

WRITTEN COMMENTS

OF THE EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTRE CONCERNING BULGARIA

To the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) for
consideration at its 111th session (20 November - 8 December 2023)

CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Discrimination Against Romani Children	4
<i>Separation from Parents – Romani Children in State Care</i>	4
<i>Access to Education and School Segregation of Romani Pupils</i>	5
Discrimination Against Romani Women	6
<i>Segregated Maternity Wards</i>	6
Hate Speech by Leading Politicians	7
Hate Speech and COVID-19	9
Access to Justice and Police Violence	10

INTRODUCTION

The European Roma Rights Centre (hereinafter also referred to as the “ERRC”)¹ hereby submits these written comments concerning Bulgaria to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) for consideration at its 111th session (20 November – 8 December 2023). The submission focuses on the discrimination faced by Romani children in Bulgaria, in particular on their overrepresentation in state care, and segregation in education; discrimination against Romani women, in particular with regards to reproductive health and segregation in labour wards; hate speech, racially motivated violence, and rights abuses during COVID-19; access to justice and police violence.

In its May 2017 Concluding Observations CERD expressed its concerns about the continued marginalization of Roma in all walks of life, including in public and political life, and the serious challenges they face in accessing basic services. Among other things, CERD called on the State Party to:

- Stop the persistent practice of forcibly evicting and destroying Roma settlements without offering alternative housing or adequate compensation
- Strengthen efforts to provide adequate social housing to Roma families
- Ensure that Roma can access quality health-care services without discrimination
- Firmly address the de facto segregation of Roma children in education with a view to complying with article 3 of the Convention
- Establish protocols to prevent and condemn hate speech by public officials and politicians, investigate incidents of racist hate speech and racially motivated violence
- Take effective measures to reinforce public confidence in existing institutions and mechanisms responsible for addressing racist hate crimes
- Take immediate steps, such as awareness-raising campaigns, to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes regarding Roma and their contribution to society in order to secure their adequate representation in political and public life

The evidence compiled in this submission strongly suggests that none of the CERD recommendations were heeded by the State Party, discrimination against Roma continues unabated; hate speech continues to proliferate and has been amplified in print, broadcast and social media; and anti-Roma racism and hostility has been further fomented by prominent politicians and public figures.

¹ The ERRC is a Roma-led international public interest law organisation working to combat anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma through strategic litigation, research and policy development, advocacy and human rights education. Since its establishment in 1996, the ERRC has endeavoured to provide Roma with the tools necessary to combat discrimination and achieve equal access to justice, education, housing, health care and public services. The ERRC has consultative status with the Council of Europe, as well as with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. More information is available at: www.errc.org.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMANI CHILDREN

In its Concluding observations on the combined third to fifth periodic reports of Bulgaria (2016), the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its deep concern at the persistent discrimination against Romani children. Romani children continue to face discrimination in all areas of life; are overrepresented in state care institutions; continue to face discrimination with regard to access to education, health care and adequate housing, often living in fear of forced evictions or house demolitions; and many Romani children continue to be exposed to racially-motivated violence, and hate speech. continue to face discrimination with regard to access to education, health care and adequate housing.

SEPARATION FROM PARENTS – ROMANI CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

The ERRC's 2021 report *Blighted Lives*, covering five countries, found that in Bulgaria, disproportionate numbers of Romani children are separated from their biological families and end up in state care.² Notwithstanding legal prohibitions on taking children into care because of poverty in the five countries surveyed, the most frequent reasons for child removals are material deprivation and poor housing conditions in Romani communities.

Child protection policy context: In Bulgaria in 2019, amendments to Bulgaria's Child Protection Act and the Social Services Act were placed in jeopardy in the wake of what the National Network for Children described as a "backlash against children's rights (which) raises concerns around national policies becoming hostage to speculation, disinformation and fake news." Public discussion around the draft National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 (the Strategy) quickly soured as far-right organizations and religious groups mobilized against it; and the Protection Act "was subjected to extreme propaganda, accompanied by a massive disinformation campaign by radical religious and political organizations".³

Civil society and expert groups expressed concerns about the quality of all types of alternative care placements, and the ways that decisions in relation to children are made, implemented and monitored, as well as severe under-resourcing of the child protection system, an acute shortage of staff, poor material resources, and high turnover of social workers who lack competency-based standards, training, and supervision.

