

(7b)

## BULGARIAN GOV REPLY

Mr. Chairman,

Bulgaria is fully committed to the principle that all persons, including those belonging to minorities, should live in dignity and be able to fully enjoy all human rights. We consider the fulfillment of this principle to be a sine qua non for the achievement of peace, security and sustainable development both at the national and international levels.

However, constitutional and legislative guarantees of equality and non-discrimination alone may not always be sufficient to achieve this aim. In the past 15 years, during the transition towards a market economy, my country has undergone profound economic changes, which affected all segments of our society. Due to a number of objective reasons, large groups in society, including Roma, suffered from certain unfavourable socio-economic trends, which rendered them vulnerable.

Nevertheless, we consider some of the remarks, made by the distinguished representative from the Centre for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe as inaccurate and unsubstantiated.

1. Abuses and ill treatment in Bulgaria may occasionally exist, but not only or specifically against Roma. It is prosecuted under the law in every single case.

2. Hate speech and propaganda on the basis of ethnicity are strictly prohibited by law and the government is monitoring the expression of the freedom of the media in that sense.

3. There is no discrimination in Bulgaria against anybody. The problems of the Roma are mainly social-economic. Many Bulgarian citizens regardless of their ethnic origin have suffered equally during the transition period. One could even state -with all measures undertaken by the government- that Bulgarian Roma are not discriminated but rather privileged, having the opportunity to enjoy special care and advantages available only to them.

4. Offering intercultural education to promote mutual understanding and tolerance between different ethnoses in Bulgaria is a priority for the government which makes a lot of efforts in that field. Of course, it is a challenge for the whole society and the progress depends on the activities of all the stakeholders.

5. The Bulgarian government has a clear policy for the integration of the Roma community. Improving the condition of the Roma is among its key priorities. To adequately address the root-causes of the problem, we have developed relevant legislation, policies and programmes, providing additional budgetary and other support for measures in the areas of

education, health care, employment, social protection, housing and living conditions. I would like to mention just a few.

Strategic documents have been adopted and implemented – Framework programme for the Equal Integration of Roma (1999), National Action Plan for further implementation of the Framework programme (2003-2004), National Action Plan for fulfilment of Roma Inclusion Decade Goals (2005-2015), Health Strategy for vulnerable groups of persons belonging to ethnic minorities, 10 year National Programme for Improving the Housing Conditions of Roma etc.

Along with the legislative measures – adoption and entry into force of the Protection Against Discrimination Act and Ombudsman Status Act (January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004), additional budget resources have been allocated supporting different programmes.

The **unemployment**, based on lack of education and professional qualification, is the first among the social-economic problems faced by the Roma community. In this context the government is implementing measures for overcoming of the social isolation of Roma and their reintegration into the labour market through professional training, new jobs and promotion of business initiatives. Under several programmes against poverty and unemployment more than 100 thousand persons, 80% of them Roma, have been trained and half of them found employment. In 24 municipalities Roma cultural-information centres were established for the promotion of business initiatives and 86 projects for around 4 mln. euro are being financed. The Employment Agency is developing a special programme for Roma wishing to work in the state administration.

In the field of **education** a comprehensive Concept for educational system integration of children belonging to ethnic minorities, focused especially on Roma children, has been adopted. Several other programmes are also being implemented. A Centre for educational integration of children from ethnic minorities with a budget of more than 1 mln. euro has been established. The project on integrated schools covers more than 20 schools and 10 kindergartens with more than 1 500 Roma children. 2 000 Roma children are enrolled in schools this year under a special programme for improving of the well-being. The government is providing financial support for 12 500 Roma students in 32 municipalities. 13 mln. euro have been allocated until 2009 for renovation and furnishing of integrated schools. Free transport, books and breakfast are being provided for the students in the primary grades at the cost of more than 25 mln. euro. Two Bulgarian universities have higher education programs on Roma language teachers.

In March 2006 a long-term National programme for improving the **housing conditions** of Roma until 2015 was adopted. Building some new 30 065 houses and renovating some 47 245 has been planned for the next ten years. The fulfillment of this programme will improve the housing conditions of more than 85 000 families in 88 towns across the country. The programme is being financed by national and municipal budgets along with contributions from the EU and adds up to a total of 1, 26 bln. euro. Just an example - this year 75 new houses and 80 appartments were built for Roma families in just one district of Sofia and 284 houses are about to be finished in the second largest Bulgarian city of Plovdiv.

In the field of **healthcare** the government has adopted a special Health Strategy for vulnerable groups of persons belonging to ethnic minorities along with an Action Plan updated each year. The renovation and furnishing of medical centres for GP in the districts mainly populated by Roma have been financed. Special units for free immunizations have been opened in all medical centres. Home visits for free immunizations have been completed in all Roma families across the country.

Efforts have been made in the sphere of **culture** where the administration works together with the Public Council for Roma integration. Such councils are functioning in the larger cities and they are supporting events of the Roma folklore.

The main body coordinating and monitoring the implementation of all these measures is the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues to the Council of Ministers with a special Commission for Roma Integration.

Mr. Chairman,

Before concluding, just one specification – according to the last population census in 2001, the **Roma ethnic group** numbered 370 908 persons, or 4.6% of the population, out of which 319 821 persons, or 4.1 % of the population speak **Romani (Gypsy)** as their mother tongue.

We are open for dialog and any suggestions on improving the situation of Roma, including Mr. Getzov's remarks, will be taken into consideration.

Thank you for your attention.