

29 September 2011

President Georgi Parvanov
Minister of Interior Cvetan Cvetanov
Prosecutor General Boris Velchev

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Dear Excellencies:

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), a public interest law organisation working to combat anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma, is writing to express deep concern about the anti-Roma violence in Katounitsa and other Bulgarian cities, and to urge the full investigation and prosecution of all responsible perpetrators.

Information gathered in the media indicates that violent protests were triggered by the death of a young man, who was hit by a vehicle on the night of 23 September in Katounitsa, south-east of Plovdiv. Although the suspected driver was taken into custody, a local Romani family, allegedly linked to the suspected driver, was blamed. The ERRC supports the vigorous investigation and prosecution of all those responsible for the death of the young man.

That night, more than 500 town residents marched to the family's house, where the ensuing protest involved threats, destruction of property and the death of a 16-year-old boy. During the following days, particularly on 26 September, a series of protests against "Romani crime" were organised in several Bulgarian cities, resulting in the destruction of property, attacks against police and attempts to enter Romani neighbourhoods. The protests, called for by far right politicians, involved many children under the age of 18 and have reportedly included racist chants against the Roma. The climate of widespread insecurity caused great panic in Romani communities, including some areas in which children did not attend school, fearing for their safety.

The ERRC welcomes the prompt response from national and local officials in calling for restraint, visiting the involved locations and deploying police to monitor and arrest those committing crimes during the protests. Public officials have an opportunity in such a situation to ensure that one tragic incident does not escalate into the collective criminalisation of a minority group, but to affirm the rule of law.

According to both international and domestic legal frameworks, Bulgaria is obliged to protect the life and personal integrity of all of its citizens: As a party to the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Bulgaria is bound to ensure that all citizens can exercise their right to liberty and security of the person. Articles 4 and 28 of the Bulgarian Constitution guarantees the "life, dignity and rights of the individual"; Article 32 recalls the right to privacy and ensures protection against invasion of privacy; and Article 44 prohibits inciting racial, ethnic and religious hatred. The criminal code and domestic law carry serious penalties for actions violating the rights enumerated above.

The ERRC urges Bulgarian authorities to undertake further measures to reduce the tension and end the anti-Romani protests in Bulgaria. The presence of police patrols must be guaranteed in order to adequately ensure the safety of the residents at all times and to prevent any further violence or destruction of property. It is imperative that a thorough investigation into the violent protests be conducted to identify and prosecute all perpetrators of violence, destruction of property or incitement to hatred, with consideration of racial motivation.

We respectfully request to be informed of any and all actions undertaken by your respective offices in a timely manner.

Sincerely,

Dezideriu Gergely
Executive Director

TO: President Georgi Parvanov
Minister of Interior Cvetan Cvetanov
Prosecutor General Boris Velchev

CC: Sofia Vasilva Hristeva, Mayor of Katounitsa
Dimitar Nikolov, Mayor of Bourgas
Kiril Yordanov, Mayor of Varna
Slavcho Atanasov, Mayor of Plovdiv
Svetlin Tanchev, Mayor of Stara Zagora
Bozhidar Yotov, Mayor of Ruse
Todor Popov, Mayor of Pazardzhik
Detelina Nikolova, Mayor of Dobrich
Nayden Zelenogorski, Mayor of Pleven
Jordanka Fandakova, Mayor of Sofia
Kostadin Stoianov, Mayor of Blagoevgrad
d-r Hristo Grudev, Mayor of Asenovgrad
Zlatko Givkov, Mayor of Montana
Rumen Rashev, Mayor of Veliko Tarnovo
Jordan Lechkov, Mayor of Sliven