

**Exposure to and Self-Perceptions of the Risk of Discrimination and Social Exclusion in  
Access to Public Goods, Media, Healthcare and Employment**

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**Подложеност и самооценка за риск от дискриминация и социално изключване по  
отношение на достъп до обществени блага, медии, здравеопазване и заетост**

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### Abstract

This paper examines the dimensions of social exclusion and the elements of self-perception of discrimination in access to public goods, employment, and in the media, which is juxtaposed with the priorities of the Bulgarian National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS). The findings are based on the "National representative sociological survey for identifying and elaborating profiles of groups and communities most affected by the risk of discrimination, such as the Roma" carried out in 2017 by "BG ASSIST LTD" and a group of scientific researchers commissioned by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in Bulgaria. The sample consists of 3,600 individuals aged 18 or over. The ethnic distribution of the respondents is as follows: 2,985 persons of Bulgarian ethnicity, 299 of Turkish ethnicity, 246 of Roma ethnicity, and 69 of another ethnicity. The paper shows the contrast between a variety of quality indicators and the priorities of the NRIS. Based on the data obtained, the risk of discrimination among the Roma and other ethnic groups in Bulgaria is tracked in a comparative manner in major public spheres. The survey results demonstrate that the most vulnerable people in the country are those without health insurance, residing in hard-to-reach settlements, low-qualified and unemployed individuals, people with disabilities, multi-member families and single parents; these categories indisputably include a solid share of Roma. Nevertheless, as the results show, not all Roma and arguably not only Roma are the most disadvantaged and marginalized individuals in Bulgarian society. This study's outcomes are related particularly to profiling the groups at risk, allowing critical linkages between the empirical data and ways of improving equal opportunities and non-discrimination policies. On the part of the NRIS, the paper calls for identifying adequate measures and a balanced approach to political engagement with the planning process in the coming years.

*Keywords:* social exclusion, discrimination, integration, employment, public services, media, healthcare, Roma

### Резюме

Статията разглежда самооценката за подложеност на риск от дискриминация при различни социални групи в достъпа им до обществени блага, заетост, медии и др. Данните са от „Национално представително социологическо проучване за идентифициране и изработване на профили на групи и общности, най-засегнати от риска от дискриминация, като ромите“, проведено през 2017 г. с извадка от 3600 лица на възраст над 18 години. Изследването бе възложено на група учени-социолози и „БГ АССИСТ ООД“ от Комисията за защита от дискриминация. Въз основа на получените

данни подложеността и/или рискът от дискриминация сред ромите и другите етнически групи в България се проследява в сравнителна перспектива, което е и съпоставено с приоритетите на Националната стратегия за интеграция на ромите. Резултатите от проучването сочат, че най-уязвими са хората без здравно осигуряване, живеещите в труднодостъпни населени места, нискоквалифицираните и безработни лица, хората с увреждания, многочленните семейства и самотните родители. Тези категории безспорно включват солиден дял от ромските общности. Резултатите показват и че не всички роми и не само ромите са сред най-необлагодетелстваните и маргинализирани в България.

*Ключови думи:* социално изключване, дискриминация, интеграция, заетост, обществени услуги, медии, здравеопазване, роми

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### **Introduction**

The Roma in Bulgaria represents the third largest ethnic group (4.9 % of the total population, or 325,343 people) after Bulgarians (85%) and Turks (9 %) (NSI, 2011). However, experts and researchers argue that, responding to the population census questions, not all Roma self-identified as such and that their real number is close to 800,000. The official demographic poll disclosed that 44.6% of the Roma live in rural areas, and 55.4 % reside in cities. Roma people are the youngest population in the country: 57.33 % are under the age of 30, in contrast to 28.11 % of Bulgarians in the same age group.

In 2012, the Bulgarian Parliament endorsed the National Roma Integration Strategy. That was the first time that a political document on Roma integration was passed by a legislative act (Civil monitoring report on NRIS, 2018). This article's authors pose a fundamental question regarding Roma integration in Bulgaria: is there light at the end of the tunnel? Since the article will provide a critical overview of "Roma integration," two urgent issues related to the query must be addressed.

First, the authors will accentuate the concept of 'Roma' in the context of international documents. The Roma are diverse, heterogeneous groups consisting of mixed yet identifiable populations across Europe. Non-Roma people tend to see them as a single ethnic entity. As defined by the Council of Europe, the "Roma" construct is fluid and tends to embrace various "segregated ethnic communities" corresponding to similar patterns of vulnerability. These populations share less similar cultural characteristics and history of constant marginalization in European societies such as Roma, Sinti, 'travelers,' Ashkali, Kale, etc. Researchers and the European institutions are aware that the term "Roma" encompasses various communities; yet, it summarises the notion in policies and documents dealing with social exclusion and discrimination (Milenkova & Hristova, 2017). Roma inclusion policies and forms are a code of thought that seeks to include only the excluded Roma, and not all Roma (EU platform for Roma inclusion, 2009). Andrei Ivanov argues that not the entire Roma population should be declassified as marginalized. Reality reveals that not all of them are discriminated against, but those who live in the periphery, where they have no social contacts with other communities (except economic) and therefore, do not have access to the opportunities of modern society (Ivanov, 2012, p.119-139).

