

Bulgarian Policies towards the Roma Housing Problem and Roma Squatter Settlements

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ABSTRACT *The paper argues that the national and local authorities in Bulgaria do not utilize the vast experience accumulated by many developed and developing countries, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) and the World Bank in providing housing for the poor and dealing with squatter settlements. Ignoring this experience is a serious omission, which has resulted in a typically inefficient, top-down 'slum eradication' policy. New large-scale projects funded under European programmes also follow this flawed approach. The research identifies several important factors which could inform the development of better policies. For example, it stresses the existing extremely high rate of uncontrolled construction of robust housing made with reinforced concrete in the Roma neighbourhoods. The paper concludes that this is a critical factor, which has become the major threat to living conditions and leaves no other alternative but to regularize the settlements and develop streets and other infrastructure. Yet these high rates of construction serve as evidence that Roma households are capable of contributing to the solution of their own housing problems if only their development initiative is encouraged in the proper direction.*

KEY WORDS: Roma housing, eastern Europe, policy of enablement, Bulgaria

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to examine the housing and planning policies of the state and the local governments in Bulgaria. It briefly explores the relevant international experience and then details specifically Bulgarian housing policy and experience. The paper studies the current situation in the Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria in order to draw conclusions about the efficiency of the approaches of the local, national and the European institutions. The policy efficiency is assessed based on two main criteria and several sub-criteria, as follow.

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Improvement in the living conditions of roma population

This includes:

- the number of Roma households living in houses better than the slums in which they lived before the implementation of specific policy measures. 'Better' houses means: superior structures; better insulation of the external walls, and better provision of hygienic amenities (running water, sewerage, etc.) architectural layout corresponding to the specific needs and preferences of Roma households; and
- the number of Roma households living in settlements with acceptable and hygienic public spaces and with a street network that meets fire safety regulations.

Sustainability of the policy measures and the effects achieved

This includes:

- relevance of the policy measures to the main factors affecting the development of the situation; and
- promotion of public awareness, stimulation of social and ethnic co-operation, formation of informal and formal bodies, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc., to support positive development.

Problem Statement

The issues of Roma housing should be examined within the broader context of the whole situation of the Roma population in Bulgaria. According to the 2002 Bulgarian census, the Roma minority at the moment make up about 4.7 per cent of the population, but the true share is assessed as much higher because many Roma have declared themselves as Bulgarians or Turks. According to most statisticians, they are well over 7 per cent (Marushiakova & Popov, 1998), some suggesting even 9 to 10 per cent (UNDP – Bulgaria, 2005). Whatever the actual number, this definitely is the fastest growing part of the population. The Roma population in Bulgaria increased by 150 per cent from 1965 to 2001, while the total number of ethnic Bulgarians slightly decreased (National Statistic Institute, Census 2002).

At the same time, this is the minority in the poorest economic situation. According to Tomova (1995), they suffer the most from the economic difficulties arising from the transition from communism. Research conducted for the preparation of the *Regional Report on Human Rights* (UNDP – Bulgaria, 2003) found that 46 per cent of the Roma interviewed were jobless, 37 per cent last worked in 1990 or earlier, and 21 per cent had never worked. The survey conducted by Tomova estimated that in 1994 76 per cent of Roma people of working age were unemployed, while most women had never worked. Other sources estimate that in certain regions this rate even exceeds 90 per cent (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1998).

The rate of illiteracy in the Roma ethnic group is also the highest in Bulgarian society and the current trends are especially disturbing. *The Roma in Bulgaria* report (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1998) estimates that about 60 per cent of Roma children either have never attended, or have dropped out of, school. As a whole, the illiteracy rate in the Roma population is estimated at between 16 per cent (Tomova, 1995) and 25 per cent (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1998) (for the Bulgarian population it is 0.2 per cent). The share of those with secondary education is 8.5 per cent and only 0.3 per cent have experienced higher education.

In light of the above stated facts, any substantial problem related to the Roma minority represents a significant social issue. Undoubtedly, housing and living conditions in Roma neighbourhoods are among the most acute problems of this ethnic minority. In 1995 Tomova described the 'typical' Roma slums as 'looking like cattle-sheds, roofs made of thatch, several iron sheets, or nylon folio'. In 2005 a report from UNDP-Bulgaria concluded that most of the Roma population in Bulgaria was living 'in severely deteriorating conditions'. It is estimated that about 412,000 persons in about 86,000 households live in the big towns and cities of Bulgaria (UNDP – Bulgaria, 2005), which represents about 55–60 per cent of the Roma population. The 1992 census data prove the strong trend to urbanization of the Roma minority, because in less than 30 years the urban Roma population tripled. This is important because in cities they seem less likely to be integrated in society. Like any other slum areas, Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria are urban areas of poverty and crime.

With regard to the specific issue of this research – the assessment of Bulgarian policy towards Roma housing – this paper identifies two major deficiencies in the approaches employed by Bulgarian state institutions. First, the policy does not utilize the experience accumulated by many countries and world organizations in providing housing for the poor and dealing with squatter settlements. The issues of Roma housing in Bulgaria have always been regarded as different from the housing issues of other ethnic groups, and caused by the specific 'life-style' of Roma people. As a result, at present, the state institutions in Bulgaria are making the same mistakes as those made by many other states and international institutions decades ago.

