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Roma Political Participation in Bulgaria

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I. Introduction

Roma populations have been largely left out of political and economic transitions throughout Central and Eastern Europe, discriminated against and marginalized through poverty, social ills, and, for many Roma communities, physical isolation. If Roma are to advocate for better opportunities and solutions to their communities' problems, they will need to strengthen their level of participation in the political processes of their countries. As few Roma have political experience, they will need strategies that address both external and internal barriers to Roma political participation and the development of organized Roma political leadership.

In February and March 2003, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted assessments in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia to analyze the salient challenges and opportunities to increase Roma political participation. Funded by and conducted in cooperation with the Open Society Institute (OSI), this project reflects the interest of both NDI and OSI to raise the issue of Roma political participation with relevant international organizations and to take the first step toward initiating strategic blueprints for Roma communities to enhance their political participation, representation, and influence. Three separate reports will offer the key findings and recommendations of the NDI assessment team in each country; this report covers the Bulgaria assessment.

During the two-month assessment period, NDI teams traveled to the three countries to meet with a wide range of Roma and non-Roma political and NGO leaders, elected and appointed government officials, as well as and opinion makers, researchers, journalists, educators, project leaders, and ordinary citizens. The group also representatives of international organizations active in Roma-related issues. The assessment teams spent one week in each country, visiting the capitals and other cities, smaller towns, villages, and communities and settlements. The often divided into two groups in order to broaden its scope and perspective. The list of the meetings in Bulgaria is found in Appendix 1.



The membership of the assessment teams varied with each country visited. Three core team members participated in the

policy analysts, met with issues. in each large Roma team to The list in

assessment in all three countries. Each core team member contributed his/her experience and expertise in human rights, political organization and strategy, democratization, and Roma and related regional issues. In each country assessment, this core group was supported and augmented by in-country team members, including a respected Roma leader, who provided relevant experience, expertise and knowledge. This core team approach was intended to provide the individual country reports with a broader sense of context, continuity and perspective.

The Bulgaria assessment was conducted February 1 to 8, 2003. The team visited Sofia, as well as Lom, Plovdiv, Rakovski, Sliven, and Vidin. Members of the team and support personnel included core team members Michael Brown, James Denton, and Rumyan Russinov, as well as Sofia-based support from team members Michael Farnworth, Lika Pishtalova, Toni Tashev, and Sevdalina Voynova. Brief biographical sketches can be found in Appendix 2.

II. Background

Roma in Bulgaria are faced with numerous social, political, and economic challenges that prevent them from fully integrating into the larger, majority society and taking part actively in politics. As a result, both the quality and quantity of Roma participation in political affairs is generally low.

Racial prejudice, poverty, low education levels, sub-standard living conditions, language barriers, and other social and economic factors increase the communication and policy gap between the Bulgarian government and ethnic Bulgarians on one side, and the Roma population on the other, reinforcing mutual distrust. The obstacles facing Roma are exacerbated by generally poor economic conditions in the country as whole and a political system still struggling to shed the legacy of communism. Despite some attempts on the part of the government, the overall lack of political will has further resulted in Roma issues being inadequately addressed.

Economic Situation. The Roma economic situation in Bulgaria deteriorated sharply as a consequence of the post-communist transition. Roma unemployment rates in the 1990s skyrocketed far above the country's average. In 1998, for example, official unemployment among Roma was reputedly between 80 and 90 percent, while the average unemployment rate in Bulgaria at that time was 16 percent. Roma suffer from higher poverty rates as well. A recent World Bank poverty study revealed that, in 1997, more than 84 percent of Roma in Bulgaria were living in poverty compared to the national poverty rate of 36 percent. Roma are often excluded from formal and official employment rolls, limiting their access to insurance and other social benefits. Job discrimination and low education are two salient causes of Roma poverty.

Health Data. Statistical data relating to health conditions among Roma in Bulgaria is scarce; however, available reports and credible estimates point to significant gaps between Roma and other Bulgarians. One study found that only 1 percent of Roma live beyond 70 years of age, and collectively attain a life expectancy up to 15 years' lower than average Bulgarians.² The Roma infant mortality rate was estimated to be almost two times higher than that of other Bulgarians in the last decade. Because of inadequate access to health care, poor living conditions, malnutrition, low education levels, high levels of smoking, drug use, and other social factors, Roma run a much higher risk for birth abnormalities than non-Roma. Studies have found that Roma in Bulgaria are significantly more susceptible than other groups to contract such diseases as tuberculosis, Hepatitis B, and HIV/AIDS.

² This study was conducted by the foundation *Health Problems of Minorities* in May 2002.

Education Levels. Roma suffer from significantly higher illiteracy rates, preventing them from being competitive for employment. Few Roma in Bulgaria receive higher education and hold high professional positions. After 1989, the government largely preserved the communist era educational system resulting in two types of schools for Roma children: so-called “Gypsy schools” located in Roma neighborhoods and thus populated entirely by Roma children, and special schools for children with mental handicaps where Roma children (generally not handicapped) comprise the main portion of the student body. Both types of schools *de facto* segregate Roma. Since 1997 municipal authorities have been asked to selectively introduce the study of Romani language in schools and to create special groups for Roma children to help them learn Bulgarian. Some positive steps have been adopted in the sphere of education, but the problems have not been resolved, largely due to a lack of political will, compounded by a lack of unified policies and a continuing debate on the best approach to minority education.

Political Participation. Romani political participation was stifled in the past by constitutional prohibition against the formation of political parties on ethnic and religious bases. Despite the pressing social and economic issues facing the community, mainstream political parties have incorporated limited Roma issues into policy platforms. No Roma-based political parties have achieved measurable success. Some parties have opted to include Roma as their representatives in parliament in order to secure Roma votes. However, openness to Roma issues has been limited at best and, at worst, has the potential to jeopardize the political standing of those seeking to address Roma issues.

Openness to Roma issues by mainstream political parties has been limited at best.

Many Roma and non-Roma NGOs working to advance Roma rights have emerged in the past decade to fill the political vacuum. Although the nongovernmental sector has been the most active and successful party in the struggle for alleviating the Roma conditions in Bulgaria, many organizations’ efforts are hampered by the lack of focused agendas and, some say, corruption.

