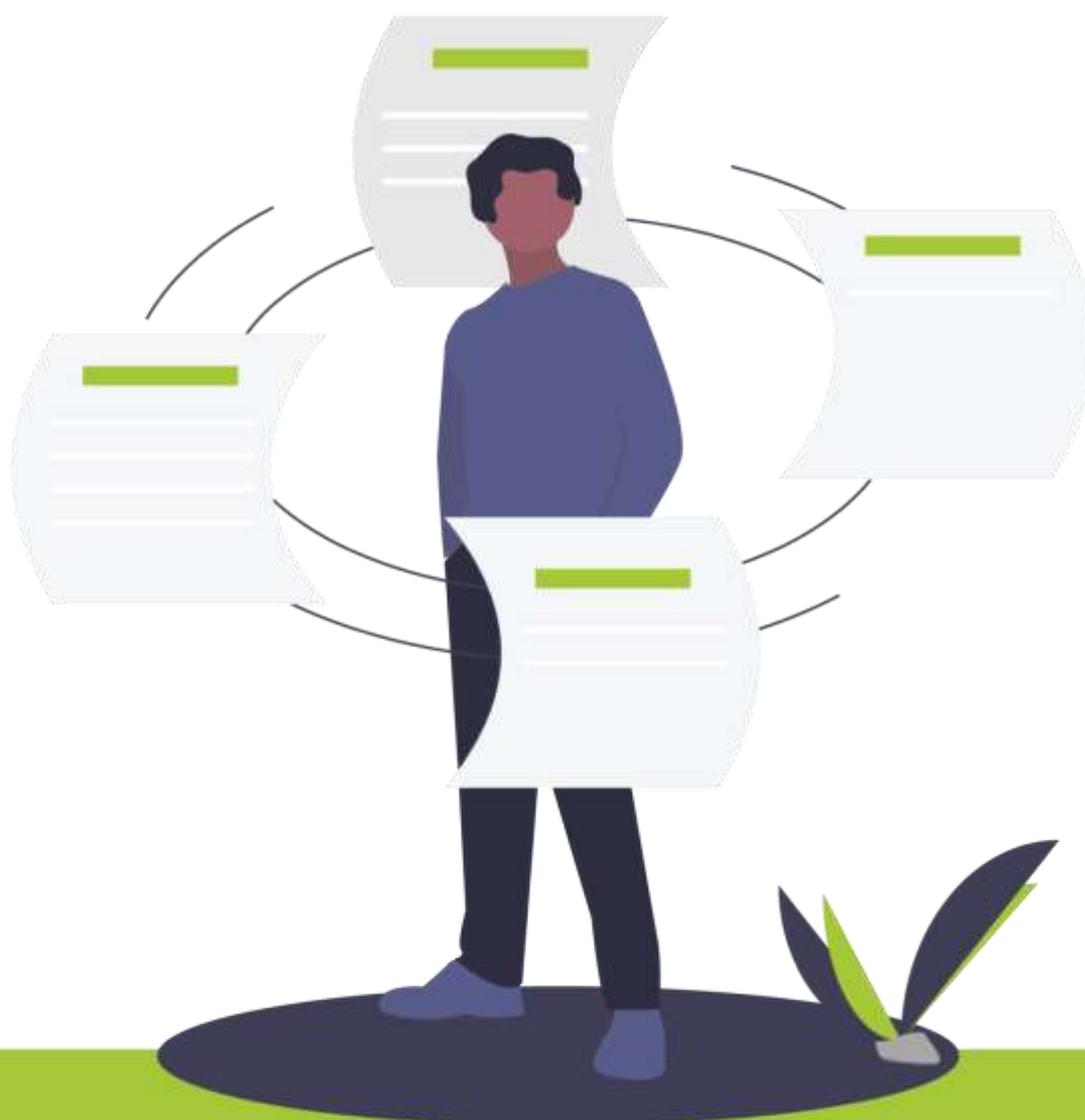


Diversity Strategies of Companies and Roma Inclusion

Experiences from the Bridge to Business
Programme in Bulgaria





Bridge to Business is performed within "*Bridging Young Roma and Business - Intervention for inclusion of Roma youth through employment in the private sector in Bulgaria and Hungary*" project that has been supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation ("EaSI") 2014-2020.

Goal: The overall aim of the project is to highlight an approach that contributes to the emergence and strengthening of Roma middle-class, consisting of Roma with at least secondary education, working in mainstream environment in quality positions. The project is applying rigorous quantitative and qualitative measurements to evaluate the effect of the interventions. The final outcome of the project will be policy conclusions and recommendations for state employment services to adapt to the needs of that special target group of relatively educated Roma employees as well as providing similar policy advice to future employers on internal procedures and services needed for a similar Roma employment initiative.

