



Erasmus+



National Gathering Report

Organization in charge of co-implementing the activity: Center Amalipe

Date of the Gathering: 20 October 2022

Place: Bulgaria, Veliko Turnovo, Veliko Turnovo University

Hosting institution: St.St.Cyril and Methodius Veliko Turnovo University. The meeting was agreed together with the Rectorate of the University. It was held in the official solemn hall of the University called "Europe". There were also other options for other meeting halls in different buildings of the university. However, we decided to organize it exactly in this one, because it is in the main building of the University, the Rectorate. This decision had two purposes: from one side to motivate Roma women who would participate, to show them that University is a place for Roma women too. From another, it aimed at provoking the university community having such a big number of Roma women in the very heart of the University

1- PREPARATION PHASE BEFORE THE GATHERING

Dates of meetings with NCC pre Gathering: two preparation meetings were organized in advance to prepare the Gathering. They were followed by a number of bilateral meetings with active Roma women who participated in the first gathering. We decided to speak first with different Roma women groups (young girls, high school students, and adult Roma women).

- The first one was organized on 11 May 2022 with Roma girls who are high school students. During the meeting we discussed the point of view of the younger girls and how it should be reflected during the meeting. They proposed at the meeting to have women of different age. In addition, they suggested to deliberately invite active Roma women with their daughters if they are high-school students or university students. This would create continuity and transferring the message from generation to generation. In addition, this would help younger active girls to become more respected by the elderly women generation.
- The second meeting was organized with adult Roma women from different parts of Bulgaria. This happened on the 3rd of June during the Children Roma Festival. We discussed the organization of the meeting, the topics and how the different generations to be involved. We spoke also that we need to attract higher political attention and we decided to approach the Vice President of Bulgaria Iliyana Yotova and invite her. It was further decided to organize the meeting at the end of September. Further, the meeting was moved for October 20th, because of technical issues that had to be solved with Drom Kotar.

Staff Member(s) involved: 2

NCC Member(s) involved: 5

Locations. Various locations were used: the meeting with young Roma girls took place during a training of young active students, the second meeting took place in Veliko Turnovo during the Roma children festival Open Heart; the bilateral meetings took place in different place, some of them online

Evidences: pictures

Action Points:

1. To organize the meeting in the end of September, later it was changed to 20th October
2. Invite women from different generations
3. Invite Vice President of Bulgaria

Notes: included in the paragraphs above

2- ACTIVITY IMPLEMENTATION: THE GATHERING

You make me believe that this country has a future

Iliyana Iotova, Vice President of Bulgaria to the Roma women participants in the National Roma Women Gathering, 20 October 2022

October 20, 2022 for many women in Bulgaria is probably just another monotonous day, but for more than 50 Roma women it was the beginning of a new period of their lives. They gathered in the “Europe” hall of Veliko Tarnovo University “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”. The occasion was the National Gathering of Roma women under the title “Girls with dreams: Let’s turn the page!” The university is also a place for Roma women!”. At the meeting we discussed the challenges each Roma woman face, the challenges she faces in her work and everyday life, the strong role models to motivate the participants to face the difficulties along the way of education, opportunities and the importance of mothers supporting their children.



The Vice President of Bulgaria Iliyana Iotova, the Rector of Veliko Tarnovo University “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” Prof. Dr. Hristo Bonjолоv, Neiko Genchev – Deputy Mayor of Veliko Tarnovo Municipality and the Regional Governor of Veliko Tarnovo Region Georgi Guguchkov.

And while the men left the meeting after the official welcoming, Iliyana Iotova stayed almost for the whole Gathering and took active part in the discussions with Roma women. Her presence and active

participation was a particularly strong message. In her welcoming words, Vice President Iotova stated that *“we must understand the traditions of the Roma. To be able to know more about their history, about their livelihood, what really excites them, about what they revere, about the relationships inside the home. Only then, if we know this essence, only then will we be able to find the good suggestions, we will be able to be adequate.”* She strongly welcomes the willingness of Veliko Tarnovo University to host this meeting. *“It is very important that young people are stimulated. A young person is stimulated and educated through the Bulgarian education – at school and then at the university. This is the natural place for such discussions. Our teachers work here in this building. There is no one better than them to give good advice, to tell us about history... and through history and the past to say “this is how it is decided and you can make the appropriate decisions”. We must make sure that young people see their future in Bulgarian education [...] They say that a person’s life is a blank sheet of paper. Everyone writes this white sheet of paper themselves. It is as long as we are allotted. But what is written inside depends largely on each of us. I would very much like, not only for you, for every Bulgarian girl, for every Bulgarian young person, to use the conjunction “and” more often when writing this page. And I get up in the morning early, and I see that I slept well, that I look good, and I want to go to school, and I want to go to work, and I want to tell about my life today, and I want to meet many friends today, and I want tonight, when I come home, to have something to tell my children, and I want to have something to brag to my parents about, and I want to have more and more colleagues to be friends with, I want to have more friends. Let this little conjunction “and” be used more and more. Because that’s how dreams are born. And that’s how dreams come true.”*