Government Response. *The Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society* (or “*Framework*”) is a policy document initiated and drafted by a huge coalition of Romani organizations who then advocated for its adoption by the government. It summarizes an overall strategy to address and solve a myriad of broadly defined problems and challenges during the coming 10 years, in discrimination, economic development, health, education, culture, media and image, and gender equality.

Though the former government of Bulgaria (led by the Union of Democratic Forces or UDF) signed the *Framework* in April 1999, it did not undertake steps to implement it until the end of its term in office in June 2001. Neither that government nor its successor (led by the National Movement of Simeon II) has concretely supported measures outlined in the document, the goal of which is the “elimination of the unequal treatment of Roma in Bulgarian society.” The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the predominant party of the Turkish minority), as a ruling coalition partner with both the UDF and Simeon governments, similarly confirmed its commitment to the program but did little in terms of concrete implementation.

The September 2002 statement by the Ministry of Education and Science Instruction that the system of segregated schools in Roma neighborhoods should be eliminated could be an indication that the government intends to implement one of the central goals of the *Framework*, i.e. desegregation of Roma ghetto schools. The current government has also drafted an anti-

discrimination law, the adoption of which is recommended by the *Framework* program; however, the law has not yet been adopted.

Nonetheless, the signing of the document was a major accomplishment for the Roma community, recognizing the major challenges facing the population and making the elimination of discrimination one of its main political priorities. Unfortunately, the initial momentum seems to have waned following the governments' lack of effort in implementing the measures. Overall, the nascent connection between Roma communities and the political parties and organizations ostensibly representing them is tenuous at best and fraught with challenges.

III. Major Findings

A. The Roma Population: Size and Diversity

A basic understanding of the size, nature, and diversity of the Roma population is fundamental not only to determine the degree to which they are under-represented in government, but also to design strategies to correct this under-representation.

Roma Population Size. As in other Eastern European countries, there is considerable disagreement in Bulgaria about the actual size of the Roma population. According to Bulgaria's 2001 nationwide census, 370,000 citizens identified themselves as Roma (or about 5 percent of the country's population of approximately eight million). Although the team is unaware of any formal challenges to the census results, various government, NGO and Roma political activists, researchers and social scientists, as well as international institutions, believe that this official number significantly understates the country's Roma population. Outside estimates of the Roma population in Bulgaria range from 700,000 to 900,000³—two or three times the official count or up to 10 percent of the country's population. Given the 4 percent threshold for entering parliament in Bulgaria, the relative size of the Roma population is relevant when considering political strategies, particularly at the national level.

With respect to this report, however, the explanations for the undercounting are instructive, and considerably more relevant than the actual size of the Roma population.

Political and Ethnic Identities. The Roma's collective high poverty and illiteracy rates, as well as the census pollsters' limited reach into more depressed Roma communities, undoubtedly contributed to the undercounting. However, most Roma leaders seemed to attribute at least some of the undercounting to an undocumented but widely acknowledged practice whereby some Roma deny their ethnicity to avoid the social stigma of being attached to the bottom rung of society. Indeed some citizens who listed the Romani language as their mother tongue—a language unique to Roma—did not identify themselves as Roma to census pollsters.

According to this view, the better educated, more urbanized and financially successful Roma—and Roma of dual ethnicity—often identify themselves with either the Bulgarian majority or a non-Roma minority, the affect of which understates the Roma population, diminishes its identity, and dilutes its political clout. While many Roma are said to deny their ethnicity because they consider themselves assimilated into Bulgarian society, one common

³ Jean-Pierre Liegeois' book *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers* provides an estimate of 700-800,000. The United Nations estimates the population to be approximately 900,000.

belief is that many identify with other segments of society to enhance their prospects for improved socioeconomic status.

At the same time, other religious, ethnic, cultural and geographical factors can weigh heavily when identifying one's nationality. For example, informed Bulgarian government officials and Roma leaders alike claimed that a significant number of Roma living in the southeastern region of Bulgaria, which historically has a large Turkish population, identified themselves as ethnic Turks. The Turkish community is the country's largest and most influential minority with a population of 747,000, according to the 2001 census. Roma reportedly identify themselves with the Turkish minority partly because some consider themselves to be genuinely assimilated, but also because the Turks' elevated socioeconomic and political status appeals to the stigmatized Roma. Also, many Roma in this region share the Turks' Moslem faith. In this case, a reasonable assumption is that Moslem believers among the Roma claim Turkish ethnicity because they identify more closely with their Moslem faith than their Roma ethnicity.

Diversity and Divisions. The Roma share a common ethnicity, history and culture that can be traced back hundreds of years. Throughout their history, they have also shared a tradition of high rates of poverty, discrimination, dependency and joblessness. However, based on the interviews conducted by the NDI assessment team, the Roma do not share a common sense of purpose, community or ethnic identity in the political context. In a democracy, such a breakdown within an ethnic minority decreases its political representation and its ability to advance public policies that expand opportunities in education, employment, and quality of life.

Much has been written about the legendary divisions within the Roma population. The NDI assessment team repeatedly heard accounts of political, family, and business rivalries within the Roma community, driven and sustained by self-appointed leaders, who prevent Roma from developing a common sense of purpose, identity, or vision. Other differences in language, work ethic, education, as well as socioeconomic status, expectations, and self-image—as discussed previously—further encourage this fragmentation.

The level of Romani political participation is stronger at the city and town level where frustration levels are high. Voter turnout records and various reports (see UNDP Regional Human Development Report, 2002) indicate that Roma recognize that their political interests are best represented at the local level. However, regardless of the higher levels of engagement, the assessment team saw no indications that their political participation was organized, effective, or developed to its potential.

Geography and Dispersal. In recent years geographic factors have added new stress to the fabric of Roma society in ways that will instruct strategies to increase Roma political participation and influence. Unlike ethnic Turks, whose large and stable minority is concentrated in southeastern Bulgaria where they enjoy a regionally dominant social, political and cultural presence—the smaller Roma minority's numbers are thinned out, spread more or less evenly across the country.

Although historically a relatively transient and rural group, more recent generations of Roma established roots in the urban centers, particularly during communist rule. However, in the wake of the collapse of Bulgaria's command economy, many of the less skilled and therefore less adaptable Roma lost their jobs in the cities (many were in seasonal construction) and were unable to find alternative employment. Facing unemployment and rising costs, thousands of Roma had to uproot their families, abandon their homes, and resettle to less costly, mostly

depressed areas outside the cities. This relatively recent dislocation severed longstanding ties among thousands of Roma, making communication and organization more difficult, and diluting the community's potential political influence.

