# CARE for TRUTH -

# AGAINST FAKE NEWS AND ANTI-ROMA DISINFORMATION

This book is co-funded by Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) of the European Union

This publication has been developed for the purposes of the Care for Truth project Challenging Anti-Gypsyism by Roma Empowerment for Counteracting Disinformation and Fake News in Bulgaria (REC-RDIS-DISC-AG-2019-881923) under the coordination of C.E.G.A. Foundation in partnership with the Center for the Study of Democracy, the Roma-Lom Foundation, and the Applied Research and Communications Fund.

The book is a product of the joint efforts of a team of experts from the four partner organizations with contributions as authors and co-authors.

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Sofia, 2022

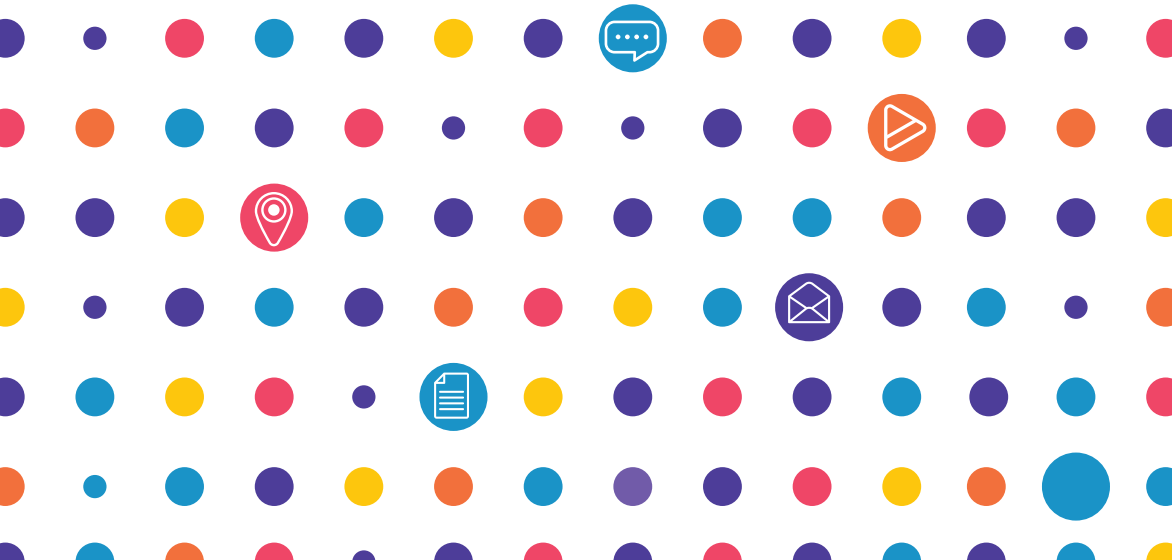
Design and layout: Rositsa Kalamova

**ISBN: 978-954-9630-68-8**

Publication under CARE for TRUTH Project - Challenging Anti-Gypsyism by Roma Empowerment for Counteracting Disinformation and Fake News in Bulgaria **(REC-RDIS-DISC-AG-2019-881923)**

This book is co-funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020). The content of this publication represents the views of the authors only and is theirs sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains

# CARE FOR TRUTH – AGAINST FAKE NEWS AND ANTI-ROMA DISINFORMATION



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The book is a product of the joint efforts of a team of experts from the four partner organizations with contributions as authors and co-authors:

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# CARE FOR TRUTH - PROJECT AND MISSION

This publication was developed within the project CARE for TRUTH – “Challenging Anti-Gypsyism by Roma Empowerment for Counteracting Disinformation and Fake News in Bulgaria”, co-financed by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program (2014-2020) of the European Union and realized in partnership by the C.E.G.A. - Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives Foundation (lead partner), Applied Research and Communications Fund Roma-Lom Foundation and the Center for the Study of Democracy.

## The „Care For Truth“ Project

The CARE for TRUTH project focuses on one of the most obvious and unsympathetic manifestations of anti-Roma attitudes and trends in Bulgarian society – the media discourses that rely on disinformation and fake news in presenting Roma communities and covering events, related to them. The project supports the public opposition to the growing waves of anti-gypsyism in Bulgaria by involving the Roma themselves in this process.

The idea for the Care for Truth project was not conceived and invented in the office of one of the partner civil society organizations for the purpose of participation in the competition under the EU program. It was “imposed on us” by the actual situation in which the Bulgarian society finds itself, divided on various grounds through targeted actions by political formations and well-organized groups. The new technologies - electronic media and social networks, are very successful in supporting this process, as they have developed rapidly in recent years, finding people unprepared to handle them wisely.

The participation of the nationalist parties in the government of Bulgaria served as a catalyst for ethnic tensions, especially with regard to Roma communities. Disinformation and fake news have taken over most of the information on social media. The Roma were again the most affected - apart from the fact that a large portion of the fake news was directed against them, they found it more difficult to filter them and uncritically accepted them as the truth at first instance. It was necessary to take steps to change the existing situation, to work actively against hate speech and fake news leading to anti-Roma sentiments. In order to have a long-lasting effect, the agents of this change had to be the Roma themselves and the people who work with them and are close to them, such as the teachers.

## What We Achieved

In order to achieve these goals, it was necessary for the project partners

to develop the relevant resources, each one of them according to their expertise and experience gained.

- **The Center for the Study of Democracy**, with experience in research, has developed a qualitative survey analysing the perceptions of the representatives of the Roma communities about the impact of the hostile media and online environment on their lives. Along with the review of the literature and the study of the main channels, approaches and narratives, through which anti-Roma speech is manifested in Bulgarian media, focus groups were held with representatives of Roma communities in Bulgaria, which studied the impact of fake news and disinformation on Roma and how this affects their attitudes towards self-segregation and integration. The Roma-Lom Foundation provided great assistance in the implementation of qualitative focus group survey during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **C.E.G.A. Foundation** with the help of the Roma-Lom Foundation, which has been working for decades for the development of Roma communities, composed a report "Facts and arguments - in response to the most common myths about the Roma." It has been developed on the basis of research and statistics. It contributed for achieving the project objectives by providing topics for reflection and provoking people's thinking about behavioral change and how to respond to disinformation stemming from myths.
- **Applied Research and Communications Fund** is the coordinator of the National Safer Internet Center and has accumulated serious experience in training young people and teachers in this field. The team of the ARC Fund developed toolkits that were used in the training of Roma activists, Roma mediators and teachers, and were subsequently provided for use in their follow-up activities - working inside Roma communities and in the schools with students and their parents.
- **The Roma-Lom Foundation team** provided active support during the trainings and fully coordinated and supported the outreach activities of the trained Roma activists in their meetings within the local communities they live in. In spite of the complex Covid situation, the experts managed to organize local activists to participate in the trainings and subsequent outreach actions.

Using the developed approaches and resources within the project, digital and media literacy of key actors from the Roma communities (activists and mediators) was built up, through which they could detect and counteract the anti-Roma disinformation and fake news. They, on the other hand, passed on what they had learnt to the more aware people in the Roma neighborhoods, who in turn, explained to others how to discern fake news and disinformation. Teachers, after going through the relevant trainings, taught their students how to recognize

and detect fake news, how to point it out to others, thus reducing ethnic tensions and the formation of negative prejudices against Roma communities. Their goal is to also teach them how to protect themselves from the dangers of the Internet. At the same time, strategic measures against anti-Roma disinformation and fake news have been proposed and the foundations have been laid to overcome the absence of Roma representatives in public debates on the subject.

## About The Book

In this book, we have tried to compact the bulk of what has been done under the Care for Truth project. The resource materials developed would be useful to all those who directly or indirectly deal with the topics of anti-Roma disinformation, fake news, safer internet. An abbreviated format of the three handbooks for detecting and counteracting fake news and media manipulation, developed by the Applied Research and Communication Fund, is included - a basic version for a wider audience, another one for Roma leaders, activists and health mediators, and one more handbook, designed for teachers, which includes a methodology for developing critical thinking and tolerance in students, as well as sample lessons that can be applied in class. The analyses, methodologies and resources published will help Roma activists in their specific work with the communities in dispelling rumors and false statements, often leading to additional auto-segregation.

# RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY IN ROMA COMMUNITIES – FINAL REPORT

As a first step in the project's efforts to identify the actual needs of Roma communities, a qualitative study was conducted. The study was aimed at better understanding the hostile relationship between the media and Roma communities in Bulgaria by identifying its most prominent manifestations. The included text is an edited version of a more detailed report from the qualitative study and it describes the main channels, approaches and traits of anti-Roma narratives, myths and images in Bulgarian media. The study is based on qualitative data, gathered in two stages. **The first stage** includes desk research, which identified the most important online media channels for dissemination and popularization of anti- Roma hostilities and narratives.

**The second phase** of the study consists of focus group discussions with representatives of the Roma communities and aims at identifying the influence of anti-Roma media and online narratives and messages on the Roma communities themselves. 11 focus groups were conducted in July and August of 2020 with Roma people from 10 different Bulgarian locations. The focus group participants included activists, Roma mediators, Roma leaders, Roma youths, pupils and tutors from mixed and segregated schools. The focus groups were conducted with respondents from Lom, Montana, Septemvriitsi, Novi Pazar, Plovdiv, Sliven, Yambol, Vidin, Sofia, and Razlog. The participants had different profiles, reflecting the diversity of the Roma communities in terms of origin, social status, ethno-cultural and religious affiliation, levels of obtained education, gender, age, self-identification, language, income and different levels of inclusion into the micro- and macroeconomic processes in Bulgaria. The following **analysis answers three main questions:** What are the main characteristics of successful channels, spreading anti-Roma disinformation? How do anti-Roma narratives affect Roma communities? What is the relationship between anti-Roma disinformation and the attitudes of Roma people toward integration and autosegregation?

# CONTEXT

The issue of discrimination of the Roma minority in Bulgaria has been consistently brought to the forefront of political debate. Roma people have persistently been subjected to exclusion and acts of violence, motivated by ethnic hate (Council of Europe, 2020:11). The racist public and political discourses in Bulgaria have persistently been criticised by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and identified as one of the main drivers of persisting anti-Roma and racist attitudes in the country (Council of Europe, 2014:15-16). Most recently, the report of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe from her visit to Bulgaria in November 2019 attested to the seriousness of persisting racism and discrimination against minority groups in Bulgaria, manifested through hate crimes and the prevalence of hate speech, especially against the Roma community (Council of Europe, 2020:4). Research, previously conducted by the CSD and ARC Fund[1] has indicated that not only hate speech and hostility against Roma people is the most popular and commonly accepted form of exclusion from public and civil life, but it also causes the most active engagement from social media users.

Hate speech has been encountered in mainstream media channels and on social media (Daskalova, 2015:2). It has been normalised through its frequent use by social media users, political commentators, experts, and even renowned and "impartial" journalists (Daskalova, 2015:2). News discourses in traditional print and TV media have perpetuated the trend of structural exclusion of the Roma minority in Bulgaria (Bahar, 2018). The media focus in printed periodicals has developed the image of Bulgarian Roma around the notion of "otherness", which relies on the myths of Roma criminality, inherent nature of Roma people, the assertion that Roma people drain the national and EU resources, and of the evil satanisation of particular members of the Roma minority (Indzhov, 2012:25-30). Roma people remain the most negatively represented minority group in Bulgaria (Spasov, 2017:13).

Those identified negative media tendencies in the portrayal of the Roma minority in Bulgaria and their uncovered correlation with the discriminatory attitudes and practices are coupled with extremely low levels of discrimination complaints by Bulgarian Roma people[2] (EU-

1. These conclusions are outlined in an unpublished report, written by the CSD. The report has been developed for the purposes of the YouthRightOn project, funded by the European Commission's Internal Security Fund of Directorate-General Migration and home affairs. The report is based upon the findings of a mixed method study of Bulgarian youths' attitudes and media consumption habits in relation to trends of radicalisation. These conclusions draw upon data, gathered through desk research, a quantitative study (employing a detailed questionnaire) and a qualitative study (employing focus groups).
2. Bulgarian Roma attest for the lowest number of experienced discrimination rated "based on ethnic origin" among EU countries with only 19%. In comparison, the highest established rates were in Portugal (61%), Greece (41%), and Croatia (42%).

MIDIS II:29). Roma people in Bulgaria appear far less likely to either report cases of experienced discrimination, or identify certain behaviours as discriminatory towards them (EU-MIDIS II:49). This tendency could stem from Roma people's established belief that "nothing would happen or change as a result of reporting a discrimination incident[3]", which indicates a systemic level of mistrust in the social cohesion and in governmental authorities and institutions. Furthermore, this factor could indicate that Roma people need to be further educated within their communities on how to identify and tackle discriminatory and hostile media against ethnic minorities. The CARE FOR TRUTH project tackles this particular objective through training and educating key change players, activists, educators and advocates from the Roma communities. The aspirations for a multiplier effect of spreading awareness and Roma empowerment is foundational to the broader structural process of tackling discrimination and anti-Roma attitudes and rhetoric.

## Definitions And Concepts

The study analyses the main components and specificities of media-disseminated anti-Roma hostility in Bulgaria. The topic is approached through the framework of structural antigypsyism, which consists not solely of individual acts of prejudice, but also includes institutionalised and/or covertly internalised beliefs of Roma people's inferiority to ethnic Bulgarians. This report adopts five key definitions and concepts: *antigypsyism, media hostility, hate speech, fake news, and disinformation*.

**Antigypsyism.** This report adopts the working definition of antigypsyism, developed by the Alliance against antigypsyism, which defines the concept as "a historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism against social groups, identified under the stigma "gypsy" or other related terms, and incorporates 1) a homogenizing and essentializing perception and description of these groups; 2) The attribution of specific characteristics to them and 3) discriminating social constructs and violent practices that emerge against that background, which have a degrading and ostracizing effect, and which reproduce structural disadvantages" (Bulgarian Alliance Against Antigypsyism, 2017:5).

Thus, manifestations of antigypsyism include, but are not limited to, hate crimes, ethnically based violence, hate speech, as well as more covert casual practices of using derogatory terms, offensive language and stigmatising practices. Antigypsyism is not solely a personal prejudice. It is systemic interdependence of institutional exclusion and

3. 66% of Bulgarian Roma refer to this argument in justification of not reporting an incident of discrimination while applying for a job (EU-MIDIS II:49).

the practices, which legitimise and normalise it in the everyday life and perceptions of society.

**Media hostility.** This study defines media hostility as a manifestation of negative narratives, based upon hostile myths and images of Roma people, including manifestations of prejudice (Tolsma, 2009:148). Media hostility is one of the observable manifestations of antigypsyism, as it perpetuates ethnic hostilities, through the normalisation of ethnic exclusion, discrimination and prejudice by narrating the finer (and rougher) inter-group distinctions between the majority and the minority into reality. Hostile media narratives reaffirm hostile everyday attitudes and bind them to an overarching ideology of ethnic distinction. Media hostility utilises the classic "us vs them" narrative of the relationship between the Roma minority and the majority of ethnic Bulgarians, where both juxtapositions are painted in extremes – one is entirely good and righteous and the other – entirely bad and evil.

The manifestations of media hostility against Roma people include publicly disseminated hate speech and fake news targeting the Roma minority and leading to general disinformation among both the majority and among the minority group and includes degrading, ridiculing, and offensive language, which might be normalised to serve the purpose of perpetuating ethnic distinctions and intolerance.

**Hate speech.** The most common definition of hate speech, which has been employed in analysing this phenomenon in practice, comes from the Council of Europe and defines the notion as „all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed through aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin" (Council of Europe, 1997: Rec. No. R 97).

In defining hate speech and identifying its manifestations, we need to also account for the contextual specificities of this phenomenon across EU states. This study considers anti-Roma hostility as a specific manifestation of hate speech, which pertains to the everyday normalisation and spread of antigypsyism.

**Fake news and disinformation.** For the purposes of this study, fake news is defined through the prism of disinformation. It consists, therefore, of any misleading information, inciting and drawing upon existing social and political prejudices, such as the institutional spread and legitimation of antigypsyism, which has been publicly disseminated.

Manifestations of fake news, defined along those lines, would include any false information, which has been disseminated by media outlets (regardless of whether the intent of the article was to cause disinformation, or if it was a result of journalistic negligence) and any

false information, which has intentionally or just carelessly been shared or created by social media groups and users.

Hate speech, fake news, and disinformation are analysed by this report as a constituting element of anti-Roma media hostility and the following sections delve deeper into this process' specificities, manifestations and channels for dissemination.

**The following report** contributes to this goal by analysing Roma people's perceptions of the media and online environment's influence over their experiences of living in Bulgaria, providing a literature review outlines the main concepts and definitions, a discussion of results from a desk research, and a data analysis through focus groups with representatives of the Bulgarian Roma communities.

# DESK RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following part of this report discusses the main findings of a conducted desk research on the topic of anti-Roma media hostility. The desk research includes two main components. Firstly, an observational study of the most prominent channels and approaches for spread of anti-Roma disinformation and fake news was conducted. Secondly, a discourse analysis of media materials and online content outlines the most popular anti-Roma public narratives in Bulgaria.

## OBSERVATIONAL STUDY OF ONLINE CHANNELS FOR DISSEMINATION OF ANTI-ROMA MEDIA AND ONLINE HOSTILITY

The observed channels for online dissemination of anti-Roma hostility include Facebook, Blitz.bg, 24chasa.bg, NovaTV, plovdiv24.bg, rodopi24.com, and zapernik.com.

### blitz.bg

Blitz.bg is selected for an object of observation, due to the website's uncontested dominance in the News and Media category of popular websites. It is the only news website, appearing in the top 10 of most visited websites in Bulgaria. Blitz.bg is also representative of a news website with a bad reputation, as it is infamous for its misrepresentation and misinformation practices (Spassov, 2017). As a news website with information-based content, the units of analysis, uncovered in Blitz.bg are news articles in written format, as well as the accompanying images, which visualise the narratives.

### 24chasa.bg

24chasa.bg is the first "highly reputable" media outlet, which appears in the ranking of popular websites. It is the online platform of one of the biggest informational periodicals in Bulgaria and has been selected for the observational study as representative of "serious" journalism and reporting. The examined units are news articles in text and images.

### „Lords Of The Air"

The Nova TV show "Gospodari na Efira" has been selected for an object of

the observation as a representation of the most popular satire content in Bulgaria. The Roma-related narratives, employed in the show, have been accessed through archived videos, still available on YouTube. Analysing the content of "Gospodari na Efira" videos on YouTube allows the study to incorporate an intersection of two very popular online media channels – Nova TV (whose online streaming platform ranks the highest among national TV networks, according to Similarweb) and YouTube (which is the second most utilised peer-to-peer online platform in Bulgaria). Analysing YouTube videos also allows the study to include a variety of formats in the online media observation, thus assessing text, images and video. It further improves the representation of communication formats, which now include informative content (news) and leisure content (satire shows and memes).

## plovdiv24.bg, rodopi24.com and zapernik.com

These websites emerged as particularly active and "aggressive" disseminators of anti-Roma hostility online, during our observation of Facebook activity. They have been included in the observational study as representative of regional media and news online platforms, which demonstrate outstanding levels of anti-Roma hostilities.

## Facebook

**Radical Facebook groups and forums as drivers of antigypsyism.** The most popular unifying discourse of anti-Roma groups of people revolves around "liberalism" and its threat to the nation state.[4] YouthRightOn established a strong correlation between the passive exposure to far-right narratives online and young people's readiness to become involved in anti-Roma activities in real life.[5]

**Political Party Facebook platforms, spreading hostile narratives.** Political actors use their platforms to easily access like-minded audiences. Most of them are also politically represented (members of Parliament, Ministers or local government officials), and their opinions and statements are often covered by traditional and online media channels. According to a survey (Alpha research, 2020:3), in December 2019 and January 2020, 21.6% of Bulgarians openly declared to hate Roma people. It illustrates that the manifestation of anti-Roma hostility is more concealed, institutional, and achieved through systemised manners, rather than through personal explicit hate and prejudice.

4. As established by the study, conducted by the CSD and ARC Fund for the purposes of the YouthRightOn project.
5. Such as participation in an anti-Roma protest and in a youth anti-Roma/anti-migrant vigilante initiative, where activism readiness was measured on a scale 1-3 depending on whether active or passive.

Anti-Roma hostility is the most popular discriminatory attitude among Bulgarian youth and social media consumers.[6]

**Entertainment-related Facebook groups and forums as 'normalisers' of anti-Roma hostility.** There is an overwhelming number of Facebook pages mocking the "Gypsy-ness"[7] of Bulgarian Roma. Their role is mainly in the covert manifestations of antigypsyism in media and online. Thus, they serve as normalisers of anti-Roma hostility, by injecting those attitudes in "normal" communication spaces.

Five Facebook groups stand out as especially popular disseminators of stigmatizing content, presented for the purposes of entertainment and fun for outside onlookers: Laughs, Jokes and Anecdotes „Смях, шеги и вицове" with 156 065 followers), Laugh to tears („Смях до сълзи" with 40 503 пfollowers), Laughs.bg („смях.бг" with 35 001 followers), The Gypsy Idiocy („Простотията Циганска" with 15 422 followers), and Laugh to the Break Point Club („Клуб смях до скъсване" with 133 followers). It is important to note, that out of the five Facebook groups, only one is openly declared as aimed against the Roma people – "The Gypsy Idiocy". A common place for all of the mentioned Facebook groups is the use of a "borrowed content" – videos and jokes, created and gathered from other sources (mostly mass media), but further shared and exchanged among the group members. Therefore, the role of these Facebook pages is not to create original content, rather they are utilized mostly to create connections and foster communities. These Facebook groups unite the community of social media users of this particular content, thus excluding the dreators of the jokes, as well as the objects of the jokes.

The most popular source of "funny videos" ridiculing the Roma community and its members are the compilation videos, produced by the popular TV show Gospodari na Efira" (Господари на ефира) and then reposted by Facebook users and groups (see for example a Facebook post by Laughs.bg from 08.04.2014. (Smyah.bg, 2014), or the shared publication of Dupe TV in "The Roma Idiocy" Facebook group on the 21.04.2020 (Dupe TV, 2020)). The TV show has been off the air since 2019. However, the content produced throughout its decade-long history on TV is still popular on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. This content is regularly reposted and shared through Facebook users, who elongate their public life and presence. The narratives employed by both the leisure content providing Facebook pages and the YouTube videos of Gospodari na Efira compilations centre on established and

6. As established by the study, conducted by the CSD and ARC Fund for the purposes of the YouthRightOn project.

7. Here and in any future references the term "Gypsy-ness" is used to indicate the generalised perception of the "typically Roma" behaviours and traits. "Gypsy-ness" is approached through its ideologised meaning, which has been created and supported by public narratives and attitudes. With the term "gypsy-ness" we mark the stereotypical perceptions against the Roma community, rather than the actual experiences and realities of the Roma people in Bulgaria.

popularised narratives of ridicule and dehumanisation of the Roma community and its members.

### Online Pro-Integration Activism Space

Examples of the online pro-integration activism space as a counterpoint to anti-Roma narratives are the online platforms of The Roma Standing Conference and websites like Marginalia.bg. These media outlets have been popularised and brought into public discussion by intellectuals (mostly journalists and University professors), thus attempting to establish a broader debate and to challenge the mainstream views of normalised antigypsyism (see. for example, Marginalia, 2020). Those early steps form a necessary ground for a public forum, which shifts the public opinion away from unproblematised anti-Roma attitudes and beliefs in Bulgaria. In order for those voices of pro-integration efforts to be sustained and grounded into a social climate, a media approach of acceptance and cultural tolerance needs to be fostered.

## CHANNEL SPECIFIC APPROACHES FOR SPREADING ANTI-ROMA DISINFORMATION

Mainstream media relies on fake news, disinformation and stereotypical images, as key communication forms to normalise anti-Roma hostility, using already established myths and stereotypes against Roma people to spread the message that they are not susceptible to integration into the Bulgarian society, leading to the stigmatisation of the Roma ethnic group and is subsequently easily appropriated for political and sensational purposes.

Simultaneously, they construct identifying images of Roma people and specific traits of Gypsy-ness, which permeate the public domain and the mainstream attitude toward minority groups. The specific approaches of mainstream media are: the fake news and stigmatisation, produced by online news media websites; misleading visualisations, employed by news media outlets; the falsely represented expertise in online news media; humour and sarcasm, weaponised by Facebook groups and forums; and the one-dimensional image of Roma people in the public domain as a whole.

### Online News Media Websites As Producers Of Fake News And Stigmatisation

Anti-Roma disinformation and hostility has been incorporated within traditional media narratives and storylines. Information, which fits into

a pattern of negative perception, is more likely to appear real to both journalists, who are competing for speedy updates and are therefore willing to compromise fact-checking for the benefit of sensationalism, and audiences, who are more inclined to believe (and consume) information, which fits easily into their already established worldview. Therefore, the success of fake news stories could be explained by the systemic and popular, deeply rooted hostility toward Roma people.

## News Articles' Visualisation As A Component Of Fake News And Hostile Narratives

Fake news on Roma-people is usually published by sensationalist websites and social media, which often reuse staple images of Roma people protesting, of a group of men beating up another man, or of other stereotypical scenes, which have nothing to do with the actual occurrence, which the article is reporting (see. for example, Blitz, 2020), perpetrating prejudice against Roma community (see. for example, Percheva, 2020). It also serves a more covert purpose of linking concrete Roma faces to the abstract image of criminality and moral depravity. It also serves a more covert purpose of linking concrete Roma faces to the abstract image of criminality and moral depravity.

## The Faking Of Expertise In Online Media

Publicly recognisable personalities and celebrities express their opinion on matters, regarding Roma people and receive a high level of public engagement. As celebrity faces are recognisable, audiences tend to trust their opinions. However, their higher public status creates an illusion of a more informed and valuable opinion, although they never possess expertise on integration and Roma-related topics. This effect is enhanced by the lack of actual expert opinions dealing with the topic of integration and Roma-related matters in news media websites.

## Humour As A Code Of Unity And Exclusion In Facebook Groups And Forums

The "leisure uses"[8] of Facebook, although rarely inciting direct action, influence the perception of users in implicit ways. Most importantly, the consumption of "a socially accepted" entertaining content could be defined as a mechanism for soft influence over the users' perceptions

8. By "leisure uses" we refer to the consumption of content, which is purely aimed at entertaining the online user and could be considered "light content" – one that does not incite any sort of action, does not earnestly declare itself as serving an ideological purpose, and does not declare itself as factual or informative.

and beliefs, achieved through the "normalisation" of the provided content.

Humour and sarcasm are used as tools for reaffirming the dominating narratives about Roma people's inherent cultural and moral inferiority. It plays with deeply rooted ideas and prejudice (such as Roma people's illiteracy and inability to conduct moral labour), without naming and explaining the discriminatory assumptions. These discriminatory narratives are hostile and lead to disinformation, which exaggerate and stress the inherent ethnic polarisation in the country. Although they do not directly incite violence, hatred and discrimination, these narratives are harmful and contribute to structural antigypsyism in Bulgaria. Disinformation is achieved not particularly through presenting false facts (although such might be presented) or seeking to misinform and mislead. The disinformation, which stems from narratives, which exaggerate and stress the inherent ethnic polarisation in the country, is based upon re-establishing the norms of normality and falsely portraying them as juxtaposed to everything inherently Roma. Thus, such narratives are also hostile, although not directly inciting violence, hatred and discrimination. Such narratives of ridicule are harmful and contribute to structural antigypsyism in Bulgaria.

### The Generalized Gypsy-Ness And The One-Dimensional Depiction Of Roma People In The Public Domain

The general media image of Gypsy-ness is constructed by a complex multi-layered interdependence of specific "typically Roma" images, myths and clichés. These "fit" well together into a general narrative of Roma people's inferiority to Bulgarians and their civil and moral degradation.

These descriptions (employing myths, images and clichés) serve as a justification and construct an image of Roma people as inferior. This one-dimensional image of Roma in the media allows for Roma people to be perceived as Roma first, and rarely as people.

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ANTI-ROMA NARRATIVES, MYTHS, AND IMAGES IN THE MEDIA AND ONLINE

The hostile narratives against Roma people in Bulgaria follow a steady trajectory of peaks and lows – both dependent upon one another in order to sustain and produce an overwhelming normalisation of antigypsyism and of individual prejudices.

The most prominent hostile anti-Roma public narratives in Bulgaria are

heavily employed by media and online channels in order to perpetuate the stereotypical images of Roma people. The most explicated anti-Roma narratives, which have been identified in the CARE FOR TRUTH qualitative study are: "Roma people are criminals and deserve harsh punishments", "Roma people deserve to be excluded from society, as they cannot fit into social norms of public decency", "Roma people are morally unfit to be Bulgarian citizens", "Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer", "The integration of Roma people in Bulgaria is impossible". Each one of these narratives is associated with a negative image of Roma people, which is used by the media to normalise Bulgarian hostility against ethnic minorities, sustaining anti-Roma hostile narratives both in media discourses and in the everyday perceptions of Bulgarians.