Second, due to the inherited bureaucratic approach and its typical neglect of squatter housing, public servants and policy makers in Bulgaria have not recognized the considerable increase in the rates of solid construction (reinforced concrete columns and slabs, and brick walls) in Roma settlements. Evidence provided in this paper demonstrates that the situation has changed dramatically over the last 10–15 years and at present about two-thirds of the houses in the Roma neighbourhoods in the big cities in Bulgaria are solid houses. They may have an unacceptable appearance, many of them may lack hygienic amenities, and they may be of poor design. However, they are built of reinforced concrete, and are usually two stories in height, and thus have little in common with the 'traditional' Roma slums described by Tomova (1995). It is crucially important to be aware that the slums described by Tomova, although still found in many neighbourhoods, no longer reflect the 'prevailing type' of Roma

dwelling and that rates of new solid construction have become extremely high in the last decade, thus presenting new types of threats to the living environment.

Methodology of Research

The main research question concerns the efficiency of the policy towards Roma housing issues and Roma squatter settlements in Bulgaria. To answer this question, the paper starts with a brief review of the development of the policies of the UN Centre for Human Settlements and the World Bank. Then, in order to assess the Bulgarian policy, the paper explores the situation in Bulgarian Roma settlements and, in particular, analyses the performance of two projects supported by European Union (EU) programmes and implemented in Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria. These projects were chosen because they are typical examples of the two main types of policy measures employed by the state institutions. Both projects were realized in the last four years, so they reflect the recent policy trends. Projects in Plovdiv were chosen because the share of Roma people in Plovdiv is the highest among the larger Bulgarian cities. In addition, the first of the projects examined (in the Shekher neighbourhood) has been the largest Roma project in Bulgaria to date.

General information about the situation of the Roma population in Bulgaria was collected from publications of the National Statistical Institute, internet sources and sites of EU and UN institutions (such as UNDP – Bulgaria), NGOs and research organizations, as well as by field studies and personal observations in five neighbourhoods in Plovdiv and several other Roma settlements in Pazardjik, Stara Zagora and Varna.

Information about the first project – the Shekher project – was collected by interviews with public servants in the Northern Borough of the city of Plovdiv and with the mayor of the borough.¹ National and local publications were also sources of information – mainly the national professional journal *The City* and the most popular newspaper for Southern Bulgaria – *Maritza*.

Next, information about the second – the Arman – project was collected from the project team and from local Roma people through interviews and discussions, and also by personal observations. In fact, the author of this paper was the team leader of the Arman project. A very important part of the research, related to the trends in squatter housing development, was based on a detailed study of three cadastral plans (cadastral pictures, surveys) in the Arman neighbourhood in Plovdiv over the course of that project.

It should be stressed that sources of statistical information at the national and the local level in Bulgaria as well as in the rest of eastern Europe are extremely limited, especially regarding Roma-related urban processes. This is so because, first of all, the Roma have a very low level of integration in society, so they are not covered by the channels of the statistical institutions. Secondly, an important factor is the high mobility of the Roma population and its very poor literacy, combined with the policy approach of Bulgarian state institutions, which have underestimated the specifics of

Roma housing problems and have not carried out research on these issues relevant to their scale, also contribute to the under-reporting of statistics regarding the Roma. Only two previous attempts were made to study the Roma housing situation. The first survey was performed by a team led by Ilona Tomova in 1994 (1995). It was a piece of profound sociological research, but it was not focused on housing. The second survey was performed in relation to a UNDP initiative – a roundtable on the Formulation of a National Programme for Improving the Living Conditions of Disadvantaged Ethnic Minorities in Urban Areas, which took place in February 2005. This survey generated only a small amount of data, most of which is included in the current paragraph and the first paragraph of the ‘Problem Statement’.

International Experience

Before evaluating the official policy in Bulgaria towards the Roma housing problem and Roma squatter settlements, we should study relevant international experience in housing provision for the poor and in dealing with squatter settlements.

Squatter settlements similar to Roma neighbourhoods in eastern Europe have always been, and still are, widely spread in many countries. At present, in countries such as Brazil, India, Argentina, Turkey, Egypt and many others, these settlements comprise up to 40 per cent of new housing. In cities such as Cairo, Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Manila, etc., they occupy more than 50 per cent of the urban territory. It is estimated that, in 2001, 924 million people in the world lived in squatter settlements (UN, 2003).

Countries in different parts of the world first addressed such problems decades ago (in Britain, with the late nineteenth century slum clearance laws; in the USA, the housing acts of 1906 and 1949). Worldwide actions were initiated by institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank after World War II. Since then, international policies aimed at housing provision and slum clearance have undergone three basic stages outlined below.

The first stage spanned the 1950s and 1960s, and the respective approach was formulated as ‘slum eradication’. It was based on the notion that the squatter settlements should be demolished because they could not be improved. The slums had to be levelled to make way for new ‘roomy and hygienic’ habitations. This policy involved direct top-down intervention undertaken by the state and very often by international institutions (Keivani & Werna, 2001). However, the bureaucratic approach, typical of all ‘top-down’ initiatives, most often resulted in an acute disparity between the new housing and the needs of the inhabitants (Drakakis-Smith, 1981; Yap, 1996; Okpala, 1992).

Predictably, that policy gave rise to a well-grounded criticism, which often came from the UN experts themselves. Authors and experts such as Charles Abrams (Abrams, 1964a), John Turner (Turner, 1966, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1976, 1978) Cedric Pugh, (Pugh, 2001), etc., initiated the revaluation of the policy of ‘slum eradication.’

Over time, many 'impressive' failures, such as those in Caracas (Drakakis-Smith, 1981), Pakistan and Nigeria demonstrated the inefficiency of direct housing provision (Keivani & Werna, 2001) and the UNCHS and the World Bank eventually abandoned the 'slum eradication' policy.