Roma appeals for governmental and international assistance need to be balanced by a new understanding among Roma that they can and should address basic needs in their communities through self-help initiatives.

Political Orientation and Dependency. Though it is undeveloped, uninformed and probably tenuous, the Roma community's political orientations generally lean to the center-left, with a particular emphasis on a strong role for government. This is especially true among the older, rural, and poorer populations who are nostalgic for the days when the government was perceived to have provided for their financial needs.

Younger, educated and urban Roma, however, recognized that the system locked many Roma into a cycle of dependency and poverty. Nonetheless, most experts in Bulgaria estimate that 70-80 percent of Roma typically support a "cradle to grave" political agenda.

Indeed, government intervention and support are necessary to help solve the institutionalized poverty, discrimination, and social ills. However, Roma appeals for governmental and international assistance need to be balanced by a new understanding among Roma that they can and should address basic needs in their communities through self-help initiatives, which is critical to fostering political participation.

B. Roma Political Experience

Leading up to Bulgaria's most recent parliamentary election in June 2001, eight Roma parties formed a coalition, Free Bulgaria. This coalition failed to reach the required four percent threshold at the national level and, therefore, no Roma party coalition candidates were elected to parliament. Indeed, the coalition received less than one percent of the vote in an election where the Roma voter turnout was reportedly around 70 percent, or roughly 400,000 voters using the UNDP population estimate, which corresponds to approximately 8 to 10 percent of Bulgaria's total voting population.

The Roma parties' failure to attract a substantial Roma vote indicates that Roma do not always vote as a bloc, and further do not necessarily support the ethnic-based political parties and candidates that claim to represent them. This disconnection between the Roma political leaders and their constituents was dramatically and repeatedly illustrated and substantiated by the comments made to the NDI assessment team by Roma and non-Roma throughout Bulgaria. It also reflects the general weakness of Bulgaria's political system in which non-Roma voters, too, tend to feel alienated from their political representatives.

Roma Political Parties and Leadership. Approximately one dozen Roma political parties and movements exist in Bulgaria. None is guided by a discernible set of political or philosophic principles or values. None offered a political platform in the 2001 election. No ideological, organizational, or functional cohesion is evident among them.

NDI observed nothing that would challenge the overwhelming consensus that Roma political parties are weak and lacking basic political organizing capacities. With perhaps no exception, the parties appear to exist primarily to

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advance narrow, and in some cases family business, interests of party leaders, and not the interests of Roma communities. One Roma remarked that “Roma political leaders see politics as a way to ‘make a living.’” Another quickly added, “Yes, and poor people get rich in politics.”

Roma tend to be more politically active at the local level than at the national level. However, there too, politics are undeveloped, guided by the self-interests of a few so-called leaders. One Roma woman remarked that she had worked in every local campaign since 1989 in Vidin, but that, in the end, “the Roma are manipulated by a small number of leaders for a small amount of cash.”

By most accounts, the Roma exert increasing influence in local politics. Yet, among the relatively few local Roma candidates elected to serve in office, almost none is re-elected to a second term. While this reflects a common trend throughout many parts of the region among non-Roma candidates as well, it does suggest that Roma leaders, like many of their non-Roma counterparts, are often unprepared to govern once elected. Indeed, after meeting with nearly 200 Roma and non-Roma officials, political and NGO activists, and ordinary citizens alike, the NDI assessment team concluded that the traditional Roma political leaders—with perhaps a few exceptions scattered in a few communities—are unskilled, inexperienced, and divided. Based on both the 2001 election results, as well as the consensus of the Roma who were interviewed during the assessment, NDI also concluded that, as with most non-Roma politicians in Bulgaria, the Roma politicians and the establishment they represent have been discredited and, to all intents and purposes, have been abandoned by the Roma population.

Roma Attitudes and Perceptions. Indeed, the NDI assessment team found that the Roma communities’ attitudes toward their Sofia-based leadership was marked by a sense of alienation and betrayal. Among about 100 local activists who were asked, not one could name a national political figure they believed represented their interests in Sofia. The leaders’ perceived disinterest, and lack of a coherent and articulated agenda, coupled with complaints of corruption and broken promises, have left the Roma electorate disillusioned, detached and in a state of political disarray.

One Roma summed up the pervasive feeling: “No one represents Roma interests in Sofia. The politicians come here before an election when they need a vote. And, the NGO people come here when they are preparing a proposal. And, we never see them again.”

These attitudes were best illustrated by the reply to a question posed to every Roma group the NDI assessment team met during its seven-day visit. The question was: “What political party, group or leader best represents the interests of Roma communities?” Except for a local leader in Lom who named an NGO, every Roma citizen replied with a combination of smirks, shrugged shoulders, and shaking heads—and the same word: “Nobody.”

While this mirrors a general trend among the non-Roma electorate in Bulgaria – and arguably throughout the Balkans – both the impact and the intensity of this citizen dissatisfaction is dramatically higher among the already disenfranchised Roma.

Family Finances and Politics. Studies show that a strong sense of common identity and purpose exists within Roma families, and that family interests and loyalties are the unifying force within a community. Throughout the three country assessments, family links usually appeared to be at the core of Roma political interests, structures and activities—including some in the NGO sector.

The lines that separate these political and business interests are sometimes blurred, seemingly to the point where the two can become indistinguishable. The result is a clan-oriented political structure unified by the common desire to advance specific family financial interests, rather than by a set of common philosophical or political values with a corresponding agenda intended to advance the common good. Real authority within political structures flows top-down; political legitimacy is rarely based on the votes of a constituency.

Election Campaign Experience. The NDI assessment team gleaned from its meetings, research, and media accounts that the Roma parties' 2001 election campaign was conducted at a rudimentary level. Neither the Free Bulgaria coalition nor individual Roma party leaders prepared or articulated a platform or agenda. But for a few rare and unique local exceptions, no organized or *ad hoc* voter education or get-out-the-vote campaigns were conducted. By all accounts, 2001 election campaign efforts consisted largely of, and were derided as, base appeals for votes backed up by free alcohol, "passing around money," etc.—practices common in the world's more depressed, less organized, uneducated, and easily manipulated communities.