### *Narrative: Roma people are criminals and deserve harsh punishments*

This narrative is mainly based upon the portrayed inherent criminality of Roma people. Media coverage contributes to the construction of this idea, through the use of the image of Gypsy-ness as criminality and the myth of the inherent opposition between state authority and Roma people.

**The image of Gypsy-ness as criminality.** The most popular topic for media stories, relating to Roma people, is the topic of Roma criminality. Bulgarian media coverage links criminality as a trait of a "universalised" image of Gypsy-ness. The criminalisation of the image of Roma people further serves the purpose of "universalising" the inherent Gypsy-ness. The media-represented global linkage of Roma people and Gypsy-ness is also utilised for adding multiple layers of criminality to the depiction of Roma people through the demonstrated practice of its "internationalisation".

In this case, the narrative is intentionally phrased in terms of "them" vs "us" as a means to separate the Bulgarians from the compromised morality of Bulgarian Roma. Thus, Bulgarian-ness"[9] is opposed to Gypsy-ness both linguistically and representatively.

**The myth of the opposition between state authority and the Roma**. Roma people's otherness is most successfully demonstrated through oppositions. One of the most popular images of opposition, which is often ascribed to Roma people and Roma communities is the opposition between Roma and State authority.

9. Here and in any future references the term "Bulgarian-ness" is used to indicate the ideologized patriarchal and traditional concept of how to properly experience the Bulgarian ethnic identity. With the term "Bulgarian-ness" we mark the publicly disseminated ideas of what constitutes "traditional Bulgarian ethnic values", rather than defendable actual experiences and realities of the ethnic Bulgarians.

### *Narrative: Roma people deserve to be excluded from society, as they cannot fit into social norms of public decency*

The narrative of impossible Roma integration into the Bulgarian society is supported by the continuous reassertion of Roma people's inherent inferiority and inability to fit into social norms.

**The image of Roma illiteracy**. The main object of ridicule of Roma people is crafted around the demonstration of Roma people's illiteracy and inability to express themselves, while interviewed by media. Mispronunciations and misspeaking are ridiculed to a degree as to not only diminish the content of the information, which the Roma interviewee is trying to convey, but also to dismiss any further attempt for voicing of opinions in a Roma accent.

Steps need to be taken in the direction of providing a more extensive public participation of opinions, phrased, voiced and argued by Roma people. The narratives of mocking the portrayed Roma illiteracy also serve the purpose of presenting Roma opinions as invalid, due to their inherent illogicality.

**The myth of the inferiority of Roma bodies – the images of the Welfare queen and the Charmant Lady.** The image of Roma women is constructed as a complex intersection of illiteracy and „unwomanness", indicating Roma people's inability to conform to gender roles. The mockery of illiteracy intersects with inadequate performance of the role of motherhood, being presented as deprived of the natural morality of "womanhood", being reduced to selfish economically motivated "welfare queens"[10], and using their children as tools for personal gain.

Media makes use of sarcasm and mockery, aimed at ridiculing the gender identity and mannerisms of members of the Roma community, portraying the inherent inadequacy of Roma people to take moral roles. The dominating narrative of "impropriety" of the Roma bodies and gender performances contributes to the moral and cultural boundaries. Their media representation and practical application reaffirms the nationally accepted practices of exclusion of Roma people as a constituent of institutional and cultural antigypsyism.

### *Narrative: Roma people are morally unfit to be Bulgarian citizens*

Even, when the acts of Roma people are not illegal, the media coverage still classifies them as inappropriate and unacceptable by presenting them as immoral and therefore not belonging to the pure national body. The linkage between Roma immorality and the inappropriate enactment of a Bulgarian nationality is narrated through stories

10. The term "welfare queen" has been previously used to depict the notion of discrimination against African-American women, whose sole source of income is from social benefit and welfare (see. Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

of Roma people's disrespect to symbols and artefacts of national importance and emblems of humanity and spirituality. The narrative of Roma people's immorality plays a role of depicting Roma people as villains and Bulgarians as victims on both material and symbolic levels.

**The image of Roma as barbaric non-humans.** Media narratives of Roma people's otherness depend on not only presenting Roma people as different from Bulgarians, but also on presenting Roma people as evil. Thus, Roma people easily fit into the role of the villain, while Bulgarians are portrayed as long-suffering victims of ethnic clashes, both physical and ideological. Therefore, Roma poverty is villainised, whereas Bulgarian poverty is sanctified.

**The myth of Roma bodies as public property.** The de-humanisation of Roma people legitimises the implicit practice of media treatment of Roma people, as if their bodies are public property. Although in present times bold claims such as "Roma do not own their bodies" would probably only be present in extreme far-right platforms (if even there), the subtle acts of utilising imagery of Roma people (and especially of Roma women) for amusement and ridicule, demonstrate the attitude toward ownership and disregard of personal space and privacy. The free sharing of images and videos of Roma women either dancing (see. for example, Muzika, 2020) or in overly sexualised poses and barely clothed bodies and images of the faces of Roma children is indicative of the attitude toward regarding Roma bodies as "public property".

Objectification, dehumanisation, and demonisation are the most popular tools for enhancing the distinctions between the "us" and "them" group, consolidating the unity of the inter-group, reasserting the boundaries against the outgroup through intimidation and denigration, and promoting ethno-violence (Baider and Kopitowska, 2018:2).

### *Narrative: Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer*

The distinction between "us" and "them" is further fused with influence through the portrayal of "them" as the "evil wrong doer" and us as the "innocent victim". The distinctions between "us" and "them" are elevated to the level of juxtapositions through the assignment of power dynamics and a narrative with a villain and a hero. This process is supported by the media narrative, that Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer.

**The image of Roma as political sell-outs.** The image of Roma people, as political sell-outs encompasses the belief, that Roma people traditionally sell their votes to the one political party, which outbids the others in the wake of elections. Thus, media narratives portray Roma people as an ignorant and not politically involved mass, inciting the image that corruption and improper democracy are assisted by the less

educated, less civically involved masses of Roma people, who sell their democratic rights for money and personal short-term benefits. Thus, they are portrayed by media not as citizens, rather as fake and unworthy beneficiaries of civil rights, who willingly participate in perpetuating the established corrupt practices in Bulgaria.

**The myth that Roma people are parasites to public funding.** Apart from being depicted as moral parasites, who take advantage of public spaces, Roma people have been consistently perceived as social parasites, taking advantage of available civil rights. Most notably, the narrative of taking advantage of social benefits, has become one of the key arguments claiming that Roma people are social parasites, perceived as economic non-contributors to the well-being of the country and blamed for taking advantage of the achievements of tax-paying Bulgarians.

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE DESK RESEARCH

The conclusions from the conducted desk research identified some key trends to the dissemination and influence of fake news and disinformation about the Roma community in Bulgaria:

- **Anti-Roma media hostility cannot be limited to openly declared hate speech and fake news.** There is also the perpetuation of stereotypical images and harmful, prejudicial narratives about the Roma people.
- Although differently, both **"renowned" and "leisure"** channel for communication and information contribute to the media hostility against Roma people and communities in Bulgaria.
- **The most prominent characteristics of the channels for anti-Roma disinformation cannot be generalised.** On the one hand, mainstream media employs anti-Roma messages and stereotype-based narratives in their general representation of Roma-related topics. On the other hand, the most aggressive platforms and channels for anti-Roma hostility employ various tactics for misinformation and misrepresentation, such as **fake news and stigmatisation, non-relevant visualisations, the faking of expertise of public figures, humour and sarcasm, and the one-dimensional representation of Roma people and gypsy-ness.**
- **Hostile media narratives against Roma people in Bulgaria are constructed of myths and prejudicial images**, which are exploited for the popularisation of broader narratives of antigypsyism. The identified prejudicial narratives, discussed in detail in this report are: "Roma people are criminals and deserve harsh punishments",

"Roma people deserve to be excluded from society, as they cannot fit into social norms of public decency", "Roma people are morally unfit to be Bulgarian citizens", "Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer", "The integration of Roma people in Bulgaria is impossible".

- **The explicit media/public discussion of integration are ambiguous.** There are examples of polar opposites in the public discourses: intellectuals, who lobby for a shift towards tolerance, and intellectuals, who oppose integration, by describing it as means for achieving the oppression of the majority.
- The implied notion of integration in media discourses draws upon the **popularisation of anti-Roma discourses** and the developed negative images and myths. The media picture of integration is one of opposition, being illustrated as impossible, due to the inherently non-integrational nature of Roma people.

The desk research concludes that anti-Roma media hostility has two manifestations. On the one hand, there is explicitly discriminatory content, which often includes hate speech and anti-Roma propaganda. On the other hand, there is an implicit use of negative stereotypical images and myths, which perpetuate the normalisation of anti-Roma attitudes.

# FOCUS GROUPS FINDINGS

The key conclusions about Roma communities' perceptions and experiences of the media and media hostility are useful to present insight into 1) key practices and uses of media by Roma people, 2) effects of fake news and disinformation on the Roma communities, and 3) to highlight possible future actions, to counter misinformation and anti-Roma misrepresentations in media and online. Those main conclusions provide the basis of seven recommendations toward the content and prospective objectives of the methodological and practical manuals for the training of Roma activists in Bulgaria.

## MAIN INFORMATION CHANNELS USED BY THE ROMA COMMUNITIES

The most popular information channels among our respondents include various sources of information. Interestingly, respondents mentioned social media platforms, national TV outlets, online sources of leisure content, as well as some highly renowned media channels, which employ complex political analyses and represent an alternative to the easily digestible "yellow websites"[11].

### Social Media And Facebook

Facebook stood out as the most popular source of information among our respondents from the Roma community, regardless of age: the students and youths mentioned Facebook as a main channel for spread of news and information, as much as more mature and established members of the Roma communities.

### Nationally Disseminated Tv

Big media outlets are largely distrusted by the Roma communities and perceived as dishonest, perceived as corrupt or in service of big political interests, or they are ignored by Roma people altogether. National and big media outlets are (somewhat) popular mostly because of their accessibility. Those could be utilised for an awareness building campaign aimed at the ethnic majority, rather than the Roma minority, which does not feel represented or properly illustrated by neither one

11."Yellow websites" is a term used by one of our respondents – a Roma leader in Razlog. He used this self-made term in order to relate the currently popular websites in Bulgaria. The most important specificities of "yellow websites", to which the respondent referred included short and easy to read articles, big titles and questionable information.

of the mainstream media channels. The video content, which Roma people mentioned to have used was accessed through YouTube and was of a recreational, rather than informative nature.

*"I mainly watch all types of videos on YouTube – mostly self-development videos. I read such articles on Google as well."*
*(Activist, Razlog)*

## Analytical And Highly Reputable Sources

Alternative examples of news media, which were also mentioned (very rarely) by our respondents as possible channels for communication, included some smaller TV stations or particular websites, disseminating popular knowledge or leisure content. A notable exception to this trend was provided by a student in Sliven, who seemed to be well informed of the media environment in Bulgaria and provided some examples of media outlets, known for their political analysis and in-depth journalism:

*"I guess it depends what media channels you use for information. If you take a look at NovaTV, bTV, about two months ago, during the peak [of the pandemic], when the measures were stricter, there were different news reports, which of course presented the Roma communities extremely unfavourably. (...) When it comes to media sources, which I suppose everyone should read, and which are ethical and highly objective, those would be Deutsche Welle, Free Europe, Capital, Dnevnik, Bivol and may be one or two more. I suppose, those exact media sources, which I use, they are quite objective and there is not the attitude of PIK, Bradva, and the rest. These are the cool and ethical media, which do not ethnicise any issues."(Youth, Sliven)*

However, these sources, however reputable, are not popular among Roma communities, due to trivial reasons, such as 1) the high language they employ in their articles, 2) the complex issues they discuss, and 3) their non-sensationalist approach to facts.

*"The question of how many Roma people use those [reputable] sources are on point. If I had to guess, it would be less than 1%."(*
*Roma leader, Sliven)*

These results indicate, that the most appropriate channels for challenging anti-Roma fake news and disinformation among the Roma communities, would mainly be online channels, including platforms, which share leisure content or popular knowledge (rather than only information and news media outlets) in an easily accessible manner.

## Health Mediators As The Most Reputable Source Of Information

In all of the Roma communities, included in this study, respondents pointed out the health mediators' importance and key role in spreading

news, informing the communities, and challenging disinformation. Health mediators serve a crucial role in connecting the Roma communities to the outside world, to the state and local institutions and to any and all figures of authority (which tend to be distrusted by people in the communities):

*"We are like a small local municipality. (...) I joke that the only thing we do not do yet is issue passports." (Health mediator, Novi Pazar)*

Furthermore, the methods of communication, utilised by health mediators are very personal and exemplify the individual approach, where every single member of the community feels listened to, cared for and appreciated. For example, our health mediator respondents shared numerous stories of personally helping people, who were being discriminated against, but once represented by a mediator, were quickly better received by administrators in official institutions.

Health mediators are recognisable and highly revered figures in Roma communities. They often contribute to the creation of knowledge and dissemination of information. In many places they have replaced the media as distributers of trustworthy information and have learned to digest and present complex information from the source directly to concerned citizens:

*"Most of the information, shared on Facebook by some random sites, is just a lie that aims to intimidate people and make them even more afraid. The best source of information [with regard to coronavirus] is the website of the Ministry of Health. We mainly inform people through brochures."*
*(Health mediator, Lom)*

Health mediators employ potent approaches in their communication with members of the community, as well as with institutions. Their unique positionality allows them to navigate both of these social spheres and to mediate the relationship and communication between them, being well suited to identify and challenge fake news and the effects of disinformation and panic among Roma communities.

Most importantly, health mediators are equipped to challenge disinformation and change the opinion of people in the Roma communities through their personal actions, arguments and reputation. These encounters have been successful purely because health mediators are highly reputable and trusted members of the Roma communities. Most notably this tendency has been illustrated by an activist in Montana through her short answer to the question "If you were to receive conflicting information on a certain topic, where Facebook says one thing, and [the health mediator in your community] says another, who do you trust?":

*"The health mediator! I trust her, because she is my friend!" (Activist, Montana)*

The most efficient channels of communication and information among Roma communities are those, which support the non-linear model of communication. With all of their weaknesses, social media platforms allow for bigger agency of the audience – this seems to be a deciding factor for Roma people. Members of the Roma communities need to be able to personally assess the origin of the information, which reaches them. This is why Facebook is the most popular channel for information and the health mediators (judged by their personality) are the most trusted source of information.

Future digital literacy building campaigns and approaches should utilise social media as the main channel for reaching and informing Roma people. Any sort of community action, involving Roma people and aiming their empowerment or citizenship, would have no potential, unless it heavily incorporates Roma mediators and activists. They are the most appropriate target for popularisers, multipliers, educators, influencers or any other type of community energisers.

## MEDIA HOSTILITY – THE ROMA COMMUNITY'S PERSPECTIVES

The media hostility against the Roma community was mostly considered by our respondents to be something normal, or at least in line with the general attitude of society. Therefore, our respondents did not necessarily acknowledge the vital consequences, which media representations have on the forming of public opinion. Rather, the "media problem" (although diagnosed and noted as such) was generally perceived as just another manifestation of the discriminative nature of the Bulgarian society. However, all of our respondents agreed that the media environment in Bulgaria is hostile against minority groups, and especially against the Roma minority. Our respondents believed that efforts to change those tendencies would only be a step in the right direction.

### Popular Understandings Of Fake News And Disinformation

The most frequent definition of fake news and disinformation, employed by our respondents, was exhaustive and practical in its simplicity:

*"Fake news means distortion of the truth." (Youth, Sofia)*

When confronted with the direct question "What do you think "fake news" means?" most respondents had an idea about such a phenomenon. They often provided their own explanations (such as the one cited above), which defined fake news and disinformation. However, it was a little bit more challenging for respondents to think of examples

of fake news, which they had themselves "fallen for" or believed in.

*"To me fake news is also when they advertise a certain product for a particular price and then it turns out that they sell you something of way lower quality. I have fallen for that sham." (Health mediator, Lom)*

This demonstrates our respondents' understanding that any lie, disseminated through publicly accessible channels, was fake news. But they could rarely think of examples of fake news. This is a meaningful conclusion, combined with the result that most (if not all) of the respondents could provide an example of hostile media articles, which perpetuated anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudicial narratives. Coupled, those two results demonstrate, that there is a disparity between Roma people's understanding of what can be categorised as fake news, on the one hand, and the "normality" of anti-Roma media hostility in Bulgaria, on the other.

This study, however, detected the respondents' high sensitivity and very firm grasp on both the effects of and the manifestations of particular disinformation campaigns and media hostility. Most popularly, fake news was perceived as something, in which mostly illiterate people could possibly believe. Prejudicial narratives and hostile anti-Roma myths and images were considered to be something, in which only non-Roma people could believe.

## Distinction Between Fake News And Disinformation

Fake news is one of the components of the hostile anti-Roma media environment in Bulgaria. Disinformation (the process of influencing people's belief, which are based upon questionable or unfounded information) is one of the main effects of the hostile media environment. Fake news is one of the key tools, used (intentionally or unintentionally) to achieve the effects of disinformation. For this analysis, disinformation is perceived as a social process of subscribing to false beliefs and views of reality, while fake news is the specific units (examples) of false or misleading media and social media stories.

One conclusion from this study is that simply fighting fake news would not be a sufficient approach in challenging the broader processes of disinformation in the Roma communities and in the Bulgarian society as a whole. However, challenging anti-Roma hostility in media and popular online channels (in its complex manifestations and diverse means for popularisation) is still considered to be the post potent approach to challenging disinformation and the anti-Roma social sentiments in Bulgaria.

## TYPES OF DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS, WHICH AFFECT THE ROMA COMMUNITIES

A key distinction, which came up during the analysis of the conducted focus groups was with regard to the intended recipient of fake news and disinformation. Disinformation tendencies, which concern the Roma communities in Bulgaria can be hereby analytically categorised in two main groups: disinformation about the Roma communities and disinformation among the Roma communities.

On the one hand, respondents testified to a trend of successful disinformation campaigns, which were exceptionally popular among members of the Roma communities and led to real-life consequences. Such types of media/online media hostility can be defined as disinformation among the Roma communities. On the other hand, respondents acknowledged the negative media influence of the stereotypical and prejudicial depiction of Roma people in mainstream Bulgarian media. Such types of media hostility can be defined as disinformation about the Roma communities.

## SUCCESSFUL FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AMONG THE ROMA COMMUNITIES – WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW TO TACKLE THEIR INFLUENCE?

The two main factors for successful disinformation campaigns among[12] the Roma communities are the wide-spread illiteracy of Roma people and the flawed relationship between Roma people and public authority (including media). A critical audience, with resources for fact checking is believed by our respondents to be the most potent counteraction of fake news and deliberate disinformation campaigns.

Negative public opinion about this ethnic group fuels (or is fuelled by) the overwhelming negative attitudes of the governmental agencies and of society as a whole. Interestingly, the distrust in government and official authority is coupled with a naivety in news, spread by Facebook (probably because those are perceived as more authentic).

12. An important clarification needs to be made, with regard to the spread and nature of these disinformation campaigns. Roma communities were not the only "victims" of either one of the popular conspiracy theories, which were widely disseminated mostly on social media platforms like Facebook. Members of the Bulgarian ethnic community also believed the fake news about "COVID-19 as a sham" and the National Strategy for the Child.

## *"COVID-19 IS FAKE!" – The distrust in authority and prevalence of personal experiences*

In March 2020, Bulgaria became one of the first countries to impose strict lockdown, as early as March 13th. Strict measures were imposed on a national level. Bulgarians were ordered to shelter in place, with the small exception of leaving their homes for grocery and pharmacological shopping. Checkpoints were installed at the exits of towns and cities in order to ensure that no one is travelling out of town unnecessarily.

The coronavirus pandemic hit the Roma community particularly hard, due to the closure of the cities. In almost every town and city in Bulgaria, the Roma are segregated into neighbourhoods specifically designated for them, which are popularly called 'ghettos' by the media (see. for example, Dzhambazki.com, 2008). During the coronavirus lockdown, rumours surfaced around the spread of COVID-19 by the Roma communities – news media reported how the Roma are not complying with the pandemic measures and were leaving their homes, which supposedly dramatically helped the spread of the virus (see. for example, 24chasa.bg, 2020b). This led to the government making the decision to restrict the entry and exits of the "ghettos" in some of the cities where the spread of COVID-19 was perceived to be too high. Media outlets attributed this decision to Roma people's incompliance with the legal measures (see. for example, Nova.bg, 2020).

The distribution of COVID-19 related fake news, concerning Roma communities, was twofold. On the one hand, media outlets claimed that Roma people were responsible for the spread of COVID-19 (Petrov, 2020). On the other hand, disinformation about the existence and nature of the virus was being distributed among members of the Roma communities.

Fake news on the verge of conspiracy theories started spreading among the Roma community, that the virus does not exist and that it was a way to keep them segregated and closed off:

> *„Roma people were told that there is no virus and that everything was an elaborate plan to keep them confined in the neighbourhood."*
> *(Youth, Sliven)*

Overwhelmingly, our respondents testified to the fact that Roma people did not believe that a dangerous virus truly was out there. There are two main reasons for Roma people's distrust in the news media and official governmental information. Firstly, Roma people have suffered from the anti-pandemic measures more severely, than they have suffered from the health-related issues of the pandemic itself. The predominantly Roma neighbourhoods were subjected to stricter measures, in comparison to other spaces in the country. Roma people were not allowed to leave their respective neighbourhoods (whereas other segments of the population were confined within the boundaries

of their hometowns and cities). These confinements resulted, among other things, in loss of employment (as Roma people were not allowed to go to their workplace, if it was outside of their respective neighbourhoods). Simultaneously, the victims of the COVID-19 virus were not as visible (where any occurred) and not as overwhelmingly distributed, as the authorities might have claimed. The anti-pandemic measures had more tangible negative consequences to the everyday reality and perceptions of Roma people, compared to the actual disease[13].

The desire to come up with an interpretation (or to subscribe to one) that makes more sense with regard to Roma people's lived reality and their personal experience emerged. By believing in the conspiracy theory that the virus was a sham, Roma people were making sense of the world through facts through a combination of wishful thinking and making sense of their own reality.

*"It's easier to believe in something made up, because [Roma people in my community] didn't want [the ghettos in Yambol] to be closed." (Health mediator, Yambol)*

In order for people to be able to come up with alternative (to the officially provided) explanations to their current reality, there must be 1) a disparity between the official version and the lived experience and 2) a space for re-interpretation of facts. The space for re-interpretation of official facts emerges, when there is an overwhelming belief that the official interpretation might not be truthful and is therefore not entirely trustworthy. Bulgarian media (and the official authorities as a whole) have a complex relationship with the Roma communities. As discussed in previous sections of this report, media outlets rarely address the interests of the Roma community favourably and usually perpetuate the overwhelming hostility toward this particular ethnic group. These tendencies are not overlooked by Roma people.

*"We, the Roma are accused of all sorts of things (...) and this is why they say – everything spreads because of the Roma and their neighbourhoods (...) Regardless of what has happened, if someone has done something and he is Roma, they will always highlight that."(Activist, Montana)*

This flawed relationship between the Roma communities and the official authorities and media create an overwhelming atmosphere of

13. Among our respondents, it was solely the health mediators, who had faced the virus and its real dimensions face-to-face. The more popular opinion, among Roma people was that the virus story was a sham, mostly because they had not seen it with their own eyes. Furthermore, the health mediators shared, that their biggest challenge in working with the Roma communities during the pandemic was to convince people, that the threat was actually real and that (most of the) measures were necessary (excluding the health mediators in Montana, who were also forced to take on the duties of paramedics and medical personnel, who were afraid to enter the Roma neighbourhoods and "out-sourced" the duties of initial checks and communication with potential COVID-19 patients).

mutual distrust. The distrust in government and official media outlets creates more space for acceptance of alternative stories and a more enhanced vulnerability to the belief that 'alternative facts' can exist and be as reliable as official facts, supported by data and expertise. The authority of facts and expertise is undermined by the inherent distrust in the presumption that the government and the media are acting with the Roma community's best interest in mind. This phenomenon of the flawed relationship between the Roma community and authority and media representation paves the way for efficiency and popularity of fake news and the success of disinformation. The Roma communities' susceptibility to distribution and fake news on the issue of COVID-19 finds its roots in the mass media portrayal of the Roma – that they are responsible for everything bad in society which now, in the eyes of our respondents has been extended to coronavirus. The consequences of these narratives materialise in Roma people's adherence to alternative sources of information and figures of authority.

### *"The National Strategy for the Child aims to kidnap children for Norwegian gay couples" – emotional topics and irrational fears*

The abovementioned example of wide-spread disinformation among Roma communities is not unprecedented. In fact, it could be interpreted as another manifestation of Roma people's distrust in official authority and information sources. The conspiracy theories about the government intentionally acting in a manner, which excludes and discriminates against Roma people in Bulgaria were introduced as early as 2019. In 2019, the Roma community was hit by one of the biggest cases of disinformation and spread of fake news[14] вthat Bulgaria had seen. It all stemmed from the created National Strategy for the Child (2019-2030). It was drafted in 2018 and suggested amendments in the laws in favour of child abuse prevention and extended child protection, building upon the previous Strategy (National Strategy for the Child, 2008-2018).

A disinformation campaign (supported by those in favour of a more 'traditional family', including one of the governmentally represented parties, IMRO[15] (News.bg., 2019)), which gained popularity on Facebook in 2018/2019. According to the fake news, the new National Strategy for the Child was co-funded by Norway and was promoting amendments to the law, which would allow for the state and social services to take away children from their families 'based on the Norwegian model of

14. The "wide-spread" nature of this news was illuminated by our respondents' response to the questions about fake news – the initial example, which they were always ready to point out, was the case with the National Strategy for the Child.
15. As a result of this fake news campaign, the National Strategy for the Child was withdrawn with no further explanations (https://www.eurochild.org/news/news-details/article/bulgarias-national-strategy-for-the-child-2019-2030-withdrawn-following-disinformation-campaigns/?no_cache=1).

child protection' (Ditchev, 2019). In its essence, the fake news narrative claimed that children could be taken away from their parents for trivial reasons (such as not buying a toy, for example) and then forcefully adopted by Norwegian same-sex couples[16].

This disinformation campaign led to a wide-spread fear that children will be taken away from their parents, especially from Roma parents who have little to no resources for counter-reaction. The fear-induced panic escalated in places like Sliven, where Roma people quickly picked their children from school before the end of the school day, so that they could keep them safely away from the authorities (who they believed were out to practically kidnap children with little or no explanation).

*"I don't know how, but the news came to our neighbourhood and reached people's attention, that some people came and took kids away, without the parents' knowledge. (...) People just heard that their children would be taken away and panic ensued. That's what any parent would do, I would do that, so would you, if you hear that you might lose your child. So, people just ran to the [predominantly Roma] schools and took their kids home." (Activist, Sliven)*

Our respondents from Sliven further elaborated, that Roma people's fear of losing their children was also fuelled by a video, which had previously been circulating among members of the community. In this video, a man explains that their children will be taken away from them and given to Dutch families for no apparent reason (Actualno.com, 2019). Graphic details of actual scenes of a child being taken away were also included.

*"This all came from the media. Foreign media disseminating videos of children, who were taken away from their parents. The mother is crying, the child is having a tantrum, the police and the social services are just claiming the child, without consulting the parent. And our people, whatever they see on TV and on social media, think is going to happen to them as well."(Activist, Sliven)*

Fortunately, the biggest consequence of this disinformation was that Roma missed a few days of school. However, this occurrence illuminated some troubling trends, regarding the relationship between Roma people on the one hand, and governmental authorities and media, on the other. Some of our respondents used this opportunity to draw conclusions about the nature of this relationship:

*"There was an idea to test how quickly the community can be mobilised. (...) It was a good experiment, which showed that people aren't rational; it's easy to manipulate people's emotions." (Student, Sliven)*

16. Needless to say, that this interpretation of the text of the proposed new Strategy is not truthful and has no basis in facts or the actual legal adjustments proposed.

This disinformation campaign was seemingly successful for a while, as parents from other cities like Karnobat, Yambol and Assenovgrad were thrown into panic and started withdrawing their children from school. This escalated and resulted in a strong police presence in the Roma neighbourhoods. Some of our respondents even saw an organised political act, behind this occurrence. According to Roma activists, this whole campaign was fabricated so that 1) the tensions in the already segregated and marginalised Roma neighbourhoods can be exacerbated, leading to even more negative opinions about the Roma; and 2) that the Roma could withdraw their children from school, thus aiding the ongoing narrative of Roma illiteracy and the idea that the Roma do not let their children attend school.