A phenomenon worth describing in the present study is the internal division among subgroups within the Roma population. Ilona Tomova observes (2012, p.104-118) that Roma subgroups in mutual kinship reject external subgroups, labeling them as low status (i.e., economically uncompetitive, with obsolete crafts, etc.). The isolation of the poorer subgroups is a deliberate endeavor to subordinate to the requirements, values, and norms of the ethnic majority due to fear of punishment and humiliation on the part of the macro-society and maintaining the status hierarchy between the different subgroups.

Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov (2012, p. 165) highlight two other grounds for internal stratification among the Roma population. On the one hand, these are the professional names that the Roma subgroups have obtained depending on the craft they exercise (e.g., tinsmiths, musicians, etc.). On the other hand, there is a noticeable East European phenomenon of "preferred ethnic identity," meaning that populations, perceived by others as "gypsy" groups, have stopped speaking their "mother tongue" and have taken the language of the majority as "theirs" or another language of a neighbouring ethnic group. This phenomenon has led to a public declaration of these groups belonging to a preferred ethnic community (thus appearing Turkish-speaking, Bulgarian-speaking, Albanian-speaking, Romanian-speaking, etc.). Such social tendency has resulted from conformism with the values and rules of the macro-society, from striving for acceptance and taking advantage of the majority's opportunities (whether social, educational, or economic), from efforts to reduce stigma discrimination, etc. Over the last two decades, there has been a new, opposite trend – Roma communities and individuals started declaring Roma identity, influenced by macro-social processes (p.165). Ivanov calls this roll-over "strategic ethnicity" and explains it as follows: if the circumstances suggest that you may be classified as Roma, for example, in a national census, the number of Roma will decrease; however, if potential benefits (access to certain services) are available, the number of Roma increases (p.165).

Considering the active scientific conversation on Roma identity, a tribute must be given to the philosophical "replacement" of Sarah Carmona (2013), who proposes the term "episteme" instead of identity. For Carmona the term "identity" is weak, inconsequential, and trivial to encompass the Romani idiosyncrasy, cosmogony, traces in the memory, enrichments, paths and sensibility, which the elastic and permeable "episteme" pertains to.

Second, the authors of this paper will elaborate on how various Roma and non-Roma public voices have seen "Roma integration". Roma integration has been largely understood as implying that the Roma are to behave like the majority population. The institutions tend to

impose a "'civilizing' solution to what they see as a problem, stemming from the cultural difference between the Roma and mainstream society" (Popova, 2014, p.10-11). The authorities expect that the Roma are supposed to integrate into society by being "blended" into it; this view disregards the fact that the Roma might find the dominant society's requirements contradictory to their cultural values and lifestyle. Karyna Mordynska (2017) thinks that "blending" the Roma into mainstream society does not correspond with Roma insecurities, rooted in institutional and social discrimination, as such processes are viewed as "attempts to develop integration without interaction" (p.31-35). The "integration" policies are meant for those who differentiate from the majority's values and have limited access to the opportunities of modern society, whereas, in reality, not all Roma are socially and economically vulnerable or discriminated against (Ivanov, 2012, p.119-139).

In a non-academic article in "Huffington Post," the Roma scholar Margareta Matache (2016) puts forwards a stance that the term "integration" implies the superiority of the "white" norm", also called "gadjo-ness", which attempts to "civilize," "change the habits," and thereby "integrate the Roma into the wider society"; this is based on "the insistent negative reading of the Roma's customs, morality, and attitude toward the law". *Gadjo-ness* (Matache's italics) is explained as a social construct denoting racially defined beneficiaries – the inferior Roma, whom the dominant society granted social, economic, cultural, and institutional privileges. Matache puts forward a renovated agenda for thought on the Roma that advises an analytic transition from "participation and achievement gaps to opportunity gaps," from vulnerability to perpetrated institutionalized racism and from Roma integration to the abandonment of rigid retrograde beliefs by the non-Roma.