The second approach employed by the two world institutions prevailed in the 1970s and was known as the 'site and services' approach. Its essence was that the central and/or local governments had to provide the land and infrastructure, with the housing developed by the households themselves (Keivani & Werna, 2001). Certain problems of this approach, which appeared over time (Burgess, 1992, Soliman, 1986, Jones and Ward, 1994), included: low rates of development (only 11–12 per cent of the needs were met by this approach); problems with access, due to the peripheral locations of the new settlements; and speculation with the land adjacent to the new settlements.

These problems caused the emergence of a new approach, which has already dominated the policies of the UNCHS and the World Bank for more than two decades. The late 1980s saw the promotion of the *policy of enablement* (UNCHS, 1987; Pugh, 2001). Gradually developed by many researchers, politicians and experts (Barton & Olsen, 1976, De Salvo, 1976, Pugh & Catt, 1984, Pugh, 1987, 1991, Peattie, 1987), it became the concept that served as the basis for *The Global Strategy for Shelter* (UNCHS, 1990) and the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements (UNCHS, 1997), as well as many other programme documents of the World Bank (1991, 1993, 1994, 1998, 1999) and the World Health Organization (1998). The policy of enablement does not aim at new housing provision, as much as at providing the conditions, facilities, organizational and financial instruments for the poor to be able to solve their housing problems on their own. The state and the local government should focus on the provision of public amenities, the improvement of the public spaces, the streets and the infrastructure. That is how this policy formulated the 'squatter and slum upgrade' approach, aimed at measures to improve the living conditions in existing slums by introducing urban services and social amenities, building infrastructure, better street design and design of social spaces, general upgrade of the built environment, etc.

In summary, in the period since the World War II significant international experience has been acquired regarding housing alternatives for the urban poor and issues of squatter settlements. That experience should be seriously considered by national and local agencies when dealing with problems of this type and this applies to issues concerning Roma housing in Bulgaria. While specific national or local conditions should always be taken into account, international experience should be considered in order to avoid repeating mistakes or following practices already identified as inefficient.

The Bulgarian Experience in Dealing with the Problems of Roma Housing and Roma Squatter Settlements

Describing the official Bulgarian policy so far, we have to stress that the prevailing idea has always been that Roma slums should (when the time comes) be levelled to

make room for new hygienic housing. Such a view is based on the understanding that these settlements are illegal and may not meet the elementary sanitary norms. In general, this has been the essence of the policy for several decades since its early stages and it has not changed with the political and economic transformations in the second stage since the beginning of the 1990s. Policy has been modified slightly due to recent pressure by the EU, but its general direction has remained the same.

Yet before examining the two stages in the development of the Bulgarian policy we should emphasize one important consideration concerning the specific Roma housing preferences. Roma housing problems should be solved by providing housing relevant to their needs. Therefore, it should correspond to their preferences which are, indeed, specific. Although almost all Bulgarian Roma now live settled and the nomadic life is quite rare nowadays, it was their tradition several decades ago. That is why Roma households are not used to apartment buildings and prefer to live close to nature and their livestock. For the same reason they are not familiar with new construction materials and higher finishing specifications. Finally, families have very close ties and usually live in clans. Therefore, low-rise flexible forms of housing that would make extensions easier and affordable would correspond much more closely to Roma needs.

The experience of the 'socialist' period

The first stage of Bulgarian experience refers to the decades of socialism. We may identify two stages within this period: the first one spanning the 1960s; and the second from the end of the 1960s to the changes at the end of the 1980s.

At the beginning of the 1960s, in many Bulgarian towns and villages, the state built neighbourhoods with small single-family houses for poor Roma households (Tomova, 1995). These areas were supplied with water, sewerage and electricity. In many cases, instead of housing, building land provided with infrastructure was made available to Roma households free of charge. In fact a *site and services* policy was employed to a certain extent in this period.

The policy of the second stage had sub-periods of higher and lower activity and went through some changes in the means of intervention, but nevertheless it generally remained a typical 'slum eradication' policy. In fact, it was very similar to the first stage of the policy of the world institutions, insofar as the objective was to 'bulldoze' the slums and to move the squatter population into new housing. In the 1970s and 1980s, because of the expansion of the prefabrication technology in Bulgaria (as in all socialist countries), many Roma households were accommodated in prefabricated apartment buildings. The 'top-down' approach typical of the slum eradication policy was much stronger in Bulgaria because of the political mechanisms of the highly centralized state. This policy did not take into account the specific Roma housing traditions and preferences, the structure of Roma households and the required specific organization of their homes, described above. Since the new homes did not reflect their



Figure 1. Prefab apartment block in a Roma neighbourhood in Plovdiv.

traditions and needs, the new inhabitants usually tried to adjust the dwellings to their preferences and very often destroyed some of the finishing works (like floor coverage or equipment), which they considered useless (because they were not used to new finishing materials). Thus problems related to the maintenance of the buildings became especially acute in the prefabricated buildings, which were much more vulnerable. ‘Many of these buildings are now in wretched situation, the staircases are “like after an earthquake”, the windows and the window frames of many apartments are broken, the linoleum has been overthrown and the floor covered with bedding straw. The cellars were turned into toilets’ (Tomova, 1995). However, we should state that the condition of most such buildings today is not so appalling; it is definitely better, although far from good (Figure 1).