Political Organizing Infrastructure. Roma political organizations lack a developed infrastructure beyond a scattered handful of party leaders and activists who have little influence in the larger Roma community and official circles. The functional and structural links between national-level party leaders and local Roma communities are scant. There are a small number of narrowly focused, single issue (and often impressive) NGO-sponsored networks with regional or multi-city networks.

Mainstream Parties. (National Movement of Simeon II, Union of Democratic Forces, Bulgarian Socialist Party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms⁴). While there were no ringing endorsements to be sure, the Roma with whom NDI met were considerably less resentful of Bulgaria's mainstream political parties and leaders than of the Roma parties and leaders. This perhaps accounts for why the coalition of eight Roma parties, Free Bulgaria, apparently received fewer Roma votes than a handful of mainstream parties in the 2001 election.

Indeed, neither of the two MPs of Roma ethnicity in the national parliament was elected on the merits of votes for a Roma party. Alexander Filipov ran with the governing party, the National Movement for Simeon II (or NMS), while Toma Tomov attached his small Roma party to the left-of-center Coalition for Bulgaria, now part of the opposition.

Still, the Roma's view of the mainstream parties was generally negative. The concerns most typically expressed were that mainstream parties were dismissive of Roma community problems and, as one said, "the parties voice token interest with token programs before elections, or when civil unrest erupts, or when the international community exerts pressure." Frequent charges were made that the mainstream parties manipulate the Roma vote in election campaigns.

However, as this discussion continued it became clear that much of the perceived "manipulation" occurs when Roma politicians trade votes or endorsements with mainstream parties for their personal gain. For example, one leading Roma activist asserted that the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) "bought" two of the major actors in the Romani umbrella coalition two months before the 2001 election, giving them a significant part of the left-leaning Romani vote. This kind of deal making was typically seen as an act of betrayal or "selling-out" by an individual party leader—at the expense of Roma interests.

⁴ These are the four major political parties in Bulgaria, all of which are represented in parliament.

Roma Public Image and the Mainstream Media. As previously discussed, Roma are popularly considered to be the permanent occupant of the lowest rung of Bulgarian society. By all Roma and non-Roma accounts, the national and local media outlets reinforce this image with an endless parade of predictably negative reports that highlight socio-economic problems and the disarray of the political life within Roma communities. Stories about Roma crime, corruption, dependency, and rising out-of-wedlock birth rates dominate media coverage, and are rarely countered by positive news or images of Roma.

As best as the NDI team could determine, there is only one Roma presenter/host on a nationally broadcast program, on a public television morning show. Otherwise, very few – if any – Roma editors, producers, publishers, reporters, researchers, assistants or trainees are present in the newsrooms of mainstream print or electronic media. NDI understands that few Roma have been properly trained or are being groomed to enter the mainstream media.

C. Opportunities and Assets

As the Roma consider strategies to increase their political participation, they would be wise to take inventory of upcoming opportunities and assets that can be mobilized. For example, several events and issues being discussed in Bulgaria, as well as inherent, if latent strengths within the Roma community, could be incorporated into this strategy. Some of the more readily apparent opportunities and assets are below:

- 1) The parliament and government are considering critical reforms to Bulgaria's proportional electoral system at both national and local levels. Although that debate appears to be temporarily sidelined, reform of the election system, particularly at the local level, could introduce a mixed system of proportional and majority representation that would allow for some measure of direct representation in areas where Roma predominate. This reform could significantly increase the prospects for Roma representation in local governments. At the national level, a system that allowed for preferential voting might raise the electability of Romani candidates who are typically placed low on a party's list.
- 2) More than 200 Roma issues-oriented NGOs in Bulgaria conduct empowerment, advocacy, monitoring, and anti-discrimination initiatives to increase Roma access to education, jobs, political participation, health care, legal services, etc. The highest concentration of young, experienced, educated, internationally connected, and motivated Roma managers and leaders are working in NGOs. The NGO sector appeals to young people because it provides a stage from which one can advance the Roma cause and, at the same time, offers employment, educational and travel opportunities that are otherwise scarce.
- 3) The level of Roma political participation and influence, as well as some political development and infrastructure, is higher in a handful of cities and local municipalities where the Roma population accounts for a sizable portion of the community. In Lom, where the Roma account for half of the population, the NDI assessment team met several impressive Roma NGO and political activists with seemingly relevant experience in governance, issues and message development, organization, and electoral politics. Those cities and towns with higher concentrations of Roma voters are ideal sites to incubate, develop, and launch programs to strengthen the level and quality of Roma political participation.

4) *The Framework Document for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society* (discussed previously) not only demonstrates the potential impact of a fully mobilized NGO community committed to reaching mutual goals, it also offers a standard to which the government may be held accountable. The *Framework* states that “groups of experts and public officials will develop the mechanisms and steps for the realization for the *Framework’s* basic principles.” The National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCEDI) has contracted the Roma Parliament to draft an Action Plan for further implementation of the Framework. (The Roma Parliament has the legal status of an NGO and receives funding from the government.⁶) EU Phare has allocated \$150,000 to study a broad array of needs in the Roma community, and reportedly will allocate another eight million euros to implement the *Framework’s* action plan once it is developed.

5) Several international institutions, represented by embassies, multilateral governmental and financial institutions, and NGOs and foundations, are keenly interested in supporting efforts to enhance the Roma’s political and economic conditions Others can be recruited in light of the urgency of the need and the implications that failure will have on the expansion of Europe and its economic stability. Indeed, Bulgaria’s EU membership will depend partly on improving economic opportunity, education, housing, and health conditions for Roma.

6) The two Roma Members of Parliament, Alexander Filipov and Toma Tomov, were not elected on a Roma-specific agenda. The NDI assessment team met Mr. Filipov, a lawyer and a member of NMS, who gave his perspective of Roma political life and a general description of his work on Roma-related issues through the National Movement for Social Policy. The team was impressed with Mr. Filipov’s analysis of Roma political culture, his assessment of its needs, and his apparent commitment to addressing the needs of the Roma.

7) Roma citizens, while recognizing that their political structures and leaders are weak, particularly at the national level, appear eager to acquire the political organizing skills necessary to build proper structures and replace the leadership. Referring to the Roma’s traditional leaders, one analyst observed that, “The Old Guard has lost its exclusivity. Today, doors are open everywhere.”