As a follow-up on Ivanov's and Mordynska's thoughts on whether all Roma need to be "integrated" ("civilized"), Andrzej Mirga (2020) does not contribute directly to the debate over the term "integration"; moreover, the scholar discusses the access to opportunities for all Roma. As a considerable share of Roma populations across Europe lives at risk of poverty, it is illusory to expect them to alter the negative group ascription, Mirga says. In the webinar speech, the Polish Roma scientist puts forward the necessity for "effective participation as influence" approach (Mordynska, 2017, as cited in Van Baar & Vermeersch, 2017, p. 120-139), meaning that the Roma representation in decision-making processes, the Roma participation, and the stronger voice of the minority – these all lead to recognition and influence, as counterpoints of negative social ascription and "developing integration without interaction" with the Roma communities (p.31-35). However, Mirga argues, building such

influence is more concomitant with the more educated strata of the Roma who are capable of exercising various intellectual, i.e., leadership and expert roles in society. Somewhat differing from Matache's stance, who vigorously defends Roma cultural self-determination, Mirga believes that the presence of the minority voice on the social stage means empowering; yet, empowerment requires Roma to develop social capital that may change part of their culture but in return would increase their power in the state and society.

Finally, but not least, Huub van Baar and Peter Vermeersch (2017) explicate two different "integration" policy responses: recognition vs. redistribution. (p.132) Highlighting recognition policy pledges on *inclusion* measures such as human rights and combating anti-Roma racism but, to some extent, the scholars admit, this policy tends to disregard access to public resources. By their side, redistribution policies (more of *integration* measures) focus primarily on social and economic improvement but tend to neglect anti-discrimination actions (p.132).

The discussion above has led the authors of this paper into thinking whether the introduction of the term "Roma inclusion" has entirely muted (or alternate, or substitute) the phrase "Roma integration"? Does "inclusion" replace "integration" or rather reshapes, or widens it, and goes beyond it? The model of "integration" presumes that there is something wrong, a problem to be fixed to fit into the existing pattern. Separate policies are invented for the "underachievers," "non-socialized," etc. The beneficiary of such targeted policies has two options: to adapt or to fail. Inclusion approaches, in contrast, accommodate and adjust different needs, merged in a mainstream common setting. The practicality of inclusion assumes that people are different yet entitled to equal access to the same rights, public goods, and services. "Integration" underlines the particular needs as inferior, problematic traits of the Other (i.e., ethnic Other), while "inclusion" calls for acknowledgment of diversity and participation of all as a step towards a renewed societal mindset.

### **Methodology**

In this paragraph, the author will explore the self-assessment of individual exposures to the risk of discrimination and social exclusion in access to healthcare, employment, media, and public services in the context of the six years since the endorsement of the NRIS. This paper focuses on the juxtaposition between some of the priorities of the NRIS and a variety of quality-of-life indicators surveyed in 2017 among a nationally representative population sample, including a sample of the Roma.



A national representative sociological survey for identification and elaboration of profiles of groups and communities most affected by the risk of discrimination in Bulgaria, such as the Roma, was commissioned by a research team, i.e., Valentina Milenkova, Svetlana D. Hristova and Mariana Draganova, in 2017 by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPR, 2017). The survey was funded under the project "Preventing Discrimination and Equal Opportunities," financed by the Operational Program Human Resources Development. The survey has also detected the factors increasing discriminatory acts in health care, employment, interaction with public institutions, etc.

The quantitative study used a sample of 3,600 individuals above 18, distributed equally within the six statistical regions, with 600 individuals interviewed in each region. The distribution by ethnicity covers representative samples from all ethnic groups: 83% Bulgarians (2,985 persons); 8.3 % Turks (299), 6.9 % Roma (246), 1.8 % other (69).

The argument for utilizing the aforementioned national survey to identify advancements under the NRIS priorities is twofold.

First, the survey will be used to validate, or dispute, the results voiced in the administrative report of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, the Civil Society Monitoring Report on NRIS, as well as the package of the European Commission's Midterm Review on the NRIS (all of which present the legislative context, implemented projects in support of the Roma and progress data).

Second, the quantitative study embraces social exclusion and discrimination terminology and indicators that easily collate with the NRIS priorities. Hence, the survey will clarify pending developments, improvements, failures, and lessons learned in the strategic areas.

The critical observation will be elaborated in the following analytical manner:

1. Comparing the risk of discrimination in major public spheres among the Roma and the rest of the sample.

2. Cross-cutting between the survey findings and the priorities embedded in Bulgaria's NRIS (2012-2020) to make a midterm assessment of the outcomes to date.

### **Theorizing social exclusion, vulnerability, and discrimination**

Social exclusion is a multifaceted concept. A possible definition is that it represents discrimination against certain groups or individuals concerning access to the public environment, culture, interactions, resources, and all associated implications of the community seen as meaningful (Berghman, 1995). Social participation (in contrast to the



social exclusion) relies on consensus based on common values, which require involvement in and contribution to the general material culture. The smaller the opportunities for access to the material culture, the more societies lose their integration power.