These problems should have led to policy change, but the centralized state never responded properly and the mainstream policy remained unchanged. Consequently, at the end of the socialist period, a small proportion of the Roma lived (and still live) in the housing areas developed in the 1960s – in houses built under legal permits, supplied with urban services and, therefore, of an acceptable standard. But the fate of Roma areas in villages and cities was different. In large towns and cities, processes of uncontrolled increased housing density started in the 1980s and quickly gained strength. These new extensions and houses were not supplied with running water and electricity, and were not connected to the sewerage system of the town. In general,

living conditions severely deteriorated in these neighbourhoods (Tomova, 1995) – very much like the conditions in the squatter settlements. Indeed, the neighbourhoods in the smaller towns and in the villages, developed in this initial period, are now in a much better state. Obviously, the critical factor is the absence of uncontrolled housing construction – only small extensions have been built, which did not affect the street spaces and the infrastructure networks.

Another part of the Roma population at the end of the socialist period lived in prefabricated apartment blocks in Roma neighbourhoods in towns. Today, in Plovdiv, in one city area 34 blocks with about 2,430 apartments are inhabited by Roma only, which means that these blocks accommodate about 25–29 per cent of the Plovdiv Roma population. A much smaller share lives in ‘mixed’ apartment buildings in other areas of the city.

However, at the beginning of the transition period, the vast majority of Roma lived under exceptionally poor conditions in squatter settlements in big cities. According to the 1992 Census (National Statistic Institute, Census 1992), only 37.3 per cent of Roma dwellings were provided with running water, sewerage and electricity, while for the dwellings of Bulgarians this share was 87.9 per cent. The research carried out in 1994 (Tomova, 1995) found that 52 per cent of the houses in the (compact) Roma neighbourhoods were not provided with running water, and 74 per cent of the dwellings had no toilet. About one-third of the Roma in these neighbourhoods used toilets shared with several other households.

Policies in the post-communist period

The second stage in Bulgarian state policy covers the current period of socio-economic transition. During the early transition years the urban development activities in Bulgaria collapsed. In the late 1990s, with the first signs of economic revival, the problems of Roma squatter settlements became topical again. The influence of the European Union places a greater emphasis on the ethnic and democratic aspects of the issue, but, in fact, this has not affected the policy trends and most funding is still directed at ‘slum eradication’ projects.

Bulgarian ‘slum eradication’ projects

The current Bulgaria slum eradication policy trend will be illustrated by the Plovdiv Roma housing project (the Shekher project). In fact, that has been the largest Roma housing project to date. It is estimated that about 30,000–35,000 Roma live in five neighbourhoods in Plovdiv (total population 350,000). The project described here was initiated by the municipal administration and was implemented in the Shekher neighbourhood. It started in 2002 and was completed in 2004. The funding (EU PHARE Programme) was about 8 million euros including the infrastructure development. Eighty houses for Roma families were built on a site of 3.4 hectares. Nearly half of the site was ‘greenfield’ and the rest of the territory was initially occupied by

slums – a small part of the existing squatter settlement. First the slums on the site were demolished; the residents lived in temporary sheds while the site was under construction, and eventually many of them were resettled in the new houses. Therefore, it was a pure ‘slum eradication’ project.

When the project was near completion, six Roma foundations claimed rights to distribute the houses. Only then did the municipality realize that the rents the potential Roma tenants were ready to pay were several times lower than the municipal rents, despite that, the new houses were called ‘the Roma Beverly Hills’. Critical voices were heard in the media (*Maritza*, 2003) claiming that poor Bulgarians were severely disadvantaged compared to poor Roma, so this gave grounds for views that the project was causing ethnic tensions (*Stroitelstvo-imoti*, 2003). What is more, the new tenants were required to pay for utilities (electricity, water supply, etc.), which the inhabitants of the slums did not pay for. In the spring of 2004, the Municipality decided to let the houses to Roma families with higher incomes who were able to pay the rent. Eventually, priority was given to those who lived in the territory and the rent was fixed at €35 for a house per month. Again objections were expressed that poor Bulgarian families paid the normal municipal rent, which is much higher. Finally, after a couple of scandals due to refusal by occupiers to pay the rents and subsequent police intervention, the situation came under control. In January 2005 only 34 households were accommodated, but only six of them paid the rent and five other households had signed agreements to reschedule their rent duties (*The City*, 2005). The remaining 23 cases are currently being processed in court.

Bulgarian ‘squatter upgrade’ projects

Special attention should be paid to a new trend, reflecting the ‘slum and squatter upgrade’ approach. Two projects will be quoted in this respect.

The first of these is the ‘Urbanization and Social Development of Areas with Predominant Minority Populations’ project. It was approved by the European Commission (EC) in 2002 and started in 2003 (*The City*, 2005). This project is a big initiative for Bulgaria, jointly funded by UNDP, the EC and the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the government of Bulgaria. Its purpose is to develop street and infrastructural networks in minority populated areas, and is developed in six Bulgarian municipalities. The works in Pazardjik, which have made greatest progress so far, comprise the development of the street network, installation of water and sewerage mains, and modernization of the electric supply network. A goal is also the creation of 96 sustainable jobs, 20 to 30 micro-credits for start-ups of small businesses, and vocational training in the process of construction.

Another ‘slum and squatter upgrade’ project that will be examined in more details here was implemented in Plovdiv, again by a small company, which gained PHARE funding at the end of 2003 and was operational in 2004. Its activities comprised infrastructure development: laying a new water-supply main in the Arman neighbourhood,

a Roma squatter settlement of 2,200 inhabitants. Measured by its budget, this project was almost a hundred times smaller than the Shekher Roma housing development, since the finance of the Arman project was €80,000. The only advantage of the latter project was that the team was aware of the accumulated international experience and tried to make use of it. Yet, although the main initially specified project goals were achieved, it was difficult to demonstrate all the advantages of the approach in such a small-scale project.

