, preferring to earn income from unregulated work such as occasional labor, herb and waste collection, etc. These incomes may not be consistent but can yield the same amount as social assistance in two to three days. Furthermore, individuals can manage their time more freely without the obligations associated with receiving assistance. In practice, only Roma who live alone, have health problems, or are elderly benefit from social assistance.

**Example:**

***Analysis of data from Integro’s studies on Roma employment within various projects shows a trend among social assistance recipients in the Roma community. A significant portion of Roma receiving social assistance are elderly people living alone, with health problems, or single mothers with multiple children. Despite the high percentage of unemployed young Roma, a considerable number of young Roma families do not apply for such assistance. They do not maintain registration with employment offices, which automatically disqualifies them from receiving aid. The amount of these benefits is too small, and most families report that they can earn a similar amount in just three to four days of work in the informal sector or by collecting herbs, mushrooms, etc. At the same time, the requirement to perform 40 hours of community service limits their freedom of movement. Additionally, earning any income automatically reduces or even terminates social assistance. Ultimately, most Roma families prefer not to receive assistance but to earn income through various means as described above.***

✓ ***Antigypsyism in accessing employment***

Unfortunately, the Roma still face discriminatory treatment in the labor market in Bulgaria. Due to deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices among a significant portion of institutional employees, including those in the labor market sector, antigypsyism is widespread and seriously hinders the Roma's ability to find decent and sustainable employment. One of the most common forms of discrimination is the unequal treatment of Roma at employment offices. This manifests in dismissive and often rude behavior, refusal to provide necessary information, refusal to assist with the preparation of required documents for registration, delays and even denial of services, imposition of sanctions, and termination of registration for the slightest infractions.

Unfortunately, many employers also treat Roma based on their stereotypes and prejudices. They hire Roma only if there are no other candidates for the positions they have advertised. The attitude towards Roma candidates is highly negative, and very often, Roma avoid applying for jobs to avoid being subjected to humiliating and offensive treatment. It is telling that in municipal institutions and local authorities, the proportion of Roma employees is much smaller than the proportion of the Roma community in the respective locality. At best, Roma are offered low-skilled positions or jobs specifically targeted at Roma.

**Example:**

***In many places, Roma with solid education in fields such as education or social services are hired as health mediators. Despite their qualifications, the highest level they are employed at is as health mediators. To secure more prestigious positions and have greater opportunities for professional development and realization, many Roma are forced to abandon their identity and present themselves as members of other ethnic groups. Health mediation is an activity that the state delegates to the municipalities. Health mediators are appointed by the local government, and the salary is provided by the state outside the municipality's budget. Usually the pay is within the minimum wage for the country. The main requirement for holding the position is the command of the Romani language.***

***The majority of appointed health mediators are Roma, and therefore the position of health mediator is considered a "Roma jobs". Low pay and the nature of work - primarily in Roma neighborhoods with a vulnerable population contribute to the low prestige of health mediators, although they do very important and useful work for the Roma community and for the whole society.***

✓ ***Adequate wages and the ethnic pay gap***

Despite the lack of extensive official information, it is a fact that Roma in Bulgaria are overrepresented in low-paid and unskilled jobs, placing them in an economically disadvantaged position. "Studies on Roma employment in Bulgaria indicate a seasonal pattern with higher employment rates during the summer but extremely high unemployment rates in the winter. This trend is strongly linked to relatively low education levels, leading to employment in specific sectors with a high level of temporary, seasonal positions, such as forestry, agriculture, and construction. This was further amplified by the cyclical patterns of cross-border seasonal employment following EU accession."<sup>4</sup> Generally, Roma are most often offered positions in sectors with unattractive jobs to the majority and with low societal prestige, where wages are low, and working conditions are poor.