Regardless of whether this was organised group political action (intentional disinformation), or just an unfortunate chain of coincidences (fake news leading to serious consequences), this exceptional occurrence managed to draw upon already existent characteristics of the Roma communities' vulnerabilities toward fake news and disinformation. Just like in the case with COVID-19 disinformation, the false information lead to actual consequences because it was coupled with distrust in authority and because the fake stories resembled a reality, which seemed to more accurately depict the lived experiences of Roma people .[17]

### *"It was for the better!" – Can fake news campaigns be a positive thing?*

Social services perceived as the enemy, from whom Roma parents need to protect themselves, is not a new notion. The juxtaposition between authorities and the Roma community (exacerbated by media representations as demonstrated in section V.1.2. of this report) has always been central to the lives and livelihoods of the most marginalised and excluded members of society. This trend is illustrated by a story about overcoming fake fears through cleverly applied "positive fake news":

> *"I would like to share a fake news story, which [my colleague] and I came up with. It really was fake, but it was for the better. It must have been in 2006, when we started working as health mediators. We had a meeting with all of the general practitioners, who practice*

17. On the one hand, this reality refers to Roma people's familiarity with cases of children taken away from their families. Our respondents in Sliven testified that there have been exceptional cases, when social services have taken children away from their parents, due to neglect or other such reasons. On the other hand, there is an overwhelming feeling that Roma children are not safe outside of their homes. Respondents in Sliven told stories of Roma children, who were bullied and/or physically harmed by older kids, committing actual hate crimes, based upon ethnic hatred. Regardless of whether those stories are true, they are imprinted in the local Roma people's memories and perceptions of the world, which they inhabit. More specifically, a world, where Roma children are not entirely safe, unless they are at home with their parents.

*in Lom. So they explained that in [one of the predominantly Roma] neighbourhood all of the mothers have refused to bring their children in for vaccines. So we go out to speak to the mothers and they basically explain to us, that they will not vaccinate their children, because vaccines are bad for children – they make them sick, paralised, etc. We go back the second day – we speak to them for hours, they still refuse to vaccinate their children. So [my colleague] and I are sitting in our office, wondering how to solve this issue. Because if a child is not vaccinated, some illnesses and diseases will begin to spread and so forth. So the two of us decide to basically go back to the neighbourhood and just lie to the people. Just create some fake news. So we go back to the neighbourhood and tell people: Listen here, people, if you do not go vaccinate your children by Friday, your doctors will send a note to the social services and you will no longer be able to get any sort of benefits. (...) A few days later we get calls from the general practitioners asking us: What did you guys do? There is a queue in front of our offices – we cannot manage the flow of mothers bringing their children for vaccination. So sometimes, may be, fake news might have a positive outcome."(Health mediator, Lom)*

This example demonstrates, that knowing the specificities of "believable fake stories" could be employed not only to educate people and foster their critical thinking, so that they no longer fall victim to disinformation. Knowledge about the finer details in believable "fake stories" could be applied to counter other fake stories. However, it is important to note, that once again, a key component of a successful "fake news campaign" is the reliance on the flawed relationship between Roma communities and figures of authority.

## *"Bill Gates is spying on us" – the fear of an invisible enemy*

The fear that some foreign influence is tampering with vaccines and making children sick is not new. Furthermore, this negative sentiment against vaccines (Popovski, 2018) has been exacerbated by the COVID-19-related conspiracy theories. The foreign or unknown enemy is a serious threat which has been hard to tackle by the health mediators among our respondents.

Our respondents mentioned the fake news, surrounding the conspiracy theory about the origin of the COVID-19 virus. More particularly, the fake news campaign claims, that the virus is artificially created by the software mogul Bill Gates (Mileva, 2020), who will then get involved in the development of a vaccine, through which tracking devices will be implanted into non-suspecting citizens. This conspiracy theory is not exclusively disseminated in Bulgaria, but exceptionally popular among Bulgarian Facebook users (Newsroom, 2020).

*„Our biggest challenge currently is that people no longer believe in the vaccines. They think that something bad is going to get transfused into their children's blood. (...) We now need to explain to people, that the regular vaccines have nothing to do with the COVID. (...) This did come with the coronavirus. People now think that some chips will be injected into them. You know how Facebook is, there are all sorts of nonsense. And this is a problem, because some people believe in those things."(Health mediator, Vidin)*

This example provides an illustration of another variation of mistrusted authority. Here, however, the far-away evil conspirators are perceived to be acting on a global level. The idea that Bill Gates is trying to control the entire planet illustrates the notion that people have really lost control over their lives and have no rational explanation as to why things are going unexplainably bad for them.

Based upon the identified popular cases of widespread fake news and disinformation campaigns, we could draw the conclusion that in order for 'alternative representations of the truth' to be acceptable to the Roma communities, those representations need to entail Roma people's inherent distrust in the government and news. These two vital conditions make Roma people especially susceptible to such conspiracy-theory-based fake news.

**Fake news stories incorporate the following components:**

- The sense of an imminent threat (albeit real or perceived) to some of the fundamentally valued components of their actual everyday reality.
- The image of a far-away and unfamiliar enemy.
- A storytelling comprehensively matching Roma people's lived reality of opposition between Roma communities and the authorities/ media.
- A story which has been previously disseminated but is now activated to serve the purposes of disinformation. Preferably and emotionally charged one.

The most important factors contributing to the Roma communities' vulnerabilities were the high levels of illiteracy in Roma communities, the limited channels for information, and the low levels of affinity with media and digital literacy.

## MEDIA APPROACHES FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE ROMA COMMUNITIES, WHICH REACH MEMBERS OF THESE COMMUNITIES

Anti-Roma hostility contributed to the general disinformation of non-Roma people, through the practices of perpetuating harmful anti-Roma narratives in mainstream media, making popular public opinion anti-Roma, hindering any effort of the Roma community to shift the negative images and myths, which lead to antigypsyism and discriminatory practices. There was a general sense among our respondents, that mainstream media and the popular public opinion was anti-Roma. This emotional internalisation of the normalised anti-Roma hostility in media (and in society) established Roma people's sense of a general discriminatory media environment in Bulgaria. Thus, Roma people felt, that the media in the country were not working for them and with their best interest at heart. Rather, media and their messages were perceived as something, which hindered any effort of the Roma community to shift the negative images and myths, which lead to antigypsyism and discriminatory practices.

Most notably, our respondents had identified the media myths of Roma criminality; of the presented parasite-like nature of Roma people, living on benefits; of Roma people's inherent inferiority, which leads to the villainisation and moral depravity of the ethnic community.

Our respondents from Roma communities described media hostility, the practices of fake news and disinformation as one of the mechanisms for exclusion of the minority groups from public life and debate. Furthermore, our respondents identified four tactics, which media channels employ in making those prejudicial arguments. These include ethnicisation of issues, intentional misleading, sensationalism, and intentional deprivation of Roma people from their voices.

### *The ethnicization of issues*

What our respondents referred to as "ethnicisation" of certain issues, consists of the journalistic practice of highlighting the Roma ethnic background, linking the Roma people to criminality, treating them as "lesser than" and "inherently different" from the ethnic Bulgarians.

*"[Only when Roma people have perpetrated a crime] does the issue get ethniciesed. Nobody raises their voice over Bulgarians conducting crimes. Nobody would ever say "A Bulgarian beat up an elderly woman". This is just not the practice of informing the public. Whereas, if a Roma person had done it, nobody would miss highlighting that!"*
*(Roma leader, Sliven)*

Our respondents identified a practice of "ethnicisation" of problems, which directly diagnoses the social condition behind all of the media narratives, treating Roma people as "lesser than" and "inherently different" from the ethnic Bulgarians.

### *Intentional misleading, due to corruption of the media*

Roma people's distrust in media transpired in Roma people's perceptions of how media served the purposes of disinformation – through corruption of the particular media outlets, which intentionally mislead people:

> *"Media could challenge people's perceptions. They could serve to confuse, to create false ideas. The media owners are at fault here. Mostly, the owners of the big media, which are known to represent private corporate interests and merely mention what suits them, rather than tell the truth. (...) People who own media are more resourceful than bank owners, because they can enslave two billion people on Earth, as we can see." (Activist, Septemvriitsi)*

This grand explanation of the inherently flawed nature of Bulgarian media is based in the generally negative opinion of Roma communities about Bulgarian media. None of our respondents had positive examples of mainstream media ever apologising or refuting false or negative statements, which they had previously made.

### *Sensetionalism, based upon established prejudice*

Fake news and disinformation are perceived as another example of how societal structures work for the benefit of the majority and achieve the goal of excluding the minority. Anti-Roma disinformation and fake news about the Roma community were often used as a political strategy to disperse public attention, which should otherwise have been focused on a political scandal or a story.

According to our respondents, this easily achievable agreeable audience's comfort was utilised by media as a divergence strategy. Whenever news stories emerged about high level corruption or white-collar crime, the perceived as corrupt media would protect their "patrons" and shift the media attention back to the convenient villains – the Roma communities.

The topic of Roma criminality especially is perceived by our respondents as exploited for the purposes of distraction:

> *"When there is a problem with [a certain politician or a very connected businessman], whenever a news story breaks about*

*them, all of a sudden the media start to shift their gaze to the Roma problems: who killed whom, who stole what, who did what. The attention is immediately being shifted."*
*(Social worker, Novi Pazar)*

### *Intentional deprivation of Rome people of their voices*

Roma activists have noted that there has not been a proper representation of the diversity and variety of Roma people in media, with regard to their varying levels of literacy and education. Media deprive Roma people of their voices by obstructing diverse representation, particularly the more educated and literate members of the Roma communities, in order to perpetuate the prejudice and already established images of Roma people as illiterate and uneducated people.

*"I have personally witnessed reporters, who have come to Roma communities and refused to interview me. Instead, they intentionally sought out people, who were not articulate in Bulgarian and could not properly speak to the issues at hand."(Youth, Sofia)*

Thus, media deprive Roma people of their voices by depriving them Roma community of diverse representation, in order to perpetuate the prejudice and already established images of Roma people as illiterate and uneducated people. Challenging the systemic issues of antigypsyism through an opposition of media hostility would require inclusion of Roma voices. Particularly those, which have been persistently left out of media representation and coverage – the more educated and literate members of the Roma communities. Neither one of our respondents felt like they were represented by popular media outlets, nor did they feel like mainstream media targeted Roma communities as an important component of their audiences.

## EMOTIONALLY CHARGED ASPECTS OF ANTIGYPSYISM

### Real Life Discrimination And Media Hostility As Internalized Factors For Roma Self-Perception

Some respondents shared stories about discrimination and prejudice, they have encountered in real life, while others had relevant online experiences to share with regard to online discrimination and public hostility. All of our respondents had experienced discrimination and faced challenges to their social and economic lives, which stemmed from their ethnic background and how it was perceived by others.

### *Direct antigypsyism and covert microagressions*

Some manifestations of discrimination were perceived by respondents as components of normality and were not confronted. Some of our respondents did not challenge subtle signs of discrimination, but were keenly aware of such microagressions against them:

> *"They never say [that they think we should not get high grades, because we are Roma], but they look at us funny. I sense these kinds of things." (Student, Lom)*

Perhaps the most classic example of real-life prejudice (mentioned by our respondents), which had also crossed into the online realm, was the statement "You are not like the rest of them". Our respondents testified, that was the most common response to their attempts to challenge prejudice. Our respondents told stories about attempting to oppose the generalisations of anti-Roma myths in conversations with members of the majority of ethnic Bulgarians. Our respondents' strategy consisted of providing a counterexample of the prejudicial stories, by demonstrating themselves as educated, literate, non-criminal and highly productive members of society. In response, Roma people's arguments were refuted with the mere statement "You are not like the rest of them" – thus reclaiming the authority over the production of dominating truth and painting our respondents as an exception, rather than as a representation. Treating our respondents as "exceptions from the general rule" allowed ethnic Bulgarians to retain their prejudicial attitudes toward Roma people and to reconcile them with the tangible proof of their falseness (in the face of our respondents).

This study has found, that **the inter-personal discriminatory (anti-integrational) statements are oriented around the same sentiment – "Gypsy-ness is inherently bad and lesser than"**. The approaches for challenging the negative representation of Roma people online and in media could draw upon the proposed mitigation strategies, which our respondents had identified as potentially effective in representing the other side in arguments and discussions:

- Sharing facts - referring to both historical accomplishments, and to current success stories about Roma people's contributions to society;
- Providing positive personal examples – telling the stories and showing the faces of successful Roma people;
- Demonstrating expertise and knowledge to challenge prejudice, as well as fake news about the Roma – disproving disinformation through factual counteraction, by referring to official and reputable sources, which negate false claims and prejudicial assumptions.

Those identified mitigation strategies could be used in activism, in advocacy and in the development of media/online publications,

creating spaces where Roma people could feel safe and supported, and challenging the normalisation of antigypsyism. This contribution to knowledge is a necessity in order to 1) create spaces, where Roma people could feel safe and supported and obtain more self-esteem in embracing ethnic background and 2) it challenges the normalisation of antigypsyism, which is often utilised for sensationalism and reaffirmation of "common sense" among members of the ethnic majority.

### *The debate about integration – intergroup tensions among Roma people*

Integration was mostly perceived by our respondents as an individual action:

> *"Integration is not the correct word. It should be socialisation. These people have been here for so many years, how are you going to integrate them? They just need to be lead out of this capsule, this marginalised environment"*
> *(Social worker, Novi pazar)*

This debate around integration was also heavily influenced by Roma people's perception of the influence of the disinformation about the Roma community. Because of the media practice to portray integration as impossible due to Roma people's inherently non-integrable nature, they believed that integration is solely a task to be achieved by Roma people themselves. The internalisation of media hostility has led to inherent fears that those stereotypes might actually be true (about certain members of the Roma community, the "marginalised").

However, tackling disinformation and media hostility requires challenging the effects which those processes have on the Roma community and on society and other ethnic groups about the Roma community. Thus, any strategies, aiming to challenge the effects of fake news and disinformation need to address both the disinformation about the Roma communities and the disinformation among the Roma communities. This is how antigypsyism can be challenged and tackled by Roma people and for Roma people.

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

The main conclusions from the analysis of the data, obtained through conducted focus groups identified some key trends, which can be either challenged or utilised in the attempt to tackle fake news and anti-Roma disinformation in media and online:

- In order to overcome the general media hostility and anti-Roma disinformation, **efforts need to be taken to address the results of disinformation both** in Roma communities and among members of the majority of Bulgarians.
- **The popular media and online information channels, used by Roma people are Facebook, YouTube, Google.** To a lower extent, Roma people also inform themselves through nationally disseminated TV networks, and some highly reputable analytical media channels. However, mainstream media channels are perceived mostly negatively, as they are not considered to be working in the interest of the Roma communities.
- The most reputable channel of information among Roma people are the **health mediators.** They realise the linkage between institutions and Roma community, they have the most influence in refuting fake news and supporting members of the Roma communities.
- There are **two distinct types of media hostility toward the Roma community**. On the one hand, there is disinformation among the Roma communities, and on the other hand, there is media disinformation about the Roma communities. **Disinformation among the Roma communities** mostly affects their actions and fears of real life occurrences. **Disinformation about the Roma communities** mostly affect their self-esteem, emotional well-being and their perceptions of their own place in society.
- Fake news and disinformation have an ambiguous relationship with the Roma communities. In order to challenge media hostility and antigypsyism, both types of disinformation need to be tackled.
- Fake news and disinformation among the Roma communities **achieve their goal of spreading panic and causing irrational fears** and actions, through playing with Roma people's emotions and relying upon their general distrust in official authority's good intentions.
- All previously identified **anti-Roma hostile media narratives reach Roma communities**. Furthermore, Roma people have identified tactics used by mainstream media to perpetuate these narratives and their accompanying negative images and anti-Roma myths. Those tactics are **"ethnicisation" of issues, intentional misleading, sensationalism, political strategies and intentional deprivation of Roma people from their voices.**
- **Media hostility appears to have a complex effect on Roma people's perception of the processes of integration and particularly Roma people's responsibility in achieving those processes**. On the one hand, due to media narratives, Roma people perceive integration as a personal and individual action, which is to either be achieved on one's own, or not. On the other hand, autosegregation is perceived

as a harmful (also individual) practice of perpetuating marginality and exclusion. Autosegregation is largely perceived by Roma people as the only important obstacle to integration.

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# FACTS AND ARGUMENTS – IN RESPONSE TO THE MOST COMMON MYTHS ABOUT THE ROMA

The analysis of the most common myths about the Roma in Bulgaria was aimed to support the process of capacity building among Roma activists, mediators and teachers educating children in a mixed environment of Roma and Bulgarians, to enable them to discern and show others the fake news and anti-Roma disinformation that leads to ethnic tensions and forms negative prejudices towards Roma communities.

An important task of the report is to provide topics for reflection on how Roma activists can provoke the critical thinking of the people in the community towards changing their behavior, which is sometimes the basis of myths that weed over with false information and lead to conflicts. They, in turn, are increasingly encapsulating Roma communities, setting them up against everyone outside of them, regardless of whether one is sympathetic or hateful. This closes the circle.

The report refers to statistics and research results, but is not an academic piece of work - it builds on the work of both researchers and objective journalism, sociological research and statistics from official Bulgarian and EU institutions. The findings are of the authors, who rely on the above sources and analyse them with their expertise and experience in working with Roma communities, media research and social networking. By debunking the myths, the report will help the trained Roma activists and mediators to support the people in the neighborhoods navigate in the huge volume of various information and sift out false information from the true.

This report is not intended to enter into an academic, much less into a political debate with any of the authors of false and malicious allegations. It will refute deliberately unreliable facts through easily verifiable data from official sources, such as the National Statistical Institute (NSI), Eurostat, the websites of the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA), the Employment Agency (EA), etc., as well as from studies conducted by leading and reputable organizations dealing with these issues.

# MYTHS AND FAKE NEWS – A LITTLE ABOUT THE PHENOMENON AND THE CONCEPTS

## Disinformation And Fake News

Systematic disinformation as a tool to pursue certain political ends is nothing new. It has been used since the public opinion became important to those in power. One of the modern definitions of disinformation is: "deliberately creating and disseminating information that is known to be false" (Wardle's definition, used by the Center for the Study of Democracy in qualitative study on Roma communities). In recent years, with the development of technology, the use of disinformation has taken up an increasing share of the propaganda aimed at the pursuit of political gains by one power group or another, by playing different sections of society against each other. One of the main methods is the fabrication and dissemination of fake news in the media and social networks as false and misleading information, based in most cases on prejudice and lack of adequate information about the Roma.

## Myths And Prejudice

The classic definition, also published in the dictionary of myths, is an ancient tale of legendary heroes, gods, nature, or historical events and personages. The first association we make is with ancient Greek myths. Here, however, we consider contemporary myths, the definition of which is figurative: fiction, incredible story, untrue story. Often modern myths are based on half truths, reflected through the prejudices of a person or a group. Repeated many times and coated with additional "details" published in the media and social networks, they "become truth". In other words, myths are stories, shared by a group, that are part of that group's cultural identity. Part of this cultural identity is based on stereotypes and prejudices towards other groups, with whom they share common living spaces, without intensive contact with them.

Today, modern myths are multiplying and spreading like a wild fire through electronic media and social networks, and if we do not view them with a critical eye, we can easily find ourselves in a world of delusions and scary scenarios that will upset our already difficult daily lives. Through their uncritical acceptance, many people and entire sections of society, justify their personal misfortunes and direct their

negativity, turned into hatred, towards other groups that they usually do not know well.

Anti-Gypsyism / anti-Roma discrimination is a multifaceted phenomenon with widespread social and political prevalence. This is a critical obstacle to the inclusion of Roma in the wider society and prevents Roma from enjoying equal rights, opportunities and profitable socio-economic participation.

## Roma, Roma Population, Detached Closed Communities

In this report **the concept of Roma** is used as a general term, more widely so by the groups with declared Roma self-determination. It also includes groups with a mother tongue other than Romani, some of which state a preferred identity other than Roma. Therefore, in the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration (2012 - 2020) the name "Roma is accepted as a generalization" for Bulgarian citizens in vulnerable socio-economic situations, who self-identify as Roma, and for citizens in a similar situation, which the surrounding population defines as Roma, regardless of their self-determination[18].

It is important to clarify **the concept of detached / closed and isolated Roma communities**. Roma and other disadvantaged ethnic communities living more or less compactly in isolated neighborhoods / territories, separated from the macro-society. An essential characteristic of these communities is not so much their ethnic origin but their detachment and isolation, which affects the attitudes and the social norms. It is not ethnic origin that is crucial, but belonging to a closed, isolated community, because the critical risk factor is not ethnicity, but the life of generations in a closed community and in social isolation from the macro-society, which generates complex risks and trends towards marginalization.

18. National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2012-2020 (NRISB). http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=726

# THE ROMA - A HOMOGENEOUS OR DIVERSE COMMUNITY?

## The Myth: "All Roma Are The Same"

The myth "All Roma are the same" is very widespread among the majority and other ethnic groups in Bulgaria. The generalization of the notions about the Roma is caused by the ignorance of the macro-society, regarding the Roma and bears the marks of stereotypes and prejudices accumulated in it, summarizing the behavior of the most marginalized part of the Roma communities.

The Roma are not all the same, they are not a homogeneous community, as are not the same people and communities within any other ethnic group. Knowledge of the internal differences and specifics of the Roma communities is a prerequisite for taking adequate approaches and forms of interventions, which address both the attitudes and motivation for change within the isolated communities and the attitudes and readiness of the macro-society to accept excluded communities.

One of the main obstacles to Roma acceptance is the continuing practice of the majority - from the media to the administration and the dominant public opinion, of unifying perceptions (and prejudices) about Roma. They are most often reduced to the image of the most marginalized groups of the Roma communities. A distinction is seldom made, they are all placed under one denominator. Thus, it is easier to spread false statements about the Roma, which are gradually becoming long-lasting opinions of the majority of representatives of the macro-society. This is how myths are born.

It is important to know that the Roma are not a homogeneous community. Like any other ethnic group (including the Bulgarian one), there are different groups and subgroups among them, which differ according to social status, education and social experience, ethno-cultural traditions, religion and other characteristics.

## ROMA COMMUNITIES AND SUBGROUPS

First, like the Roma anywhere in the world, in Bulgaria the Roma are not a single and homogeneous, but a heterogeneous community, and the group affiliation is most important in terms of identity and norms of behavior. There are different classifications of Roma subgroups in academic research. If we summarize them, it can be assumed that in Bulgaria there are over 20 Roma subgroups, which are characterized by great diversity. These subgroups adopt different and often non-Roma

names. People declare different preferred identities - Roma, own self-group, sometimes Bulgarian, and numerous Turkish-speaking Roma communities prefer an ethnically neutral identity such as Millet and other similar groups or self-identification as Turks, although they are not accepted by ethnic Turks, who consider them Roma.

The subgroups also differ in traditional livelihood, origin (place of origin), religion and ethno-cultural codes. There are big differences in the spoken mother tongue in the subgroups - from the dialects of Romani, Turkish, Wallachian, including Bulgarian language, and in some subgroups or settlements the Roma speak only Bulgarian and do not even speak Romani. Often Roma from different subgroups do not communicate with each other, marriages between them are an exception.

Therefore, when planning integration policies and interventions in Roma communities, it is important to know and take into account these specifics when choosing approaches and "entry points" to individual communities. Similarly, these specifics must be taken into account and explained in the communication regarding counteraction to counterfeit news and disinformation, which usually "transfer" certain characteristics, social norms or traditions preserved in a subgroup on the entire Roma population, forming ugly and distorted notions of the entire Roma population. This is how myths are born, such as "all Roma do not speak Bulgarian", "all Roma sell their daughters for brides" and the like.

## SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN THE LEVELS OF INTEGRATION

There are significant differences in the degree of integration among the Roma communities in Bulgaria. About 20-25% of the Roma in the country live in a mixed environment among the macro-society, most of them are integrated and in some cases assimilated – they do not differ from the majority in their social, educational status and professional fulfilment, they are generally accepted by society and remain invisible, unrecognized by society as Roma.

In recent years, however, with growing anti-Roma sentiments and manifestations of the "anti-gypsyism" phenomenon, the attitude towards these integrated groups of the Roma community has changed in a negative direction. This results in deepening of the assimilation process - many families hide their origins so as to avoid the stigma of their families. At the same time, Bulgarians emigrating from a number of cities, are selling their homes to Roma with good economic and social status. This increases the percentage of Roma living outside the segregated neighbourhoods. Therefore, it is necessary to focus in this area part of the efforts to debunk fake news concerning the Roma and increasing the prejudices of the majority of the Bulgarian society.

Despite the above trends, the predominant part of the communities - over 70% of the Roma, live in detached neighborhoods / neighborhoods on the outskirts of settlements. Along with the relatively normal living conditions of some families, the serious problems of social isolation, detachment and poverty are concentrated there. According to the goals and intentions of the present report, it is there that the main target groups for future intervention are concentrated - young people, students and people of all ages, who are subject to fake news and who can help debunk them among the rest of the community.

## INTRA-COMMUNITY HIERARCHY BETWEEN FAMILIES AND CLANS IN ROMA COMMUNITIES

Internally, community hierarchy between families / clans is observed in each Roma neighborhood. In general, the internal stratification of authorities/influences is formed by various factors and at least two parallel hierarchies of influences on the community are differentiated.

The first one is based on the high community status of clans / families, which are traditionally accepted as an authority in the Roma community – authority that has a decisive influence on attitudes, adherence to or revision of traditions and public opinions in the neighborhood. Their informal leadership and authority in the community is built on complementary factors such as economic potential of the family, education, recognition of community-based activities (civic organizations, pastors, doctors, mediators, etc.).

The second hierarchy is based mainly on the material capabilities of the family, which are often a product of the gray (and black) economy in the shadow business, usury, etc. As research shows, without traditionally high intra-community status, such families are not recognized by the community as informal leaders, (although often non-Roma perceive them as such). They do not have a major impact on the attitudes and public opinion in the neighborhood, but they build dependences, through which they can influence the behavior and decisions of people, especially during elections.

These specifics are important in identifying possible agents of change within individual communities that have the potential to influence the change of attitudes and the community development processes.

## SEGREGATED COMMUNITIES AND MARGINALIZATION

Research shows that **in almost every closed community / neighborhood, areas of extreme poverty and marginalization have been formed.**

In 2013, a special study was conducted to map and characterize the most marginalized groups among ethnic minorities (under a project of the MLSP, co-financed by the European Social Fund). Based on objective statistics from the 2011 Census, this survey identifies the 10110 most marginalized households from ethnic minorities living across the country (out of a total of 101095 households from ethnic minorities).[19] In these areas the levels of employment, education, housing conditions are many times worse than in the rest of the Roma neighborhood.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that **marginalization is not just a matter of income and poverty.**

**The key characteristics of marginalized groups**[20], that are a consequence of generations living in social isolation, are essential:

- Permanently broken ties and communication of the marginalized group, both with "their" Roma community and with the macro-society;
- Attitudes towards the future and "day-to-day" thinking;
- Growing differences in living standards and the rest of the community;
- Economic models for access to income, long-term unemployment and isolation from the labor market of all generations in the household;
- Predominance of the priorities for family survival at the expense of development and personal fulfilment.

For the macro-society, these marginalized groups are in fact the "visible part" of the Roma - they are viewed with eyes blurred by negative stereotypes and prejudices. Although difficult, it is necessary to work with them, especially younger people and children, in order to start overcoming the decline.

In actuality, in these areas, families are doubly isolated and unaccepted, both by their community and by the macro-society. Marginalized groups are isolated in everyday life from "their" community in the Roma neighborhoods. A number of research and field surveys show that marriages and friendships between marginalized families and others in the neighborhood are either non existant, or are a very rare exception. In the intra-community social networks, there is a practice of support by wealthier to marginalized families (food, clothes), but in the communication between them, there are clearly distinctive boundaries.

19. Handbook for planning and implementing measures for the integration of marginalized communities with a focus on the Roma. MLSP, Sofia, 2013. Project BG051P0001-6.2.11 "Development of comprehensive measures for integration of the most marginalized communities among ethnic minorities with a focus on Roma" of MLSP with contractor Consortium C.E.G.A. ISIM-Prime Consulting Ltd".

20. Handbook for planning and implementing measures for the integration of marginalized communities with a focus on the Roma. MLSP, Sofia, 2013. Project BG051P0001-6.2.11 "Development of comprehensive measures for integration of the most marginalized communities among ethnic minorities with a focus on Roma" of MLSP with contractor Consortium C.E.G.A. ISIM-Prime Consulting Ltd".

# MYTHS AND REALITY - WHAT THE FACTS SHOW

## Main Myths Around Which Fake News About Roma Are Formed

We will focus on some of the myths that can be taken seriously at first glance - if we do not think more seriously or do not know the matter, we can take them for truth. This is where the catch lies, some elements are true, but combined with false facts and other elements that have been withheld, a real myth is created. Once in circulation, this myth can be branched and multiplied to be convenient for a variety of uses - from the most vicious slander, to justification for some actions of the Roma, which in turn, can lead to other negative consequences. These ramifications can be directed both at those who are overly negative about the Roma, as well as at those who are liberal, and do the same harm. Some will solidify their hostility, while others will waver and take a step towards negativity.

