

ROMA ACTIVISTS ADVISE BULGARIAN PRESIDENT ON EDUCATION



PRESIDENT TO CONVENE SPECIAL SESSION TO DISCUSS PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

On January 26, 2006, over 20 Roma activists participating in NDI's political skills training course met with Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and several of his top officials to discuss Roma education standards. The group secured a commitment from Mr. Parvanov to convene a special session including Ministry of Education officials, Parliamentary Education Committee members, and Roma activists to discuss possible amendments to pending legislation on educational reform.



President Georgi Parvanov invited NDI's Roma program participants to discuss key issues with members of the Bulgarian government.

In his opening remarks, President Parvanov thanked NDI for the opportunity to meet with its Roma program participants for the second year in a row. He cited such meetings as critical in developing a tradition of communication between the executive branch of the Bulgarian government and Roma community leaders.

The meeting focused on the issue of Roma education, elaborating on last year's National Forum on Education attended by NDI training course graduates. Throughout the discussion, the Roma attendees cited numerous obstacles affecting the education of Romani children, including: non-attendance and drop-out rates; poor school-curriculum quality; ill-qualified teachers; and school segregation. The group stressed the need for more Roma employees at all levels of the educational system to enhance Roma involvement in the day-to-day decision making within the schools. They requested the President's support in opening public debate on their concerns and expressed their hope for passage of a bill on continuing education as well as measures encouraging Roma students to pursue higher education.



President Georgi Parvanov spoke personally with several of the NDI program participants.

The Roma activists were not without criticism of the government, taking aim at the pending educational reform. Criticisms of the draft law included its provisions to: shorten primary education degree requirements by one year; end primary education after 7th grade; and close rural schools. President Parvanov however, responded to all of the group's questions and comments, expressing his concern for the challenges facing Bulgarian Roma communities. He shared his belief that young Roma can gain self-confidence through inclusion in mainstream political and public life.

To conclude the meeting, participants presented the President with a written set of 15 "best practices," citing proven methods of addressing Roma education deficiencies. Providing the President with specific examples from localities across the country, participants offered him creative and original ideas to bridge the gap between Roma and mainstream education standards. Mr. Parvanov promised to visit as many schools across Bulgaria as possible to promote the good practices.