**Example:**

***Research by Integro reveals another negative trend regarding wage disparity. A significant portion of Roma respondents reported receiving lower pay for the same work compared to non-Roma. This is particularly true for sectors such as agriculture and construction. This pay disparity is often due to discrimination and prejudice on the part of employers.***

✓ ***Sustainable contracts, employment rights, working conditions***

The primary issue for working Roma in Bulgaria is their significant presence in insecure employment relationships, primarily due to their overrepresentation in temporary or seasonal activities. A substantial number of them do not have formally signed labor contracts, which deprives them of access to social security while working under poor conditions, including a lack of health and safety standards at the workplace. The absence of official contracts increases workers' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse by employers, such as unpaid wages and excessive working hours without compensation.

Even with labor contracts, many workers, including numerous Roma, work in dangerous conditions without the necessary safety and health measures. They are more likely to suffer workplace injuries due to the lack of appropriate protective equipment and safety training. Certainly, the main reason for this is that many employers take advantage of the lesser knowledge of some Roma about their labor rights and allow themselves not to comply with basic requirements of labor legislation. Some of them even think that it is not worth the effort

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<sup>4</sup> Roma Civil Monitor 2022 – Civil monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Bulgaria

to ensure equal working conditions for the Roma. This is also a manifestation of antigypsyism, born of stereotypes and prejudices.

**Example:**

***Our research confirms that Roma employment issues are most pronounced during the winter. In the summer, there are many activities that allow Roma to earn income. Therefore, they are reluctant to commit to long-term contracts that would prevent them from participating in these activities during the summer. To secure income during the winter, they are willing to accept short-term contracts that do not meet all legal requirements, thereby forfeiting all workplace protection opportunities.***

✓ ***Access to on-the-job training and career progression***

It can be said that a significant portion of Roma have very limited access to professional training and career development opportunities compared to other ethnic groups. The main reason for this is that their employment is in sectors that do not require specific skills or knowledge and do not necessitate any special professional qualifications. Consequently, employers in these sectors do not offer training or development courses to their Roma employees, as this could help them find better jobs and leave these low-paid, unskilled positions.

Providing opportunities for skill enhancement and acquiring new knowledge is not a priority for employers, not only concerning unskilled workers. Overall, employers are reluctant to allocate significant funds for on-the-job professional qualification and rely more on the workers' own efforts and the qualification programs provided by employment institutions. Unfortunately, the opportunities offered by employment offices are not entirely adequate to meet the labor market's needs, especially when targeting low-skilled workers, many of whom are Roma. The emphasis on literacy programs deters people not only from these programs but also from all opportunities offered by employment offices.

✓ ***Roma representation in trade union structures***

There is no official data on the representation of Roma in trade union structures in Bulgaria. These structures are established to protect the interests of workers according to the requirements of the Labor Code and other regulatory documents. Given that a large portion of Roma work without the necessary labor contracts, it can be said that Roma are very poorly represented in trade unions as members. Additionally, there are no studies on the participation of Roma in leadership positions within the two largest trade unions in Bulgaria. Perhaps with one exception—recently, a Roma woman has taken a very active position in one of the unions and gained media recognition for her advocacy of workers' rights. Unfortunately, neither she nor the unions as a whole address the specific problems of working Roma—encounters with discrimination, protection of low-skilled and low-educated Roma, and the lack or insufficiency of social protection.

The lack of representation of Roma in trade unions is the main reason for the lack of attention to their specific problems and their neglect in collective bargaining. Consequently, targeted programs or policies for the inclusion and protection of Roma in the labor market are not developed. National trade unions acknowledge the need for better integration and representation of Roma, but in practice, little is done to actually improve their situation. The lack of coordination and targeted efforts leads to the continued marginalization of Roma workers within trade union structures.

✓ ***Antigypsyism and discrimination in employment***

The issue of workplace discrimination is extremely delicate and painful for those affected. Regardless of whether they have experienced discriminatory treatment, very few Roma are willing to speak about it. Such incidents usually remain hidden and are often not sanctioned by the relevant authorities. Although Bulgaria has legislation and judicial bodies to enforce it, very few Roma who face racist, discriminatory, or mocking behavior seek protection. This reluctance is partly due to distrust in institutions and partly due to fear of repercussions and the potential exacerbation of such treatment.