The most widespread myths even serve as a basis for political documents, aimed at raising the ratings of political parties from the populist spectrum. Such a document is the so-called "Concept for Changes in the Policy for Integration of the Gypsy (Roma) Ethnic Group[21], of the nationalist party IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), which its leader has submitted without success several times for consideration and approval by the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria.

## EDUCATION - "ROMA ARE ILLITERATE BECAUSE THEY DO NOT WANT TO AND CANNOT STUDY"

### The Myth: "The Roma Do Not Want To Study"

To rephrase, this myth means that education is not a priority to the Roma, neither to parents nor to children. Of course, it is again a generalization - this statement refers to all Roma. Indeed, even now, among some Roma, mostly those who are marginalized, there are some families for whom education is of no value, but of course it is not valid for all.

Since the middle of the previous century, the state's educational policy has included the Roma, by building schools in neighborhoods where only Roma study up to the end of the primary stage. A little later, special curricula have been introduced, in which the classes from the general education curricula have been reduced in favour of subjects such as

21. Concept for changes in the policy for integration of the Gypsy (Roma) ethnic group in Bulgaria and the measures for implementation. BMPO, 2019. http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=16795

labor training and practice, painting, physical education, dancing, singing. In reality, these curricula cut off the path of Roma children to secondary education, because they offered less training and even the excellent students dropped out of school in the first year. Immediately afterwards, they were included in the ranks of low-skilled workers in enterprises or as street cleaners.

And so, even if they received basic literacy in the so-called "Gypsy schools" at the time, the Roma knew that "study or no study, they would be a low-skilled worker". The motivation for a good education was kept to a minimum. The "special" curricula in the separate schools were abolished only in 1991. Although in the 1970s and 1980s, many Roma moved to the newly built panel complexes of cities and their children were already studying in mixed schools, the percentage of high school graduates remained very low and Roma university graduates could be "counted on the fingers of one hand", as the saying goes.

After the democratic changes of the early 1990s, for various reasons, some of the Roma living in the mixed housing complexes returned to the segregated neighborhoods, thus increasing the number of students in local schools.

At the same time, a number of NGOs are working to improve the quality of education there and to take some students out of neighbourhood schools. These efforts encourage some Roma children to get a better education, to complete secondary and for many - higher education.

Despite these successes, the majority of Roma in the detached neighbourhoods still have low education – elementary and primary education. The share of drop-outs remains high. The reasons are complex:

- Lack of perspective and motivation – study or no study, there's no work;
- Socio-economic - often parents do not have the capacity to prepare children for school, lack of clothes, teaching aids, food;
- Inadequate school environment - bad attitude of teachers; fear of theft for marriage for girls;
- Lack of adequate support from social and school authorities.

However, data from the last two censuses show that, **although slowly, the level of education among the Roma is gradually increasing.**

| Ethnic group | Bulgarians % | | Turks % | | Roma % | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Census / year | 2001 | 2011 | 2001 | 2011 | 2001 | 2011 |
| Higher education | 19.2% | 25.6% | 2.4% | 4.9% | 0.2% | 0.5% |
| Secondary education (up to 12 grade) | 47.6% | 52.3% | 21.9% | 29.7% | 6.5% | 9.0% |
| Primary education (up to 8th grade) | 24.9% | 18.0% | 46.9% | 44.5% | 41.8% | 40.8% |
| Elementary education (up to 4th grade) | 6.9% | 3.4% | 18.6% | 13.4% | 28.3% | 27.9% |
| Less than elementary education or never attended school | 1.4% | 0.9% | 10.2% | 7.5% | 23.2% | 21.8% |

*Table 1: Educational structure of the population by ethnic self-identification (NSI)*[22]

The process of increasing the level of education among Roma communities grows exponentially over the next 10 years. A study by Global Metrics, conducted at the end of 2020 on behalf of the Trust for Social Alternative, shows that the educational achievements of the Roma community in Bulgaria are improving over time, with the younger generations marking the highest results. The share of Roma attending school has increased in all age groups compared to 2011, i.e. the number of children from the Roma community participating in the education system is growing. „The share of persons with no education or with lower than elementary education decreased almost three times (from 15.3% in 2011 to 5.6% in 2019). The reasons for this are the change of generations and the influx of cohorts who have a higher level of education.

As a result, there is a decrease in the share of persons with elementary education (from 31% to 13.8%) and an increase of those with primary education (from 31% to 39.7%). At the same time, we observe a trend of increasing the share of Roma with secondary education (from 22.8% to 34.5%). The younger generations (19-35) have a contribution to this growth, with the highest increase in the number of people with secondary education (from 19% to 35% in the 19-25 age group and from 11% to 24% % in the 26-35 age group).[23] (The data used here for comparison with 2011 are taken from studies of UNDP and the World Bank and differ from those of the NSI censuses due to the use of different methodologies).

22. NSI data from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses, cited in the NSRBIR (2012 - 2020).
23. Education and fulfilment/employability of the Roma community in Bulgaria. Main conclusions from a nationally representative survey of the Trust for Social Alternative and Global Metrix Ltd. January 2020. p.16. http://socialachievement.org/web/files/richeditor/dokumenti/Education%20and%20Employment%20survey%20report%202020.pdf

## The Myth: "Even When Going To School, The Roma Learn Nothing"

The statement that "*Even when going to school, the Roma learn nothing*" is somewhat true for some Roma children, but it is more important to understand **why this is so** – is it due to their "*unwillingness to learn*" or is it the educational environment which the education system has set for them for decades, regardless of their desire.

It was noted above how the segregated Roma schools and the curricula for the children were created. Thus, from the very beginning, these schools became 'second-hand'. Although until the early 1990s, teachers there received special supplements to their salaries, which became known as the "*Gypsy 15 levs*", their work was not considered prestigious and any teacher who could move to another school did it. To the relatively low motivation for learning on behalf of children and families and the special curricula, the lack of motivation of most teachers is added, which undoubtedly affects the quality of education and the level of knowledge.

This harmful "tradition" is preserved to this day, and according to studies, over 60% of Roma children were "educated" in segreagated schools. The situation is particularly serious in the larger Roma neighborhoods, for example, in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik and other settlements, where the majority of residents are Muslim, speak Turkish, and identify themselves as Turks. The same applies to the villages and small towns in Northeastern and Southeastern Bulgaria - mostly Turkish is spoken there and people selfidentify as Turks or Millet. In some of the rural schools, children do not speak even basic Bulgarian. It is not clear how they study at all, given that all training must be conducted in Bulgarian. In all detached and segregated schools, the level of teaching is significantly lower than in other schools in Bulgaria. This is clearly seen in Table 2 with the results from the study of educational achievements. In it, the first three schools are of the so-called "elite" type, the next three are "standard", followed by detached and segregated schools. The data in the Table 2[24] show that the achievements of students in segregated schools are many times worse, but it is obvious that in ordinary - standard schools, the educational level is also not up to par.

24. Education, Sliven. The presentation was made at a Round Table: "Roma integration 10 years after EU accession", Sofia, 12.07.2017.

| № | Town | Name of the school | Number of students | Bulg. Language and literature | Maths | Total | % success rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Maximum score | | 65 | 65 | 246 | 100% |
| 1 | Sofia | Private primary school "St. Sophia" | 52 | 57,55 | 60,12 | 227,58 | 92,51 |
| 2 | Sofia | Sofia Mathematics High School "Paisii Hilendarski" | 128 | 58,06 | 63,13 | 225,49 | 91,66 |
| 3 | Varna | Mathematics High School "Dr. Peter Beron" | 58 | 55,98 | 63,13 | 220,03 | 89,44 |
| 166 | Burgas | "Anton Strashimirov" Primary School | 162 | 44,98 | 38,78 | 166,28 | 67,59 |
| 319 | Yambol | Secondary school „St.Kliment of Ochrid" | 98 | 36,82 | 33,70 | 153,52 | 62,41 |
| 461 | Plovdiv | Secondary school „Peyo Kracholov Yavorov" | 67 | 41,67 | 37,04 | 144,84 | 58,88 |
| 1607 | Yambol | Primary School „Dr. Petar Beron" | 92 | 17,57 | 24,89 | 88,72 | 36,07 |
| 1610 | Sofia | 75 Secondary school „T. Kableshkov", Faculteta district | 97 | 14,46 | 11,27 | 88,62 | 36,02 |
| 1665 | Stara Zagora | Secondary school „Hr. Smirnenski", Lozenets district | 78 | 15,81 | 16,81 | 82,20 | 33,42 |
| 1711 | Sliven | "Bratya Miladinovi" Primary School, Nadezhda district | 140 | 14,13 | 11,96 | 77,04 | 31,32 |
| 1747 | Burgas | "Hristo Botev" Primary School, Pobeda district | 42 | 12,23 | 11,09 | 72,24 | 29,37 |
| 1759 | Sofia | 94 Secondary school "Dimitar Strashimirov", Hristo Botev district | 94 | 13,16 | 12,11 | 69,77 | 28,36 |
| 1768 | Plovdiv | "Pencho Slaveykov" Primary School, Stolipinovo district | 118 | 8,39 | 9,81 | 67,65 | 27,50 |

*Table 2: Comparison of the results of the national external assessment in 7th grade for the 2015/2016 school year according to a list of 1839 schools*

The results of the PISA International Student Assessment Program for 2018, which examines reading skills, show that only 2.4% of students in Bulgaria meet the highest criteria for reading comprehension and analysis at the 5th and 6th levels[25]. In comparison, the "excellent students" in other countries are on average 8.6 percent. On average, 20 percent of students fall into the satisfactory fourth

25. Source: "Results of Bulgaria's participation in PISA 2018", Ministry of Education and Science.

level. In Bulgaria their share is only 8.4%. On the other hand, 72% of the students in the country enter the 2nd and 1st levels. The second level is considered critical with regard to skills. Students with results below it have significant gaps in their studies. In Bulgaria, their share according to the reading indicator is 47.1 percent.

Inequality in access to quality education is most severe and most visible in segregated neighborhoods. Data on the educational level in the detached neighborhoods, based on the results of the census, show that over 40% of the residents are without completed primary education. Most of the residents have completed the compulsory primary education for the country - 45 percent. 15% have secondary education. If we look for the reasons, we will see that with increasing age, the share of people with lower education increases. 18 percent of young people between the ages of 18 and 29, who studied at the beginning of this century, have secondary education. While among older people, who graduated in the 1990s and before 1989, this share decreases significantly with increasing age, reaching 8% for the oldest - over 60 years of age. Accordingly, the largest share of those who have never attended school (9%), is found in villages.

In the past twenty years, a positive trend has been observed - in big cities, more and more parents have been sending their children to schools outside the neighborhoods where they lived. Roma children there receive education equal to their peers and successfully continue to secondary and higher education. This fact, as well as the above mentioned, show that the claim / myth that Roma, even if they go to school, do not learn anything is not due to their ethnicity, but to a number of factors, some going back in time and others, reflecting the current state of Bulgarian education and the negative attitudes of the majority towards the Roma.

Based on the PISA results – on reading, mathematics and natural sciences, the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation also studied the relationship between the socio-economic situation of parents and the achievements of their children, as well as the extent to which the education system provides quality education. The report on Bulgaria, developed by the Center for Evaluation of Preschool and School Education[26], shows that the country maintains educational inequality and draws several conclusions:

- Bulgaria is one of the countries where students with unfavorable socio-economic status are most often concentrated in schools with no peers with high educational achievements. The country has a high index for the so called academic segregation - students with low and those with high achievements are isolated from each other.
- 60 percent of students from low-income families have lower than critical grades in natural sciences.
- The share of Bulgarian students from families with low socio-economic status and high educational achievements is relatively small - 13.6%. In other countries, their share is on average 29.2%. The

26. Source: "Results of Bulgaria's participation in the Program for International Student Assessment" Report, Center for Assessment of School and Preschool Education, December 3, 2019., http://copuo.bg/upload/docs/2020-07/Pisa_2018_full.pdf

Bulgarian education system fails to compensate for inequalities in family incomes.

The problem affects the whole country, not just the Roma community. Inequality in education is also confirmed by the data from the National Population Census in 2011. Data from the Census (2011) also shows significant differences in the level of completed education related to the place of residence. Almost three quarters of the urban population (71.6%) have completed at least secondary education, while in rural areas only 40.3% have completed secondary and higher education.[27]

## The Myth: "The Roma Received Good Education During Socialism"

The misconception that barriers to Roma education and employment have emerged with the changes since 1989, continues to spread to this day.

However, the conclusions based on in-depth research are interesting and demonstrative. In the surveys of 2016 (empirical studies for the development of the System - for the needs of the NCCEII), 12.3% of the Roma respondents stated that they were illiterate, compared to 0.1% of the non-Roma. With the distribution of the data on the functionally illiterate by age groups, the share of people over 59 is the highest - 17.3%.[28] Both these data and what has been described in the previous paragraph, show that the gap between the Roma and the majority in education has been broadening for many decades and again refute the myths about better education of the Roma during the so-called socialism - the highest share of recognized functional illiteracy is actually in the generations that graduated before 1989.

This conclusion is confirmed by a nationally representative sociological survey of 2013, according to which the share of functionally illiterate in the age group over 60 is the highest - 20%, i.e. among those Roma who received their education before 1989.[29]

One of the benchmarks for Roma education can be the number of graduates during and after socialism. Although there are no official data by ethnicity, according to experts, there are between 700 and 800 Roma

27. Source: „2011 Census: Final Data", National Statistical Institute, https://www.nsi.bg/census2011/NPDOCS/Census2011final.pdf
28. Report: Conducting empirical research on the SYSTEM, p. 47, http://nccedi.d8.gateway.bg/bg/node/139
29. Report on Activity 3: Study of the forms and regional distribution of the specific problems before the integration of the ethnic communities. Under the project of MLSP BG051P0001-6.2.11 "Development of complex measures for integration of the most marginalized communities among ethnic minorities with a focus on Roma" of MLSP with contractor Consortium "C.E.G.A-ISIM-Prime Consulting Ltd." The documents are published on the MLSP website 2014 (Quoted hereinafter as Report: Study of the specific problems before integration). pp. 7-8

with higher education for the entire period up to 1989. According to the data of The Student society for the development of interethnic dialogue, collected by them, with no claim for completeness, in 2006 there were 2,163 Roma students, 57% of whom were women and 43% men.[30]

The data from the already cited Global Metrics survey of 2020, confirm the positive trend of rapid increase in the number of Roma graduates. The survey reports an "increase across Roma communities (six times) in the share of people who have completed higher education" from 0.2% in 2011 to 1.2% in 2019). The groups with the highest growth rates in higher education graduate numbers are the younger generations, more women than men. The share of higher education graduates is twice as high among those, who have attended kindergarten, and there is a clear tendency for higher likelihood of graduating from higher education with the increase in the number of years spent in nurseries and kindergartens."[31]

With no claim for accuracy, we can conclude that in the last 30 years, the number of Roma with higher education has increased tenfold, compared to the previous 40 years.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROCESSES AND FEARS THAT "THE ROMA WILL ASSIMILATE US"

### The Myth: "The Roma Are Multiplying And Soon Enough (By 2050) They Will Become More Numerous Than Us, The Bulgarians"

The statement that "soon enough the Roma will assimilate us and the Bulgarians will disappear" has long been not only a media manipulation, but has become a political concept that also aims to generate fears and redirect public energy against an "external", imaginary enemy. Many claim authorship of this concept, but for the longest time, it has been most consistently defended by the sociologist Mihail Mirchev, who has been a professor at the University of National and World Economy for some time now. According to him, in 2050 the population of Bulgaria will shrink to 4.5 million, i.e. 2.5 million less than it is now, 40% of which will be Roma[32]. (Meeting with President Parvanov on the issues of demographic development on January 6, 2006.)

These false statements, dressed in scientific form, have been presented constantly and aggressively. The situation reached a point where

30. The Student society for the development of interethnic dialogue
31. Education and fulfilment/employability of the Roma community in Bulgaria. Main conclusions from a national representative survey of the Trust for Social Alternative and Global Metrix Ltd. January 2020. p.16. http://socialachievement.org/web/files/richeditor/dokumenti/Education%20and%20Employment%20survey%20report%202020.pdf
32. See, for example http://old.segabg.com/article.php?id=132988 https://vmro.bg/sotsiologt-mikhail-mirchev-ne-ostariavame-a-se-top

in October 2011, after a series of publications and using his political contacts with then-President Parvanov, Mihail Mirchev managed to persuade him to convene the National Security Advisory Council to discuss the threat to the country. In other words, the "Gypsyization", as these people call it, threatened Bulgaria's national security. From there on, the avalanche of publications in the printed and electronic media, as well as the social networks, completed what had been started.

What is the actual situation, what is true and what is not , and how the omission of some facts leads to distortion of the end result, so as to instill fear in the majority?

The data we will use below are from the National Census, conducted in 2011. Chart 1 below shows the age structure of the three main ethnic groups - Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma, as well as the national average as at 2011.

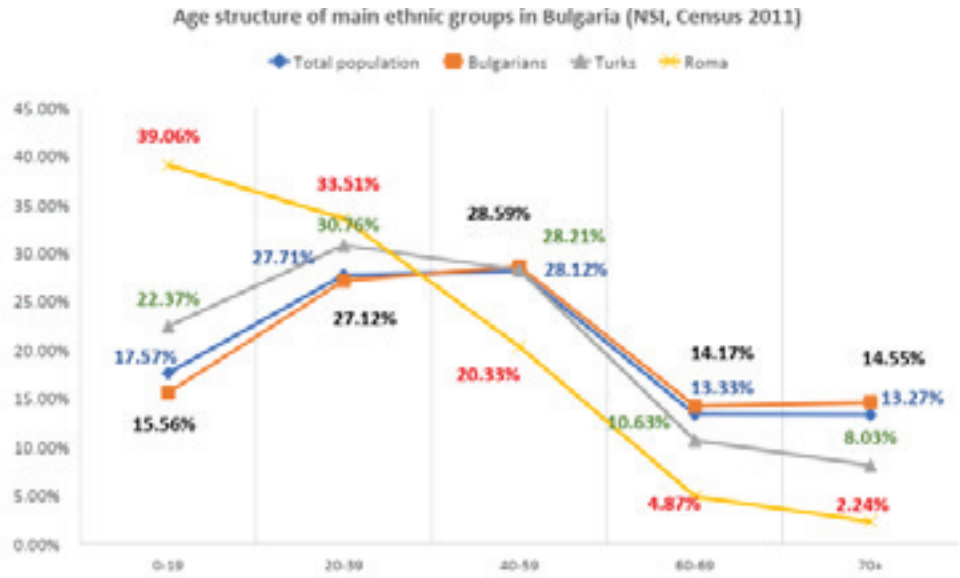


*Chart 1: Comparison of the age structures of the ethnic groups in Bulgaria - data from the Census of 2011. (The sum of the percentages for each ethnic group is equal to 100)*[33]

The data in Chart 1 show that only 7.11% of Roma reach the age of 60+, while the national average is 26.6%, and among Bulgarians this share is 28.72% - four times higher than that among Roma. The age segment of Roma between 70 and 79 years of age is five times smaller (2 percent), and in the segment over 80 years of age, the share of the Roma is almost twelve times smaller than that of the Bulgarians. The Chart also shows more than twice the share of the population aged 0 to 19: among the Roma - 39.06%, compared to the national average - 17.57%, and the difference compared to the Bulgarians (15.56%) is two times

33. NSI, Census Data (2011) with authors' own calculations.

and a half. The percentage of the population between the ages of 20 and 59 is about 56 % for Bulgarians and 54 % for the Roma, respectively - almost equal values but for the Roma, it is higher in the segment that enters the 20 - 29 age group than the one where people leave the 50 – 59 age group. The opposite is true for the Bulgarians. Indeed, 10 years have passed since the census, but expert analyses and observations of demographic trends among the Roma community suggest that in the next Census, the expected difference in the data as at 2021 compared to 2011 is unlikely to be striking.

Based on this data, we can draw the conclusion that the two ethnic groups have different age groups - younger among the Roma and definitely aging among the Bulgarians. At the same time, the high early mortality rate among the Roma is an obvious factor that they do not increase much as a relative share of the population.

A number of other assumptions can be made from Chart 1, regarding the attitude to the life horizon in both communities, the attitude to jobs under employment contracts, affecting the pensions that the Roma will not receive, significantly earlier marriages between them, not to mention those between minors etc. Some of these findings disprove other myths discussed later in the report, such as the myth that Roma drain the pension system.

No official data by ethnicity has been collected on the number of large families in Bulgaria, but research indisputably proves that the high birth rate among the Roma is a myth. Indirect data, collected in individual Roma neighborhoods on the number of children born in them, eligible for enrollment in the first grade in the early 1990s and twenty years later, show that the number of children in these neighborhoods has decreased more than twice.

The media also quote data that only 3% of all families have three children and only 1% have more than three[34]. The general Eurostat data as a whole on families with children in Bulgaria, show that as at 2015, a total of 93% of all families with children have one or two children. Only 6.9% of all families with children have three or more children,[35] among them families of different ethnic backgrounds, including Bulgarians and ethnic Turks. Given these ratios, it is difficult to take seriously the threat that "*the Bulgarians would disappear due to the high birth rate among the Roma*", initially brought up by political forces belonging to the so-called left, and then widely circulated by extreme nationalist formations in Bulgaria.

34. Breaking news: 10 myths about the Roma. https://www.actualno.com/columnist/article/1172/author_id/29
35. Eurostat, 2016. http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_lvph05&lang=en

## The Myth: "The Roma Marry Early And Give Birth Early"

No one can deny that there are cases of child marriages where "children give birth to children". However, there is a widespread myth that this holds true for all Roma, because it is the Roma culture, they are not up to date and get married early, disregarding the maturity of the newlyweds, especially of the girls.

However, research on marriages in Roma communities shows **a steady trend towards a gradual increase in the normal age for marriage, and a steady decrease in the number of child marriages in Roma communities, accordingly**. In the 60s and 80s of the twentieth century, "15-16 years of age for the girls and 17-18 years of age for the boys were considered the ultimate for starting a family", after which the age for marriage gradually rises to and above the age of adulthood.[36]

As shown on Chart 2, according to NSI data, child marriages / cohabitations decreased by more than 30% in the ten years between the 2001 and 2011 censuses alone.

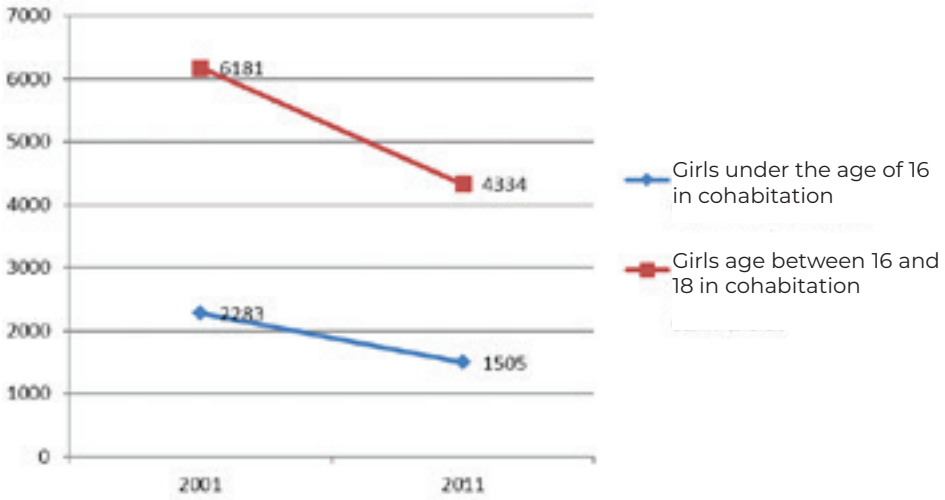


*Chart 2. Trends in the number of girls under 18 in cohabitation (NSI data)*

In 2001, 6,181 girls under the age of 18 were in cohabitation, 2,283 of them under the age of 16. Ten years later, the number of 18-year-olds, living in cohabitation has fallen by about 30% to 4334 in 2011. The reduction in 16-year-olds living in cohabitation is over 33%, reaching 1505 in 2011.

The data vary across different areas and Roma subgroups. Of course, one can always give an example of a detached neighborhood where early marriages / cohabitations continue to have a relatively high, sustainable rate, but this is the exception rather than the rule and applies mainly to

36. Zahova, Sofia. Social norms in Roma communities that hinder girls' access to education and especially to secondary education. Report from a study developed for UNICEF Bulgaria. Sofia, 2015, p. 19.

its marginalized section. According to research, early marriages in the last two decades are most common in some Roma groups in eastern Bulgaria, called Turkish Roma by the surrounding population, especially those, who live compactly in neighborhoods in large towns and/or detached villages. Most of them are Turkish-speaking, with a preferred Turkish identity or a more neutral Millet identity. Data from the last two NSI censuses (2001 and 2011) confirm that the highest number of underage girls living in cohabitation is in the districts where exactly these Roma communities predominate – the number is especially high in the districts of Burgas, Varna, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Sliven, Stara Zagora and Haskovo. More than half of the girls, living in cohabitation there are under the age of 16 and 18.[37]

Raising the age of marriage and consequently reducing early marriages is a process that should not surprise us. Every community goes down that path, some earlier, others later. It all depends on the degree and time of lifestyle change, degree of isolation, sustainability of traditions, etc. The influence of the environment within the respective community and the mutual penetration of cultures is especially important. Roma across Europe embrace a part of the respective culture of the dominant ethnic group, adapting it to their views. Part of this culture are the family models, which they adopt with the respective delay. Just like the Bulgarian marriage model had early marriages and many children during the pre-modern period, then the age increased and the number of children decreased to two or less, in the same way Roma families gradually move towards marriages at a later age and up to two children, but a bit later in time.

As shown on Chart 3, for the 1993 to 2014 period, the early birth rate reached 9.8% from almost 25% in 1992, i.e. it has decreased two and a half times in twenty years.

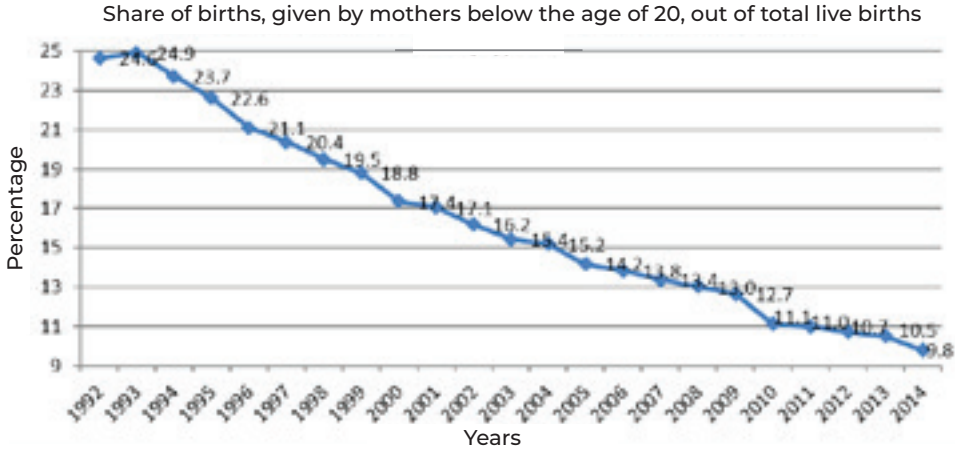


*Chart 3: Births of mothers under 20 years of age (NSI data)*

37. Zahova, Sofia. Social norms in Roma communities that hinder girls' access to education and especially to secondary education. Report from a study developed for UNICEF Bulgaria. Sofia, 2015, pp. 20-22.

This Chart 3 does not present the information by ethnicity, but given the fact that a large proportion of the early births, preceded by early marriages, are of Roma families, we can conclude that the number of early marriages is declining by the same percentage, which is confirmed by NSI statistics. Accordingly, there is enough data on the correlation between early births, cohabitation and education, the degree of isolation of some neighborhoods, religious affiliations, etc., but even in these conditions, the number of early marriages and births is declining.

These data refute the claims, published in a number of media and social networks, that Roma continue to marry early and have children for the sole purpose of draining the country's social system and continue living in their closed world, which has nothing to do with European development of the 21st century. Although there are still many such cases, mostly among marginalized communities, they are gradually becoming the exception, rather than something that comes naturally.

## EMPLOYMENT, INCOME AND MYTHS THAT THE "ROMA ARE A PEST OF SOCIETY"

### The Myth: "The Roma Live On Social Assistance, And Refuse To Work"

How many people actually receive social assistance in Bulgaria? The number of recipients of social assistance and the allocated funds can be seen in the annual reports of the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA). The data are published on the website of the Agency, in the section "About us, annual reports"[38]. In 2019, a total of 31,004 people across the country were supported with one-time, targeted and monthly social assistance, according to SAA data. The total amount, allocated for social assistance from the budget is BGN 30,734,949, almost BGN 4 million less than the funds spent in 2018 (See Table 3).