Social exclusion processes are dynamic and complex, as they refer to employment, income levels, educational opportunities and achievements, citizenship, and presence in local communities. To be socially integrated, community members need to be simultaneously included in various social systems. Overall, shared institutions contribute to people's sense of solidarity. Lawrence Wilde (2007, p.171-181) further elaborates on the solidarity concept by highlighting that people are "esteeming each other 'symmetrically', "viewing each other through the prism of values, which allows "the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared practice" (p.171-181). The fact of people living together and sharing values, material culture, and practice "transcends mere tolerance but invokes solidarity as the active support for the expression of multiple values" (p.171-181).

Before Wilde, Graham Room's notion of social exclusion explained society in terms of hierarchically ordered collectives liable to mutual rights and obligations deriving from broader moral imperatives. Consequently, the social exclusion would mean becoming detached from this moral order. The meaning of being disadvantaged has shifted over time – from "poverty" to "less privileged" and then to "social exclusion", expounds Room (1995, p.1-9).

Another scholar of social exclusion, J. Berghman (1995) differentiates between the terms "poverty" (defined as lack of disposable income) and "social exclusion" (seen as malfunctioning of major societal systems that involves an element of poverty). A third relevant term is the concept of "relative deprivation.(p.10-28). This third concept is described quite ambiguously – both as a broader version of poverty and an operational interpretation of social exclusion. In search of a theoretical framework for social exclusion, Berghman explains "poverty" (deficiency of income) as a static outcome of the dynamic process of "impoverishment," whereas "deprivation" is the static outcome of the systematic "social exclusion process"(p.10-28),).

In 2004, a joint report of the EU Commission and the Council on Social Inclusion pronounced its stance that poverty refers to inadequate income and resources, leading to numerous further disadvantages, such as unemployment, low housing, and obstacles to health care, education, and lifelong learning. Social exclusion, however, is viewed as malpractice, i.e., certain people are living on the margins of economic, social, and cultural standards due to

their lack of social competencies and basic qualifications or as a result of discrimination. Social exclusion relates to powerlessness, the inability to participate in making decisions that influence individual lives, being beyond the social norms, and not properly exercising one's fundamental rights (EU, 2004, p. 8).

Social exclusion may have an additional interpretation: it contributes to intensifying the degree of vulnerability. This is a factor of discrimination because the people at risk are much more vulnerable to unequal treatment. The vulnerability occurs in a social setup penetrated by insecurity, ineffective social policy, state participation, unstable local economies and institutions, underdeveloped market relations, etc. The most endangered individuals are usually those who have the least prospects to appropriately respond to and cope with the hostile environment and whose lives have been marked by discrimination, physical disabilities, lack of education and employment, absence of civil rights, as well as other historically rooted practices of domination and marginalization (Bolin & Stanford, 1991).

In Bulgaria, the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion was estimated at 38.9 % in 2017 (NSI, 2018), which represents a 0.5 percentage points decrease compared to the previous year. Nevertheless, the relative portion of the working poor at risk (for persons in the age group 18–64) is 10 % of the population, as these are people working both full-time and part-time. The National Statistical Institute discloses additional vulnerability data. The households most exposed to the risk of poverty consist of two adults with three or more dependent children and those with a single person aged over 65.

Table 1 shows the fluctuations in the share of the population at risk of poverty in different years.

**Table 1**

*NSI 2018 Population census. Poverty and Social Exclusion Indicators*

Year of the national survey	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Year of referent income	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Share of the population at risk (%)	48.0	40.1	41.3	40.4	38.9

There is a direct correlation between educational attainment, employment status, and poverty. Table 2 displays differences in the share of people at risk of poverty depending on attained education levels.

**Table 2**

*People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by educational level (population aged 18 and over)*

Bulgaria by education level and gender (%)	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
All education levels	<b>48.3</b>	<b>46.9</b>	<b>38.8</b>	<b>40.7</b>	<b>39.3</b>	<b>38.3</b>
Less than primary, primary, and lower-secondary (level 0-2)	<b>72.7</b>	<b>73.4</b>	<b>66.5</b>	<b>70.3</b>	<b>68.3</b>	<b>69.3</b>
Upper secondary, post-secondary, and non-tertiary (level 3-4)	<b>45.3</b>	<b>43.8</b>	<b>33.4</b>	<b>34.8</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>33.0</b>
Tertiary (level 5-8)	<b>24.2</b>	<b>21.9</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>16.0</b>
Women (all education levels)	<b>50.1</b>	<b>48.2</b>	<b>40.1</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>41.4</b>	<b>40.2</b>
Men (all education levels)	<b>46.3</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>37.4</b>	<b>38.3</b>	<b>36.9</b>	<b>36.1</b>

*Note:* See EUROSTAT 2018.

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/product?code=ilc\\_peps04](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/product?code=ilc_peps04)

On the other hand, discrimination, according to Anthony Giddens (2003), involves "actions that refuse the members of group resources or awards that others can receive"; usually, these actions stem from prejudices (expressed in negative attitudes) and are based on restriction, or preference, towards a specific race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origin, property status, birth or any other trait (OHCHR, 1996). A large share of the victims of ethnic discrimination is the Roma. That is why, in 2012, the European Commission urged the governments of EU countries to develop national Roma integration strategies with specific financial commitments and action plans.