In general, the results of this project included the development of a 570-metre water main, plus cleaning and maintenance of the environment in the neighbourhood (about 5 hectare) and job creation of 140 person-months.

An important goal that was not achieved was the preparation of a development plan for the settlement. The reason was the lack of co-operation with the local government. In fact two different tiers of the municipal government acted in different ways. The central Municipality did not co-operate and acted as if the project team were interfering with the policy of the municipality. The Chief Architect of Plovdiv silently refused to process the development plan of the neighbourhood presented by the project team, thus causing the failure of this very important project activity – the importance of urban planning is explained in the next section. In contrast, the administration of the Northern Borough did co-operate and tried to facilitate the project activities to the best of their capacity. That was probably due to the fact that the borough administration was much closer to the local people and their problems.

Key Factors and Trends of Development of the Situation

For the proper assessment of the Bulgarian policy towards the Roma housing issues, after studying its main stages, we need to examine the existing basic factors affecting the situation and the current trends of development. Above all we should pay special attention to the existing extremely high rates of new solid construction (brick walls and reinforced concrete structure). This is the most important existing factor because of its intensity and the scope and the scale of its effects on the living conditions in the Roma neighbourhoods.

The first aspect of the problem is that, despite the fact that this trend has been noticed by most citizens and also by the municipal officers and officials, they actually have not realized the threat it presents to the development of these areas. The observations in Arman, in Stolipinovo and Adjasan (Roma settlements in Plovdiv) and in other towns and cities prove that during the last ten years over 70 per cent of the Roma households have undertaken new construction – either an extension, or new two- to three-storied houses (Figure 2). However, this construction must be considered from two different perspectives.

On the one hand this is illegal construction developed without any architectural and structural plans. It usually lacks any amenities and may not meet the sanitary requirements. Besides it does not comply with any planning rules. The high rates of



Figure 2. New solid houses in Arman neighbourhood.

construction, examined below, have resulted in its expansion, increased density and numerous encroachments onto the communication areas. These encroachments cause a number of problems:

- These houses must be demolished when the street network is established.
- The encroachments prevent normal, and very often any, vehicular traffic.
- The encroachments prevent the laying of infrastructure (sewer, water, electric lines), as well as its upgrading.

On the other hand, this construction provides housing for the Roma households, which, though of poor quality, is definitely much better than the ‘traditional’ Roma slums described by Tomova (1995) as ‘looking like cattle-sheds’.

To analyse the rate of construction in Plovdiv’s Roma settlements, three cadastral plans (surveys) of the Arman neighbourhood were examined. The first one was adopted in 1984, the second was elaborated in 1994 and the third was prepared for the purpose of the PHARE project.

In general, the reinforced concrete structures were not built based on design plans, prepared by construction engineers. In some cases the reinforced structure is partial – only some reinforced elements were realized. Nevertheless, because many Roma

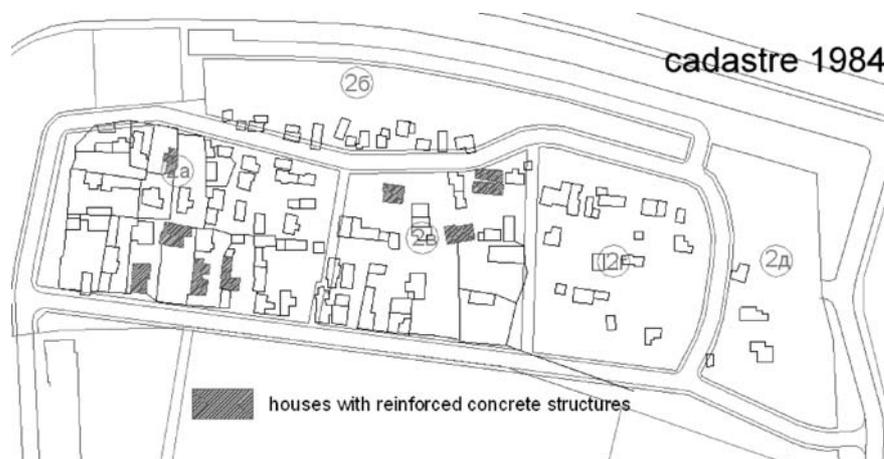


Figure 3. Cadastral plan 1984 – solid houses built by 1984.

have experience as construction workers, these structures are strong enough and at least stronger than many buildings in Plovdiv older than four or five decades.

For the purpose of comparison, in the three plans the street regulations proposed by the PHARE team are shown. The first cadastral plan proves that 22 years ago only nine solid houses existed in the Arman neighbourhood and none of them was to be found within the boundaries of the street regulations suggested by the team of the PHARE project (Figure 3).

In the period between 1984 and 1994 some 40 new solid houses were built and, according to the 1994 cadastre, the total number of solid buildings reached 49, of which approximately one-third were two stories in height. Still the rate of expansion of construction into the space of streets was much more moderate than today. If the suggested streets had been at that stage, only one two-storied and two single-storied solid buildings would need to be demolished (Figure 4). Hence, if the municipality had developed the street network in 1994 the social and economic costs would have been quite acceptable.