Contrary to popular belief, the data show a steady trend in the policy of reducing the number of assisted persons in recent years. The annual report of the ASA shows that 33,422 citizens received monthly assistance in 2017. In 2018, their number decreased by 23 percent to 27,408 people. In 2019, 23,699 people were supported with monthly assistance, or 16% less, compared to the previous 2018.

38. https://asp.government.bg/bg/za-agentsiyata/misiya-i-tseli/otcheti-i-dokladi

| Year | Total number of assisted persons | Budget | Number of persons receiving monthly social assistance | Budget |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | 31 004 | 30 734 949 BGN | 23 699 | 28 248 343 BGN |
| 2018 | 34 518 | 34 634 301 BGN | 27 408 | 32 383 093 BGN |
| 2017 | 40 846 | 35 511 731 BGN | 33 422 | 33 255 390 BGN |

*Table 3: Persons receiving social assistance in the 2017 – 2019 period. (Source: ASA, Annual Activity Reports for the 2017-2019 period.)*

The ASA reports an increase in the average monthly allowance from BGN 83 to BGN 98, as one of the reasons is the increased amount of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) from BGN 65 to BGN 75, as of January 1, 2018, according to the annual ASA report. (The monthly social assistance is defined as a percentage of the Guaranteed Minimum Income /GMI/ per person for the respective year. For 2020, it was BGN 75 per month. The monthly allowance for persons who are not of retirement age and are cohabiting or married, is 66 percent of the GMI. For single people under 65, it is 73% of the GMI).

**Only 23,699 people across the country received monthly social benefits in 2019. Their number decreased every year - in 2019 by 16%, in 2018 by 23%.** Regardless of the indexations to the annual minimum income, the funds allocated from the budget for social assistance decrease every year. If in 2017 the allocated funds exceed BGN 35 million, then in 2019 the allocated budget was BGN 5 million less.

Given that the Roma in Bulgaria, according to expert estimates, are at least 700,000 people, of which about 450,000 are in the age range for receiving monthly social benefits and we assume that all these benefits go only to the Roma (which is not true), we will get the following result: only 5% of the Roma "live on social assistance" in the average amount of BGN 85. In addition, in order to receive it, each of them is obliged to give four hours/day of community service for 14 days.

## The Myth: "The Roma Women Give Birth To Children In Order To Support Themselves From The Child Allowances"

In order to receive social benefits for children / child benefits, a family must meet a number of requirements:

- Children must attend kindergarten or school. The attendance is proved by an official note from the respective institution. Absence from school is grounds to stop the support. Every month, kindergartens and schools are obliged to submit information about

absentees in the Information System of the Ministry of Education, module "Absences of children and students"[39]. From there, the report automatically goes to the social assistance services.

- Children should be inocculated and should have undergone mandatory medical examinations. It is proved again with an official note from the child's GP or from the Regional Health Inspectorate, in case the child does not have one.
- Minimum income of the family. The application for child benefits also declares cohabitation without marriage, taking into account the income of the partner. The data on family cohabitation are checked by the employees of the Social Assistance Directorate by residence. For 2020, families with a monthly income of each family member of up to BGN 410 for the previous year, received childcare allowances. Those with a monthly income between BGN 410 and BGN 500, received 80% of the amount.

As of 2017, the monthly child benefit is determined depending on the number of children in the family. After the second child, the allowance decreases for each subsequent child. This is the amount of the monthly aid for 2020.

| Number of children | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Next child |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amount of monthly allowance | 40 BGN | 90 BGN | 135 BGN | 140 BGN | 20 BGN |

*Table 4: Monthly childcare allowance in 2020 (Source, ASA)*

Children, whose families receive monthly allowances regularly, go to kindergarten or school, have undergone health examinations, and the income per family member is less than BGN 410 per month (2020).

The official figures of the Agency for Social Assistance in no way correspond to the publications in some media, which are also circulated on social networks, that Roma women give birth to support themselves on child benefits, which reached over 1000 levs. To receive this amount, the family should have over 40 children!

## The Myth: "The Roma Go Abroad To Steal, Not To Work"

In the years of transition - through the crises of hyperinflation, economic restructuring, high unemployment, changes in the social system – the labor migration abroad is undoubtedly crucial for the survival of Roma neighborhoods in Bulgaria. After that, the income from working abroad retains its significant share in the income of a significant part of the Roma in Bulgaria, but this time contributing not only to the survival but

39. https://ots.mon.bg/

also to the quality of life of families, definitely visible through renovated housing, appliances and other external signs of material improvements.

This model is also observed among the Bulgarian majority and other ethnic and ethno-confessional groups - Turks, Bulgarians-Muslims, etc. The migration model of permanent family resettlement abroad has been preferred among Bulgarians, Bulgarians-Muslims and other groups in Bulgaria since the 1990s. Initially, the Roma had the most widespread preferences for labour emigration, typical of Bulgarians in the 1920-1940 period. At that time, part of the family or the whole family went abroad, but not with the idea of settling permanently there, but to earn money and return home, using the means to build a home or a business.

Gradually, however, a change in the migration pattern began to emerge among Roma communities, which has been observed to occur en masse in the last five or six years in many of the detached neighborhoods. There is a transition from the model of labour migration - temporary labor migration of a family member to ensure the support of the family in Bulgaria - to the model of relocation of the whole family, together with the children, settling down abroad, taking care of the education for the children, work for one or both parents, inclusion in the social assistance systems, adaptation and adoption of living standards "in compliance with the rules".

The dominant pattern of previous years of temporary migration or labour migration is still preferred by poorer and marginalized groups with limited resources and skills, some of whom go to work temporarily, while others continue to rely on "social services" abroad to ensure the family survival in Bulgaria.

However, many migrants with education and initiative are relocating, integrating into the labor market and living better lives. An Open Society Institute survey (2011) found that 86% of Bulgarian Roma abroad work.[40] These trends are also confirmed by later studies on the employment of Bulgarian Roma migrants in Spain and the Czech Republic.[41] From the interviews with the Roma from Bulgaria, working in these two countries, it can be concluded that they have adapted to the new conditions, which they find significantly better than those in Bulgaria, feel accepted by others and do not plan to return soon . One of the reasons for this decision is the fact that children prefer the new environment to living in an isolated neighborhood, where hygiene and living conditions are incomparably worse.

40. Pamporov A. Emigrant experience and intentions for emigration of the population of Bulgaria in the February-July 2011 period. Sociological problems, vol. 1-2 / 2012, p.337.
41. The faces of Roma migration in the EU. Study by the Center for Liberal Strategies, NGO Links and the C.E.G.A. Foundation. http://roma-migration.info/49/page.html

## The Myth: "The Roma Live In Illegal Houses Because The Law Does Not Apply To Them"

In response to these myths, it is important to know - at least a little - about the history of Roma neighborhoods and the policies conducted by the authorities on the urbanization of Bulgaria over the past 100 years.

Since the middle of the 19th century, the systematic settlement of the Roma began, mainly in detached neighborhoods on the outskirts of large cities. It continues as a natural process and intensifies as a targeted state policy in Bulgaria after the Second World War. The settlement ended in 1958, when the authorities forcibly coerces the representatives of the last two groups - the Katunars and the Kardarashs - to settle permanently.

Periodically, since the beginning of the twentieth century until the mid-1970s, the Bulgarian authorities took drastic measures to "clean up" the central parts of the city by "relocating" to the periphery those Roma neighborhoods that found themselves in the center of the township due to the urban sprawl.

The initial limited territories of these neighborhoods could not accommodate the growing population due to the natural growth and the influx from the villages. New premises were being added to the existing houses, and where possible, the neighborhoods were being expanded at the expense of adjacent plots of land, municipal, state or cooperative property. Most of the houses were built without construction permits, which until the mid-1960s was a common practice not only for Roma neighborhoods but also for villages in the country. Most of the detached neighborhoods do not have cadastral maps, some of them do not even exist in the legal space, but they are supplied with water and electricity, which can not happen without the permission of state and municipal authorities.

The process of growing Roma neighborhoods has intensified, following the abolishment of mandatory inhabitancy/domicile law and the economic restructuring, when many Roma families, living in prefabricated complexes, returned to their neighborhoods in order to survive, while others streamed to the big cities in search of a livelihood. According to data from the beginning of the XXI century, stipulated in the National Program for Improving the Housing Conditions of Roma, at least around 25% of Roma housing is completely illegal.[42]

Later surveys indicate a higher share of illegal housing among the Roma. According to a representative sociological survey on the problems of

42. National Program for Improvement of the Living Conditions of Roma in Bulgaria 2005–2015. p. 9.

Roma communities in 2013, only 55% of respondents said they had a notary deed for land ownership, 52.3% - a notary deed for the house, and 51.1% pay tax on their buildings and garbage collection tax.[43] A sociological survey on the housing situation in Roma neighborhoods in 2016 shows similar data - 59.4% of Roma respondents say they have a notary deed for their home, and other respondents most often point out the "lack of capacity" or the "grandfather clause" as the reason for the lack of a notary deed.[44] Indeed, the majority of Roma have lived in these homes for over 50 years, and with regard to the problem of "the missing documents", the state remembers about demolition during pre-election campaigns or if the terrain is attractive for construction of commercial sites.

**From everything said so far, it is clear that the problems with unregulated detached Roma neighborhoods are not recent. They have accumulated over the last 100 years and more.**

What are the possibilities for change now and is anything being done about it, especially since it is not only about the Roma neighborhoods? The conditions for regularization of unregulated neighborhoods are set out in the Spatial Planning Act (SPA) and include several prerequisites for a home to be legalized:

- The settlement should have an adopted General Development Plan;
- The manner of permanent land use must be changed from forestation use or use for agricultural needs to urbanized territory.
- A cadastral map of the neighborhood must be available, areas for green, social and technical infrastructure must be outlined, the streets and land properties of houses must be regulated;
- The neighborhood must have an approved Detailed Development Plan.

At the end of 2018, out of 265 municipalities in Bulgaria, only 75 had current general development plans for their entire territory. The data were presented by the Ministry of Regional Development, which is responsible for enforcing the Spatial Planning Act, in response to a parliamentary question to the former Minister Petya Avramova on 23 November 2018. The deadline for the preparation of General Development Plans of municipalities was extended in 2016, 2017, for the last time it was extended until the end of 2020. This deadline again failed to be met.

According to one of the main findings of a study by the Equal Opportunities Initiative Association (March 2017), the issuance and execution of orders for the demolition of illegal housing is particularly unfavorable and disproportionate to Roma families, in violation of the Racial Equality Directive of the European Council (Directive 2000/43)

43. Report: Study of the specific problems of Roma integration. 2013. p. 34.
44. Report from a study on housing problems in Bulgaria, 2016, C.E.G.A., p. 14.

with regard to "indirect discrimination" on ethnic grounds"[45]. The Association provides information in supports of the above:

- 97% or 500 of the 514 orders of the DNCC concerning residential buildings, issued in 2010-2012 period refer only to Roma dwellings.
- According to data collected from two thirds of the municipalities, 89% or 399 of all 444 orders, concerning residential buildings, issued by local administrations, refer to only housing of the Roma concerned.[46]

In order to legalize the dwellings in the detached Roma neighborhoods, it is mandatory to prepare the General Development Plans of the municipalities and to introduce a regulation scheme. As at the end of 2018, 75 out of 265 municipalities in Bulgaria had their plans ready.

## The Myth: "The Roma Do Not Pay For Electricity"

The issue of electricity thefts began in the mid-1990s, or at least it was at that time that they became visible through the media. It was namely through the media, that it was suggested that only in Roma neighborhoods no one pays for the electricity consumed, that bed springs, tractor wheels and other "exotics" were used as heating appliances there that draw unlimited amounts of electricity.

No one - neither the media, nor the relevant institutions, paid much attention to the houses in the suburbs of Sofia, for example, where the theft of electricity also reached alarming proportions. Punitive actions were aimed at the detached Roma neighborhoods, where, indeed, thefts of electricity occurred, but not by all residents. Mass power outages began in entire neighborhoods, imposing collective guilt and responsibility, not just on those who actually broke the rules. This led to mass social unrest in these neighborhoods and refusal to pay by regular payers. In some places, politicians intervened and forced energy companies to restore energy supply, in order to benefit at the upcoming elections. This move of the politicians really blew up the society - "the Roma are given rights to which the other Bulgarian citizens do not have access!".

However, after the elections, the Roma in the big neighborhoods, like Stolipinovo, were again left without electricity or it was turned on at certain hours. Unlike other neighborhoods, Roma electricity meters were mounted on eight-meter poles to prevent theft, but at the same time users did not have access to information on energy consumption.

45. Report "Demolition of housing in illegal Roma neighborhoods: a sustainable solution to Roma integration or a problem of discrimination against Roma in Bulgaria", March 2017, Association for Equal Opportunities Initiative", https://www.equalopportunities.eu/docs/REPORT-2017-bg.pdf
46. Ibid

It was also a kind of discrimination, reported as such by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, which ordered the removal of electricity meters from the poles. Gradually, both the Roma and the energy companies saw that the solution to the problem could be achieved through negotiations and mutual concessions. Contracts for deferred payment of accumulated debts were concluded with households, and in some places, energy companies invested in new electricity meters with remote metering.

In Stolipinovo, the problem ended 14 years ago, after EVN replaced the technical infrastructure and installed 6,300 new meters in 2007. One of the last cases is in Dupnitsa in December 2014. There, CEZ concluded contracts for deferred payments with households, increased individual accounts and ended the practice of power outages for regular payers as well. In a Free Europe survey[47] camong CEZ, EVN and Energo-Pro in 2019, electricity distribution companies said they had no problem collecting payments on electricity bills. In Stolipinovo over 98% pay regularly according to EVN, in Hristo Botev and the Faculteta neighbourhoods in Sofia the collection rate varies between 93 - 95%.

These successes were reflected in the media. Nethertheless, one of the most persistent stereotypes in society and grounds for accusations against the Roma for failing to meet their obligations – remain the using of electricity without paying for it. However, there is no denying that in the last few years there have been almost no publications in the media and on social networks about Roma stealing electricity. Nevertheless, if you ask any person on the street who steals electricity, they will answer - the Roma.

## MYTHS ABOUT ROMA POLICIES: "BILLIONS ARE POURED INTO ROMA INTEGRATION"

### The Myth: "The Roma Are Privileged - Billions Are Spent On The Roma"

The myth of the billions invested in Roma integration is one of the most prevalent and untrue myths about the Roma. The misconception about the "huge money" spent on Roma integration, the country's budget and EU funds has penetrated the public sphere to such an extent that it is now used even in political documents, such as the Concept for Changes in Integration Policy of the Gypsy (Roma) Ethnicity in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Measures for Their Implementation"of IMRO.

In actuality, the truth is quite different. In fact, no funds are provided from the state budget and this can be seen from the State Budget Act, which is adopted by the National Assembly every year. It is relied solely on funds from the European Social Fund, but even so, there has never been a budget headline, allocated specifically for Roma integration. The funds are intended for groups and people with disabilities, who are

47. See "Do Roma pay for electricity? The figures speak.", Ivaylo Vezenkov, Free Europe, 08.03.2018 r. https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/29810139.html

a priority for the European Commission. This way are funded training courses for the unemployed and for young people.

Serious manipulation is being done in the development of the Action Plans for the implementation of the National Strategy for Roma Integration. In them, under the individual components, funds are provided, which are not targeted specifically at the Roma, but at all users. For example, in the education priority of the Plan, the funds for free textbooks for all students up to the primary level of education (7th grade) are included as targeted at the Roma. These are huge funds that have nothing to do with the integration funds.

The most clear idea of how the money from the EU funds are distributed and what the real amounts that go to the Roma in Bulgaria, can be obtained from the study of the Institute for Public Environment Development, conducted in 2019[48] and covering three districts of Northwestern Bulgaria - Vidin, Montana and Vratsa. It is well known that the concentration of Roma communities in that area is one of the highest in the country. The survey covers "all projects implemented under operational programs on the territory of the surveyed 23 municipalities, whose number is 552. Their total value is BGN 674,936,787. Funding for all 101 projects, in the descriptions of which, support for vulnerable groups has been requested, is equal to a share of 9.9% of the total amount. The value of the 69 projects with priority targeting vulnerable groups, including Roma, amounts to 4.4% of the total. The value of those 11 projects, for whose activities and results the Roma are explicitly indicated as a target group, is 0.5% of the total amount."

And these facts are best illustrated by the data in Chart 4

48. Money, measures, policies: How far does support for Roma communities go? https://iped.bg/bg/publication/roma-policies-report2019BG

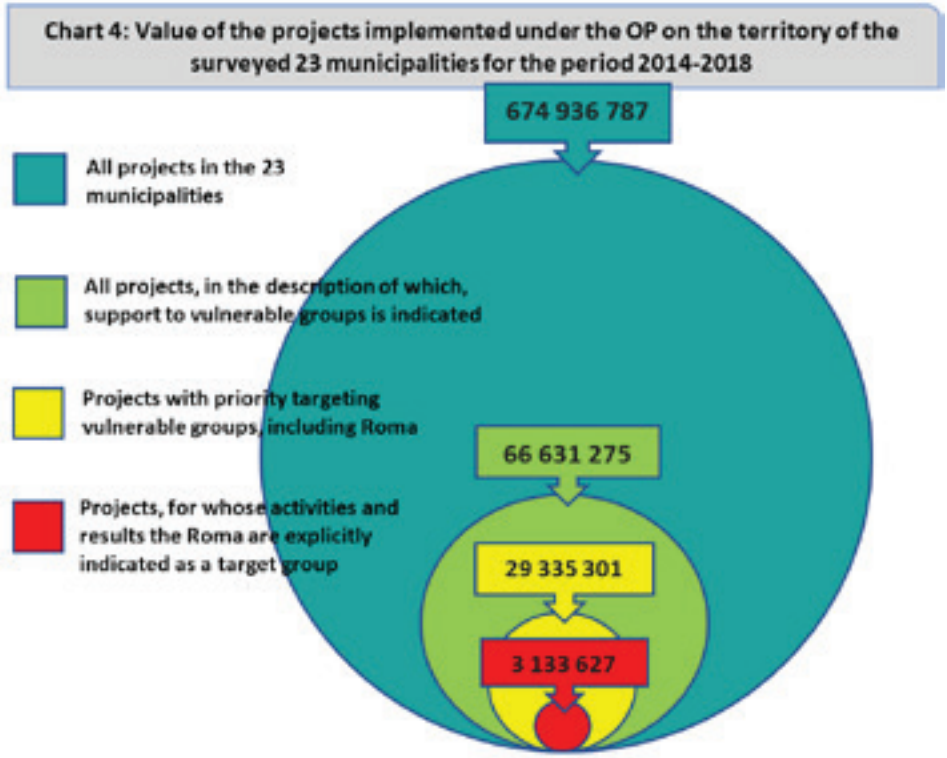


*Chart 4 (in red are the funds targeted exclusively at the Roma)*

Thus, on the one hand, it turns out that municipalities point to EU funds as the most significant source of funding for measures to support socially vulnerable groups and in particular the Roma integration. On the other hand, however, the actual amount of funding for such interventions is insignificant, compared to the total amount of European funds, allocated to the surveyed municipalities for the 2014-2018 period.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that more than half of European funds in support of socially vulnerable groups and Roma are actually distributed on a common basis and not as a priority to them. Significantly less funds are allocated to projects whose main final beneficiaries are in fact the vulnerable people. The share of funds for projects that openly address the specific needs and problems of marginalized Roma communities remains almost insignificant.

## The Myth: "The Roma Neighbourhoods Are A Breeding Ground Of Covid And From There They Infect Others"

„The Roma and their neighborhoods are a breeding ground for Covid, from where it spreads to the rest of the settlements." This claim was widespread, especially in the first year of the pandemic, and not only among ordinary people, but also among decision makers on how to fight the infection. Without seeking scientific and empirical evidence, based on personal and societal prejudices, the medics who managed the pandemic, together with local authorities, took drastic discriminatory measures against Roma living in the detached suburbs. Some of the neighborhoods were literally blocked, with checkpoints, hampered supply of basic necessities and healthcare. There were also locations which were "disinfected" by helicopters, as if insects lived there, not people. These actions against Roma neighborhoods have reinforced the opinion of most Bulgarians that the Roma are, indeed, causing the spread of the Covid virus.

Tensions rose additionally due to new rumors that Roma returning from abroad were massively infected and did not comply with quarantine restrictions. In some stores, they began to prevent Roma from entering for fear of infecting their employees and other buyers.

In this case, we can not talk about myths in the classical sense of the word, because the time of their creation and sustainability is relatively limited. It is rather a matter of disinformation aimed at reinforcing anti-Roma attitudes and even greater isolation of the Roma from the rest of Bulgarian society. In this case, the accumulated negative stereotypes about the Roma are used, combined with the fear of the virus and the fabricated lies, circulated in the media and social networks, that in isolated neighborhoods almost everyone is infected with Covid.

What was the actual situation in the isolated Roma neighborhoods in the last two "Covid" years? There are no statistics on the level of virus incidence specifically for these neighborhoods. It is not clear what this lack is due to - equal treatment of all Bulgarian citizens, because it is difficult to do or because those in power have not thought of it. A study by the Open Society Institute - Sofia was conducted at the end of the first year of the pandemic, covering ten of the largest neighborhoods, in half of which "special anti-epidemic measures" had been implemented, in other words – they were isolated from the rest of the settlements. The authors declare that the aim of the study is to determine whether there are specific problems (and / or manifestations of common problems) in Roma neighborhoods in a situation of pandemics; if so, what causes them; what are the interactions between the residents of neighborhoods with a predominantly Roma population, local authorities and NGOs in a

pandemic situation.[49]

According to this study, and according to empirical observations in the course of the pandemic, certain conclusions can be drawn.

- The incomes of the Roma in the isolated neighborhoods have significantly decreased in the first year of the pandemic - about 70% express such an opinion. A February 2021 survey by Alpha Research found that, on average, 12.4% of families in the country expressed such an opinion - more than four times less than the Roma.
- The imposition of Special Anti-Epidemic Measures only in Roma neighborhoods without real evidence of their need, apart from the fact of being discriminatory, also has an impact on reducing the income of the affected persons. Many people could not go to work because they did "piecework" repairs in construction and small services. Isolation also affected people's health. In some places it was difficult to obtain medication, they could not go to the relevant medical centers for an examination.
- The fear that the Roma were hosts of the infection and therefore had to remain isolated did not seem to apply to the sanitation workers, who continued their work in full lockdown. Otherwise, the cities would be littered. Few thought of thanking the people rising before dawn, who were often the only living souls we could see outside during these troublesome months.
- The others, who fearlessly performed their duties and worked non-stop (according to the media and social networks) in "Covid packed neighborhoods" were health and education mediators. Because after the closure of schools and the transition to distance learning, a large number of Roma children actually dropped out of the education system, due to lack of access to the Internet and technical means. This lack was largely compensated by the mediators who were bringing the teaching materials on paper to the children's homes.
- Declaring all Roma neighborhoods dangerous and closing some of them down brought about something positive as well. Communities got themselves together and sought their internal potential. Initiative groups and civil society organizations arranged the collection of food and means of protection - masks and disinfectants, which were distributed among the residents of the neighborhoods. Here again, the health mediators came to the fore, and took part in the distribution and delivery to the families of the means of protection and food received from charities and the Red Cross.

49. COVID-19 in Roma neighborhoods in Bulgaria. (March-December 2020). Report of the Open Society Institute - Sofia. http://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Covid_Roma_Apr_2021.pdf

The difficulties experienced by the Roma from the isolated neighborhoods during the Covid crisis, caused by the unacceptable discriminative attitude of the authorities and the macro society, were exacerbated by the rumors circulating inside them. Starting with the fact that “Covid does not exist”, but it is used to isolate the Roma and on to the myths about vaccines, “which aimed at the sterilization of the Roma and their elimination”, dozens of rumors and fake news were spread in the neighborhoods. Unfortunately, most of them came from the Roma themselves, and especially from the Roma pastors, who had previously spread the frightening false news that the government would take the children from their parents. It is difficult to say, and even more difficult to prove, what was the original source of those rumors and who had influence over those who spread them.

# APPROACHES TO COUNTERACT ANTI-ROMA DISINFORMATION

The Handbook on Recognition and Dealing with Fake News, Manipulation and Disinformation contains a basic methodology on how to discern fake news, media disinformation and manipulation, addressing both more general social issues and specifically anti-Roma manipulation. It is beneficial for the development of digital media literacy and the capacity of all target groups of the Care for Truth project, providing them with basic knowledge and skills on the topic. This handbook is complemented by two specialized practical handbooks - one for Roma and pro-Roma activists and another - for teachers, to equip them with specific methods and tools, tailored to their tasks and their own specific target groups, which they address.

The main content of the developed handbooks is published in abbreviations in this book.

# BASIC HANDBOOK: HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE FAKE NEWS

Discriminatory and specifically anti-Roma arguments are fueled by media manipulation and disinformation, including fake news. Unfortunately, through social networks such content is dissiminated quickly and uncritically by many users, which contributes to the wider spread of stereotypical and negative attitudes towards minority groups. Therefore, a good way to counteract such a negative trend is to provide Roma and pro-Roma activists, as well as teachers, who work to develop the media literacy of their students, with tools to enable them to recognize and counteract disinformation and media manipulation.

The methodology is intended for initial basic training of representatives of the main target groups of the project - Roma leaders, mediators, teachers. The training modules are as interactive as possible, so as to enable the learners to participate actively and not just be passive listeners. For convenience, the modules are presented in tabular form, with the left-hand side column containing the activities performed by the trainer, while the right-hand side column describes what is expected of the trainees.

## TOPIC 1: DETECTION OF FAKE NEWS

In the age of information, in which the Internet and digital technologies provide quick access to all kinds of information content, the phenomenon of “fake news” - media reports that present false information as true - is also flourishing. The widespread use of social media, through which every user already has the opportunity to be a media in their own right, unfortunately also contributes to the dissemination of such false information. Often, fake news spread faster than the true information on the same topic. One reason is that fake news usually sounds more attractive in both content and form. Another important factor is the low level of media literacy both among children and adults. Many users, who through social networks also spread information content, unfortunately do not know how, or do not make the effort to check information from the media. It is not uncommon for well-educated and intelligent people to believe and even spread fake news.

Fake news is a “hot topic” around the world and in our country, as various national and international institutions are working to counter this form of media disinformation. Although regulation and sanctions by state institutions are needed, which are currently existing in some cases (for example in the case of open call for violence), it would be problematic for state institutions to sanction their publication entirely. Such an approach could come into conflict with the freedom of speech - it is not always obvious whether a piece of news is fake or not. If a state institution is entrusted with the function of judging the truth, there is a

risk of abuse by those in power, as well as risk of censorship

Therefore, **the most appropriate approach is education, which develops media literacy and critical thinking in children, on whom we shall rely to be active and aware citizens in the future.**

**The main signs that a piece of news is fake, which are important to be recognized both by adults and children alike, are:**

- The title evokes strong emotions.
- The piece of news has been published in a non-authoritative media (often without an author).
- No confirmation from an official source or authoritative expert.
- The news is not confirmed in serious media and international media.
- The same photos are used everywhere, which are easily faked.
- Sometimes the content lacks internal coherence, or it does not correspond to other known facts.

**On the grounds of these characteristics, we can outline the following criteria for verifying media information:**

- Attention should be paid to the title and the language used (are there expressions such as “shock”, “bomb” and the like, typical of yellow media and clickbait sites?); is it intended to evoke emotion (for example, are many exclamation marks used or are the titles written in capital letters entirely?)
- The information should be compared to at least two more sources.
- Check whether the media itself is reliable (whether an editorial team is indicated, what the other content in it is).
- Identify the author of the article, and check whether there is a mention of the author at all.
- Check the date of publication.
- Check whether an authoritative source or an official institution is cited.
- Check the photos to the publication - in case they are not visibly illustrative, but claim to be documentary, check if they are found in a completely different context (in some cases they are indicated as illustrative, but with a very small font which is easily missed).