### **Results of the 2017 national survey and discussion**

The following survey has been presented in the published work of Svetlana D. Hristova & Valentina Milenkova "Self-perceptions of the risk of discrimination and social exclusion: Assessing the six-year aftermath of the National Strategy for Roma Integration in Bulgaria" (2020, Journal of Contemporary European Studies). Consequently, in the current article the authors will expound an update, a more detailed elaboration on the survey results

according to various social indicators and survey variables (e.g., health, employment, the subjectivity of discrimination, etc.).

### **Subjected to discriminatory acts**

The national survey highlighted that (according to self-assessment) the following groups in Bulgaria were most at risk of discrimination: individuals with low incomes; individuals without national health insurance; unemployed people, usually residing in small or remote settlements; people over the age of 55; people with disabilities; low-educated people; those belonging to an ethnic group other than Bulgarian.

86.1% of the sample claimed that they had never felt discriminated against for any reason. A total of 502 individuals, or 13.9 %, said they had experienced discrimination at least once. Essentially, practices or risks of discrimination often occur on more than one ground – for example, on the grounds of both age and ethnicity, or both gender and unemployment, or both disability and unemployment, which could be complemented by residence in a remote or isolated geographic area, with limited access to public services and job opportunities. Multiple discrimination appears when the primary reasons for lack of access to public goods are two or more intermingling vulnerability indicators.

Further, 35.4% of all respondents who had experienced discrimination believed that the reason for this was their affiliation with an ethnic group other than Bulgarian. 62.7% of the Roma respondents felt they belonged to a group that is subject to discrimination, whereas 37.3% did not.

### **Health care**

An essential precondition of social exclusion is reduced access to quality medical care and health services. The National Roma Integration Strategy of Bulgaria recognizes that ensuring equal access to decent health services is a core priority; here, equal access emphasizes maternal and child healthcare, the development of a healthy culture among the Roma, and more widespread health insurance among the Roma. The 2017 national study reveals the profiles of people reporting poor access to quality health care: people of different health insurance status (lack of health insurance); people with no national identity cards and no health insurance; residents of isolated or remote settlements lacking access to health care (and even to emergency medical care); inhabitants of segregated urban neighbourhoods; people with low incomes (self-defined as "living in poverty") who cannot afford to buy medicaments; individuals with disabilities or with chronic diseases; those lacking social skills

and the willingness to communicate with the health care representatives; people with low health culture.

The European Commission midterm review on NRIS clearly states that health insurance remains among the significant issues for the Bulgarian Roma (COM, 2016). Having health insurance is necessary for choosing a general practitioner and accessing free outpatient and hospital care. Previous research shows that one-third of the Roma in Bulgaria have no identity papers, therefore have no health insurance, and are automatically excluded from public services (Dimitrov et al., 2012, p.45). The absence of health insurance is also associated with other problems, such as, in some rural areas, the lack of physicians working full-time; the fact that emergency assistance often does not reach less accessible areas; the unwillingness of some physicians to examine and treat people belonging to marginalized communities like the Roma, etc. (p.45).

Data on the health status of the Bulgarian Roma indicate a shorter life expectancy, increased levels of mortality and disability among the adult population, and high levels of child mortality (ibid). Health-related vulnerability parameters derive predominantly from low monthly income, poor housing conditions, malnutrition, bad personal and public hygiene, alcohol, tobacco, psychoactive substances abuse, lack of family planning, etc. The share of communicable infections, such as tuberculosis and blood-borne and sexually transmitted infections, is relatively high in Roma-populated areas. A report of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (2016, p.49) acknowledges increased levels of morbidity observed among Roma patients living in hard-to-reach areas, due to the irregular prophylactic activities that Roma people undertake (survey data in support of this statement are given below).

The 2017 national survey largely confirms previous researchers' findings regarding Roma health indicators and expounds on Roma self-perceptions of exclusion from the health system. Half of the Roma respondents had no health insurance, while 91% of respondents had valid health insurance in the general population. "Difficult, because I have no financial means to pay for health and medical services" is how 43 % of the Roma sample qualify their access to medical service. However, another 41 % admit that they use medical services without any difficulties, while 10.8 % point out they live in remote areas and cannot benefit from proper medical assistance.

Regarding health status, 63.7 % of the Roma respondents described it as "good" or "satisfactory." 15.6 % stated their health is "bad" or "very bad," compared with 8.2 % of the

general sample. The responses of the Roma to the question "How often do you use medical (health) help?" were:

- Relatively often – 12 %
- Sometimes – 19.8 %
- Rarely – 59 %
- Cannot afford – 9.4 %

Regarding visiting the doctor "every six months", the Roma do so half as often as the Bulgarian majority. Regarding visits "once a year", three times fewer Roma indicated this than Bulgarian respondents and twice fewer than the respondents from the Turkish ethnic group.