In the absence of clear statistical information, the number of Roma children separated from their biological families and placed in care can only be estimated from information gathered by ERRC researchers from social workers, community mediators, and non-governmental organizations working in the field of children's rights. Roma account for just over 10% of the population, estimates of Romani children in state care suggest they account for 30-60% of the total, depending on the region.

How and why Romani children end up in care institutions: Respondents told ERRC researchers that the main reason for Romani children being removed from their families is deep poverty, compounded by the inability of social workers and the state care system to provide adequate support for parents. Social workers asserted that the reason Romani families face more difficulties in raising children is purely on a material basis, parents with no fixed income simply lack the resources to provide for their families.

For the poorest families, with no source of income whatsoever, living conditions are hazardous, and children are at risk of neglect in overcrowded dwellings, lacking access to clean water and sanitation, where there is no electricity or heating. Children in such settings are often malnourished, have missed compulsory medical examinations and vaccinations; and many are exposed to high-risk environments.

In its 2016 Concluding observations on Bulgaria, the UNCRC was concerned about the high number of disadvantaged children, including children up to 3 years of age, placed in institutional care; the lack of support and inadequate training for social workers in family-type centres; and the gaps in the child protection system, which has led to children being removed from their families without proper assessment or planning. In the intervening period, based on its most recent research the ERRC maintains that the Committee's recommendations have been ignored, and earlier progress on deinstitutionalisation has been derailed by chaotic governance.

² ERRC, *Blighted Lives: Romani children in state care*, p.27. Written by Bernard Rorke, January 2021. Available at: http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5284_file1_blighted-lives-romani-children-in-state-care.pdf.

³ George Bogdanov Executive Director of National Network for Children. National Network for Children Annual "Report Card 2020", 25 June 2020. Available at: <https://nmd.bg/en/national-network-for-children-introduced-the-annual-vreport-card-2020v/>.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SEGREGATION OF ROMANI PUPILS

Access to quality education for Bulgarian Roma remains a matter of great concern. Overrepresentation of Romani children in segregated schools, or in schools for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), as well as a lack of funding for all levels of education for Roma persists.

Romani pupils continue to be disproportionately represented in schools for children with Special Educational Needs. This perpetuates segregation in education and seriously affects the chances of the students to find employment upon graduation. The 2016 FRA report suggests 60% of the Romani children surveyed attend schools where a majority of the pupils are of Romani origin. Despite the ban on the formation of segregated classes in ethnically-mixed schools introduced in the Pre-school Education Act, the Roma Civil Monitor found that this practice continues. In its 2022 survey of segregated institutions in Bulgaria, the expert NGO *Amalipe* found that 185 primary schools and 150 professional gymnasiums (VET schools) function as segregated schools and their number is increasing.⁴

According to the European Commission (EC) report: 'Education and Training Monitor 2020', while enrolment rates in pre-school have improved since 2011, the gap between Roma and non-Roma (66% and 87% respectively) remains a major concern. According to the 2019 World Bank Report, dropout rates remain high and desegregation programmes are limited in scope.

The Education and Training Monitor also found that bullying and truancy affect student outcomes. Bulgaria has one of the highest percentages (34%) of students in the EU who reported being bullied at least a few times a month by their peers. According to a survey on public attitudes towards hate speech in Bulgaria conducted by Open Society Foundation Sofia, hate speech is "one of the factors for school dropout among Romani children, while the segregation of kindergartens is a factor for further marginalization of the Romani community".