“When a person is ambitious and when s/he really looks positively at the world and wants to show that s/he is also ready, s/he is not another dough, s/he is not different from everyone else. On the contrary, how s/he will realize her/himself tomorrow depends on his/her own strength and self-knowledge. In order to achieve all this, we also need something very important. This is the example we follow. We have often talked with “Amalipe” and other civil society organizations about how important this campaign is “for everyone who follows – pass it on!” If some have already achieved their successes, they attract more and more people.... let’s pass on what we’ve learned, let’s tell each other without hesitation where we’ve gone wrong, where we’ve failed, because that’s how we’ll make sure that the next one who comes after us and who takes this example and who wants to continue in our direction, to protect him/her from the mistakes we have already made and lost a lot of time because of them. To tell what we have achieved, to give him/her advice, to give him/her a hand... Long may this campaign continue.”

*“It is good to show the good examples, not to paint only with poisonous paints what happens in Roma families with Roma girls: we already have a significant number of examples. **When we show these good examples, we tell everyone: you have an alternative, you can count on a helping hand, you have***

people who will help you and you have every chance to make your dreams come true. Let's do it together. There is no reason why anyone should try to lock them up in certain, very conservative societies, in ghettos, they are one of us," said Vice President Iotova. "These problems cannot be dealt with in a campaign way. This is even dangerous and does not produce any results. We need a policy of small steps, to support mediators, to support civil society extremely much, because it is on the ground. ", the vice president also pointed out.



Teodora Krumova – Program Director of the Amalipe Center shared that *"the purpose of the meeting is to talk about who we are, where we come from. what is behind and ahead us. We are not starting from scratch, and in order to have the opportunity to organize this meeting, many other Roma women have already taken the first steps."*

Prof. Dr. Hristo Bonjolov, Rector of Veliko Tarnovo University "St. St. Cyril and Methodius", shared that *"the most important thing is the unification of our society. We must somehow bet on this education, because you see that in today's world without education a person cannot realize himself. Here the emphasis should be on everyone. ... There is no other window to the world than education. Whatever the differences, we have to commit to this school, together with the parents, to educate the children so that we do not end up in these cases... I am sure of success, but it comes with unity, not with division."*

The deputy mayor of the municipality of Veliko Tarnovo, **Neiko Genchev**, said that education is the key to solving the problems. *"I really like the name of the initiative that you have chosen, because a person who has dreams has not given up. The one who has dreams has a future. The Roma woman has a future, although she sometimes has to fight on two fronts, because gender inequality is a fact, both in domestic and social relations. Some Roma women live as they did 500 years ago. A society in which a part of it lives in the past cannot move forward. On the other hand, we have a huge potential in the face of these smart and beautiful women – the Roma women... the best means for the advancement of women in society is education."* *"We achieve everything because we know it can be achieved, nothing is impossible! If you have a goal to strive for, you can always achieve it"*, shared **Teodora Krumova**. She expressed her gratitude for the support from the institutions, without which achieving the set goals would be much more difficult. *"The idea of the meeting is to leave here with specific ideas and plans that each of us can make in our own locality. Going back to pass that on to the girls and women we work with."*



In the second module, the participants shared real examples and difficulties they have faced so far. The difficulties they encounter during their work as educational mediators or teachers, the early marriages, the still existing domestic violence not only against Roma women, but also children. The girls shared what inspires them, what helps them survive the hard stories they face. The general opinion was how important it is to know that you are not

alone, that there is someone to call when you need, someone to share successes with, but also problems. It turned out to be extremely useful that we were able to adapt and continue our meetings during the pandemic, albeit over a virtual coffee. And, of course, they all emphasized the power of role models.

Vice President Iliyana Iotova expressed her gratitude and admiration for the women who took part in the event. *“In just one hour, you managed to make me believe that this country has a future, because you all follow the political situation. My team and I feel like we are in an oasis of kindness, of positive news and of many warm-hearted, energetic and ambitious and most importantly – very good people who are doing something most important and giving young people faith, faith not just in something, and most importantly – in yourself. That they can literally walk through walls, change their lives, break stereotypes, fight long-established dogmas and show that this fight and this struggle is worth it, because they all have a better destiny than what they are what their grandparents and parents expected or thought about... I have an observation that our grandparents lived well. The missing generation is our parents. And this does not apply only to the Roma community. This is a problem of our country as a whole... It is very commendable and one wants to help you because you are the people who disagree with it, grumble against it and want to change it.”* Mrs. Iotova shared that the President’s institution is always open to signals. *“We have the leverage and the means to contact the relevant authorities discreetly enough so that we don’t put anyone in danger.... I think there is more to be owed regarding your work. For years I have dealt with the topic of violence against women, not only in the Roma community. Unfortunately, the pandemic has made this problem even more drastic. The perpetrators felt unpunished. Women can’t go outside, they can’t complain, they can’t go to their workplace. This broke out as a second epidemic. In our society, these issues are not talked about...”*



Silvia Stancheva – regional pedagogical coordinator for the districts of Shumen, Targovishte and Razgrad, presented data about the state of education of Roma women. The problems with early marriages, the importance of the parent-child relationship were discussed. *“A mother is the person who loves her child the most and who can do anything for her. We as mothers need to show this to our children. And not for the children to say “I want to run away from home, that’s why I’m going to get married.” It is not known in the other house, in a new family, whether the child will be well, whether he will be so loved and cared for.”*

The topic of domestic violence in the Roma community was not forgotten either. The participants shared about cases of domestic violence not only with Roma women, but also with children. They shared that one of the most difficult parts of their work as educational mediators is precisely the topic of domestic violence. They indicated that victims need support, but the most important thing is for the victim herself to be willing to take action to end the abuse she and her children are suffering. The film “Turn the Page” produced by the “Amalipe” Center was also presented.