## *Training module on the “Fake news“ topic*

**Objective:** Train learners to recognize fake news by a set of criteria for verifying media information.

**Materials:** flipchart sheets and flipchart stand / whiteboard, markers, projector, computer, internet connection

| Introductory activity: 5 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| Trainer asks trainees if they have heard of the **Blue Whale** online game.<br>He/she then asks them if they think the story of the online suicide game is true or fake news. | Volunteer responds.<br><br>One supporter of each of the two answers provide arguments as to why they thinks so. |
| **Main activity (group work): 30 minutes** | |
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| Trainer proposes to look at two media articles on the subject - one that claims that the game exists and one that rather calls it into question.<br>He/she then shows the two open sites – one of Blitz[50], the other one of BTV[51].<br>He/she titles a blank sheet of the flipchart "Signs of Fake News".<br>A discussion begins, to compare the two sites with the following guiding questions: Which of the two media do you think is more reliable? Why? In your opinion, which of the two titles evokes stronger emotions? Why would the author evoke emotions when reporting news? Which of the two titles sounds more credible to you? How many children does it say have committed suicide? What is the evidence presented? Who should confirm the suicides? Which sources of information are cited (are there specific names, if so, are they verifiable, how real are they and if so, to what extent are they experts on the topic)?<br>What are the motives of the sites to release fake news with dramatic headlines?<br>**The Trainer searches for "Blue Whale"** by image in Google and sees that the same photo of a hand with cuts is shown everywhere. How can a photo be forged?<br>Again, the Trainer asks the group who thinks the game is real and who doesn't.<br>While listing the signs for the discernment of fake news (criteria for assessing the reliability of information), the Trainer writes them on a flipchart.<br>The Trainer discusses with the group the motivation / reason for creating and spreading fake news. He/she asks what a "clickbait site" is and, if necessary, explains (online media that seeks to generate profit through sensational headlines and content).<br>He/she asks if there are other reasons to generate fake news. | Trainees participate in the discussion.<br><br>Results of the discussion:<br><br>The participants come to the conclusion that the game "Blue Whale" is in fact fake news and deduce the following **signs of fake news:**<br><br>• The title evokes strong emotions.<br>• No confirmation from an official source.<br>• The news is not confirmed by serious media and international media.<br>• The same photos are used everywhere, which are easily faked.<br>• There is no internal coherence of the content of the material.<br><br>They add "fake news" to the list of important topics on the wall.<br><br>**Expected answers:**<br><br>• For profit - the more sensational the headlines and content, the more profit the media will generate from advertisers.<br>• For political and / or ideological propaganda.<br>• Due to lack of professionalism - lack of fact-checking, succumbing to stereotype thinking and prejudices, etc. |

50.https://blitz.bg/lyubopitno/dzhadzhi/izvratenata-igra-koyato-kara-detsata-da-se-kltsat-na-parcheta-veche-e-v-blgariya-snimkivideo-18_news489164.html
51.https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zloveshtata-igrata-sin-kit-istina-ili-borba-za-onlajn-poseshtenija.html

| Closing activity (discussion): 15 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| Temporarily covers the flipchart with fake news signs and invites students to summarize the lesson by listing these signs. | They participate in the discussion and with the help of the questions of the Trainer list the **strategies for recognizing fake news** and clickbait sites:<br>• compare the information with at least two other sources.<br>• check who the author of the article is and whether an author is indicated at all.<br>• check if the media itself is reliable (whether an editorial team is indicated, what the other materials in it are).<br>• pay attention to the language used and what the title is (are there expressions such as "shock", "bomb", exclamation marks, capital letters only, etc.) typical of the yellow media and clickbait sites, see if it aims to evoke emotion.<br>• check the date of publication.<br>• seek confirmation from an expert in the field.<br>• use a critical attitude to information on the Internet. |

Thus, the participants present the main signs of fake news and, respectively, the ways to verify media information. The question arises as to why some media outlets generate fake news and their motives for doing so deliberately, which are most often linked to a desire for greater profit or to serve the purposes of political and / or ideological propaganda. Sometimes it can be an unintentional misinformation of the audience – due to nonprofessionalism, but it may also be due to prejudices and stereotypes. At the heart of anti-Roma talk, in addition to the desire to profit by attracting attention, unconcious prejudices and stereotypes of journalists and social media users may hide, as well as targeted political and ideological propaganda in service of "far right" political formations.

## TOPIC 2: MEDIA MANIPULATIONS

In addition to publishing materials with false content - the so-called "fake news", there is much content in which real facts are presented in a biased and even misleading manner. Sometimes, a mixture of real facts with false information are presented as one content, making it

harder to identify the manipulation. At the same time, very often, the real facts are given together with the author's interpretation, corresponding to his/her personal political and/or ideological biases or those of the editor-in-chief and/or the owner of the media. However, the information is not honestly presented as the author's interpretation, but claims to be an "objective" presentation of the bare facts.

**Types of media manipulation:**

- Mixing facts and false information;
- Biased presentation of facts;
- Reporting of facts, together with the author's interpretation, without it being explicitly presented as an interpretation

These techniques are often used on topics related to the Roma community, thus affirming stereotypes about it and creating negative attitudes in society. An example of such manipulation is the generalization - where a generalized interpretation is made about all Roma from a particular case, which may otherwise be an objective fact. Such a generalization is not presented as an interpretation, without valid logical arguments at that, but as the actual content of the news itself. For example, it is said: "Gypsies rob elderly women in villages in the Vratsa region". Often, there is a specific fact behind this - that man X, who is of Roma origin, has committed a crime against the elderly woman Y in the Vratsa village of Z. But when the news is presented in the above described manner, it is suggested not that a particular person has committed a specific crime, for which he/she is personally responsible, but that "Roma steal", meaning that the act is attributed to the whole community, as if it is collectively responsible for it. At the same time, when a member of the ethnic majority commits the same, or a different crime, the media usually does not mention his or her ethnic background. This is how generalizations and suggestions are made, which affirm negative stereotypes.

## *Training module on the topic of "Media manipulation "*

**Objective:** Trainees should be able to recognize the main characteristics of media manipulation.

**Materials:** flipchart sheets and flipchart stand / whiteboard, markers, projector, computer.

| Introductory activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer asks the participants what other forms of media disinformation, besides fake news they know of.<br>If necessary, he/she directs them by asking additional questions to the following **types of media manipulation**:<br>• mixing facts and false information;<br>• biased presentation of facts;<br>• reporting of facts, together with the author's interpretation, without it being explicitly presented as an interpretation.<br>What could the motives for such media manipulations be?<br>Could they be done unintentionally and in which cases? | They answer the questions (expected answers – mixing facts and false information; biased presentation of facts; reporting of facts, together with the author's interpretation, without it being explicitly presented as an interpretation).<br>**Expected answers:**<br>• For profit<br>• For the purpose of political / ideological manipulation<br>• Unintentional reproduction of stereotypes |

| Main activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer shows the participants a media content, entitled "The Gypsies rob the treasures of Ivaylovgrad", published on the site ivaylovgrad.com. He/she invites them to analyze together its form and content.<br>**Asks guiding questions:**<br>What catches their eye in the title? Why is there a "the" before the subject of the sentence (the Gypsies)? Does this create a specific suggestion and what is the problem with it?<br>Is the information provided in the text fully consistent with the title? How do they differ?<br>Is there an emphasis on one element of the information at the expense of another?<br>Where should the emphasis of this message be? Where is it actually placed?<br>Do you think the author is deliberately making these suggestions or is he/she unconsciously reproducing stereotypes? | **Expected answers:**<br>The subject "Gypsies" does not identify a specific person or persons and is a definite noun, which conveys a generalization and suggests that the responsibility belongs to "all Gypsies".<br>There is no adequate correspondence between the title and the content of the information - it is clear from the article that not only Roma, but also treasure hunters (probably of Bulgarian ethnic origin) have been looting the artefacts for years<br>The emphasis should be on the fact that valuable archeological finds have been left unprotected, and instead, the title emphasizes that people of a certain ethnic group are engaged in illegal activities. At the same time, since the site does not seem to be directly related to a specific far-right formation, it is quite possible, that the author reproduces such stereotypes unconsciously – i.e. due to lack of self-reflection. |

| Closing activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| Invites participants to sum up the discussion. | The Trainees participate in summing up the topic by outlining the main points of the discussion. |

The widespread of fake news, misinformation and media manipulation on the Internet, facilitated by their uncritical sharing on social networks, is a phenomenon that seriously threatens the positive development of social processes and may even be a threat to key democratic values. The spread of disinformation and media manipulation of various minority groups can have a particularly negative impact. In recent years, in Bulgaria, unfortunately, the dissemination of such media content, related to Roma communities, is increasing. Here is why teachers, Roma leaders and mediators, Roma and pro-Roma activists need to know how to counter such negative tendencies efficiently and with a long-term effect.

In recent years, tools have been developed to identify fake news in general, but there is still a need to offer tools specifically focused on disinformation about certain communities. This handbook is an effort to provide all these target groups with basic knowledge and skills to help them act, in order to improve the situation.

# HANDBOOK FOR ROMA LEADERS, ACTIVISTS, MEDIATORS, REPRESENTATIVES OF ROMA AND PRO-ROMA NGOS

The handbook for Roma leaders, activists, mediators, Roma and pro-Roma NGOs on countering fake news and anti-Roma disinformation includes four chapters, focused on fake news, media manipulation, that creates unfavorable image for the Roma, countermeasures to fake news and manipulations, regarding the Roma community, how to inform the Roma communities in the neighborhoods about fake news - approaches and methods. The last chapter is dedicated specifically to social networks, due to the specifics of this environment.

## Content And Topics

The handbook introduces the reader to the situation, in which the development of information and communication technologies and the Internet, as well as their penetration into all spheres of life, has brought with it new opportunities for quick access to information. Communication between people from all over the world being faster and easier, regardless of distances, allows them to exchange knowledge and ideas on an unprecedented scale, but at the same time allows the manifestation of unprecedented negative phenomena, such as disinformation and propaganda, to the point that even the basic values of modern democratic societies are threatened.

**This is how the age of information turned out to be the age of disinformation; the time when the world is more connected than ever is also the time of accelerated polarization of modern societies.**

The digital environment also provided an opportunity for mass dissemination of hate speech, reproduction of stereotypes and radical propaganda against vulnerable groups and minority communities, based on gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity. In our country, unfortunately, the representatives of the Roma community are especially often under the target of instilled negative, and even hostile attitudes.

Similar formation of negative and even discriminatory attitudes towards minority communities, the imposition of extreme views and radical propaganda are, often fueled by false news and media content that contains deliberately or unknowingly, but always based on prejudice, distorted facts, whose rapid and mass dissemination is facilitated by social networks. This is done both consciously by members and followers

of “far-right” political formations, sharing negative and discriminatory attitudes towards certain groups in society, based on their ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, including those sharing anti-gypsyism, and not so consciously by people who do not fully share such extreme views, but are still influenced by ingrained stereotypes.

At the same time, the presumption of freedom of speech, as a fundamental democratic and constitutional right, limits to some extent the ability of the state institutions to regulate the media environment. From the point of view of the legal framework, such regulation is nevertheless provided for in cases of open hate speech, especially in the case of open calls for violence and personal defamation, but it must be acknowledged, that there is a tendency to react relatively rarely to such abuses of the freedom of speech.

However, with the exception of cases of completely false news, provable defamation or overt incitement to violence, there is large amount of content that could fall into the “gray area” of expressing one’s personal position or one’s own interpretation of the facts, in which case it is even more difficult to talk about regulation by the institutions. Admittedly, even the current political situation in certain periods hinders the possibilities for reaction.

The handbook offers Roma activists the specific methods and tools they need to detect, monitor and counter fake news and discrimination against Roma. Materials on how to work with the media have been developed, as well as tools to reach out to people in the community and to spread critical thinking and response to anti-Gypsyism. The training modules are based on an interactive methodology that puts the trainees in an active role, it relies on teamwork in groups and the application of a Socratic method, so that instead of presenting, the Trainer facilitates a general discussion through guiding questions.

## TOPIC 1: FAKE NEWS ABOUT THE ROMA

Fake news, as previously stated, is a phenomenon that is ironically widespread in an era of rapid development of information and communication technologies and the Internet. Although they have made it possible to access a very large amount of information quickly and easily, these technologies have also made it possible to quickly and easily disseminate false media content, which is facilitated by social networks and the fact that many of their users share such content without doubt, thus often, even unknowingly contributing to the misinformation of more people.

Some of these false news help to reproduce stereotypes for

representatives of various vulnerable or minority groups in our country, by creating or reproducing negative attitudes towards them, on the basis of false statements, presented as objective facts. Unfortunately, fake news are often published and disseminated, especially in relation to the Roma community, and are spread quickly by uncritical and / or prejudiced users through social networks.

## Signs Of Fake News About The Roma

Regardless of the subject matter of the fake news, there are specific signs, with the help of which, such inaccurate media content can be recognized, which usually apply to media content that is targeted specifically at the Roma community. The criteria for detection of fake news should also be applied by Roma and pro-Roma activists, as well as Roma mediators, the Roma they work with, and ultimately all people who are users of media information.

Here's how **the main signs of fake news, related specifically to the Roma community**, look:

- **The title seeks to evoke emotions**, most often it is about fear, which is a strong basic emotion - in the case of false content about the Roma, it is usually about fears, which in turn, can escalate into anger and even aggression. Most often, the specific content corresponds to the most common stereotypes about the Roma - they "steal", "commit crimes", "do not pay for electricity", "do not work, but rely on social assistance", "will become more than us and become a threat to us", etc.
- **The media in which the news is published are not reliable media**. Often, in such media the author of the material is not mentioned, it is not a rare occasion when information about the editorial team is missing as well (the section "About us"). This is usually the case with fake news about the Roma. If it is not a case of false news, but of mispresentation of facts, it happens that even more authoritative media are misled by prejudice, but it is rarely intentional.
- **The news is not confirmed by other authoritative media** – if it is about completely false news, this is usually the case with representatives of the Roma community.
- **Reliable and authoritative sources are not quoted** – experts, representatives of institutions, responsible for what they say. This is usually the case with fake news about the Roma. However, things are different when it comes not to pure fake news, but to biased presentation of the facts - then we may have people with a claim to expertise in a given field and even representatives of institutions.

**Clickbait sites:**

- Clickbaite site is an online media seeking to generate profit through sensational headlines and materials.

Usually, media reports with fake news are based on or correspond to some of the most common myths about the Roma community, presented in the report "Facts and Arguments - in response to the most common myths about the Roma" (see the previous chapter of the book). Such myths are not based on objective facts but rather present a distorted interpretation of individual facts, and form

(unfortunately sustainable to a large extent) stereotypes about the Roma community, thanks to which negative and even hostile attitudes are formed and reproduced. They are often reproduced in various, more specific media content, or are, sometimes, interpreted in relation to otherwise true facts. These stereotypes should be answered with accurate and correct facts. The question of the motivation for publishing and disseminating fake news specifically about the Roma community is interesting.

With most of the fake news, the main motivation is usually financial gain (especially with the so-called "clickbait sites"), because of which they seek to attract attention with a "scandal" and provoke emotion, i.e. they have a better chance of not leaving the user indifferent. In addition to this motivation, it is often either about deliberate propaganda of "far-right" views, published by a media, openly or covertly associated with such political formations, or about unconsciously misleading stereotypes, as is often the case with users, who uncritically share the news on social media networks. This difference is important when it comes to counteracting the spread of such fake news.

## *Plan for training module on the "Fake news" topic*

**Objective:** Trainees should be able to recognize the signs of fake news related to the Roma community.

**Materials:** Flipchart sheets and flipchart stand, markers, computer with internet connection.

| Introductory activity (10 min.) | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer asks the participants if they have come across fake news related to (representatives of) the Roma community. If so, he/she asks them to give specific examples. The trainees answer the question. They give examples of such fake news, if they can think of any. | |
| **Main activity (40 min.)** | |
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer introduces the participants to the following media material: "Pratfall: The state sent Roma dressed as veterinarians to kill animals in Strandzha!"[52] He/she asks them if they think the news is credible. Meanwhile, he titles a blank sheet of the flipchart "Signs of Fake News". A discussion then begins with the following guiding questions:<br>• Do you think the media itself is reliable? Why?<br>• Does the title evoke stronger emotions?<br>• Why would the author seek to evoke emotions when reporting news?<br>• Does it sound credible to you? What evidence is presented?<br>• Who should confirm the information, are the sources cited (are there specific names, are they verifiable, how real are they and if so, how many are experts on the topic)?<br>• What are the motives of sites to release fake news about the Roma community with dramatic headlines?<br>The facilitator outlines the signs for recognizing fake news (criteria for assessment of the information reliability), writes them on the flipchart and discusses with the group what the motivation / reason is for creating and disseminating fake news for the Roma community. Then asks the participants what a "clickbait site" is and explains the concept, if necessary, directs them to search for other reasons for generating fake news about the Roma community. | |

52. https://www.informiran.net/

| Final activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer temporarily covers the flipchart sheet and asks the participants to sum up the signs for discernment of fake news. The Trainees list the signs for discernment of fake news that were outlined within the main activity. | |

## TOPIC 2: MEDIA MANIPULATIONS PRESENTING THE ROMA IN AN UNFAVORABLE LIGHT

ith regard to the Roma community, media content is often disseminated that presents information in a manipulative or misleading way, and not just false information with completely false content.

**Media manipulations targeted at the Roma community usually use the following techniques:**

- **The selection of news**, related to the Roma community. More often than not, news are reported, in which a person of Roma ethnicity has come into conflict with the law, but good examples are very rarely shown - people from the community who have achieved significant success in their professional fields or have committed an act that may serve as an example.
- There is a steady tendency to indicate **the ethnic origin** of the perpetrators of crimes if it is other than Bulgarian, and especially if it is Roma.
- **Generalizations** are made, and in the media this is rarely done explicitly. More often, it is suggested through the language itself (eg. "THE gypsies steal" rather than the specific person X has committed an illegal act against the specific person Y).

Here, a brief outline is presented of the plan of the second training module, which is applied in the training of the target groups - Roma activists, leaders, health and educational mediators, and in turn can be used by them to educate people in Roma communities they work with.

### *Plan of the training module "Media manipulations presenting the Roma in an unfavorable light"*

**Objective:** Trainees should recognize the main types of media

manipulation and the main techniques used in such media content in relation to the Roma community.

**Materials:** Flipchart sheets and flipchart stand, markers, computer with internet connection.

| Introductory activity (15 min.) | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer asks the participants what other forms of media disinformation about the Roma community they know of. If necessary, and with additional questions he/she directs them to the following types of media manipulation:<br>• mixing facts and false information;<br>• tendentious/biased presentation of the facts;<br>• reporting of facts, together with the author's interpretation, which is not explicitly presented as an interpretation.<br>The Trainer asks the participants what could the motives be for such media manipulations. Also – if they could have been done unconsciously, and if so - in which cases.<br>**Expected answers:**<br>• For profit<br>• For political / ideological manipulation<br>• Unconscious reproduction of stereotypes | |
| **Main activity (40 min.)** | |
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer divides the Trainees into three groups. Each of the groups receives one media material. The task of each of the groups is to find out whether its content is about media manipulation and if so, what methods of manipulation have been used.<br>**Discussion of the results of the group work.** After the groups conclude their work, the Trainer invites each of them to get the others acquainted with the media content they have been given and to share with them whether they think it is media manipulation and, if so, what techniques have been used in it. After the presentation of a given group, the trainer invites the other two groups to share whether they agree with the conclusions of the presenting group and whether they have anything to add.<br>**Expected answers:**<br>These are media manipulations targeting the Roma community, which apply the following techniques:<br>• The very selection of the news related to the Roma community. More often than not, news are presented, in which a person of Roma ethnicity has come into conflict with the law, but very rarely the examples shown are good - people from the community who have achieved significant success in their professional fields or have committed an act that may serve as an example.<br>• The ethnic origin of the perpetrators of crimes is indicated if it is different from Bulgarian, and especially if it is Roma.<br>• Generalizations are made, (eg. "THE gypsies rob" and not the specific person X has committed an illegal act against the specific person Y). | |
| **Final activity** | |
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The participants sum up the main forms of media manipulation and the main techniques used in such manipulations in relation to the Roma community. | |

## TOPIC 3: HOW TO COUNTERACT FAKE NEWS AND MANIPULATION AGAINST THE ROMA COMMUNITY

Counteracting the negative tendency to reproduce stereotypes and negative attitudes towards the Roma community through false news, disinformation and media manipulation through biased and distorted presentation of facts, is essential, including for the protection of fundamental democratic values for the benefit of society as a whole.

### Principles And Techniques

Such counteraction can take place through various public communication channels, such as participation in traditional media broadcasts, various forums, such as round tables, conferences, etc. The opportunities offered by the Internet, and especially in the social networks, can also be used, although nowadays, unfortunately, they significantly contribute to the spread of such stereotypical and negative attitudes in society.

Therefore, we shall first pay attention here to what **principles and techniques** are most appropriate to serve as a basis for such counteraction, regardless of the communication channel which shall be used for the purpose. Then we will look in more detail at how it would be most appropriate for this to happen in the digital environment and social networks, as they are the kind of media that have their own specifics.

**No matter what communication channels are used, it is important to observe the following principles:**

- **Firstly, presentation of the facts in a calm and clear manner**, in order to expose the spread false information (when it comes to fake news and disinformation). The weaknesses in biased and malicious interpretations of facts should be pointed out carefully in cases of media manipulation and distortion of the truth through biased presentation and interpretation.
- **Secondly**, when it is necessary to enter into a dispute with an opponent who maintains extreme and discriminatory claims on the basis of false facts or misinterpretation of half truths, it is good **to remain calm and good-natured, regardless of possible provocations on the part of the other party**. At the same time, false and biased interpretations should be clearly and categorically refuted. The use of a more aggressive tone, even if the opponents allow themselves to use it, does not contribute to the desired effect of debunking fake news, stereotypes or manipulative statements, but may have the opposite effect.

- **Thirdly**, it is important **to assess the extent to which false news and misinformation about the Roma community correspond to the views and motivations of the opponent**. Sometimes, the opponent him/herself has been deceived or misled (sometimes without realizing it) by his/her own stereotypes. In many cases, however, these are people who deliberately promote extreme and discriminatory views and deliberately work for such extreme propaganda. When entering into a discussion with such people, who have an interest in promoting certain ideas, it is good to keep in mind that it is unlikely to dissuade them in a single discussion, no matter how good counter-arguments we put on the table.
- In similar situations, **we are not convincing our opponent, but the people who are following our dispute with him/her and are unbiased** or have unknowingly succumbed to certain prejudices, which, however, they can abandon when presented with facts and reasonable and clear arguments. Such opponents also do not seek to convince you, but mostly talk to the people who follow the conversation (TV viewers, participants in some forums or other users on the social network). It is possible that they deliberately provoke you, in order to take you out of balance, so that to present you in an unfavorable light to the audience and thus compromise your claim and arguments. It is often that prejudiced people with an interest in certain propaganda also resort to arguments ad hominem, i.e. they attack the personality of their opponent, in order to discredit them, instead of presenting rational and factually supported case. **It is important to refute personal attacks in a calm but firm manner** (if defamation is also launched against you, you could seek the responsibility from the person who did it, even in court). At the same time, even if we are provoked, we should not shift the conversation to personal attacks, much less to offensive qualifications, but should argue with clear and well-argumented facts.

The above recommendations apply both to participation in a "traditional media" broadcast or a live forum, and to the social media space.

## Reasonable Deflation Of Stereotypical Perceptions

With regard to the Roma community, various fake news or media manipulations are published and/or broadcasted. Many of them correspond to stereotypes and myths that form negative attitudes.

**How we use arguments and facts:**

- **It is important to carefully debunk myths and disinformation about the Roma community**, but it is also good not to counteract only by reacting and responding to specific negative claims, but to proactively present the facts that would facilitate a more objective view on these topics and more tolerant and positive attitudes.

- **It is important to proactively point out good examples of representatives of the Roma community**, who make a valuable contribution to the society or have done worthy deeds and can serve as an example and inspiration, both to the representatives of the Roma community and to all Bulgarian citizens. This is rarely done in our media and public environment, but would significantly contribute to the formation of a more tolerant and positive attitude towards the Roma community in the Bulgarian society in a natural and unobtrusive way. At the same time, good examples would contribute to raising the self-esteem of the Roma community itself, and would promote both among the Roma and the overall society positive patterns of behavior that we all need.

## Opposition In The Social Networks

Social media is a very appropriate and potentially effective tool for such counteraction, as, unlike "traditional media" or various forums (such as round tables, conferences, etc.), they are an easily accessible platform, in which the user can interact with the others, practically at any time.

In recent years, there has been a steady trend for the Internet environment to displace traditional media or integrate them into itself. For example, the circulation of paper newspapers has fallen sharply since the 1990s, as media sites have largely replaced them, some print media have simply switched to an online version, and others support an online version as well as the printed one. Television and radio stations have long developed their own websites, where one can watch TV or listen to the radio online as well.

In addition, most people have already become users of social networks (in Bulgaria Facebook remains most popular at the moment). There is a tendency for these networks to integrate much of the content on the Internet (eg. Facebook pages are becoming more important than individual sites), including online media and online versions of television and radio. At the same time, every user of the social network is practically his/her own media and could use his/her profile as a public platform. This circumstance jumpstarted the phenomenon of the so-called "influencers" - people influencing others through social networks, who have many followers, and some of them comment on serious topics, including political.

At the same time, social media has become a platform for people expressing extreme opinions, including anti-Roma attitudes, based on disinformation and manipulation. Therefore, it would be appropriate to counteract these negative phenomena right there. The above principles and methods for effectively counteracting the feeding of negative and discriminatory attitudes towards the Roma community on the basis of fake news, disinformation and media manipulation, apply to the public environment of social networks.

## Specifics Of Social Networks

However, social networks are a phenomenon that has its own specifics. First of all, the policy of big social networks, like Facebook is for people to register with their real identity, not nicknames, as was the case most often in previous chat platforms, and for most of them to be really present there with it. However, many users have a low level of responsibility with regard to what they say, as if they have an illusory sense of secrecy and invulnerability, as there is no live eye-to-eye contact when it comes to posts and comments.

**Trolls are:**

In Internet jargon, a "troll" is a person who posts conflicting, provocative or off-topic messages on Facebook, in online discussion forums, chat rooms, blogs, comments on newspaper articles, with the main goal of provoking emotional response from other users, provoking or harassing them, or simply interfering with the normal tone of the conversation.

In this sense, in social media, it is much more likely for a sharp and even harsh tone of voice towards strangers to be used than in the offline environment, and many users would probably not behave in the same way in "real life". If we want to counteract extreme positions, based on disinformation and manipulation, entering into direct or indirect disputes with their speakers, we should also observe in the digital environment the principles mentioned earlier - calm presentation of facts and arguments, disputing cases or claims, but not ad hominem arguments and maintaining a good tone of voice and compliance with norms of communication in the digital environment – or the so-called "netiquette".

An essential specificity of the online environment, and social networks in particular is the participation of the so-called "trolls" - users who enter into a self-serving dispute. "Paid trolls" or "paid writers"[53] – these are users who are paid, most often by certain political forces, to publish and disseminate pre-launched propaganda ideas or 'points of reference' by their employers, including among the groups or on the pages of their opponents. Typically, such users use fake profiles through which they post and comment.

There are such people among the supporters of ideas and claims of "far right" and "nationalist formations". It is important to keep in mind that paid trolls are hopeless to argue with, as they cannot be persuaded with arguments, because they are already defending their theses not by conviction, but for a fee. At the same time, one can waste too much time and energy in a futile argument with them. It is possible that they throw him/her off balance, which will not be useful for debunking stereotypes and myths. Trolls have fun provoking others.

53. http://offnews.bg/index.php/175011/platenite-pisachi-ni-napadnaha-a-nie-mnogo-im-se-radvame

**Some signs by which such "paid trolls" could be identified:**

- In their profiles on the social network there are often **only one or two publications**, while at the same time they are **very active on various pages and in groups** and under media content, especially on political topics.
- Usually **the profile does not have photos that show a real person**, instead there is, for example, a landscape, a drawing, a photo of a celebrity (eg. a Hollywood star), a cartoon character or anything else but their own photo.
- Sometimes the account name looks like **an obvious nickname**.
- They publish **the same phrases and texts over and over again in many places**.
- They often **do not reflect or address the counter-arguments** you give them at all.
- Many of them keep **repeating the same things**, even within the same conversation, sometimes quite literally (via the copy-paste function).

Identifying paid trolls would save time and energy to focus on people with whom we can actually discuss, counter-argue, or expose the fake news, on which their arguments are based. However, it should be borne in mind that some of our opponents may be too biased, even if they are not paid trolls. In social networks, in addition to reacting to disinforming posts, it is important to proactively explain the actual facts, as well as to show good examples. Of course, the specifics of social networks are such that any post, especially if it is public, can quickly become an occasion for discussion or debate, for which we should be prepared.

## *Plan for "Countering fake news and media manipulation of the Roma community" training module*

**Objective:** Trainees shall learn to apply basic techniques for exposing fake news and media manipulation, as well as give strongly argumented presentation in discussions through various media and communication channels - participation in "traditional media" programs (television, radio programs), participation in various forums (round tables, conferences, etc.) and on social networks. Trainees shall apply specific arguments to debunk the most common myths about Roma.