To the question, "Do you have the financial means to pay for medical services?", the Roma responded as follows:

- Always – 12.8 %
- Sometimes – 17.3 %
- Only when very necessary – 35.7 %
- No – 34.2 %

The Bulgarians responded "always" three times more frequently than the Roma. Forty-four Roma respondents (17 % of all Roma interviewees) reported they had been refused medical services. Most of them believe this was due to their ethnicity or mother tongue.

Regarding Roma representation in public services, one of the criticisms of the Civil Society Monitoring Report on NRIS (2018, p.25) is that the most visible part of the Roma public sector employees are the 170 health mediators (working in 90 municipalities), who are generally low-qualified and useful mainly in health care campaigns or in connection with access to the emergency room. Civil society organizations insist that highly qualified Roma medical professionals (such as paramedics or medical doctors) are needed for community practice. The Roma Health Scholarship Program (RHSP) of the Roma Education Fund (a network of foundations) was aimed at supporting three generations of medical students (both doctors and nurses) in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Macedonia. A total of 536 medical professionals in all four countries received continuous financial support throughout their studies. All medical scholarship beneficiaries that completed their studies became employed upon graduation. In Bulgaria, 117 medical students were supported by the program, most of whom are now specializing in a selected medicine branch (REF, 2018). Grant schemes

supporting medical scholarships in Bulgaria and Poland under the Roma Health Scholarship Program, was briefly mentioned in the European Commission's assessment of NRIS.

### **Employment**

A main priority of the NRIS is to improve Roma access to the labor market and increase labor market activity. EU experts assert that Roma inclusion in the labor market is still weak (COM, 2016), i.e., important differences exist compared with the non-Roma population, and there is an evident equity gap as concerns the numbers of young Roma neither in employment nor education, as well as a gender equity gap between Roma males and females (FRA Education and Employment, 2018; Fresno, 2018).

Regarding self-perceptions on discrimination at work and concerning working conditions, the following groups are at the highest risk: persons working without contracts; people doing unpaid labor; low-skilled people; unemployed who are not registered at the Labour Office (people in long-term unemployment who have become discouraged about finding a job); workers in the low-paid sectors; people with disabilities; people aged 55 and above.

Previous decades have been marked by increasing workplace insecurity, which raised levels of vulnerability within marginal groups. In the area of employment, the discriminatory factors are typically related to the specific circumstances in which people's work activities are pursued:

#### ***Employer's refusal to hire an individual***

This factor appeared in the survey as an aggregation of self-perception of discrimination and real events involving an employer's rejection. According to the respondents, the following cases are the most visible:

- ✓ Unfavourable attitude of the employer towards the younger job seekers due to the latter's lack of work experience.
- ✓ Ageist prejudices towards those aged over 55, based on a perceived lack of technological and language skills.
- ✓ 151 out of 194 disabled respondents considered the variety of job opportunities was quite limited for them.
- ✓ Discrimination against women trying to return to the labor market after maternity leave.
- ✓ More than half of the 246 Roma respondents reported having received at least one job refusal.



Research conducted for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights-FRA (2018, p.32) emphasized that in general, the Roma work in lower-quality jobs in terms of job security, benefits, and income. The national survey on discrimination also found that 34 Roma individuals out of 246 felt discriminated against at their workplace; most of them thought this was due to their ethnicity. The research of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights presents a more detailed picture (2018, p.32), showing that nearly one in five Roma (who had worked in the last 5 years) had been subjected to ethnically based discrimination at work; the share of this category was shown to be somewhat higher among the younger Roma age groups (18 % of those aged 16-24 had experienced work-related discrimination, and so had 19 % of those aged 25-44; compared with 16 % of those aged 45 – 64 years). However, work-related harassment is lower in cases when young Roma have permanent work contracts. Thus far, the percentage of Roma with permanent work contracts in Bulgaria is relatively high (49 %) in contrast to other countries (4 % in Portugal) (FRA, 2018, p.32-33).

#### ***Performing unpaid labor or labor without contractual relations***

The national survey on discrimination shows that 38.3 % of the Roma respondents had worked without a contract, compared with 22.8 % of Bulgarians and 22.9 % of Turks. There is a clear correlation between this phenomenon and educational level: 60 % of the Roma who had worked without signed contracts had only attained a lower primary education level.

#### ***Difficulties in finding a job***

The FRA report (2018) notes that the Roma employment prospects continue to be uncertain, mainly due to low qualifications, social exclusion, and discrimination. Early dropout from school is a factor of labor market deactivation among young Roma at later stages of their lives. Many young people in Bulgaria, including Roma, tend to share unrealistically high expectations regarding eventual remuneration.