In the last session, the participants were divided into groups, and each of them had to present their strongest impressions from the national meeting of Roma women and their action plan until the end of the school year.



3- IMPACT OF THE GATHERING

The meeting had huge impact on the Roma women participating and those who did not participate but with whom the information was shared. After the meeting many of the participants shared that they did not expect the Vice President to be so natural, participative and caring. Unlike the usual behavior of official political figures, she stayed during the whole meeting, participated in the discussions, spoke with many of the women as close friend. This normal and respectful attitude made the women feel very proud of themselves, it helped them overcome many of the prejudices they themselves had about themselves. This made them more strong, self-confident. Furthermore, it made them saw they haa a very strong ally who could help them make the change.

The participants in the meeting have been chosen after their profile was discussed with different women groups: young Roma women, adult women. Invitations were sent to those women who had been very active since the previous gathering and have managed to organize local educational trainings as well as other local activities for promoting Roma women empowerment. Many of them have already participated

in various other event and they have already started building the feeling for belonging to a community, the Roma women community.

An additional goal of the selection process would have been to bring together women who can further transfer the impulse in their communities and continue spreading the spark! We tried to cover the whole country and include representatives of different Roma groups. Special focus in our efforts for selecting participants was to promote active women mothers whose daughters are following their way and are also active. So we had several couples of mothers and daughters. In this way they additionally supported each other.

Invitations were send also to many Roma women role models. Some of them were among the founders of the Roma women movement in Bulgaria. Silvia Stancheva and Teodora Krumova participated as role models in the meeting.

After the meeting many of the women organized follow-up meetings in their localities. Very powerful was the statement of the women participants in the meeting Mira Stefanova (<https://amalipe.bg/en/miraeng/>)

Hello girls,

I am Mira...

I am happy to meet successful Roma women, women who have dreams and have the courage to fight and face life's challenges. Two months ago, Center Amalipe invited me to join the meeting with successful Roma women, which was held at the University of Veliko Tarnovo and in which Vice President Iliana Yotova also participated. There I met Roma women, successful in life, with a strive for realization. The topic was: The University is a place for Roma women too. Each one of the women shared about her dreams, about her struggles, failures and achievements, how they managed to overcome those traditions in the Roma community that limited them in their development as individuals, equal to everyone else. I am proud to say that I am one of those women. I have overcome many obstacles in my 33 years of life – things that I do not wish to happen to any girl.

I started my education at the age of 25, from the first grade. It was very difficult for me, but I managed and achieved many victories. I managed to become an educational mediator in the village of Pobeda, Dobrichka region. I thank God and my friends who were always by my side. If someone wants to achieve something in life, s/he must be ready to pay a price, which is the deprivation of many personal things, s/he must set herself a number of limitations. But let her know that she is not alone!

Education is extremely important to me because it opens doors everywhere in life. I encourage each of you to be fighting, bold, strong to open a new page in your life. I soon finished 11th grade, got a driver's license and bought a small car. It was one of my dreams. I will continue with God's will to move forward to get a diploma for secondary education, and if God wills, also for higher education. It is an honor for me to be part of Center "Amalipe" and to know that there is someone to support Roma women on their way to realizing their dreams. I can proudly say that the university is a place for Roma women too.

I did it. You can do it too!

The meeting was covered broadly by local and national media. It was also reflected on the webside of the Presidency

<https://m.president.bg/en/news6844/vitseprezidentat-podkrepi-romski-momicheta-i-zheni-v-borbata-im-za-ravnopravie>

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<https://trud.bg/%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B9%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%B5-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BC-%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D1%8F%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8/>

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<https://boliarinews.bg/2022/10/20/%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B9%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B5-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81/>

<https://www.dnesbg.com/obshtestvo/iliyana-yotova-pristiga-vav-vtu-za-natsionalna-sreshta-na-romskite-zheni.html>

<https://www.regnews.net/news/16662626656732/vitseprezidentat-iliyana-yotova-otkri-vav-vtu-natsionalna-sreshta-na-romskite-zheni-organizirana-ot-tsentar-amalipe>

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Conclusions of the Gathering:

At the end of the meeting all women agreed that going back to their settlements they would spread the word about the meeting and share with the women from their localities the information and the emotions from the meeting. They agreed to continue with these meetings.

The Vice President in turn promised to continue to be a strong supporter for the rights of Roma women and whenever the face the resistant or the rejection of the institutions they could approach her.