In the context of Covid-19, the 2020 EU Education and Training Monitor found that the abrupt shift to remote learning posed major challenges, exacerbating already high inequalities in access to quality education. The lack of equipment and teachers' insufficient digital competences hamper the use of technology and the efficiency of online learning. Almost half of young Bulgarians lack basic skills in reading, mathematics and science. In spite of growing efforts, the impact of socio-economic status on students' performances is significant, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.⁵

Romani children living in poverty were hard hit by school closures, as they missed out on breakfasts and lunches provided under the 'School Milk Scheme', and the 'School Fruit Scheme' which covers more than 3,200 schools and kindergartens across the country. On the 22nd April 2020, schools began distributing packages of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products to parents. As in other countries, these children became victims of the digital divide, as home schooling without adequate internet connections, necessary devices, or know-how proved to be unfeasible.⁶

Human rights monitors reported that tens of thousands of Romani children were excluded from the benefits of online distance learning. The main obstacles were the lack of proper internet connectivity, and the lack of suitable devices. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, between 35,000 and 45,000 pupils lacked the necessary devices. A survey by *Amalipe Centre* in March found that in 200 schools with a concentration of Roma pupils, more than a quarter of the children didn't have the necessary equipment at home; and in some schools the percentage was over 75%. Children whose parents were illiterate or lacked the digital know-how to assist in online learning were even more disadvantaged.⁷

4 See: https://amalipe.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Nosegregation-project-Bulgaria_2022_10_24.pdf.

5 European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2020: Bulgaria. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0b2b116f-2499-11eb-9d7e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-171315948>.

6 ERRC, *Roma Rights in the Time of Covid*. Written by Bernard Rorke and Jonathan Lee. September 2020. Available at: http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5265_file1_roma-rights-in-the-time-of-covid-.pdf.

7 Amalipe Centre, *Ромите в България и COVID 19*, 4 May 2020. Available at: <https://amalipe.site/newsite/romite-v-bulgaria-i-covid-19/>.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMANI WOMEN

SEGREGATED MATERNITY WARDS

A significant proportion of Romani women are left out of the health care system in Bulgaria. Reports from several sources found that Romani women were placed in ethnically segregated maternity wards in certain public hospitals; the sanitary and material conditions in these wards were said to be inferior, and, according to the reports, the medical staff of these hospitals paid less professional attention to the Romani women and newborns. The ERRC, together with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), commissioned and conducted research into segregated maternity wards in hospitals throughout Bulgaria in 2020.⁸

This research exposed the severity and the widespread nature of systemic discriminatory practices faced by Romani women who attempt to access to sexual and reproductive health care services. Romani women recounted instances where they were physically abused by medical staff, relegated to substandard rooms with poor or none of the necessary equipment, and subjected to neglect, under-treatment, or mistreatment, and often a combination of the three.

The discrimination is particularly severe in relation to racially segregated maternity wards, inferior and abusive treatment of Romani women in maternity care, and disparate impact of lack of health insurance on Romani women with regards to access to their reproductive health. These discriminatory policies and practices undermine the protection of reproductive health of Romani women in Bulgaria.

In the public hospital of Sliven, Romani women were often placed into so-called “isolator” rooms. According to an investigative report, connected to the topic of the BHC’s fact finding, these rooms would be for women with registered or suspected infectious diseases, or poor hygiene, to keep them under quarantine, and, as an employee of the hospital explained the situation, disproportionately more Romani women are placed in these rooms because “they often do not have health insurance and have not, therefore, undergone essential medical examinations during pregnancy that would identify whether they were carriers of infectious diseases”. This explanation, i.e. the lack of health insurance as a basis for segregation, was given by the hospital staff to one of the interviewees as well, who gave birth in this hospital. Another interviewee was told in the Varna hospital that Roma are ethnically segregated because “you have lice and you steal”.

According to the interviewees who gave birth in Pazardzhik, the “Roma rooms” were much dirtier than the “Bulgarian rooms”: the floor was “filthy” and the tiles were very dirty as these rooms were cleaned with less frequency by the cleaning service of the hospital. Regarding this hospital, an interviewee claimed that she and the other women in the room had been told by the hospital staff to “Clean the room by yourselves! You are not children!”

