

## Bulgarian President Seeks Policy Recommendations from Romani Youth



*On March 28, 2007, 22 Romani activists participating in NDI's Roma Political Participation Program met with Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov to discuss initiatives to improve Romani education. The meeting resulted in commitments from Parvanov to hold a forum on Romani education, create a database of Romani NGOs to assist in policy development, and encourage media outlets to feature young, successful Roma.*

“My meetings with Romani youth have already begun a tradition of good relations between us. I remember the previous meetings very well and the results that followed. These meetings contribute significantly to the affirmation of Roma integration as a priority,” said President Parvanov. The meeting was the third in a series of annual discussions between Parvanov and participants in NDI's Roma political skills building program.

At this year's meeting, the activists highlighted troubling statistics related to Romani education, including that two-thirds of Bulgaria's 25,000 school drop-outs identified themselves as Roma. “Though the problem of integration is broader than the problem of dropping out of school, this is a worrisome trend which needs to be reversed without delay,” said participant Kadrin Hasanov, a project coordinator from the Integro Association. Though public authorities have made some efforts to address socio-economic factors, the participants identified intercultural education, relevant changes to the school curricula, and effective parent involvement as avenues for further improvement, along with increased economic support to children in elementary school.

President Parvanov and the activists agreed on a broad spectrum of follow-up activities, including a national forum under his patronage on the issue of Romani education, the creation of a database of Roma NGOs to assist in policy development, and meetings with the owners and managing directors of leading media outlets to engage them in featuring young, successful Roma. “The fact that you are highly valued in your organizations, your communities, and your parties is good. It would be even better if your stories and examples become known to all Bulgarians through the media, thus combating existing stereotypes in public attitudes,” suggested Parvanov.

The President and Roma participants agreed to meet more frequently and to discuss a broader range of issues. “To openly discuss issues that concern our community and hear the direct response from the President of Bulgaria was an exceptional opportunity for us,” said participant Atanas Stoyanov, currently an intern at the ministry of labor and social affairs.



*NDI has been implementing the Regional Roma Political Skills Building program since 2004 with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).*