V. Objectives, Guiding Principles and Recommendations

The purpose of this report is to recommend strategies that could be incorporated into a plan designed by Roma to increase their political participation and influence in Bulgaria. With that in mind, the team recommends a Roma Political Participation Initiative be designed and launched to develop the human capacity, political traditions, and organizational infrastructure needed to inspire, educate and mobilize a broadly defined “Roma constituency” to advance the community’s interests.

⁶ Members of the Roma Parliament are not elected, nor do they derive their status as Roma representatives from having been elected to any other office; they are the leaders of Roma NGOs. Formally, the Roma Parliament has consultative functions – it consults the National Council for the Ethnic and Demographic Issues, which is so far the only government structure dealing with Roma issues. Members of the Roma Parliament have publicly complained about inadequate involvement of the Roma Parliament in decision making at the NCEDI. The National Council itself is a structure with symbolic powers and is an advisory body to the government.

1. Objectives. The NDI assessment team recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative have four basic, long-term objectives:

- **Develop a Cadre of Political Leaders, Managers, and Activists** trained and skilled in political organization and campaigns, as well as prepared to govern.

One Roma leader in Sofia told us, “In 1991, when communism collapsed, the Turkish community got together and decided that they would go into politics and develop political activists. The Roma decided to create NGOs and develop NGO activists. Now we have to catch up.” Another added, “In NGOs, we have discovered that *we monitor and advise*. In government, we have learned that *they choose and decide*.”

The team met many exceptionally talented, confident, and articulate young Roma activists. Most were in Sofia and virtually all affiliated with NGOs. It is essential to recruit and groom a similar talent bank of political activists as part of the strategy to increase Roma political participation and influence. From this talent bank will emerge the candidates, campaign managers, activists and specialists to help develop the campaign platforms and themes, and deliver them to a mobilized constituency.

At the conclusion of every meeting during the assessment, each individual present was asked to offer the most important recommendation that the team should include in the report. Among the nearly 200 Bulgarians interviewed, about 70 percent responded with “training to build capacity.” The NDI assessment team concurs.

- **Establish Traditions, Structures, and Mechanisms** that facilitate and encourage on-going community outreach and education to develop an informed constituency and a coherent political culture. The defining characteristic of Roma political life is the disconnection between so-called Roma political leaders and the constituency they claim to represent. This gap must be bridged by traditions, structures, and mechanisms that link the Roma leaders with their communities. These vehicles could take various forms, but some general observations and suggestions that seem appropriate to the Roma condition in Bulgaria are named below:

‘Town Meetings’. Regular town meetings that establish open, two-way communication between the community and their elected (and non-elected) Roma (and non-Roma) leaders would be an appropriate beginning. In advance of October 2003 municipal elections, for example, civic groups could organize a series of educational forums to better inform the public, as well as introduce a new cadre of Roma political activists and candidates mentioned above.

A New Political Party? Given the disjointed and divided political environment, the lack of capacity, and the Roma’s public image, the NDI team believes that the establishment of a new Roma political party is at best premature and should not be a priority at this time. The conditions are poorly suited, and the NDI team fears such an effort would fail—and, indeed, possibly create new rivalries and divisions among the new generation—setting the Roma movement back years.

Further, the overall need in the region is for all parties to become more grounded in political ideology and less formally identified by ethnicity or other special interests. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, for instance, is attempting to move beyond its label of “the Turkish party” to attract multiethnic support.

Thus, NDI recommends that the Roma first build political leadership and organizational capacities within their own ranks as well as a functioning political infrastructure and coherent political culture. After political capacities increase, the Roma constituency expands, as the new political leaders meet with campaign and governance success, and perhaps as the electoral reforms become law—the time may come to reconsider this strategy.

Roma Caucus in Parliament. The two members of Parliament who are Roma come from mainstream parties. The team recommends that consideration be given to approaching one or both of these MPs and exploring means of cooperation. One concrete proposal, for example, might be to form a Roma Caucus or Committee of 20 to 30 MPs, inclusive, therefore, of non-Roma members, which could serve as a more or less permanent body to represent and advance Roma issues, providing a critical link between the Parliament and Roma.

NDI further recommends that Roma and non-Roma MPs use intra-regional cooperation and lessons learned, providing a regional dimension with increased networking. MPs could establish best practices for enhancing the quality of life of Roma in their respective countries. These exchanges could be tied to a central issue of concern for Roma in each country, such as desegregation of schools.

- **Put Roma Issues onto the Mainstream Agenda and Broaden the Constituency** to increase the quantity and quality of Roma representation in government and reach the critical mass necessary to achieve the community’s public policy objectives. The NDI assessment team believes that the Roma’s challenges are Bulgaria’s challenges and that the issues of Roma concern should be developed and articulated in that framework, whenever possible. Likewise, the team believes that Roma politicians should seek political office not as “Roma candidates” per se, but generally speaking as candidates with a well-defined political ideology and platform (e.g., Social Democrat, Christian Democrat, Liberal), who also happen to be Roma

The NDI assessment team believes that this pluralistic approach, working with and through existing mainstream parties, will raise the country’s (including the Roma’s) common sense of purpose and identity to a higher plane. The team also believes this approach will appeal to the better instincts of the citizenry, and in the long term, ease tensions between the country’s different ethnic groups, help destigmatize the isolated Roma, and help preclude the civil strife that many Bulgarians fear and predict.

NDI believes that a more pluralistic approach is in the Roma’s interest because of the likelihood that it will help consolidate opinion among more progressive Roma, especially the urban and educated, under-40 generation.

Of course, NDI recognizes the complexity of this issue and that the centuries-old tradition of “anti-Gypsy” discrimination persists today. Thus, the recommendations set forth in this report should be seen as merely a first step in designing the strategy to overcome these obstacles – not the least of which is the mindset of both majority and minority ethnic groups. The effort to mainstream Roma issues and reach out to those Roma who deny their ethnicity will require decades, not years, to reach its full potential and will require efforts targeted at the majority population as well.

The Role of Mainstream Political Parties. In general, political parties aggregate and represent social interests and provide a structure for political participation. They train political leaders who will assume a role in governing society. As electoral contestants they assume control of government or serve in an opposition capacity that directly affects government actions. Exercising political power in government means participation in political parties.