Several interviewees claimed that they had signed documents in the hospital without understanding the content of those documents. According to the accounts of most of the interviewees, it was their general experience in the hospital that they were not provided with adequate and sufficient information by doctors or nurses about their (and their babies’) health conditions, or about the (planned) medical procedures. An interviewee, who gave birth in Pazardzhik, was not informed about the health complications of her new-born for two days after delivery. She was then sent home without her baby and without any information about the condition of the baby, because the medical personnel “did not have time” to brief her. (She learned of it six days later, when she was called by the hospital to collect her baby).

⁸ ERRC *Cause of Action Report: Reproductive Rights of Romani Women in Bulgaria*, April 2020. Available at: http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5229_file1_reproductive-rights-of-romani-women-in-bulgaria.pdf.

HATE SPEECH BY LEADING POLITICIANS

In 2017, Premier Bojko Borissov appointed Patriotic Front henchman, Valeri Simeonov, to lead the national body on ethnic integration issues, prompting protests from human rights groups against a “pronounced supporter of fascist and neo-Nazi ideology.” Simeonov, who speculated about creating ‘modern concentration camps’, infamously described Roma as “*brazen, feral, human-like creatures*” and Romani women as having “*the instincts of stray bitches*.” Simeonov’s subsequent conviction for hate speech was later overturned on appeal in January 2019.⁹

In January 2019, in the aftermath of a conflict between Roma and non-Roma individuals in Vojvodinovo, and the ensuing evictions and anti-Roma protests, the Deputy Prime Minister, Krasimir Karakachanov (United Patriots) further incited the anti-Roma protestors in a statement to the press, saying:

*“Gypsies in Bulgaria have become exceptionally insolent. Several days ago, they beat policemen. Two days ago, they beat a soldier. This cannot continue. The tolerance of Bulgarian society has run out. [...] The truth is that we need to undertake a complete program for a solution to the Gypsy problem.”*¹⁰

In an overt call for collective punishment of an entire Romani community for the actions of two individuals, he called on local authorities to deal with the matter, demanding the removal of so-called “illegal homes” in the Romani neighbourhood in the village. **Five homes were demolished** almost immediately, just three days after the incident, on the purported basis that they were found unsuitable for habitation. The following day, ten more homes were destroyed.

On 6 February 2019, Deputy Prime Minister Krassimir Karakachanov introduced his ‘*Concept for the Integration of the Unsocialised Gypsy (Roma) Ethnicity*’, which argued against continued tolerance towards “*unlawful actions by individuals from the gypsy (Roma) population*”. Karakachanov alleged that this ‘tolerance’, combined with inaction by the state and local authorities, has created “*a sense of impunity within a significant part of the gypsy (Roma) population*”.

VMRO’s plans called for halting welfare payments if Roma refuse to work or send their children to school, or if they “*demonstrate an expensive lifestyle incongruous with their socially disadvantaged status*.” Among the proposals were demolitions of all homes without proper documentation, the elimination of ‘lone mother’ status for Romani women, and genocide-adjacent measures such as “limiting births” of Romani mothers, including free abortions to Romani mothers with more than three children.¹¹

The Concept also proposed a crackdown on so-called ‘Roma crime’ in ghettos, with a specific focus on “*ring leaders, phone scammers, prostitutes and beggars*”.¹² Ultimately, Karakachanov’s concept did not get through the legislature, and his VMRO party fell from power after dismal performances in the series of elections in 2021, failing even to cross the threshold to enter parliament.