**Materials:** Flipchart sheet and stand, internet connection, at least three printed copies of the report "Facts and arguments - in response to the most common myths about the Roma".

| Introductory activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer asks the participants through which communication channels it is possible and appropriate to counteract fake news and media manipulations. Expected answers:<br>• "traditional media" - participation in television or radio programs, interviews for print media.<br>• In interviews for online media.<br>• At various forums held live - round tables, conferences<br>• In social networks (especially Facebook, which is the most popular social media in our country).<br>The Trainer writes down the answers on a flipchart and explains that they will first discuss together the basic principles and techniques for counteracting disinformation and media manipulation of the Roma community, which can be applied in all communication channels listed by the participants. | |

| Main activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| The Trainer divides the participants into three groups. Each group is given a specific task to prepare and act out as a sketch for the others, as well as a printed copy of the report "Facts and Arguments - in response to the most common myths about the Roma", which can be used in preparation for their presentations.<br>• The first group is given the task of entering into a television debate with a public figure who maintains negative stereotypes about the Roma, based on false facts and tendentious interpretations of anti-Roma statements.<br>• The second group is given the task to participate in a live forum discussion to which Roma and pro-Roma activists, representatives of civil society organizations have been invited, together with public figures well known for their "nationalist" and "far-right" views".<br>• The third group is tasked with responding to a post on Facebook that reproduces stereotypical attitudes and myths about the Roma community.<br>The trainees prepare for their tasks in groups. Each group prepares a script for the respective discussion, using the Facts and Arguments report, distributes the roles for the sketch they have to perform.<br>Presentation of the scenarios by the groups. After the group preparation time is up, each group performs, as the Trainer monitors and writes on a separate flipchart the main techniques used by the participants in the sketches they have acted out, and on another sheet - records the specific arguments used. The trainer initiates a general discussion by first turning to the representatives of the performing group to comment on the recorded techniques applied by them in the sketch, and then turns to the other two groups for feedback, inviting them to give suggestions on what they would do differently and why. The trainer records on a flipchart the edits and additional ideas to the techniques used by the performing group, as well as to their concrete arguments against the most common myths, if any. | |

| Final activity | |
|---|---|
| **Trainer** | **Trainees** |
| After temporarily covering the writing on the flipchart, the trainer invites the participants to make a summary together, by listing the appropriate techniques for discussion through the different communication channels. | |

## TOPIC 4: HOW TO INFORM ROMA COMMUNITIES IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS ABOUT FAKE NEWS - APPROACHES AND METHODS

In this case, this Handbook is perfectly appropriate. The topics and plans of the training modules can be used as given. Of course, **the appropriate adaptation is needed, depending on the level of the respective group of learners**. Some of these NGOs and community groups have undergone a number of trainings, but there are also those who are just getting acquainted with civic matters. We must also bear in mind the conditions - the venue, the necessary equipment, if any, or improvise with what is available.

For the outcome of the training, it is important, apart from participants gaining knowledge about fake news and anti-Roma disinformation and skills to present it to their neighbors, to get them motivated so as to enable them to really do the job afterwards. Because people from the isolated Roma communities are the most affected by fake news - in most cases they really have no one to consult, except the Roma mediators and Roma activists from the relevant local civil organizations and initiative groups.

After the relevant trainings, the activists should be proactive and should not wait for people to come and ask them. They know very well what rumors and false allegations are spread through social media and the "wireless broken phone" and must respond adequately to any situation - to explain and convince people with arguments available to them.

**The direct outreach work with people from the detached neighborhoods** aims to transfer knowledge to the Roma communities. **In this respect, it is necessary to look for flexible approaches, depending on the situation in the respective neighborhoods**, the most isolated parts of them, the weather (summer, winter, rain, bright sun), spontaneous problems related to fake news. It is difficult to list all the specific situations.

- These meetings can be **improvised**, but can also be scheduled. They can be held outdoors or indoors - cafe, community center, another venue.
- It is not necessary, and sometimes it is even impossible, that meetings of this type take place as trainings. They are often **informal**, usually go as questions and answers. The atmosphere is relaxed, the language used is that of the majority of participants, but it is not good to go down too low a level, because then we will find ourselves in a situation where we are the leaders.
- It would be good to use **neighborhood-specific cases** or current burning issues of national or regional scale.

- More **patience is needed**, because it is difficult to convince people with different attitudes, that some of what they have heard or read may not be true, to provoke critical thinking, etc. Even if not everyone believes you, it's a success, because you provoked their thinking that there might be another point of view. Often, in the next conversation, it becomes obvious that the person has thought about what has been said at the previous meeting.

Experience shows that after meetings held, interest in the topics of fake news and especially anti-Roma disinformation is peaked and people start stopping the activist or mediator who has held this event on the street or talking to them in other places - a cafe, shop, etc. These impromptu individual conversations, often growing into group meetings, are very important because they multiply the effect of the first meeting, which has been attended by a limited number of people.

Regardles of how the knowledge is passed on – whether through training of representatives of civil society organizations and initiative groups, or directly to people from the Roma neighborhoods, it is necessary to keep in mind that at any time in your daily life, you may need to answer questions or clarify cases.

# THE ROMA COMMUNITY AGAINST FAKE NEWS - THE EXPERIENCE FROM THE COMMUNITY WORK

The methodology used in the Handbook and the training modules have been applied in the trainings of Roma leaders, activists, mediators and representatives of Roma and pro-Roma NGOs. They have received the relevant knowledge, which enables them to use it and train the people they work with, so as to increase the capacity within Roma communities to discern fake news, disinformation and media manipulation, in order to ensure the sustainability of the project in the long run.

At the end of the second trainings, each of the participants undertook to pass on what they had learned to the people of their neighborhood. As described above, and taught during the trainings, the outreach work could be done in a different way and with a different approach, depending on the situation or the people they face.

- Some of the trainees used community gatherings on the occasion of some events in their direct work, in particular the preparation for them. Direct incidents were also used in the course of the work to illustrate fake news, media manipulation and how we could actually deal with them.
- Others preferred meetings in places where young Roma people gather - local cafes or entertainment clubs. There, in a peaceful atmosphere, close to natural communication, they showed those gathered around them, how to distinguish fake news and oppose media manipulation. They used data from their own phones and those of the participants for illustration.
- The offices of local organizations, where local activists often gather anyway, were also used. Discussions in a familiar work environment were also very productive. The availability of a fixed internet provided an opportunity for a more detailed explanation of individual cases, search for new ones and clarification of the origin of certain fake news.
- Regular evangelical church meetings were used in some neighborhoods. This was done only in places where pastors did not take extreme positions and performed only their direct duties as preachers.

An important element of the work of the trained activists and mediators was the use of local cases of fake news and disinformation, the brunt of which people have borne themselves. This makes it much easier for new information to be perceived and then easily reproduce it among other people in order to have a multiplier effect. In the course of the outreach work, several cases surfaced that illustrated the negative effects of fake news and misinformation.

## The Yambol Case

During the Covid crisis in Bulgaria, especially in the beginning, there was an exacerbasion of the negative attitudes towards the Roma communities in the country. A clear example in this regard was the closure of entire Roma neighborhoods and their declaration as sources and carriers of the disease. There were blockades in Sofia – in the Faculteta neigbourhood, in the cities of Kyustendil, Samokov, Yambol and other places. The blockade in Yambol was accompanied by the distribution of fake leaflets, made with the letterhead of the Ministry of Health, containing misleading and false information that Covid was a fraud, aimed at controlling the population. The leaflets were distributed in prominent places in the institutions in the neighborhood, and the distribution was massive and accompanied by statements of certain nationalist political formations (IMRO), calling for opposition from different sections of the society. All this happened amidst lack of adequate health information, increased public concern about the Covid pandemic, exacerbated by the actions of the nationalists, involved in the governance of the country.[54] In Yambol, inadequate policies led to absurd actions - helicopters spraying disinfectants over the Roma neighborhood, which increased the tensions between Roma and non-Roma in the city. All these inadequate actions, accompanied by active disinformation and the spread of fake news, led to protests and tensions in Yambol. This case was actively used to mobilize the nationalist vote before and during the elections.

## The Sliven Case

The Sliven case can be characterized as the first organized provocation to the statehood in Bulgaria by the Roma community. Within 30 minutes, during classes at school, Roma parents took more than 500 of their children out of two schools near the Roma neighborhood in Sliven, with the argument that if they left them there, the kids would be taken away and taken abroad.[55]

How did it come to that? False materials and rumors about the new child protection strategy had systematically been circulated for several months. The channels of the Roma Protestant churches in Sliven were skillfully used to spread false materials and rumors that the Roma children would be taken away and sent to other countries to be cared for. In these false propaganda materials, there was active talk about threats of sexual abuse of children in the countries where they were supposed to be sent. When the rumors reached their peak, the false news was spread that on that very day and hour, the children would be taken directly from the schools.

54. https://news.bg/regions/vmro-iska-prokuraturata-da-proveri-koy-podstrekava-kambunt-romskiya-kvartal-v-yambol.html ; https://anteni.eu/Yambol
55. https://dnes.dir.bg/obshtestvo/panika-v-sliven-roditelite-izvadiha-stotitsi-detsa-ot-dve-uchilishta; https://slivenpost.bg/;
https://pan.bg/view_article-61-497582-romi-izvedoha-stotici-deca-ot-2-uchilishta-v-sliven.html

As can be seen, the provocation was well planned in time and was carried out successfully. It could be said that this was a test of how through fake news, rumors and manipulations, the Roma communities can be used for selfish purposes, be they political or other, including against the State. The importance of what happened in Sliven is evidenced by the fact that the then Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, who traditionally did not engage in the problems of the Roma community, took a stand and ordered the police and prosecutor services to investigate the case.

Exactly the same narrative against the new Child Protection Strategy was used by nationalist and pro-Russian groups throughout the country and gained great popularity. One of the groups on social networks, which copied the name of a popular organization for children, reached over 200,000 followers. Many of these followers were representatives of the Roma religious communities, who later became actively involved in the spread of anti-Covid, anti-vaccines, anti-Ukraine and pro-Russian positions. Findings from the investigation of the case show that nationalist groups and pro-Russian groups are at the heart of the spread of fake news.

## The Ukraine Case

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a steady trend of reviving old cases of violence against the Roma community in Ukraine and presenting them as violent treatment of the Ukrainian army against the Roma at the moment. In 2018, there were several attacks on Roma communities in Ukraine[56] on which Roma leadership in Europe had clear positions. These compilations of old cases are being shown as the attitude of the authorities and the public towards the representatives of the Roma community in Ukraine at the moment during the hostilities. What is characteristic of the dissemination of these videos and reports is that they occur through the same sources that spread anti-Covid and anti-vaccine disinformation. They also overlap with the channels of pro-Russian positions, gravitating around the nationalist formations in Bulgaria. It is important to note that certain members of the IMRO used the channels of Protestant Roma churches to distribute anti-Covid, anti-vaccines propaganda, that later began to be used for pro-Russian propaganda.

What is common in all cases is that the nationalist, pro-Russian formations use exactly the same narrative in specific cases to mobilize support in their favor. This approach seeks political support among the Roma community, through which the influence of certain political formations is increased, and through them geopolitical interests pursued. It is no coincidence that another nationalist political party called Vazrazhdane is seriously increasing its position among the Roma in Bulgaria.

56. https://www.dw.com

# SCHOOL-BASED PILOT MODEL FOR COUNTERACTING FAKE NEWS

Skills and competencies that include media literacy should be developed from an early age. A nationally representative survey by the Bulgarian Safer Internet Center (coordinated by the Applied Research and Communications Fund) as at 2016 shows that 97% of children between the ages of 9 and 17 are already Internet users. Nearly 87% of them are users of social networks, including 73% of children aged 9-11, i.e. below the minimum registration age of 12 years, officially allowed by the most popular social media (such as Facebook). According to the survey, 62% of children admit that they cannot discern fake news, which indicates a serious deficit in the ability to evaluate information.

The fact that 58% of parents also admit that they cannot recognize fake news further aggravates the situation. However, the digital environment, in addition to enabling communication and quick access to a vast sea of information, poses a risk to children to come across a wide range of materials with false content, disinformation and media manipulation, as well as to enter into negative communication with other users online. Among the disinforming and manipulative content, that is widely spread on social networks, especially harmful is the one that fosters stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes towards members of various minority groups.

# TEACHERS' HANDBOOK – HOW TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING AND PROMOTE TOLERANCE AMONG STUDENTS

The handbook is intended for teachers to assist them in training their students how to recognize and oppose hostile narratives in the media, media disinformation, manipulation and fake news, which feed stereotypes and hostility against members of minorities and specifically the Roma ethnic community.

## DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

The concepts of "media literacy" and "digital literacy" are a part of the broader context of the so-called "21st century education", which defines the role of the competence approach in education as key to active citizenship in modern societies, full inclusion in the economy of knowledge and the eventual response to the global challenges that future generations will face.[57]

The skills that stand out as core in this paradigm include critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration, problem solving, and creative skills.[58] These competencies are also the basis on which, it is claimed, that the more specific dimensions of both digital literacy and media literacy are built. A systematic analysis of 1,592 scientific papers, examining the relationship between 21st century skills and digital skills, shows that digital skills, which are often seen as a separate area of competence, in fact largely overlap with the basic skills

57. Ananiadou, Katerina and Claro, Magdalean. „21st Century Skills and Competences for New Millennium Learners in OECD Countries", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 41, OECD Publishing, Paris 2009; Scott, C. L. „The Futures of Learning 3: What Kind of Pedagogies for the 21st Century". Education Research and Foresight Working Papers, UNESDOC Digital Library 2015; Van Laar, Ester. Van Deirsen, Alexandar. Van Dijk, Johanes. De Han, Jos. „The relation between 21st-century skills and digital skills: A systematic literature review" in Computers in human behavior, Twente 2017
58. Ibid

**DigComp contains five competencies:**

- Information literacy;
- Communication and cooperation;
- Creating digital content;
- Safety;
- Problem solving.

- information literacy, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving)[59]. It is this complementarity and building on and upgrading of these core areas of competence that underpin the unifying concept of "digital media literacy". The media aspect of the concept focuses on the mass media and communication through which competencies can be manifested. The digital context is appropriate, as information and communication technologies and the Internet are already a major tool for information and communication between young people and are an integral part of the 21st century education paradigm.[60]

It is this complementarity and building on and upgrading of these core areas of competence that underpin the unifying concept of "digital media literacy". The media aspect of the concept focuses on the mass media and communication through which competencies can be manifested. The digital context is appropriate, as information and communication technologies and the Internet are already a major tool for information and communication between young people and are an integral part of the 21st century education paradigm.[61] Thus, with a media focus and within a digital context, critical analysis and evaluation of information, constructive interaction with others, self-expression through content creation, problem solving and the relationship between these processes, present the concept of digital media literacy, which this methodology offers as effective an instrument for counteracting disinformation and polarization in modern societies.

**The European Digital Literacy Framework (DigComp) was chosen for the purposes of this methodology due to the following criteria:**

- It is an official European document, which is already sufficiently integrated into Bulgarian curricula and programs.
- The framework contains an exhaustive list of areas of competence that are largely comparable to the media areas of competence, listed in other international reference frameworks[62] and can, therefore, also be used for digital media literacy.

The table below presents the five areas of competence and the corresponding specific skills. This methodology will focus mainly on information literacy (cognitive aspect) and the field of communication skills (related to the field of emotional intelligence), as our premise is that namely the combination of critical thinking and emotional

59. van Laar et al., 2017
60. Livingstone, Sonia. Burton, Patric. Cabello, Patricio. Helsper, Ellen. Kanchev, Petar. Kardefeld-Winther Daniel. Petrovic, Jelena. Stoilova, Mariya. Ssu-Han Yu. „Media and information literacy among children on three continents: insights into the measurement and mediation of well-being" in Media and information literacy in critical times: Re-imaging learning and information environment, Barcelona 2020.
61. Scott, 2015; van Laar et al., 2017.
62. Livingstone et al., 2017

intelligence can be an effective prevention of the spread of radical and intolerant attitudes, through disinformation and media manipulation, widespread today through social networks.

As the five main competencies are interrelated, the methodology offered here also develops children's creative skills (content creation), problem-solving skills and those related to safety in the online environment

### *Competencies from the DigComp framework*[63]

| Competence | Cognitive skills |
|---|---|
| Information literacy | • Search and selection of information<br>• Analysis and evaluation of information<br>• Information management |
| Communication and cooperation | • Interaction with other people through digital technologies<br>• Sharing through / in digital technologies<br>• Civic participation through digital technologies<br>• Cooperation through digital technologies<br>• Netiquette<br>• Digital identity management |
| Creating content | • Self-expression through content creation<br>• Responsible content creation<br>• Ethical synthesis and improvement of external and own content |
| Safety and security | • Device protection<br>• Personal data and privacy<br>• Care for health and well-being<br>• Environmental protection |
| Problem solving | • Solving technical problems<br>• Identification of needs and selection of technological solutions<br>• Innovative use of digital technologies<br>• Identifying gaps in digital competence |

## PRINCIPLES AND METHODS

**The principles of the methodology offered here** have been chosen because they help students to more easily and permanently acquire the necessary skills and attitudes, related to critical assessment of the information in the online environment (and offline), and positive and

63. Carretero et al., 2017

tolerant behavior in it (and offline). These principles are often referred to as the principles of "non-formal education", but many teachers successfully use them in their work under the compulsory curriculum.

## Principle Of Autonomy

At each step of the training, and at the next stages of the program, it would be good for students to have the full feeling that **their participation is voluntary and meaningful**. Each of them has the right to refuse inclusion and get the opportunity to express themselves during each of the modules. **Their decisions, opinions and suggestions are significant** and contribute to the unique course of each training and to the formation of the physical environment around them.

**Guidelines for the application of this principle:**

- **Involve students in introducing group rules.**
- **Involve in the discussions only those who** wish and always have as a priority the children who had the least opportunity to express themselves.
- **Try to remember what the children say** (especially if they demonstrate knowledge or make meaningful suggestions) and use it later in the training.
- **Draw knowledge from children through guiding questions** (eg. instead of explaining something directly, ask your students, so as to direct them to the answer).
- **Hang the children's outputs** from the various activities on the walls of the room during the training.

## Principle Of Experience Learning

Within the training, students apply their previous knowledge and experience through the modules, reflect on their experience and apply what they have learned in the subsequent modules of training. This process is made possible by **the creation of a supportive educational environment, the use of interactive methods and the adaptation to group dynamics** by the trainers.

**Guidelines for maintaining a supportive environment:**

- It would be good **if the chairs in the room are arranged in a semicircle,** facing the trainers, without gaps between the children and anything in front of them.
- **Be respectful** and don't be afraid to apologize if you unknowingly show disrespect.

- **Encourage** regularly.
- **Respect the expression of personal opinion.** Even if it is not true, seek the opinion of other children before refuting it yourself.
- **Respect the children's emotions** and ask them how they feel during the breaks, especially if you notice a manifestation of negative emotions on their part.
- **Observe self-control and good manners.**

### *Adaptation to the group dynamics:*

- **If they do not follow the rules, calmly refer to them**, reminding the children that they created these rules themselves.
- If the group still does not follow a specific rule, ask them: "Do you want to remove this rule from the list?" This will provoke a discussion with them, through which they will reflect on their behavior and possibly change it.
- Some groups are over-energetic and, no matter how much they reflect, they find it difficult to change their behavior. In this case, **energizers are especially useful**, as they consume some of the excess energy, but also help to focus children's attention.
- Other groups are too quiet and timid. In such cases, **energizers are useful**, which are **effective in unlocking the natural playfulness and courage of children**.
- **Identify the group leaders and win them over – this is the fastest way to handle a difficult group**. For example, if one of the children often provokes you and the group likes it, congratulate him on the wit and later offer him a leadership role (eg. handing out materials before the activities, cleaning the board, arranging the chairs, etc).

## Principle Of Co-Experience

**Teachers empathize with children and learn along with them**. Instead of imparting knowledge in a drab manner, they conduct and participate in a series of games, entertainment and challenges with children. They close the circle of the group, set the tone and boundaries of empathy and embark on the general adventure with enthusiasm.

**Guidelines for the application of this principle:**

- **Teachers do not see their role as authorities by default**, resorting to coercive methods, keeping too much distance, or relying too much on external motivation. Authority is gained by creating a

sense of trust in children, which depends on your ability to expose your human and childish side and show that you understand their interests and needs. Rely on your natural empathy for that.

- **Teachers do not perceive their role as friends of the children**. The goal in the first place is to help them develop their skills, and games and entertainment are a means to that end. For example, when the children really like one of the activities and want to do it again and again, it would be right to remind them with a smile that the program should continue and move on. If you start the next activity with the same enthusiasm, the objections will subside.
- **Use group rules to set clear boundaries and suggest creating new rules as needed**. The children create the rules, but it's up to you to guide the process, implement and update them. For example, if the group has not thought of the rule "we arrive on time" and they are late after one of the breaks, remind them what time you had to start and ask them "Do you think we should create a new rule?" How would you formulate it?"
- **Always monitor your position in space** so that you do not turn your back on anyone.
- **Have fun with the children sincerely during the activities** - there is no safer way to win the group, but also to enrich your own experience.
- **Don't be afraid to admit it if you don't know something**. Use such cases as an opportunity for the group to learn together.
- **Ask the children what they are interested in, what they want to learn, what their hobbies are** etc., and use what they have learned during the training to make analogies, motivate and guide children to the most appropriate roles for them during the group activities (eg. if you find out that someone is taking drawing lessons, it makes sense for him / her to design a poster, draw comics, etc.).

## Methods

The methods offered here are related to the principles described above and have been chosen to facilitate the process of skills development, making it as effective as possible and at the same time enjoyable for students. As with the principles outlined above, these methods are also often referred to as 'non-formal education' approaches, but many teachers successfully apply them in their compulsory curriculum classes.

**Interactive activities**. The lesson modules offered here contain activities in which students are active participants, not just passive recipients of information, and interact with each other.

**“Gamification”**. The proposed methodology relies on learning through games and playful learning activities.

**Work in groups**. The methodology relies heavily on team work because it helps to develop team skills, which are among the skills embedded in it, included in the framework for digital media literacy and also correspond to the attitude of tolerance and cooperation with the other, despite their differences.

**“Deriving” answers with guiding questions (“Socrates method”)** .This method is widely used in the methodology offered here, as it encourages students to think about the answers instead of giving them in advance, which would not guarantee their meaningfulness.

**Energizers (energizing exercises) and icebreakers**. Such exercises are included in the lesson plans offered here, but a separate appendix provides other examples of energizers and icebreakers that teachers could use at their discretion

## PLANS FOR TRAINING MODULES

### *Plan for a lesson on fake news (Age group 12-14)*

**Objective:** Students shall learn to distinguish between true and false information on the Internet. They will be able to identify the signs of fake news.

**Materials:** whiteboard / flipchart sheet, markers, 2 copies of News 1 and News 2 (placed at the end of the lesson).

**Room preparation:** Arrange the chairs in a circle.

| Introductory activity<br>Time: 5 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| He/she draws a blue whale on a flipchart based on a model on the Internet and asks what it is.<br>When he/she gets the answer, he/she asks how we know about the game.<br>He/she then asks the children what they think of this news. The trainer asks the children to show who thinks the suicide story online is true and who doesn’t by raising their hand. | A volunteer responds.<br>Among the expected answers to the second question is “from the media” (perhaps a list of specific types of media - television, radio, newspapers and websites).<br>One supporter of each of the two answers shall provide arguments. |

| Main activity: Team work<br>Time: 30 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| „Well, let's open two news on the subject - one that claims to be true and one that is rather not."<br>Shows the two open sites (one of BTV, the other one of Blitz, reporting on the game "Blue Whale").<br>He/she titles a blank sheet of the flipchart "Signs of Fake News".<br>A discussion begins to compare the two sites with the following guiding questions: "Which of the two media do you think is more reliable?" Why? In your opinion, which of the two titles evokes stronger emotions? Why would the author evoke emotions when reporting news? Which of the two titles sounds more credible to you? How many children does it say have committed suicide? What evidence is presented? Who should confirm the suicides? What are the motives of the sites to release fake news with dramatic headlines?<br>He/she searches for "Blue Whale" by image on Google and finds out that the same photo of a hand with cuts is shown everywhere. "And how can a photo be forged?"<br>Again, he/she asks the group who thinks the game is real and who doesn't. Again, with raising of hands.<br>As he/she outlines the signs for discerning fake news (criteria for assessing the reliability of information), he/she writes them on the flipchart. | They participate in the discussion.<br>Results of the discussion: the participants come to the conclusion that the game "Blue Whale" is in fact fake news and outline the following signs of fake news:<br>• The title evokes strong emotions.<br>• No confirmation from an official source.<br>• The news does not show in serious and international media.<br>• The same photos are used everywhere, which are easily forged.<br>They add "fake news" to the list of important topics on the wall. |
| **Closing activity: Discussion<br>Time: 5 minutes** | |
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| Temporarily hides the flipchart with fake news and invites students to summarize the lesson by listing these signs. | They participate in the discussion and with the help of the questions of the teacher they outline **strategies for detecting fake news and clickbait sites:**<br>• We compare the information with at least 2 other sources.<br>• We check who the author of the article is.<br>• We check the date of publication.<br>• We seek confirmation from an expert in the field.<br>• We use a critical approach to information on the Internet. |

## *Plan of the lesson on "Fake news" (Age group 15-17)*

**Objective:** Students shall learn to distinguish between true and false information on the Internet. They will be able to identify the signs of fake news.

**Materials:** whiteboard / flipchart sheet, markers, 2 copies of News 1 and News 2 (placed at the end of the lesson).

**Room preparation:** Arrange the chairs in a circle.

| **Introductory activity: Game "Two truths and one lie"<br>Time: 5 minutes** | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| The teacher explains that they are going to play a game called "Two truths and one lie". To do this, several volunteers think of 3 facts about themselves - two are true and one is a lie (eg. "I have an older sister", "My favorite food is pizza", "I cannot swim"). After the participant shares the three facts about themselves, the others have to tell which one is a lie without asking questions.<br>The teacher sums up that sometimes information may seem true, but in fact is a lie - it is important to know the person (the source of information) very well so that we can judge whether he is lying to us or not. | They participate in the game. |
| **Основна дейност: Работа по групи<br>*Време: 30 минути*** | |
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher** explains that **today's topic is fake new**s and starts a short discussion: "List a few ways in which information reaches us!", „What is the fastest and most convenient way to get some information?", „Is everything that is published on the Internet true?", "Have you encountered fake news yourself?" **(2 min.)**<br>The teacher says that now the class will be divided into 4 groups, 2 of the groups will work with one news item and the other two with another. The teacher divides the class into 4 groups and gives two of them one printout of Media material 1, and the other two groups - one printout of Media material 2. Each group should read the news they have and determine whether the information is reliable or false. Each group must present at least 3 signs to substantiate their answer. **(12 min.)** | They participate in the discussion.<br>Sample answers:<br>"Through television, radio, newspapers, the Internet. The fastest and most convenient way is to search for something on the Internet. Not everything that is online is true information."<br>The groups discuss the assigned materials and choose a speaker to present the results of the discussion to the class.<br><br>**They participate in the discussion on news 1 from media material 1. Sample answers:**<br>"This news is fake." |

| | |
|---|---|
| Once the groups are ready with the discussion, **the teacher starts a discussion with one of the groups, who has read Material 1**. The representative of the group reads the news and shares whether according to the group it contains reliable information or is false news, as well as the criteria by which the members of the group have come to their conclusion. The teacher then gives the floor to the other group working on the same material, who can add to the abovesaid or give other arguments, if they have any.<br>**Sample guiding questions for the discussion:** „Let's have a volunteer read the news. How did you feel while reading the news? Have you heard about some of the things written in the article? What do you think this news is - real or fake? What are your arguments for this? What strikes you about the title? Does the article have an author? Why is it important that each piece of information has an author? Are there any official sources mentioned in the text? Which sources can be official? What is the purpose of this text after all? Let's sum up the signs of fake news!"<br>The teacher then turns to **the other two groups working on Material 2** and asks the questions to them, using the same principle.<br>**Sample questions:** Let's have a volunteer read the news. Is there a match between the information in the two news items (a question for everyone)? What matches and what is different? What do you think this news is - real or fake? What are your arguments for this? How is the title different? Does the article have an author? Does it mention official sources? What are they? What is the purpose of this text? Let's summarize the signs of real news! **(16 min.)** | "The purpose of the headline is to attract attention / scare people ... It does not clearly show what the news will be about."<br>"The article does not have an author, so no one can take responsibility for what is written, because the text may have been copied from another place..."<br>„The text does not mention official sources. Examples of official sources are the police, hospitals, proven organizations..."<br>„This text seeks to evoke more emotions rather than convey true and objective information."<br><br>**The students participate in the discussion about news 2 from media material 2.**<br>Sample answers:<br>„This news is real. "<br>"The title shows what the text will be about - it is objective and does not provoke such strong emotions, but rather makes the reader think."<br>"The article has an author, and provides his organization and contact details."<br>"The article cites two official sources - for example, CNN and the Bulgarian Safer Internet Center. That makes the information more reliable."<br>"The purpose of the news is to inform and make the reader think." |

| Closing activity: Discussion<br>Time: 5 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| The teacher explains that **there are several ways we can discern whether a piece of news is real or fake**, as well as clickbait sites. He/she starts **a short discussion to present the strategies**:<br>Once we know the signs of a fake and a true piece of news, what can we do first if we doubt the veracity of a piece of news? Can we check other sources? What kind? How can we check who the author of the article is? If there isn't one, what does that mean? If we are doubting whether the news is true or false, whom can we ask? | They participate in the discussion and with the help of the questions of the trainer, sum **up strategies for the discernment of fake news and clickbait sites**:<br>• We compare the information with at least two other sources.<br>• ·We check who the author of the article is.<br>• We check the date of publication.<br>• We seek confirmation from an expert in the field.<br>• We adopt a critical attitude towards information on the Internet. |

**If desired, the teacher can give the students a homework assignment:** to look for other examples of fake news on the internet, and using the criteria learned in the lesson, justify why they think the news is fake.