Given their importance in political life and their own development needs, mainstream political parties are at once central to Roma political participation and yet ill-prepared to engage on this issue. Indeed, political parties in Bulgaria are still developing into modern organizations. They have done little to incorporate Roma political interests into their long-term policy platforms; few have reached out to Roma as potential members who can genuinely be integrated into party structures or as voters whose interests will truly be heard; fewer still have recruited Roma as candidates with equal standing among their non-Roma peers. Some parties have resorted to vote-buying and other fraudulent means to secure Roma votes. Few party leaders recognize the need for and benefits to incorporating Roma into their parties as supporters, members, and elected representatives; many are concerned by the prevalent political stigma that comes with association with Roma.

As noted above, the NDI assessment team found a consistent and dismaying reaction among most political parties to the proposition of engagement with Roma communities. The role of political parties in fostering Roma political participation must change. Party leaders will need to enhance the political and social image of Roma communities in their capacities as government ministers, members of parliament, mayors, and high-level party functionaries. It will be up to them to encourage, support, and welcome those Roma who seek to be active in the political process. If Roma are to become more politically active, then the parties will have to establish and pursue dialogue with Roma political and civic groups such that the genuine interests and needs of Roma communities can be understood and represented at decision-making levels. Similar exhortations to political parties in Europe's established democracies are perhaps also needed.

Public Opinion Research. The anecdotal information received by the NDI assessment team, while helpful in illustrating important themes, belies the apparent dearth of methodological research on Roma views in the context of political participation and representation. NDI sees public opinion research, in the form of polling and focus groups, as essential, and indeed a likely first step, to building strategies for Roma political participation. Mainstream parties and Roma themselves must obtain a clearer understanding of the attitudes of these communities and the factors that motivate or deter Roma from voting, running for office, or supporting various political agendas. Governments and international development organizations would benefit considerably from a structured recording and analysis of Roma views and attitudes related to economic, social, and human rights issues.

NDI's limited experience in public opinion research with Roma suggests that focus groups may be a preferred mechanism to polling and that isolating focus groups by gender is advisable. It is vital that Roma themselves be trained as survey implementers and focus group moderators. Sensitivity to cultural customs will enhance the integrity of data yielded through public opinion research.

- **Enhance the Roma Sense of Identity, Public and Self-Image** through a combination of political positioning, policy agenda development, media outreach, training and integration, implementation of self-help projects, and recruitment of high profile Roma political candidates.

In the political arena. The Roma image will be enhanced when a new generation of young, progressive, and articulate Roma political leaders emerges with thoughtful public policy agendas that define and link the Roma's interests to Bulgaria's interests, appealing to larger segments of non-Roma society. Training should support the development of a new class of Roma politicians, skilled in the art of political campaigns. Perhaps less obviously, training should support Roma efforts to develop realistic, practical, and achievable policy objectives—especially in local communities. Platforms should be designed to unify and mobilize a constituency around achievable goals—like building or repairing a road, improving sanitation facilities, providing job training, or securing new books local schools. In addition, the proposals and the campaign themes should be developed in ways that reach out to the larger non-Roma community as well. This will have the affect of improving the Roma image—as well as enlarging the constituency and enhancing the prospects that the platform will be implemented.

High-visibility candidates. NDI recommends that respected and articulate Bulgarians of Roma ethnicity be recruited to run for highly visible public offices, for example, the mayor of Sofia or another large city where there are high percentages of Roma in the population. This candidacy, regardless of “long odds,” could be used to enhance the Roma popular image, “mainstream” Roma issues, and create a larger sense of purpose, demonstrating that Roma issues are Bulgaria's issues.

The candidate could come from academia, the cultural or literary world, or NGOs as well as politics, but would need to develop – with technical assistance and professional advice – a platform to highlight the needs and promote the positive image of the Roma community. Even though the candidate might well lose the election, his or her candidacy would serve to enhance the Roma's public and self-image in ways that could restore their sense of pride, dignity, and identity.

Given the cultural barriers facing Roma, the current context is not one that would guarantee impressive victories for Roma candidates in any of the upcoming elections. It is misguided to assume that these countries would quickly increase the number of Roma in high elected positions. Rather, Roma would benefit most from the opportunity to learn how to wage effective electoral campaigns while affording them decent visibility in the elections. At this stage, what is important is that Roma begin to be viewed as capable leaders and valuable partners from which government and political parties would benefit.

Media. Among Roma and non-Roma alike the consensus was that the mainstream and sensational media reinforce the stereotyping and stigmatization of the Roma through a drumbeat of negative reporting. The NDI assessment team is aware of formal documentation confirming these anecdotal accounts that negative stereotyping is common. Thus, it recommends immediate efforts to balance the coverage of the Roma population as part of the Roma Political Participation Initiative through a creative and proactive approach that, at a minimum:

- monitors the ongoing stereotyping and stigmatization of Roma;

- provides the mainstream media with alternative news sources on the Roma community; and,
- trains young Roma to work as professionals in mainstream media.

The team also recommends that a cooperative effort, supported by respected Bulgarians and the international community, be launched to quietly encourage media owners and executives to end the stereotyping and to balance reporting of Roma, as well as hire qualified Roma journalists for their newsrooms—all as a matter of national interest.

Self-help programs and identity. The NDI team visited several congested villages and settlements where the living and health conditions were particularly impoverished. None of the roads was paved, electricity and running water were limited, and unemployment was virtually 100%. Certain basic self-help programs could likely improve services and conditions, as well as give the community a sense of accomplishment and pride. For example, access to simple medical services could be dramatically improved by a program (organized by a Romani community-based NGO, for example) that recruited a handful of medical professionals to visit a clinic for a morning once a month. Garbage clean-up, home repair, education-related job training and other projects could be organized by the community itself, in some cases without outside support. NDI recommends that emerging Roma political and civic leaders be trained in the organizing skills needed to develop such programs as a means to instill a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and identity in a community.

2. Activities and Guiding Principles. As the Roma Political Participation Initiative is designed and structured, the NDI assessment team recommends that it be guided by the following principles and priorities:

- **Be Comprehensive.** Like the political development and participation challenges before the Roma, the team recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be comprehensive and carefully targeted to grassroots political organizing, strategic planning, civic education, community organizing, issue advocacy, and governance – all well known to those institutions with relevant training experience in the emerging democracies, such as NDI.
- **Take a Longer Term View.** Assuming continued progress along a defined timeline, the team proposes that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be sustained for at least five years. This term is necessary to conduct the program’s development and training efforts through a local and national election campaign cycle. Given the political and economic development needs of the Roma community, and that the community has been practically left out of comparable training since the democratic revolution of 1989, this five-year term is reasonable as well as necessary.
- **Focus on the Younger Generation and Women.** The younger generation, under age 40, is generally more motivated and open, and less tainted by and obliged to the past. NDI believes that the younger generation represents both the ideal and the most viable group to reorient and increase political participation in the country, and bring it to a coherent level.