In April 2019, in the run-up to the European elections, Romani communities again became the target of violent attacks after a video showing a conflict between Roma and “ethnic Bulgarians” went viral online. The video was widely spread through Bulgarian mass media and became the pretext for demonstrations which gathered more than 1500 individuals in Gabrovo (where according to the most recent national census only 343 Roma live). As a result of the week-long protests, several Romani houses were destroyed or damaged by protesters who were heard **shouting** “Death to the Gypsies!”¹³

Some sense of the gravity of the situation can be garnered from the report on the **November 2019** country visit by Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović:

⁹ *Sofia Globe*, ‘Bulgaria supreme court acquits Valeri Simeonov on anti-Roma hate speech charge,’ 18 January 2019. Available at: <https://sofiaglobe.com/2019/01/18/bulgaria-supreme-court-acquits-valeri-simeonov-on-anti-roma-hate-speech-charge/>.

¹⁰ *ERRC News*, Calls for Bulgarian Minister Karakachanov to Resign Grow Louder. 17 January 2019. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/news/calls-for-bulgarian-minister-karakachanov-to-resign-grow-louder>.

¹¹ *ERRC Factsheet*, *Mob Justice: Collective Punishment against Roma in Europe*. March 2019. Available at: http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5136_file1_mob-justice-collective-punishment-against-roma-in-europe-march-2019.pdf.

¹² *BIRN Sofia*, ‘Bulgarian Nationalists’ Roma ‘Integration’ Plan Dismays Rights Advocates’, *Balkan Insight*, 8 February 2019. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/08/bulgarian-nationalists-issue-controversial-romaintegration-plan-02-07-2019/>.

¹³ *ERRC News*, Bulgarian Government set for Sweeping Victory in EU Elections after Anti-Roma Violence. 16 April 2019. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/news/bulgarian-government-set-for-sweeping-victory-in-eu-elections-after-anti-roma-violence>.

“The Commissioner deplores the climate of hostility against Roma, in particular against those who had to leave their homes following rallies targeting their communities in several localities. She calls upon the authorities to urgently address the situation of the persons affected and to act swiftly to strengthen the legal safeguards accompanying evictions. Resolute measures should also be taken to improve the general housing situation of Roma, including their access to social housing.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, Report on the visit to Bulgaria 25-29 November 2019. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-bulgaria-from-25-to-29-november-2019-by-dunja-m/16809cde16>.

HATE SPEECH AND COVID-19

From the very outset of the COVID-19 state of emergency leading Bulgarian politicians, particularly those belonging to the far-right VMRO party which was a governing coalition partner, without a shred of evidence singled out Romani neighbourhoods as ‘nests of contagion to be quarantined’. While general restrictions on movement were introduced and widely perceived as a necessary response to contain the spread of the virus, the quarantine, curfew, and blockading of Romani neighbourhoods marked an ‘ethnicization of the pandemic’: the measures were deemed to be disproportionate, unrelated to actual infection rates, and later acknowledged to have been largely ineffective. Below is a selection of incidents which provoked international criticism:

- **13 March 2020:** On the same day the National Assembly voted to declare a state of emergency, Interior Minister Mladen Marinov told parliament that Romani ghettos will be quarantined if necessary, should people ‘lack self-awareness’; and that the Ministry will exercise its powers “to ensure compliance with quarantine”.
- **18 March 2020:** MEP Angel Dzhambazki, leader of the far-right political party VMRO (coalition partner of the current Bulgarian government), called for the closure of Romani ghettos everywhere: “Think about whether or not the ghettos will turn out to be the real nests of infection. Hundreds of people live there in poor living conditions, without the opportunity to observe even basic hygiene standards, let alone the high ones due to the pandemic”.
- **19 March 2020:** The Sofia District Prosecutor’s Office (SRS) sent instructions to Sofia mayors and the SDVR to mount checkpoints “in neighbourhoods of Sofia populated by people of different ethnicities, clearly demonstrating their unwillingness to comply with the restrictions.”
- **14 May 2020:** The over-securitized and ethnic-specific approach was harshest in Yambol, which was fully quarantined and blockaded for 14 days. On the morning of the 14th May, a helicopter sprayed nearly 3,000 litres of detergent to ‘disinfect’ the Romani neighbourhood.