In the 2017 survey, 68.7 % of the Roma, 41.5 % of the Turks, and 30.7 % of the Bulgarians reported difficulties in finding work.

The reasons for this are listed in Table 3 (Hristova & Milenkova, 2020, p.11).

**Table 3**

*Cross-tabulation between the ethnic affiliation of the respondents and their multiple answers to the question*

What are the reasons for your difficulties in finding a job?	Bulgarians (%)	Turks (%)	Roma (%)
I am not well-qualified	<b>16.3</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>43.5</b>
I am not an active jobseeker	<b>3.0</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Because of my ethnic affiliation	<b>1.0</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>73.4</b>
I don't have enough personal contacts	<b>37.5</b>	<b>21.7</b>	<b>35.5</b>
I cannot find the type of job I am looking for	<b>31.4</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>24.2</b>
Due to illness	<b>4.7</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>7.5</b>
I don't like the working conditions	<b>40.4</b>	<b>17.8</b>	<b>22.2</b>
I don't like the pay offered	<b>45.0</b>	<b>20.9</b>	<b>19.3</b>
Due to my bad health	<b>2.9</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>5.8</b>
I cannot afford to travel to work	<b>5.8</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Due to illiteracy	<b>0.1</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>5.9</b>
Due to age	<b>19.9</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>4.6</b>
Due to gender	<b>1.4</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.4</b>
Other	<b>6.3</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>5.8</b>

*Note:* National survey 2017

***The respondents' assessment of the likelihood of discrimination regarding finding employment and the possibility of promotion among different social groups at risk of discrimination***

Looking at the general sample, we see that 51.9 % of respondents believe it is less likely for someone of ethnic minority origin to find a job or be promoted to a higher workplace position than a Bulgarian person striving for the same. The most skeptical in this respect are the Roma, as seen in Table 4 (as also shown in Hristova & Milenkova, 2020, p.11).

**Table 4**

*Comparison among groups at risk and their job promotion opportunities by presenting a cross-tabulation between the ethnic affiliation and answers to questions a) to e).*

How likely are people from the below-mentioned groups to find a job or be promoted at work compared to the rest of the population?			
Answers	Bulgarians (2,985 respondents)	Turks (299 respondents)	Roma (246 respondents)
concerning people of different ethnic background			
Less likely	<b>54.2 %</b>	<b>43.4 %</b>	<b>89.3 %</b>
As likely	<b>36.3 %</b>	<b>50.5 %</b>	<b>5.9 %</b>
More likely	<b>9.5 %</b>	<b>6.1 %</b>	<b>4.9 %</b>
concerning people with religious affiliation different from Christianity			
Less likely	<b>32.7 %</b>	<b>34.4 %</b>	<b>58.3 %</b>
As likely	<b>54.7 %</b>	<b>60.0 %</b>	<b>27.8 %</b>
More likely	<b>12.6 %</b>	<b>5.6 %</b>	<b>13.9 %</b>
concerning people with non-standard sexual preferences			
Less likely	<b>46.8 %</b>	<b>46.0 %</b>	<b>81.8 %</b>
As likely	<b>42.2 %</b>	<b>46.8 %</b>	<b>17.0 %</b>
More likely	<b>11.0 %</b>	<b>7.1 %</b>	<b>1.3 %</b>
concerning people with physical or mental disability			
Less likely	<b>86.2 %</b>	<b>80.1 %</b>	<b>96.5 %</b>
As likely	<b>9.0 %</b>	<b>14.4 %</b>	<b>3.0 %</b>
More likely	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>5.5 %</b>	<b>0.5 %</b>
concerning people aged above 55			
Less likely	<b>77.8 %</b>	<b>74.7 %</b>	<b>88.4 %</b>
As likely	<b>16.5 %</b>	<b>19.9 %</b>	<b>10.0 %</b>
More likely	<b>5.7 %</b>	<b>5.4 %</b>	<b>1.6 %</b>

*Note:* National survey 2017

### Equal opportunities and non-discrimination

#### *The media*

Under this priority, the NRIS promotes citizens' rights, emphasizing women and children, protecting public order, and preventing and counteracting intolerance and "hate speech."

The national survey commissioned by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (2017) found that 22.5 % of all respondents (812 people) had been subjected to insults in their everyday lives. Among the perceived grounds for this (multiple answers) are the following: "ethnicity" (169), "other" (165), "gender" (78), "age" (124), "religion" (53), and "speaking in one's mother tongue." Certain quite rigid representations related to the Roma thrive in the space of everyday life; the image of them generally maintained by society at large is associated with violence, crime, and illiteracy as characteristics of this minority; the Roma have been viewed as a privileged target of affirmative policies and as a problematic group in both social and economic terms (Hristova, 2015, p.152-167). The NRIS seeks to create conditions for equal representation of Roma in the media based on changing their negative image and counteracting "hate speech" in the press and electronic media. The EU Midterm Review notes that civil society organizations have been conducting regular monitoring of the media. This has resulted in the registering of 135 cases of hate speech against Roma, which were subsequently reported to the media-controlling bodies in Bulgaria, which in turn led to over 70 proceedings and 31 decisions and prescriptions which the Commission for Protection against Discrimination made to journalists and the media (COM, 2016).