Discriminatory acts are not uncommon. Roma face antigypsyism in the workplace from employers, colleagues, clients, and partners. These acts stem from negative stereotypes and prejudices, reaching blatant racism. The discrimination begins during the job application process. Many employers refuse to hire Roma due to prejudices and concerns about the reputation of their business. Roma often face harassment and discrimination from employers and colleagues, leading to isolation and psychological stress. In sectors like trade and services, Roma encounter negative reactions and refusals from clients and business partners.

One of the main reasons many Roma do not react to discrimination is fear. They fear reporting discriminatory behavior due to concerns about retaliation or losing their job. Many Roma are not well informed about their rights and the procedures for filing discrimination complaints. The lack of legal assistance and support further complicates the process.

Bulgaria has laws aimed at combating discrimination and promoting workplace diversity. Unfortunately, these laws are not sufficiently effective due to gaps in their implementation. Public tolerance for discriminatory acts is also very low. More efforts are needed to raise awareness and understanding of workplace discrimination and the possibilities and responsibilities for responding to it. Training should be conducted for both those affected by discriminatory acts and the perpetrators.

✓ ***Atypical employment forms***

The challenges faced by Roma who are self-employed and practice traditional crafts or engage in seasonal and informal work are numerous. As previously mentioned, they often work under poor conditions without social protection and income security. This is particularly true for seasonal agricultural workers who harvest crops under extremely poor conditions, often

without contracts and adequate pay. While they may not be formally self-employed, their mode of securing employment closely aligns with this category of workers.

Additionally, self-employed Roma frequently encounter difficulties in accessing credit and financing, which limits their business development opportunities. Those who practice traditional crafts such as blacksmithing, basket weaving, and tinning often face a lack of market demand for their products, leading to the decline of these trades. These traditional crafts are generally on the verge of extinction.

Of course, there is a segment of self-employed Roma who have successfully established sustainable businesses, primarily in the service and trade sectors, but they are few compared to the vast majority who lack the opportunity to develop their own businesses and can only rely on offering their labor for temporary employment.

"Studies on Roma employment in Bulgaria indicate a seasonal pattern with higher employment rates during the summer but extremely high unemployment rates during the winter. This trend is strongly linked to relatively low education levels, resulting in employment in specific sectors with a high level of temporary, seasonal positions, such as forestry, agriculture, and construction. This pattern has been further reinforced by the cyclical nature of cross-border seasonal employment following EU accession."<sup>5</sup>

There is a definite need for better support and regulation for Roma engaged in atypical forms of work to ensure decent working conditions and social protection.

### ✓ *Roma working abroad*

With Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, the opportunities for Bulgarian citizens to find employment increased significantly. From the first years of EU membership, large flows of Bulgarians headed to Western European countries in search of better incomes. These flows were primarily towards France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Belgium. A significant portion of these people were Roma. Initially, similar to their work in Bulgaria, Roma sought low-skilled and unattractive jobs in the service sector. Most Roma worked "on the black," without contracts and without any protection, usually for a few months, after which they returned to Bulgaria and went back abroad the following year. This type of work made them victims of labor exploitation and poor working conditions, with long hours for low pay. Many Roma faced improper practices from intermediaries and employers, including withholding documents and forcing them to work under unfavorable conditions.

However, recently, the situation has changed significantly. Many Roma have settled permanently in their respective countries and started legal work in various sectors of the economy. Their standard of living has significantly improved; they have become homeowners, and some have even acquired citizenship. Despite this, many Roma still work in the informal sector within companies run by other immigrants who settled in the West before them,

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<sup>5</sup> Roma Civil Monitor 2022 – Civil monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Bulgaria

mainly Turks. Roma's communication with local institutions and authorities remains difficult due to language and cultural barriers, leading to social isolation and integration challenges in the local community. In some places, sub-neighborhoods populated only by Roma have formed, bringing along some negative practices and habits, such as begging. These neighborhoods gradually fall outside the attention of local authorities and begin to ghettoize, but they do not yet pose a threat to local communities. Integro has information about such neighborhoods in Belgium, Germany, Italy, and other countries.