In a statement, issued on the **13 May 2020**, two UN Special Rapporteurs on racism and minority issues expressed deep concern “*at the discriminatory limitations imposed on Roma on an ethnic basis that are overtly supported by Bulgarian State officials as part of the broader measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.*”

They also condemned hate speech from high-level government officials and called on the authorities not to exploit the pandemic “*to further exclude Roma and portray them as criminals and contagious.*” The UN experts urged the Bulgarian Government to condemn hate speech, racist and nationalist populism swiftly and unequivocally.¹⁵

However, international concerns had little impact on the Bulgarian authorities. **On 10 August 2020, in Stara Zagora**, 100 houses were targeted for demolition. The plight of families rendered homeless at the height of the pandemic, cut no ice with Mayor Zhivko Todorov, who declared that his vision of Stara Zagora “does not include a Gypsy ghetto”.¹⁶

¹⁵ UNHR Office of the Commissioner, *Bulgaria / COVID-19 response: “Stop hate speech and racial discrimination against the Roma minority”* – UN experts. 13 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/FR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25881&LangID=E>.

¹⁶ *ERRC News*, Despair in Stara Zagora as Roma Family Homes are Demolished. 10 August 2020. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/news/despair-in-stara-zagora-as-roma-family-homes-are-demolished>.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND POLICE VIOLENCE

According to research cited in the 2020 report, *Guilty by Default*, Roma in Bulgaria were twice as likely to be the victims of physical police violence than non-Roma, and those who self-identified as Roma accounted for more than 50% of new prisoners, as well as more than 50% of those serving prison sentences, despite making up only 10% of the population. Findings showed that one third of the respondents (34%) reported physical mistreatment, either during apprehension or during detention at police stations. The survey also showed that that minors are particularly affected by police mistreatment; 66.6% of all minors interviewed reported physical violence during apprehension. The share of Romani people (28.3%) who reported being victims of physical force at the hands of the police in 2016, was double the reported share of ethnic Bulgarians (14.5%).¹⁷

The evidence suggests that Roma are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system in terms of being ethnically profiled, detained, and imprisoned, and all the available research would suggest that Roma are disproportionately at the receiving end of torture and ill-treatment during arrest and detention, and thus more likely to become victims of a virtually unchecked culture of violence within Bulgarian law enforcement.

In its 2020 annual review of human rights, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee described the year as another marked by police arbitrariness and violence that was inadequately investigated and the perpetrators not brought to justice.¹⁸ In connection with systematic failures to implement ECtHR judgments related to police violence, noting that there had been no progress with introducing the crime of torture in criminal law, and no effective investigations concerning “*deaths, ill-treatment including torture or lack of timely medical assistance during arrest, in police detention or in penitentiary facilities*”, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted an interim resolution on the *Velikova* group against Bulgaria, as a final measure in response to the state’s systematic refusal to comply with a number of ECtHR judgments.

The Committee of Ministers invited the Bulgarian authorities to make a number of urgent reforms which included: strengthen free legal assistance, to ensure that a lawyer is available to assist every person in police detention who requests it; and to introduce systematic video recording of the interrogations of suspects; entrust the preliminary inquiries and investigations of allegations of ill-treatment to prosecutors and investigating magistrates who do not have working relationships with the law enforcement agents whose actions have been challenged; amend the law so that it provides for the suspension of police officers officially accused in criminal proceedings of ill-treatment.¹⁹

As the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee noted, none of the recommended measures had been put into law or practice by the end of 2020; and in the course of the year, the ECtHR handed down eleven judgments against Bulgaria under Article 2 (right to life) and Article 3 (prohibition of torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, or punishment) of the Convention.