### ***Interaction with public institutions and corporations***

One of the dominant factors of discrimination is the lack of awareness of personal rights in discriminatory situations. The Civil Society Monitoring Report on the NRIS (2018, p. 27) highlights the absence of a "well-established practice among the Roma community of complaining or reporting cases of discrimination in labor or other contexts (as well as of violence and hate speech)." The report notes that insufficient information and a lack of knowledge about responsible institutions and their functions to protect people from discriminatory acts hinders the Roma from exercising their rights. The 2017 survey discloses that the least informed about their rights in discrimination situations are unemployed, retired, and low-educated people. Most Roma respondents admit they are not knowledgeable on the topic. Yet, many Bulgarians and Turks also seem to be ill-informed on these matters, as visible from Table 5, as also demonstrated in Hristova & Milenkova,( 2020, p.12).

**Table 5***Awareness of one's rights in case of discrimination by ethnicity*

Answers	Bulgarians (%)	Turks (%)	Roma (%)
I am informed about what to do in case of discrimination	<b>38.2</b>	<b>35.1</b>	<b>27.4</b>
I am not told what to do in case of discrimination	<b>61.8</b>	<b>64.9</b>	<b>72.6</b>

The Roma respondents have a high level of mistrust in justice and law enforcement systems and institutions responsible for ensuring equal treatment. The Roma believe that the authorities (the institutions) are always on the side of the ethnic majority (Civil society monitoring report, 2018). Indeed, 57.8 % of the Roma respondents in the national discrimination survey believe that the public institutions do not treat them rightfully as citizens, compared with 17 % of Bulgarians and 14 % of Turks giving the same answer.

Furthermore, three-fourths of the Roma respondents do not believe that anything would change if they reported a discriminatory act to the police and/or to the Commission for Protection against Discrimination; this correlates with their views on whether public institutions treat them in a just manner (as validated in previous research in Hristova & Milenkova, 2020, p.12).

**Table 6***What were the reasons you were in a situation of discrimination and not reporting it to the responsible authority?*

Answers	Bulgarians (%)	Turks (%)	Roma (%)
I am afraid of being threatened by the perpetrators if I reported the discriminatory act.	<b>8.2</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>14.2</b>
I am worried about the negative consequences of filing a complaint, which might be against my interest	<b>3.8</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>6.2</b>
Answers	Bulgarians (%)	Turks (%)	Roma (%)

I did not know where to report	<b>12.7</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>16</b>
I did not believe that anything would change if I reported the discriminatory act	<b>43</b>	<b>39.9</b>	<b>75.4</b>
The case was too trivial: it was not worth reporting; such cases happen often	<b>25.7</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>17.5</b>
Inconvenience/too much bureaucracy/ Efforts/ I have no time	<b>13.2</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>10.1</b>
I dealt with the issue by myself / I looked for help among my family and friends	<b>30.3</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>9.6</b>
Other	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>0.8</b>

### Conclusion

The paper's importance stems from the understanding and systematization of the empirical data, which illustrate the risk factors rooted in "social exclusion" and "discrimination" in contemporary Bulgarian society. The dimensions of social exclusion are mainly associated with the loss of a full-time job and with insecure income, deteriorating health and aging, housing situations, and loneliness and isolation.

Notably, the findings reported here are multifaceted and compact in terms of identifying the presence and various aspects of the mentioned risks and the diversity of vulnerability profiles. The national representative study in 2017 and other data sources disclosed that the groups in the country which are most prone to vulnerability are those who did not pay one's health insurance, those residing in isolated and remote settlements, low-qualified and unemployed persons (these risk factors often intersecting and leading to multiple discrimination), people with disabilities, multi-members families, and single parents. These categories comprise a substantial portion of the Roma population. The Roma are over-represented with respect to the above-mentioned risk factors. Surprisingly or not, the survey did not show that the Roma communities are the sole ones vulnerable, excluded, and discriminated against, the vulnerability gap does not primarily follow the ethnic borderlines.

Social inclusion policies aim to develop an integrated approach to employment, economic security, access to good quality health, housing, and education, and contribute strongly to the prevention of intergenerational transmission of poverty. Hence, the profiles of the groups at risk allow connecting the conclusions to policies for equal opportunities and non-discrimination for all vulnerable groups. Such studies indicate the need to elaborate adequate measures and make adjustments in the political engagement and future planning of the NRIS.

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