In 2004, the number of houses with reinforced concrete structure was 114, which meant that in the last decade 65 new solid houses were built, more than half of them being two- or three-storied. In 2004, 34 houses stand to be demolished, including 18 two-storied, in order to implement the street network, proposed by the PHARE team (Figure 5). It should be stated that the street network was designed to provide for the smallest possible number of houses to be demolished. It seems the number of houses to be demolished for the development of the street network has grown by more than ten times in only ten years (34 houses to be demolished instead of three), and so have the related social problems. Yet the major problem is that the network development

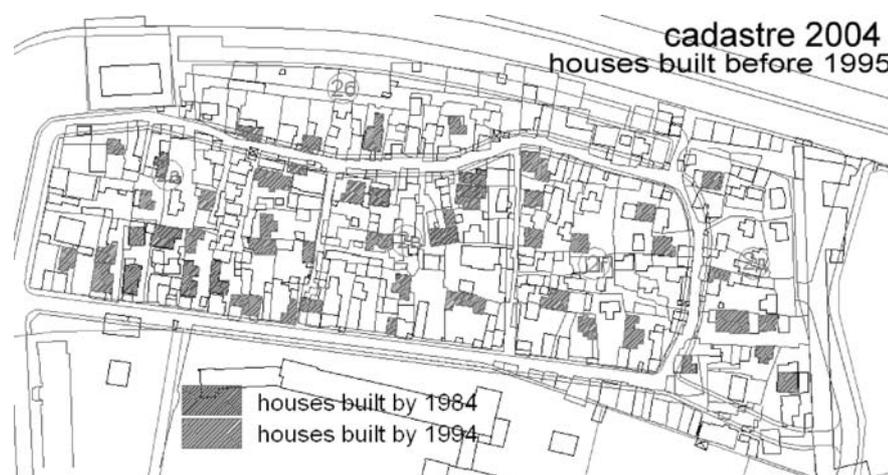


Figure 4. Cadastral plan 2004 – solid houses built by 1994.

has become impossible for the municipality, unless EU funding is engaged. Finally, when funding is provided, the inhabitants of these 34 houses will oppose the process, thus causing tension in the community.

The increase in the rate of construction is evident. In the months between the completion of the last cadastral survey and the completion of the project activities, five new family houses (not just extensions) were started and from the end of the project till March 2005 (only four winter months) the building of another three houses began.

The processes in the other settlements in Plovdiv and in all Bulgarian large towns and cities are the same. A study, carried out by the author in two other neighbourhoods in Plovdiv, as well as in settlements in Pazardjik, Stara Zagora and Dobrich, has observed rates of solid construction (the percentage of solid houses out of the total number in the settlement) of between 43 and 81 per cent (Figure 6).

A major emphasis should be also placed on the devastating effect that high rates of uncontrolled development might have on the living conditions in the Roma squatter settlement. As already stated, the problem is not only that more houses have to be demolished when streets are constructed, which means much higher economic and social costs. It also makes the laying of infrastructure many times more difficult and building of some of the streets becomes impossible. In Arman because of conditions related to very dense illegal connections, narrow communication spaces left in the streets, etc., the construction took 4.4 times more labour-hours than it should have. Due to the loss of street space, the area is now much less accessible. One of the two longitudinal streets cannot be accessed by truck any more. The cross 'streets', which once could be used for car access, are now less than 2 metres wide, much less at

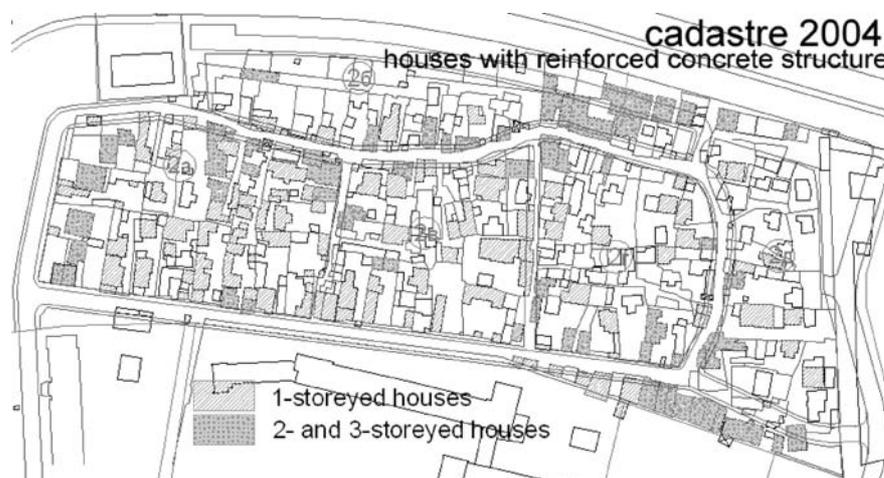


Figure 5. Cadastral plan 2004 – solid houses built by 2004.

some points, and with many twists and kinks. This is crucial because the only two sewerage mains serving part of the territory were not constructed in a professional manner and now often become clogged. Unfortunately, as a result of the expansion of new construction, the trucks of the sewerage service are no longer able to enter the street to clean up the sewer mains. This makes the situation intolerable from a sanitation point of view.

Apparently, the main reason why the situation is to a great extent out of control is the typical bureaucratic approach of the institutions. Despite the growing scale and the devastating impact of the illegal development of solid housing, it is still not monitored; it is not a priority, nor is it a policy target. So far we cannot deny that it lends support to the perception that any Roma housing initiative is harmful. Neither should we be surprised that the official policy in Bulgaria reflects this perception. Although, we should also agree that these high rates of construction prove that the Roma households are capable of solving their own housing problem.