As mentioned above, hundreds of Romani people, including children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, were evicted from their homes following a series of racist attacks in different parts of the country in 2019. Expulsions of Romani people which occurred in the village of Voyvodinovo – described by the Helsinki Committee as the largest case of organised ethnic cleansing in recent years – and the town of Gabrovo, were accompanied by property damage, arson, threats of violence and actual violence by state parties. Not only did police officers fail to protect Romani families from harm and their houses and property from destruction, but they also engaged in acts of collective punishment:

“On April 28, after an argument with a Bulgarian family, a large group of Roma were detained in the village of Kuklen and subsequently brutally beaten at a police station in Plovdiv. According to the testimonies of the victims and witnesses, they were threatened with execution and beaten with fists and bats during their arrest and on their way to the police station.”

17 Dilyana Angelova and Slavka Kukova, *Guilty by Default: Discrimination against Roma in the Criminal Justice System in Bulgaria*, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Sofia, 2020, p. 33. Available at: <https://www.bghelsinki.org/web/files/reports/138/files/2020-angelova-kukova-guilty-by-default-discrimination-against-roma-in-the-criminal-justicesystem-in-bulgaria-EN.pdf>.

18 Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2020 (Summary)*, Sofia, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bghelsinki.org/web/files/reports/155/files/BHC-Human-Rights-in-Bulgaria-in-2020-en.pdf>.

19 Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, ‘Interim Resolution CM/ResDH(2020)198, Execution of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights Velikova group against Bulgaria (*Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 1 October 2020 at the 1383rd meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies*)’, 1 October 2020. Available at: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016809fc599.

*Immediately after being taken inside the detention facility they were handcuffed, beaten with batons, and insulted with racist insults. Some were forced to drink water from the floor with their hands tied. By the end of the year, no charges had been filed against the law enforcement officers who had exercised the violence.*²⁰

The Helsinki Committee also noted that the Prosecutor General who busied himself by “*systematically undermining the prestige of the judiciary*” in 2020, launched a crackdown against so-called “domestic crime”, with checks of “*criminally active individuals*” – two terms that were not part of the current legislative framework. Numerous high-profile, highly-publicised actions were carried out in cooperation between the Prosecutor’s Office and the Interior Ministry, targeting predominantly Romani neighbourhoods.²¹

Karakachanov’s ‘*Concept for the Integration of the Unsocialised Gypsy (Roma) Ethnicity*’, also warned of concerning trends, including an increase in the number of ‘Islamicised gypsies’, which combined with rising crime creates a real danger of radicalisation among individuals from the marginalised groups, which “*in turn, can result in clear risks for the national security.*” While the ‘concept’ never got through Parliament, the notion of Roma as a radicalised community and a security threat, surfaced as a lavishly-funded EU project for training police officers.

In **October 2020**, anti-racist MEPs in Brussels protested against the use of EU funds to train Bulgarian police officers in radicalisation awareness targeting Romani neighbourhoods and called for an investigation by the Commission and a halt to EU funding for the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior until it adopts policies and practice that are proactively anti-racist. In a letter to European Commission President von der Leyen, the MPs who head the European Parliament’s Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI) stated that “*Roma are not extremists or terrorists. Roma are the largest and the most discriminated against ethnic group in the EU and we need their rights to be respected*”.

The issue was first raised by the Citizens for Democracy and the Rule of Law Coalition, which demanded an explanation as to how, under the remit of the ‘Good Governance’ Operational Programme, €1.7 million from the European Social Fund (ESF) used was to train 480 police officers to detect the alleged ‘radicalisation’ of Romani people in Bulgaria. The coalition condemned the project for reinforcing anti-Roma racism and creating a new dangerous stereotype of Roma as posing a threat to the national security of Bulgaria.²²

20 Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2020 (Summary)*, Sofia, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bghelsinki.org/web/files/reports/155/files/BHC-Human-Rights-in-Bulgaria-in-2020-en.pdf>.

21 *Ibid.*

22 ERRC News, *Racism in Bulgaria: MEPs call for EU funding to be blocked following Interior Ministry’s ‘Roma radicalization’ police training*, 14 October 2020. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/news/racism-in-bulgaria-meps-call-for-eufunding-to-be-blocked-following-interior-ministris-roma-radicalization-police-training>.