In addition, Bulgarian Roma women stand out as a target group, as they often find themselves doubly discriminated in a largely patriarchal society. Besides being morally wrong, the barriers against women’s equal participation result in wasted talent. The NDI

assessment team found, throughout the three-country assessment mission, that the Roma women were among the most talented activists and officials. Every effort should be made to ensure that women are sought out for inclusion and Roma advancement in the Roma Political Participation Initiative.

- **Establish a Reputation for Integrity, Seriousness, and Open Competition.** Given the fragmentation, the corrupting role of family and financial ties, and the exceptional levels of mistrust that characterize Romani politics—the Roma Political Participation Initiative should set the highest standards of professionalism, transparency, and equality. The recruitment and selection of training participants, for example, would be particularly critical to the program’s integrity, public perception and success. The NDI assessment team recommends that training opportunities and selection processes be publicly announced, open and competitive. The team further recommends that the neutral international sponsors and organizers of this training take a leading role in interviewing and selecting candidates.
- **Prioritize Local and Grassroots Development.** At the local level, a concerted effort to provide basic political organizing and leadership training will inject competition that will challenge the traditional political formulas that have poorly served the Roma population. Generally speaking, cities and towns – as opposed to the national political arena – are ideal sites to launch a sustained education, training and organizational effort, provided they have a relatively high density of Roma.

Although localities will most likely have a clan-like political hierarchy in place, the NDI assessment team believes that these structures are vulnerable and can yield to genuine grassroots education, development, and organizing initiatives. In addition, when choosing the localities to organize, those with Roma media outlets not obliged to particular interests should be sought out.

The NDI assessment team believes that the most lasting contribution and the quickest return on investment for the Roma Political Participation Initiative will be at the city and town level. The October 2003 local elections provide an early and promising opportunity to test concepts, strategies, and plans. Given the shortness of time, the prospect of waging a comprehensive nationwide campaign to elect *and prepare* Roma for local councils in October is unrealistic. However, maximum effort should be made to identify and target those localities where the Roma have adequate population density, political leadership and organizing talent, and infrastructure.

- **Prepare to Govern.** The NDI assessment team recommends that the goal of increasing Roma political participation be defined more broadly than increasing the number of Roma voters or representatives in parliament and municipal councils. Once elected, Roma officials must be prepared to govern effectively. If they fail in their new positions, political advancement of Roma will suffer.

Therefore, the NDI assessment team recommends that training include basic governance, legislative process, budgeting, policy, and resource implications of European integration, public-private economic development partnerships, negotiation, and constituency relations.

The NDI assessment team also recommends that training include public policy development, through universities or Bulgaria’s capable economic think tanks. Likewise, the U.S. Embassy could sponsor International Visitor Programs for Roma analysts and political and community

activists to observe grassroots public-private redevelopment sights, and recent policy innovations in housing, and education, that might have relevance for the Roma.

- **Be Judicious in Selecting Issues, Choose Winners and Show Results.** There is no shortage of critical issues challenging the Roma, which could make their way onto a Roma candidate's political platform. The economic, housing, social, educational, and health needs are staggering. However, low global and regional economic growth and the scarce financial resources available from the Bulgarian government—still recovering from two generations of communist misrule—limit outside funds. Therefore, given current high levels of mistrust and disillusionment in the Roma community, the NDI assessment team would caution against developing overly ambitious political agendas that will raise unachievable expectations and widen the trust gap dividing Roma leaders from their constituents.

While this report does not propose to develop a Roma political agenda, as that must be done by Roma themselves, the NDI assessment team offers the following observations that might be considered as such an agenda is prepared:

The Framework Document for Equal Integration. The NDI assessment team notes with cautious optimism that considerable technical, training, and financial resources are anticipated through the EU's support of the *Framework* initiative mentioned above. These funds represent an unprecedented opportunity to improve the prospects for Roma on a wide front. However, both non-Roma and Roma are understandably pessimistic, believing that the bulk of these funds will at best be inefficiently spent, and at worst diverted to corrupt purposes. Monitoring governmental funding of Roma initiatives could indeed be a principal focus of one or several Roma civic groups. Clearly, the design, implementation, and monitoring of the *Framework's* mechanisms, policies, politics, follow-through, and accomplishments must involve Roma directly and are appropriate for a Roma political agenda.

Electoral Reform. The potential to increase Roma representation in national and perhaps local parliaments/councils is considerable through possible reforms to Bulgaria's electoral system. The adoption of a mixed system is of primary importance to the Roma political participation effort, as it could help to increase Roma presence in elected office, particularly at the local level.

Self-Help Programs that Build Momentum. The NDI assessment team observed that the conditions in the Roma community appear ripe for the development and implementation of self-help programs. Especially at the local level, self-help projects could both improve the quality of life for Roma, as well as help organize them politically. Recognizing that self-help and community service traditions are undeveloped in the new democracies, the team suggests that Roma NGOs or community leaders introduce these activities on a limited, test pilot basis, with appropriate outside technical assistance, to determine their appeal and effectiveness.

- **Incorporate International Supporters and Experience.** Continued international support and engagement from government, multilateral institutions, and NGO representatives will be critical at several levels in order to achieve the goals of this program. This support should take the following forms:

- 1.) Coordinated international *financial support and guidance* will be indispensable to launch and sustain the comprehensive effort described herein.
- 2.) International *training and expertise* will be needed to conduct the program successfully. An essential component will be the trainees' participation in election campaigns in Europe, Canada, or the United States. In addition, get-out-the-vote program experiences from Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, and Croatia would be instructive to Roma political leaders and activists.
- 3.) Continued international *political, advocacy, and diplomatic support* will be critical to advance specific issues and agendas that could contribute significantly to this program's objectives.
- 4.) NDI recommends that an *International Donor Committee* be established among those international governments, multilateral institutions, and NGOs willing to support the Roma Political Participation Initiative with financial, technical, or political/diplomatic support, or some combination thereof.