**Example:**

***Despite significant changes in recent years, many Roma families share stories of working in agriculture or construction in countries like Germany, Italy, and Spain. They describe being forced to work under poor conditions without adequate pay and social protection. Some even recount cases of fraud by intermediaries who took money to arrange jobs but then failed to provide the promised conditions.***

✓ ***Job creation and (social) entrepreneurship***

In recent years, there have been numerous initiatives and programs in Bulgaria aimed at creating jobs through so-called temporary employment. These are government programs that provide employment for six months to a year in the public service sector, primarily in cleaning and municipal maintenance. A minimum wage is provided, and local authorities are responsible for securing the work. However, these programs are often insufficient and do not always meet the needs of the Roma communities. They are limited and do not offer long-term employment or development opportunities. While they provide a temporary solution for some families, they do not have a lasting impact on the labor market.

Currently, there is no effective implementation of the potential of the social economy and social enterprises. The role of the social economy in promoting employment, including for Roma, is undeniably important. Unfortunately, support for the creation of social enterprises is minimal and sporadic, mostly within the framework of various programs and projects. Beyond this, the state provides no support for social enterprises, which often cease to exist once the projects end. On the other hand, support is mainly directed towards social enterprises for people with disabilities, with no other targeted programs for vulnerable groups, including Roma.

At present, there are no specific programs to support Roma entrepreneurs. The civil monitoring report states: "The failure to implement measures to promote entrepreneurship is explained by a 'lack of motivation,' while there is no real analysis of the mechanism embedded in the implementation, especially since entrepreneurship among Roma in Bulgaria is higher compared to that of Bulgarians and has been growing over the past ten years."<sup>6</sup> Support for Roma entrepreneurs is necessary not only for the entrepreneurs themselves but also because they can be a key factor in providing sustainable employment for other Roma within the community.

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<sup>6</sup> Roma Civil Monitor 2022 – Civil monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Bulgaria

**Example:**

***Although there are few examples, there are successful cases of social enterprises that, without being specifically aimed at Roma, can contribute to the integration of Roma into the labor market. In one of the municipalities where Integro operates, a social enterprise was created by the local government. Within a project, several women, including Roma women, were trained to process various natural materials and create different items and souvenirs, which are sold at local markets, providing them with income and sustainable jobs. This and other examples demonstrate the potential of the social economy to offer sustainable employment and integration solutions for Roma. However, more adequate support from the state is necessary. The social enterprise is called "Caritas Workshop" and was established in the municipality of "Rakovski", Plovdiv region within the framework of project BG05M9OP001-2.010-0243-C01 under the procedure "Development of social entrepreneurship", under the 2018 ODA. Currently, the main activity of the enterprise is the production of decorative candles, soaps and fragrances.***

✓ ***Employment in the Bulgarian National Roma Strategic Framework***

The current National Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation largely repeats the operational goals of the previous period's strategy. The main areas of intervention remain in education and employment. In the assessment of employment measures in the Civil Monitoring Report, it states: "The risks for monitoring and evaluation stem from the fact that all measures are massified, poorly reflecting issues of self-identification, which threatens the accurate assessment of efficiency, effectiveness, and impact. The advantage of the employment measures is that they cover a variety of inactive and unemployed people and have targeted interventions for women, NEET youth, and older adults. However, several important issues are not covered: improving working conditions and preventing local and cross-border exploitation; combating the grey economy and improving labor contracts in agriculture, forestry, and construction; labor integration of cyclical cross-border migrants at the local level (i.e., in the country of origin)."<sup>7</sup>

Overall, the strategy includes various measures to promote employment among the Roma population, but these measures are often not effective or adequate. The effectiveness of the measures is hampered by the fact that many employment programs are limited in scope and resources and often fail to reach the most vulnerable groups within the Roma communities. Existing measures do not always align with the actual needs of the Roma. There is a lack of targeted initiatives for vocational training and support for labor market integration. There is insufficient focus on sustainable employment and long-term professional development. Effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the results of the measures are also lacking.