Yet, from the opposite point of view, we have to admit that under existing circumstances legal construction in the slum areas is, in fact, impossible, because it cannot conform to existing urban plans, or to national standards (see below). In fact, it becomes difficult to determine cause and effect – whether uncontrolled Roma housing activity is the reason for the perception that it is harmful, or the lack of proper policies is the reason for the prevailing illegal nature of Roma construction.

Closely related to the issue of new solid construction is the issue of urban planning. Proper urban plans are the first condition for the implementation of a proper policy. This is particularly so in the case of Roma squatter settlements, since we observe that



Figure 6. Stolipinovo neighbourhood.

the expansion of illegal construction and the encroachments onto the public areas are becoming the greatest threat to the living environment. Urban planning, regulations and rules constitute the set of instruments to promote balanced urban development.

However, because the prevailing approach so far has been ‘slum eradication’, with a typical neglect of existing squatter housing as illegal and of poor quality, all Roma neighbourhoods are treated in Bulgarian urban development plans as if they never existed and, in fact, are absent in the plans. This means that areas of existing Roma settlements are allocated for any other urban use, but not for a relevant type of housing. In Arman the land was allocated for industrial use, an administration building, a school and a workers’ dormitory, despite the fact that the first Roma houses were built there about five decades ago.

Closely related is the issue of housing standards. The absence of standards relevant to Roma traditions and preferences is, no doubt, another important factor that encourages construction without a legal permit. In reality, even if a Roma household were willing to start a legal development in the neighbourhood, this would be impossible, because urban Roma settlements are so densely developed that a plan may be adopted in conformity with Bulgarian standards only if most of the buildings were demolished. For instance, Bulgarian standards require that all traffic streets should be at least 9.00 metres wide. Also there should be a rear-yard setback of at least 10.00 meters. Since the hygiene and fire-safety norms would allow for higher densities then, apparently,

the compulsory density ceiling is not determined by hygiene or safety considerations, but simply reflects the housing preferences of Bulgarians. Hence, a higher density ceiling, reflecting Roma preferences would be relevant and make squatter upgrade much more viable.

Assessment of the Efficiency of the Bulgarian Policies Towards Roma Housing Issues and Squatter Settlements

Two main criteria were chosen to serve as a basis for the assessment of the efficiency of the policy towards Roma housing issues in Bulgaria. These comprised, first, the improvement in the living conditions of the Roma population and, second, the sustainability of the policy measures and their effects.

With regard to the first criterion we have observed that the current trends of solid-house construction result in a definite improvement of Roma houses on the one hand, but on the other in severe deterioration of the public spaces and the street network. The study of the situation in the Arman neighbourhood proved that over the last 10–15 years the rate of new construction has increased significantly and at present about two-thirds of the dwellings in the settlement are solid houses. We have to stress that this trend of improvement results from construction activities undertaken by the Roma households themselves and requires no special policy measures. On the contrary – since much of this new construction is illegal – it requires urgent policy initiatives and regulation activities to safeguard the public spaces and infrastructure networks.

Based on this conclusion and the criteria chosen we may assess the two Plovdiv projects as follows. The main result of the Shekher project comprised the construction of 80 houses. However, the construction itself did not guarantee that considerable housing needs were satisfied. Much of the social effect was lost because it was impossible for the municipality to identify the exact needs of the households. There was criticism in the media (*Stroitelstvo-imoti*, 2003) that the houses did not fit the structure of Roma households. This is not surprising, as there was not a single Roma member of the project team. Also, as is typical for this policy approach, it was much more concerned with the technical issues (urban and housing design, construction works, etc.) than with the social, economic and organizational aspects of the development. Of course, the expected social and economic results, and the effects on the target group were part of the project statement, yet nobody thought seriously about the provision of local support and real inclusion of local population in the activities, etc. Finally, in order to satisfy certain housing needs the houses had to be let out, but the existing renting system proved to be quite inefficient under the specific circumstances. As a result, in January 2005 only 34 Roma households were accommodated, but only six of them paid the rent as required.

In principle, it is very doubtful whether building 80 houses for Roma households in a city with about 35,000 Roma population could be considered reasonable. Indeed, a

small number of Roma families received a 'gift', almost a 'blessing', while thousands of other families could not get the smallest benefit from the EU grant.

Nevertheless, in view of the poor traditions in the area of Roma housing, the Plovdiv development should be assessed as a positive step in some respects. Daniela Zhelyazkova, mayor of the Northern Borough of Plovdiv Municipality (where the development was realized), stated that the borough administration was well aware of all problems and failures of the project. Yet the normalization of the situation and the establishment of a renting system in spite of many difficulties should be considered as a positive result, because the experience gained was in itself highly valuable.

In summary, the slum eradication policy (as realized in the Shekher project) was inefficient with regard to the first criterion – the improvement in the living conditions of Roma population, because: (1) 8 million euro were spent to provide better houses for only about 1.5 per cent of Plovdiv Roma population; (2) the renting system proved to be inadequate; (3) many of the new occupiers were not families from the poorest Roma population. This policy does not meet the second criterion either – the measures and the results are not sustainable, because: (1) it is not relevant to the emerging new major threat to the living conditions in Bulgarian urban Roma settlements – the deterioration due to the illegal construction of solid housing; and (2) due to the prevailing bureaucratic approach this policy is not seriously seeking Roma participation, especially in process management.

Finally, it is strange that, after all the problems described above, the Council of Europe Development Bank has already funded a new project to continue the same type of housing activities in Plovdiv. The new project aims at building many more houses – 204 – as if the project implemented in Shekher neighbourhood had been very successful.