VI. Conclusion

The problems confronting Roma are many and complex. Essential to their resolution is active, widespread participation by Roma in the political process to represent their communities strategically. This requires first and foremost a more amenable political, social and economic environment; it also requires individual skills training, enhanced political organization, and strategies that allow for political diversity among Roma while promoting collective interests imbued in their status as citizens.

The government of Bulgaria, like others in the region, needs to implement Roma development strategies in a manner that derives meaningful and measurable benefit to Roma communities in the areas of political representation, economic development, social integration, and human rights protection. International organizations need to include political participation among the key goals to Roma development strategies, and then provide the resources and oversight to ensure that progress is made. Mainstream political parties need to incorporate Roma as voters, members, candidates, and eventually among their leaders.

Given the breadth and depth of the political, social, and economic obstacles facing the Roma in Bulgaria, NDI believes that a nationwide, multi-faceted, and long-term approach to create meaningful political participation is needed. The recommendations in this report represent a first step toward Roma ownership of the future of their communities through democratic means.

Roma Political Participation in Bulgaria

Appendix 1 **Assessment Team Meetings**

Government

Simeon Blagoev, Ministry of Culture
Mihail Ivanov, Secretary, National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers
Kancho Kantardjiiski, Ministry of Work
Aleksandar Krachalov, Stara Zagora district government administration
Georgi Mikov, Sofia district government association
Hristo Nikolov, Sofia district government association
Yosiff Nunev, Ministry of Education and Science
Lachezar Toshev, MP, Chair of Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Religions

Political Parties

Alexander Filipov, Roma MP, National Movement of Simeon II (NMS)
Toma Tomov, Roma MP, Coalition for Bulgaria

Non-Governmental Organizations

Vasil Chaprazov, “United Roma Community”, Sliven
Petar Georgiev, Roma Confederation “Europa” and former BSP Roma MP
Mikhail Georgiev, Romani Baht
Emil Koen, Human Rights Project
Dimitar Goergiev, Human Rights Project
Anton Karagyozev, Coalition Stolipinovo
Stela Kostova, Association Romska Mladejka Organizacia
Georgi Markov, Roma Educational Center
Dobromir Milev, member of district government, Buro za Samopomost-Stolipinov Foundation
Zlatko Mladenov, Roma public council “Kupate”
Diana Nuneva, Edelvays
Donka Panayotova, DROM Foundation
Petar Stefanov, Nov Pat
Nikolay Kirilov, PAKIV-European Roma Fund
Asen Slavchev, Roma-Lom Foundation/Pakiv
Biserka Iotova, Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives (CEGA)
Kalinka Nikolaeva, Equal Access Foundation

Media

Kremena Boudinova, Roma host, 7 Days TV Channel
Danail Danov, Media Development Center
Dimitar Sotirov, Bulgarian Media Coalition

Bulgarian and Roma experts from the following organizations: Human Rights Project, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, CEGA, Center for Intercultural and Minority Studies (IMIR), Open Society Institute, Studii Romani, Political Academy, Roma Information Project, Foundation Roma’s World, Pakiv European Roma Fund, and Equal Access Foundation.

Roma Political Participation in Bulgaria

Appendix 2

Assessment Team Bios

Michael Brown is an independent political consultant based in Richmond, VA. Mr. Brown has an extensive background in campaign management and consultation and specializes in developing campaign strategies for African-American candidates. Recently he advised the campaigns of candidates to the 2003 House of Delegates and Virginia State Senate. From 1979-1985 Mr. Brown held the office of Deputy Executive Secretary of the Virginia NAACP Conference of Branch. During his tenure with the NAACP he conducted voter registration drives and workshops on political organization. From 1980-1983 he was the statewide coordinator for the Congressional Black Caucus, and in 1984 he participated in the Dick Davis Study Committee on Increasing Voter Registration. Mr. Brown has served on the Virginia State Board of Elections. While serving as secretary to the State Board of Elections he instituted new training manuals for Officers of Election, General Registrars and Electoral Boards.

James Denton is an international commercial, public, and government relations and communications consultant specializing in strengthening relations between former East Bloc governments, NGOs, and businesses with their counterparts in the United States. Since 1985 Mr. Denton has played a leadership role in developing US-supported programs that promote democratic and market reforms in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. From 1997-2001 he served as executive director of Freedom House, a Washington, DC-based non-partisan organization that promotes political and economic freedom worldwide. Mr. Denton has traveled extensively in Eastern Europe, Central America, and much of the former Soviet Union where he has created and sponsored training and support programs for thousands of new leaders in politics, media, business and NGOs. He is a member of various international organizations, including the Council on Foreign Relations.

Michael Farnworth has worked as NDI's resident representative in Bulgaria since April 2002. He brings extensive experience as an elected official at the municipal and provincial levels of government in Canada. From 1997 to 2001, he served as Minister to four high-profile ministries in his home province of British Columbia. In addition to his legislative experience, Mr. Farnworth has broad campaign and political party expertise, having participated in several local and national campaigns as a volunteer, manager, party member, candidate, and governmental minister. He has worked and traveled extensively in and outside of North America.

Rumyan Russinov is director of the Roma Participation Program for the Open Society Institute in Budapest. Part of his portfolio includes the initiation of projects to desegregate schools in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary. While acting as the Director of the Monitoring and Advocacy Program for the Human Rights Project from 1997-2000, Mr. Russinov participated in the drafting of "For Equal Participation of Roma in the Public Life of Bulgaria," the first document to highlight strategic measures to be undertaken by the Bulgarian state to accomplish equal status and non-discrimination for the Roma minority. He also coordinated a nationwide media campaign to create a positive image of Roma. Mr. Russinov earned a Master's degree in Economics from the University of Sofia in Bulgaria.

Sevdalina Voynova, deputy director of NDI's program in Bulgaria, served as an NDI representative on the assessment program and as a translator for external meetings. She also accumulated background material on Roma in Bulgaria for the assessment mission.

Toni Tashev is a 30-year-old lawyer from Vidin and former employee of the Human Rights Project in Bulgaria. She served as a local expert on Roma in Bulgaria, providing local insight to the delegation prior to and following each of its meetings.

Lika Pishtalova, a member of NDI's local staff in Sofia, served as a translator for the assessment delegation.