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<sup>7</sup> Roma Civil Monitor 2022 – Civil monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Bulgaria

Another highlight from the Civil Monitoring Report: "There is no recognition of the fact that due to discrimination, many local communities refuse to identify as Roma at local employment offices; there is no acknowledgment of the variability of seasonal employment related to cross-border labor migration; there is no reflection on the increase in employment in the grey economy. The fact that the highest employment levels are achieved only temporarily through programs and measures for subsidized employment, which turns out to be an unsustainable practice, is not addressed as a problem."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roma Civil Monitor 2022 – Civil monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Bulgaria

### III. Conclusion and Recommendations

Roma in Bulgaria face numerous challenges in the labor market, including high unemployment, discrimination, poor working conditions, and limited opportunities for professional development. The National Roma Strategic Framework includes measures to promote employment, but these are insufficient and inadequate to address the existing problems. The lack of targeted support and insufficient funding further exacerbate the situation for the Roma.

#### Key Challenges:

- High Unemployment: Roma communities experience significantly higher rates of unemployment compared to the national average. This is due to several factors, including limited access to education and training, as well as discrimination in hiring practices.
- Discrimination: Roma face systemic discrimination from employers, colleagues, and even institutions designed to help them. This discrimination can take many forms, from outright refusal to hire Roma workers to subtler forms of workplace harassment and exclusion.
- Poor Working Conditions: Many Roma are employed in low-paid, unskilled jobs that often come with poor working conditions. These jobs typically lack proper contracts, social security benefits, and safe working environments.
- Limited Professional Development: Opportunities for skills training and career advancement are scarce. Many employment programs are not designed to meet the specific needs of the Roma, leading to a cycle of low-skilled, low-paid employment.
- Generalized Programs: The employment measures within the National Roma Strategic Framework are often too generalized and do not specifically target the unique challenges faced by Roma communities.
- Inadequate Resources: The programs designed to help Roma find employment are often underfunded and cannot reach all those in need. This results in a lack of meaningful impact on the community.
- Lack of Focus on Long-term Solutions: Many existing measures focus on short-term employment rather than sustainable, long-term job creation and professional development.
- Insufficient Monitoring and Evaluation: There are inadequate mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of employment programs for Roma, leading to poor accountability and minimal improvements.

To improve Roma access to the labor market, it is important to take action in the following directions:

#### 1. Enhancing the Effectiveness of Employment Measures:

- Expanding Scope and Resources: Increase the coverage and resources of employment programs specifically aimed at Roma communities.
- Targeted Professional Training: Introduce initiatives for professional training and skill development aligned with local labor market needs.
- Social Security Access: Ensure better access to the social security system and enforcement of labor rights for Roma workers.

## 2. Improving Access to the Labor Market:

- Sustainable Employment Opportunities: Create more opportunities for sustainable employment through public sector jobs and social enterprises.
- Encouraging Social Entrepreneurship: Promote social entrepreneurship by providing funding and consultations for Roma interested in becoming social entrepreneurs.
- Support for Social Enterprises: Assist in the creation and development of social enterprises that offer labor integration opportunities for Roma.

## 3. Combating Discrimination and Antigypsyism:

- Preventive Work: Conduct preventive work with employers and employees to fight discrimination and promote workplace diversity.
- Strengthening Legislation: Enhance legislation and mechanisms to protect the rights of Roma.

## 4. Support for Roma Working Abroad:

- Legal Assistance and Consultations: Provide legal assistance and consultations for Roma working abroad to protect their rights and interests.
- International Partnerships: Establish international partnerships to combat labor exploitation and abuses.

## 5. Monitoring and Evaluation of Measures:

- Effective Monitoring Mechanisms: Implement effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the results of employment measures.
- Data Collection and Analysis: Regularly collect adequate and reliable data on the implementation of measures, analyze results, and plan improvements for policies and programs.

## References

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