The main result of the Arman project comprised the development of a 570-metre water main. One hundred and ten houses which had no water supply or experienced serious problems, particularly in summer time, were now provided with running water. Yet the funding was a hundred times smaller than the funding of the Shekher project. It should also be noted that over the last ten years 65 new solid houses have been built in Arman and not a single EU cent was paid for the purpose. Therefore, we may conclude that each euro invested in this small-scale 'squatter upgrade' project was much more efficient since it contributed to an improvement in the living conditions that the Roma households could not provide on their own.

Still the project team could not achieve several important goals. One such goal was the adoption of an adequate urban development plan of the neighbourhood. As already explained, despite the plan being prepared, it was not processed due to lack of co-operation by the central administration of the Municipality.

A very important goal of the project was seeking active participation by the local population. Although formally this goal was also achieved, it fell short of the degree anticipated, because volunteer labour was not utilized as had been envisaged in the project. Another important objective that could not be achieved was the establishment

of efficient collaboration with a Roma NGO to continue the local development initiatives. In fact, despite the existence of several Roma NGOs in the neighbourhood, the project team could not find a partner organization sufficiently competent and committed to working for the wellbeing of the community.

In summary, in the case of the Arman project the 'squatter upgrade' policy was efficient in improving the living conditions of Roma households insofar as: (1) 110 houses were supplied with running water (about three-quarters of these houses were solid – built by their occupiers); (2) the project provided those Roma households with an amenity that they could not provide on their own; and (3) the funding was a hundred times smaller than the funding of the Shekher project. With regard to the second criterion, the project may be assessed as efficient in providing sustainability of the measures insofar as it was directed against the main threat to the living conditions in Roma neighbourhoods – the loss of opportunities for infrastructural development. However, it failed to provide sustainability in as much as: (1) the urban plan of the settlement was not processed; (2) genuine participation of local population was not achieved; and (3) it could not stimulate the generation of efficient forms of organization within the local population to continue the activities of squatter upgrade.

Conclusions

The foregoing case studies suggest that the Bulgarian policies toward Roma housing have not been successful so far. In a country with a Roma population of about 412,000 in urban areas, most of them living *in severely deteriorating conditions* (UNDP – Bulgaria, 2005), the policies implemented in the last decade have contributed to the building of only 80 houses and some infrastructural construction in not more than six Roma neighbourhoods. At the same time, assessments claim that the National Programme for Improving the Living Conditions of Disadvantaged Ethnic Minorities will be able to utilize only about 3.4 per cent of the EU funds likely to be available (UNDP – Bulgaria, 2005).

Meanwhile the situation in the Roma urban settlements is getting out of control. Since the prevailing slum eradication policy did not manage to eradicate slums, over the last 10–15 years in most Roma settlements in Bulgaria, a massive process of new uncontrolled solid construction and densification of housing can be observed. Due to this process, streets were narrowed and public spaces diminished, thus causing major obstacles to development of infrastructure and squatter upgrade. Consequently, the upgrade will require many times higher economic and social costs. Nevertheless, upgrade is the only solution to the deteriorating conditions in those urban areas, because it is inconceivable to demolish hundreds of new solid houses.

The fact that the local Roma population has never been effectively involved is another evident and critical general weakness. With only one exception – the Arman project – nobody ever has seriously tried to involve the Roma population. Even the Urbanization and Social Development of Areas with Predominant Minority Populations

project, despite seemingly closer to the 'squatter and slum upgrade' approach, does not seriously aim at providing a space for considerable Roma involvement, and, more particularly, participation, in the process management.

Hence, based on the observations made in this paper, the proper Bulgarian policy concerning the Roma housing issues could be improved by following this approach:

- Squatter upgrade would be assessed as more relevant. Although none of the possible approaches should be underestimated, the local governments have to concentrate on infrastructure provision and modernization (water and electricity supply, sewerage), development of the street network and taking any measures (both technical and administrative) to protect the street spaces from uncontrolled construction.
- The establishment of rules of urban development is crucially important, because they target the greatest new threat to the living conditions – the loss of roads. From a technical point of view, the preparation of development plans for all areas with Roma settlements is the most urgent task. The elaboration of relevant plans will be impossible unless specific standards for Roma housing are prepared within a short time-scale. Once the new plans are elaborated, subsidies should be provided directly to Roma households to encourage them to 'help themselves'. Subsidies could be used as an instrument to promote the observation of planning rules. They could be granted in instalments on condition that each previous stage of each individual development complied with the development plan of the neighbourhood.
- Promotion and organizational strengthening of Roma associations or other forms of Roma involvement in the regularization of the settlements and management of the Roma housing problem. Special measures must be taken to regularize the delivery of urban services and eliminate the uncontrolled use of utilities. The Roma organizations that are invited must assume obligations leading to the cessation of illegal construction and the control of service delivery.

Such policy will, no doubt, be difficult to implement. Probably the most difficult part will be the establishment of Roma associations, which should assume the above-stated responsibilities. Dealing with socio-economic issues and developing human resources is always much more difficult than just carrying out construction. However, practice all over the world testifies that the participation of the local population, although usually extremely difficult to achieve, is the only guarantee for efficiency and sustainability of any urban activities, especially of squatter upgrade. The results of the Bulgarian policies directed to solving the problems of Roma housing and Roma squatter settlements indicate that these conclusions apply to the specific Bulgarian conditions, too.

Note

1. Mrs Daniela Zhelyazkova.

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