## *Plan of the lesson on the topic "Cyber bullying - discriminatory behavior online" (Age group 12-14 years)*

**Objective:** To define strategies to deal with Cyber bullying based on ethnicity. Develop teamwork skills.

**Materials:** markers, whiteboard / flipchart sheet, 5 printed case studies

**Room preparation:** Arrange the chairs in a circle.

| **Introductory activity: Game playing<br>Time: 7 minutes** | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher draws a Venn diagram** (two partially overlapping circles) on the board and on the left, it says "bullying at school" and on the right - "Cyber bullying".<br>He/she asks the children if they can guess what the idea of this diagram is.<br>Then asks them to list the characteristics of bullying at school and Cyber bullying. | Expected answer: in one circle we write what is typical for bullying at school, in the other - for online bullying, and in the middle cross section - what is valid for both.<br>Expected response on Cyber bullying: „The characteristics of the Cyber bullying are: it happens on the Internet, lasts 24 hours and is visible to many people." |
| **Main activity: Case study<br>Time: 23 minutes** | |
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher divides the class into 5 groups** at random. He/she hands out a printed case study to each group and explains that the story of a victim of Cyber bullying has been written on a piece of paper. The task of each group is to read the case study and answer the questions after it.<br>While students work, the teacher can walk around the room, watching the groups work and giving them guidance if they need it. **(15 min.)**<br>**Discussion of the group work:**<br>After the 15 minutes are up, the teacher invites the first group to say how they answered the first question. He/she then asks if the other groups have something to add until the full answer to the question is reached. | They sit in groups and work on the case study within 15 minutes.<br>The groups take turns answering the questions and adding to each other's answers.<br>**Sample answers:**<br>• This is a situation of Cyber bullying, because an offensive Facebook page has been created, which is visited by many people and can be accessed at any time.<br>• The perpetrators of the Cyber bullying are Ivan and his friends / only Ivan / only Ivan's friends / people who visit the group.<br>• The victim of Cyber bullying is Assen.<br>• The victim is shocked, offended, sad, stressed, ashamed... |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Guiding questions for the discussion:**<br>„Can you point out the main features of Cyber bullying?<br>Who are they in this case?<br>Are the roles in this situation clear?<br>Who is to blame - Ivan or the guys who comment on the page?<br>How does Assen feel?<br>Is it possible that the Cyber bullying harassment makes us sick?<br>If you are Assen's classmates, what would you do to make him feel better?"<br>**(15 minutes)**<br>**Key points of the discussion:**<br>• Three roles in Cyber bullying are clearly outlined: victim, perpetrator(s) and witnesses.<br>• Attention is paid to how the victim feels and what the consequences of the Cyber bullying may be (including physical symptoms).<br>• It is emphasized that passive observers can play a major role if they are involved in reporting and helping to stop harassment.<br>• Critical thinking towards media publications is encouraged (link to the previous topic) and generalizations about people are rejected.<br>• The specific steps that can be taken in a situation of Cyber bullying are clearly outlined. | • The other participants are the people who liked the page and who visit it are passive witnesses to what is happening.<br>• Assen can ask his classmates to delete the page and stop uploading photos of him. He can share with his parents or with a teacher. Assen can report the event to the Online Safety Advisory Line (www.safenet.bg; tel. 124 123) and report the event to Facebook.<br>• We would advise other participants to report the page to Facebook so that it can be taken down.<br>• Ivan turned against Assen because of the article he read on the Internet.<br>• It can be explained to Ivan that the fact that a Roma has done something bad does not mean that all Roma do it. Everyone has known Asen for months and has never had a problem with him.<br>**Strategies to handle the situation** that students can think of:<br>• We can always first ask the perpetrators to stop<br>• **We can report to the Advisory Helpline to the Bulgarian Safer Internet Center (www.safenet.bg; tel. 124 123).**<br>• We can share with an adult we trust - older brother / sister, parent, teacher.<br>• We can report the content on the site itself.<br>• We can ask friends and passive witnesses to report the unacceptable content as well. |

| **Final activity: Summary of the lesson<br>Time: 5 minutes** | |
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| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher sums up the lesson,** by asking the students, "What were we doing during this lesson? What was useful / valuable for you? What can you do in a situation of Cyber bullying? Who will you turn to?" | They share their observations on how the class went and answer the teacher's questions. |

## *Plan of the lesson on the topic "Cyber bullying - discriminatory behavior online" (Age group 15-17)*

**Objective:** To define strategies to deal with Cyber bullying based on ethnicity. Develop teamwork skills.

**Materials:** markers, whiteboard / flipchart sheet, 5 printed case studies

**Room preparation: Arrange the chairs in a circle.**

| **Introductory activity: Game playing<br>Time: 7 minutes** | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| The teacher asks the students to share **their favorite application, site or activity on the Internet**, starting with him/herself. He/she summarizes the game, saying that the Internet provides many opportunities to connect with others, for fun and sharing, but that it also poses certain risks. He/she asks them what the characteristics of Cyber bullying are and what distinguishes it from other types of harassment, e.g. bullying at school (including in terms of number of witnesses and duration).<br>He/she asks students if they have heard or witnessed examples of Cyber bullying and explicitly asks not to mention specific names of participants in the situation. The teacher explains that during this class they will talk more about Cyber bullying and will have the opportunity to work on a specific case study. | Students take turns sharing what they like to do online and which sites and apps they like to visit.<br>**Expected answer about the characteristics of Cyber bullying:**<br>• It takes place on the Internet;<br>• lasts 24 hours;<br>• is witnessed by many people.<br><br>They share examples of Cyber bullying they have heard of or witnessed. |
| **Main activity: Case study<br>Time: 30 minutes** | |
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher divides the class into 4 groups** at random. He/she distributes the printed case study to each group and explains that it contains the story of a victim of Cyber bullying. The task of each group is to read the case study and answer the questions afterwards. While students work, the teacher can walk around the room, watch the groups work and give them guidance if they need it. **(15 min.)** | They sit in groups and work on the case study for 15 minutes.<br>The groups take turns answering the questions and add to each other's answers.<br>**Sample answers:**<br>• This is a case of Cyber bullying, because an offensive Facebook page has been created, which is visited by many people and can be accessed at any time. |

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| **Results of the team work:**<br>After the 15 minutes are up, the teacher invites the first group to say how they answered the first question. He/she then asks if the other groups have something to add until the full answer to the question is reached. **Guiding questions for the discussion:**<br>Can you point out the main features of Cyber bullying in this case study?<br>What is specific about it compared to other cases of Cyber bullying?<br>What is the role of each participant in it in?<br>What is Ivan's reason for acting this way? Is he entitled to such an attitude and if not, what is wrong?<br>How does Assen feel? What are the possible consequences for him?<br>If you were Assen's classmates, what would you do to make him feel better? What advice would you give to bystanders?<br>Have you heard of "social blocking, do you know what that means?" **(15 min.)**<br>**Key points of the discussion:**<br>• The three roles in Cyber bullying are clearly outlined: victim, perpetrator (s) and witnesses.<br>• Attention is paid to how the victim feels and what the consequences of Cyber bullying may be (including physical symptoms)<br>• It is emphasized that passive observers can play a major role if they are involved in reporting and helping to stop harassment.<br>• Critical thinking towards media publications is encouraged (link to the previous topic) and generalizations about people are rejected.<br>• The specific steps that can be taken in a situation of Cyber bullying are clearly outlined. | • The perpetrators of the Cyber bullying are Ivan and his friends / only Ivan / only Ivan's friends / people who visit the group.<br>• The victim of the Cyber bullying is Assen.<br>• The victim is shocked, offended, sad, stressed, ashamed...The other participants are the people who liked the page and who visit it - they are passive witnesses to what is happening.<br>• Assen can ask his classmates to delete the page and stop uploading photos of him. He can share with his parents or with a teacher. Assen can **report to the Online Safety Advisory Helpline (www.safenet.bg; tel. 124 123)** and report the case to Facebook.<br>**We would advise other participants to report the page to Facebook** so that it can be taken down. This is the so-called "Social blocking" - the more people report, the more likely it is that harmful or illegal content will be removed.<br>**Strategies for handling the situation**, which students can reach:<br>• We can always first ask the perpetrators to stop.<br>• **We can report the case to the Advisory Helpline to the Bulgarian Safer Internet Center (www.safenet.bg; tel. 124 123).**<br>• We can share the case with an adult we trust - older brother / sister, parent, teacher.<br>• We can report the content on the site itself.<br>• We may ask friends and passive witnesses to report the content as unacceptable as well. |

| **Final activity: Summary of the lesson<br>Time: 5 minutes** | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher sums up the lesson,** by asking the students: how one should react in such situations, how could they be prevented? | Answer the teacher's questions. |

### *Case study "Cyber bullying"*

Ivan read in an article, shared by a friend of his on the Internet, that Roma rob elderly women in Vratsa villages and thus formed a bad opinion of them without knowing any Roma. One day, a boy named Asen, who was of Roma origin, joined his class. Some of the boys befriended him, but Ivan stayed away and reminded his friends for months on end to be careful with the new boy, even though no one had had problems with him during that time. Finally, he created a page with an offensive title against the Roma, in which he uploaded photos of Assen with mocking comments. Assen's friends and other boys from the class and school saw the page, but kept quiet. However, some of their classmates also started to write offensive and mocking comments against Assen, including people who did not know him at all. Assen found out about the page and stopped going to school.

- Is this a case of Cyber bullying? Why / Why not? (recall the characteristics of Cyber bullying)
- Who are the perpetrators of the Cyber bullying?
- Who is the victim of the Cyber bullying?
- How do you think the victim felt?
- Apart from the perpetrator and the victim, are there any other participants in the Cyber bullying? Who are they and how would you define their role?
- What advice would you give to Assen in this situation? Who would you advise him to turn to?
- What would you advise the other participants?
- What is the reason that Ivan to turned against Assen?
- Can we say something to Ivan and the other guys who write comments that will convince them to stop? If so, what is it?

## DEVELOPING ATTITUDES TOWARDS TOLERANCE

### Tolerance

After students have gone through lessons to develop communication skills and emotional intelligence, which provide them with the tools to communicate with the other, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, as well as the topic of discerning fake news and media manipulations that are the main ways to spread and reinforce negative stereotypes, they will have to go through another important component, which is crucial

for the formation of a tolerant attitude towards the different. Namely, getting to know the different. Most often, the negative and hostile attitude towards the other comes largely from ignorance.

The same is true of stereotypes and discrimination. It is usually a matter of poor knowledge of the community at which hatred is directed, as well as looking at it only through negative stereotypes with no knowledge of its positive characteristics, hence there is no sense of belonging to it. This negatively perceived group is likened to something alien and incomprehensible, i.e. a threat. Its representatives are seen as depersonalized "avatars" of this faceless threat. Therefore, knowing other communities and awareness of the similarity and commonality between us is an important element in forming a tolerant attitude.

In this lesson, this is combined with the development of skills for finding and selecting positive and reliable information online, and not just discerning false information and manipulation.

## *Plan of the lesson on the topic "Tolerance" (Age group 12-14 years)*

**Objective:** Selecting information about different ethnic groups and developing an attitude of curious and positive attitude, appreciating diversity, combined with awareness of the commonalities between people.

**Materials:** Multicolored markers, flipchart sheets, internet connection or computer room.

**Room preparation:** Arrange the chairs in a circle

| Introductory activity<br>Time: 5 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **Introductory game (2 min.)**<br>The teacher invites the children to stand in a circle. Gives instructions for the game and gives a signal to start.<br>He/she gives instructions for the second step - each child counts in his/her mind from 1 to 10 and when he/she reaches 10, claps his/her hands.<br>**He/she asks a question:** „Why does clapping happen at different times when counting in the mind?" He/she guides children to thinking that everyone is different and unique and develops at different pace.<br>**Brainstorming (3 min.)** The teacher asks the children to share what they think "tolerance" means, by giving examples from real life. | All the students start counting from 1 to 10, and instead of saying "10", they clap their hands.<br>They count in their mind to 10 and clap their hands when they reach 10.<br>They give answers to the question.<br>They answer the question and give examples. |

| Main activity<br>Time: 30 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **The teacher asks the children to name holidays and customs** that are familiar to them. He/she asks them to describe the typical way of celebrating a holiday in their locality.<br>He/she divides the class into **five** groups. Each group receives one of these holidays - Easter, Vasilitsa, Bayram, Armenian Christmas and Hanukkah. Each group has the task of gathering information about the holiday from the Internet by memorizing / writing down the keywords they are looking for and the sources of information they use. They also receive a flipchart on which to draw and write. | They name holidays and customs that they know. They describe how some of them are celebrated in their locality.<br>In groups, they collect information about the holidays they have received.<br>**Each group presents** to the others **the information** they have gathered, sharing what keywords and what sources of information they have used. |
| **Final activity: Closing the session<br>Time: 10 minutes** | |
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| Invites students to sum up, by asking the question how holidays and customs of different ethnic communities in Bulgaria are similar and how they differ. He/she guides them to the understanding that differences create diversity, yet despite all the differences, people from these communities have a lot in common. | Respond by finding similarities and differences between the holidays and customs of the different ethnic communities in Bulgaria. |

## *Plan of the lesson on the topic "Tolerance" (Age group 15-17 years)*

**Objective:** Selecting information about different ethnic groups and developing an attitude of curious and positive attitude, appreciating diversity, combined with awareness of the commonalities between people.e.

**Materials:** Multicolored markers, flipchart sheets, internet connection or computer room.

**Room preparation:** Arrange the chairs in a circle

| Introductory activity<br>Time: 5 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| **Introductory game (2 min.)**<br>Invites the children to stand in a circle. Gives instructions for the game and gives a signal to start.<br>Gives instructions for the second step - each child should count in his/her mind from 1 to 10 and when they reach 10, they should clap their hands.<br>**Asks the question:** „Why does clapping happen at different times when counting in the mind?" He/she guides children to thinking that everyone is different and unique and develops at a different pace.<br>**Brainstorming (3 min.)** The teacher asks the children to share what they think "tolerance" means, by giving examples from real life. | All the children start counting from 1 to 10, and instead of saying "10", they clap their hands.<br>They count in their mind to 10 and clap their hands when they reach 10.<br>They give answers to the question.<br>They answer the question and give examples. |

| Main activity<br>Time: 30 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| The teacher asks the children to name holidays and customs that are familiar to them. He/she asks them to describe the typical way of celebrating a holiday in their locality.<br>He/she divides the class into four groups. Each group has the task to provide information on holidays from the Internet (indicating the sources of information he/she has used and explain why he/she has chosen these sources) celebrated in a characteristic way by two different ethnic communities and to compare them: What do they have in common? What is different?<br>The first group has the task to compare the traditional Bulgarian celebration of Christmas with the holiday Vasilitsa, the second group has to compare it with the Armenian Christmas, the third - with Hanukkah. Fourth group - to compare Orthodox Easter with Bayram.<br>They also receive a flipchart on which to draw and write.<br>Group discussion:<br>Each group presents the information they have gathered to the others, sharing what keywords and what sources of information they have used. | They name holidays and customs that they know. They describe how some of them are celebrated in their locality.<br>In groups, they collect information about the holidays they have received.<br>They present the information they have gathered, sharing what keywords and what sources of information they have used and indicate the similarities and differences between these traditions. |

| Final activity: Closing the session<br>Time: 10 minutes | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher** | **Students** |
| Invites students to sum up, by asking the question how holidays and customs of different ethnic communities in Bulgaria are similar and how they differ. He/she guides them to the understanding that differences create diversity, yet despite all the differences, people from these communities have a lot in common. | Respond by finding similarities and differences between the holidays and customs of the different ethnic communities in Bulgaria. |

## THEMATIC PARENT MEETING ON FAKE NEWS

**Preparation:** Arrange the chairs in the room in a semicircle, with the open side to the board. This way, parents will be able to see each other and have partnership conversations with each other and with the teacher. This increases trust and reduces resistance in discussions.

**Opening:** The teacher thanks the parents for responding to the invitation and reminds them of the purpose of the meeting, which is already stated in the invitation: to create a shared understanding of how fake news and media manipulation spread on the Internet and especially on social networks and how parents and teachers can help children discern them so that they are not influenced by them.

He/she then explains to the parents how the meeting will go: by talking about how fake news and media manipulations can be discerned, how they can negatively affect children and how digital media literacy can help children navigate the information environment and prevent this negative impact. There is also a discussion about the role of adults in this process.

**Talk about fake news and media manipulation:** The teacher asks the parents to write on sticky notes of different colors three signs for discerning fake news and to write against each sign whether they think their children apply this discernment criterion. The parents then stick the notes on the board - they are anonymous, so that parents feel comfortable sharing. After the parents return to their places, the teacher reads and sums up the main signs for discerning fake news according to the group and to what extent parents think that their children know and apply them. Parents add to or clarify what has been written. The aim is to focus their attention on the problem of discerning fake news and the extent to which it affects their children. They, then, write suggestions of what needs to be done to prepare their children to recognize disinformation. The teacher reads and comments on their suggestions.

**Discussion:** In this discussion, it is desirable that the teacher explains to parents exactly how they can support his/her efforts to build digital media literacy in the children in the class.

**Key topics, questions and suggestions to parents, for example, can be:**

- Talk to their children about what they have learned in digital media literacy class at school;
- How they can discern fake news and media manipulations;
- To be interested in or participate in doing the homework related to the evaluation of information on the Internet and the use of digital devices;
- To talk to their children about the stereotypes instilled by the media and so on.

**Closing of the meeting:** The teacher thanks the parents for the helpful discussion and introduces them to the next steps he/she will take with the digital literacy class and what he/she would expect from the parents in their support to him/her.

# GOOD PRACTICES OF OPEN LESSONS AT SCHOOL

Following the training of teachers from schools across the country (Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Kyustendil, Pomorie, Svishtov, Oryahovo, Dalgopol, Kesarevo), as a result of which they gained knowledge and skills on how to discern fake news and media disinformation so that they can pass it on to their students, based on the resources offered in the handbook, teachers had to conduct a series of lessons. Some of them were attended by an expert from the Applied Research and Communications Fund, who provided methodological support. Below are two examples (from the expert's observations) of how teachers cope with the task assigned to them and how the lessons are perceived by the students.

In **90 High School "Gen. Jose de San Martin" in Sofia** three teachers - Shennur Nedzhmieva, IT teacher, Temenuzhka Georgieva, teacher in entrepreneurship and Zhana Valchanova, primary school teacher, held lessons on May 17, 2022 on the discernment of fake news in a total of six classes (two sixth, eighth, ninth, eleventh and even second classes). Ms. Nedzhmieva and Ms. Georgieva presented quite different lessons on the topic of fake news, but in both cases combining (adapted) activities, included in the lesson plans in the teacher's manual and their own creative ideas. Ms. Georgieva successfully applied the digital technologies for the activities of the lesson. The students were interested in the material, actively participated in the process and at the end of the class, definitely showed enthusiasm to continue digging for new data.

Ms. Georgieva also held a thematic parent meeting on the topic of misinformation with parents of third grade children. The interest of parents is definitely high, because the topic is directly related to the well-being of their children. Ms. Nedzhmieva also implemented some of the activities discussed by the group of teachers during the training. After the first lesson, the expert from the ARC Fund gave feedback, related to the time frame of the lesson activities. She immediately integrated the advice she received, into her work with the next class, where she taught the same lesson about fake news, and the result was excellent.

The teacher of information technologies at **"Tsvetan Radoslavov" High School in Svishtov Ivaylo Petkov**, who also participated in the training, in the 14-17 March, 2022 period, tested the lesson on fake news with 131 students from eight different classes (students from 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 10th grade). He had also adapted classroom activities from the methodology and training, adding creatively his own elements, dictated by his practice. Mr. Petkov shared that the lessons aroused "exceptional interest among students" and that "it creates conditions for the development of skills for teamwork, critical thinking, aggregation and analysis of information; creative skills, engaging the students attention". He and his colleagues from the school will continue to teach lessons on discernment of fake news and counteraction to disinformation because they see a real need for it.

# LOOKING AHEAD

The presented channels of fake news, anti-Roma disinformation, myths and the facts that refute them and explain why they have appeared in the public space, do not exhaust the negative talk against the Roma communities. This is impossible even due to the fact that they appear and spread very quickly in the modern world of information technology. Easy access to information allows us to quickly and efficiently access new knowledge. At the same time, electronic media and social networks flood us with false and fake news, which, taken uncritically and viewed with prejudice, give rise to myths that cause hatred.

## Recommendations To The Approaches For Capacity Building And Countering Anti-Roma Hostility In The Media And Online

**1. Providing members of the Roma community with access to more quality sources of information could establish Roma people's individual agency in information consumption, thus improving the available information environment for Roma people in Bulgaria.** Thus, the information environment that is accessible to Roma communities can be improved. Among the possible quality sources of information to be promoted among the Roma communities are:

- "Ethical media", which enjoy a good reputation. This includes quality Bulgarian journalism available on platforms such as (Bivol, Free Europe and Marginalia), official and government websites (such as the website of the Ministry of Health, which regularly publishes up-to-date information), and the websites of Roma NGOs (such as the website of the Permanent Roma Conference).
- Specially created "pro-Roma safe spaces" online to disseminate content and information of high importance to Roma communities. A "pro-Roma safe space" could be, for example, a Facebook page for Roma, where Roma leaders and activists can easily communicate with other members of the Roma communities. There, Roma activists and leaders, who are better informed and more active citizens, can share knowledge and information and thus serve as informants to the wider community.
- The Roma health and educational mediators, Roma leaders and Roma activists themselves are potential channels for spreading information among the Roma community. The method of "word-of-mouth" could be used for reliable, quick and truthful information exchange, if the highly informed members of the community are the main messengers in this process.

**2. Challenging basic stereotypes about Roma in public discourses and debates can help change the public perception of Roma and change the biases and prejudices of the ethnic majority.** The basic anti-Roma stereotypes that need to be overcome include the image of Roma as criminals, the image of Roma illiteracy, the image of Roma as barbarians and non-human, the image of Roma as social parasites living on social benefits. These stereotypes can be refuted publicly online (in

the comment sections on Facebook and / or news websites), as well as in real interpersonal communication (in conversations between people) through:

- Sharing of positive stories about Roma people. These could be real-life examples of successful and impressive Roma people.
- Relying on official facts and knowledge. These could be unemployment statistics, research findings, legal documents, etc.
- Sharing historical facts about Roma people's achievements and contributions. These could be stories about sporting accomplishments, success stories of Bulgarian Roma people abroad, etc.

**3. Granting Roma people, the opportunity to see more "people like themselves" in popular and mainstream media, improving the positive representation of Roma communities, thus healing the hostile relationship between mainstream media and Roma people in Bulgaria.** Some initial steps in the direction of securing better representation of Roma people in Bulgarian media might include:

- Seeking cooperation from media outlets in increased reporting of issues and topics, which are of high priority to the Roma communities. These include social benefit distribution, education-based restrictions to voting rights, school segregation, etc.
- Seeking allies among journalists, influencers, intellectuals. They could contribute to the improvement of the media environment in Bulgaria by providing access to representatives of the Roma communities to mainstream media channels, by conducting journalistic investigations on Roma-related issues, and by contributing to increasing the knowledge of the general public, related to Roma communities and their culture.

**4. Educating members of the Roma communities on the main components of anti-Roma media hostility in Bulgaria would be a foundational first step in fostering critical thinking on the topics of media an information dissemination.** These initial efforts will then pave the way to building the Roma communities' media and digital literacy. The Roma communities could benefit from more detailed education on:

- Fake news and how to recognize them - some of the most outstanding and easily identifiable traits of fake news are the flashy titles, simple language and panic-inducing subjects.
- Conspiracy theories and how to recognize them – the most successful disinformation campaigns in Bulgaria were based upon well-narrated conspiracies. Some of the key elements of the successful conspiracy theories include the sense of an imminent threat, a depiction of a strange and far-away enemy, compelling story-telling which explains the most pressing real issues of the Roma communities, and e repetitive use of symbols and stories for long periods of time.
- Anti-Roma myths and prejudicial beliefs that are constantly spread by the Bulgarian media – the basic anti-Roma myths, which need

to be familiar to the members of Roma communities, because they are constantly spread by media channels include the myth of the opposition between state authority and the Roma communities, the myth of the inferiority of Roma bodies, the myth of Roma as public property, the myth that Roma people are political sell-outs.

**5. Accumulating online content "for the Roma by the Roma" could contribute to the build-up of online content relevant to the Roma communities and improve the media and online environment for Roma people in Bulgaria.** This content needs to be created by Roma people for the Roma people as they are the most trusted and most capable "spreaders of knowledge" among and about the Roma communities. This content needs to be addressed so that it fosters the feeling that a media space for Roma people does exist. Some possible means for fostering the creation of online content "for the Roma from the Roma could include:

- The utilisation of online pro-Roma safe spaces for spread of relevant information in an accessible manner (by sharing short resumes of important news stories in Roma languages and with less complex vocabulary).
- The creation and dissemination of unique content about culture and history of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. These materials could be shared with mainstream media, or they could be as simple as Facebook posts, short videos, or comments.
- The increased online visibility of active members of the Roma communities (like activists and health mediators), so that they themselves can work as online and offline channels for reliable information and quality pro-Roma content.

**6. Reframing the public discussions of "typically Roma" topics could be an approach to foster more public support for practical equality and for integration.** Some amendments used by activists (and hopefully later adopted by the wider public) would be useful in achieving this shift are:

- Referring to the issues of integration as issues of "social inclusion", "equality" and/or "socialisation" to replace the word "integration, which has obtained a negative connotation in the Bulgarian context.
- Referring to "social inclusion of individuals in need", rather than to "social inclusion of Roma people" in order to discern between different Roma people.
- Incorporating Roma perspectives on societal issues and problems, in order to avoid the confinement of Roma people within the boundaries of a limited number of topics, which permeate the public space as "typically Roma topics" and only serve to recreate prejudice and clichés.

**7. Improving Roma people's emotional grasp on their identity and their sense of the practical and ideological place they hold in society could be essential initial steps to overcoming the psychosocial consequences of anti-Roma media and online hostility.** The emotional well-being of Roma people could benefit from:

- Introducing the online "pro-Roma safe spaces" as a channel for emotional support and sharing of stories about the Roma experience in Bulgaria. They can also serve as spaces for emotional support and discussion among members of the Roma communities.
- Forming a (virtual or practical) support network of Roma health mediators, Roma leaders, and Roma activists and other members of the Roma communities from around the country. This network could be used to foster the exchange of knowledge and guidance among members, if it is designed to include Roma people from different backgrounds in order to challenge inter-Roma stereotypes and exclusion.

**8. The fight against fake news, targeted misinformation and media hostility, leading to an increase in the majority's negative attitudes towards the Roma, must be integrated into the state policy, targeted at overcoming discrimination and supporting the equal inclusion of ethnic minorities in the public life in Bulgaria.**

To this end, there are needed specific measures, such as:

- Targeted measures in the Action Plan for the implementation of the "National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma 2021-2030", through which Roma should receive adequate information about how to recognize and counteract the fake news and the media hostility;
- Activities aimed at changing the attitudes of journalists through trainings, organizing trips to different parts of the country to get acquainted with the real life of the Roma communities and collecting face-to-face information about prominent successful Roma;
- The civic organizations and institutions to conduct joint campaigns to overcome the anti-Roma attitudes and prejudices of the majority, which are based on misinformation and fake news;
- Regular monitoring of the hate speech in the media publications and sanctioning the cases of fake news and disinformation, which are leading to increase of the anti-Roma attitudes..

***We hope that this book will help find the steps and approaches that everyone who wants to overcome the status quo must go through, to show the people around them that false data and information, growing into myths over time are wrong and false.***

***They harm the Roma communities, and not only them - they harm the whole of the Bulgarian society, playing different sections of it against each other.***

**C.E.G.A. Foundation**
www.cega.bg

**Center for the Study of Democracy**
www.csd.bg

**Roma-Lom Foundation**
www.roma-lom.org

**ARC Fund**
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