Project Duration: 3 years (1/10/2016-30/09/2019)

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Summary

The Bridge to Business (BtB) programme

The Bridge to Business programme (BtB) is designed to create a new approach to facilitate the link on the labor market between businesses and educated young Roma. BtB was implemented in Bulgaria and Hungary.

The programme supports the access of young Roma (18 to 35 years old) with at least secondary level education to good job in their field of education in the private sector. The programme also provides mentoring for Roma in their last two years of secondary education in selected high schools to support their successful passing of matriculation exams and to create opportunity for their access to higher education to jobs corresponding to their qualifications and preferences.

The BtB programme works closely with members of the private business sector that are interested in hiring qualified young people from the ethnic minorities.

Part of the BtB programme in Bulgaria is Diversity Pays Off initiative. In the framework of this initiative Bulgarian non-governmental organizations and private business members meet to discuss diversity policies and the employment of a diverse workforce including persons belonging to vulnerable groups. The Diversity Pays Off events are implemented in collaboration with other Bulgarian NGOs working with a wide range of vulnerable groups – people with hearing and physical disabilities, women and members of the LGBTQ community.

The BtB programme is financed by the EU programme for Employment and Social Innovation („EaSI“) 2014-2020 and carried out by Open Society Foundation Institute – Sofia in a consortium with Autonomia Foundation (Hungary) and Central European University (Hungary).

The Bulgarian labor market during the implementation of the BtB programme

During the period of implementation of the BtB programme in 2017-2019 Bulgaria's economy was strong with relatively high growth of 3% per year on average and low unemployment rate. In 2018 the GDP amounted to BGN 107,925 million in current prices (EUR 55,181 million), with 7,829 euros on average per person. The share of young persons who neither study nor work was also decreasing steadily since the end of the global economic crisis though it remained high compared to other EU member states.

The labour market in Bulgaria over the past 3 years was characterized by a low and constantly decreasing unemployment rate. According to data from the Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate continued to decline, from an average of 7.6% in 2016 to 6.2% on average in 2017 reaching in 2018 the record low level since the start of the new millennium of 5.2%. In 2018, the average annual unemployment rate was almost 2.5 times lower than in 2013. The number of unemployed Roma was also decreasing.

Improved indicators were registered in relation to youth employment. In 2018 the unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group was 8.3%. Compared to 2017, this ratio decreased by 1.6 percentage points. There is still considerable potential for bringing to the labour market young people who neither study nor work (NEETs). The relative share of non-employed and non-participating in education and training from the population aged 15-29 declined in 2018 and it is now 18.1% (against 18.9% in 2017). However, it remains among the highest in the European Union (along with those in Greece and Italy).

The economic growth however was mainly concentrated in large cities and their agglomerations and there are still deep regional inequalities. Correspondingly, the bulk of labour demand was concentrated in the capital and a few other large cities. Economically less regions offered few employment opportunities. Roma communities living in such regions were even more affected than the general population. Levels of unemployment tend to be higher in areas where the relative share of Roma is higher compared to other regions. Mobility among Roma youth is restricted by many obstacles.

Summary results of the research about the impact of BtB on companies

In the Bulgarian BtB programme there was no clear delineation between participating companies, companies that just happened to be interested in the programme and participate in some of the events and companies in which some of the programme participants ended up applying for jobs or being hired.

Companies that expressed interest in the BtB programme were predominantly located in Sofia. Among them there were companies who attended events organized by BtB but never invited BtB participants for job interviews. Other companies did invite BtB participants for job interviews but only in few cases were BtB participants actually employed by companies knowing about the BtB programme, either because the company did not offer a job after the interview, i.e. preferred another candidate, or because BtB participants finally decided not to take the job.

Most of the BtB participants who found jobs were hired although they had not expressed any interest in joining the programme prior to that. Companies that hired participants from BtB were target of this research no matter if they took part in any events organized by BtB or knew about the programme at all. From 30 persons who found jobs in the course of implementing the BtB only three were placed in companies that had expressed prior interest in the BtB and had participated in BtB events. The rest of the participants found other jobs. Some of the best jobs taken by BtB participants were in the public sector, primarily in various units of the public administration.

Private companies which hired educated young Roma from BtB included courier services, companies from the retail sector, and companies working in IT and accounting.

The philosophy of equal opportunity and related recruitment approaches and corporate strategies and principles have not gained ground among Bulgarian companies. Most HR specialists and managers from the corporate sector do not believe that it is the task of the business to level the playing field. They believe it is the government that has to cater for this kind of equity. Businesses however support equal treatment and the principle that the best candidate should get the job. Especially supporting the Roma is regarded by companies as a very unpopular kind of involvement which can result in backlash due to the negative public attitudes towards the Roma and the widely shared prejudice that Roma are a privileged group.

The unifying concept for all types of corporate involvement with vulnerable groups is corporate social responsibility (CSR). The typical corporate CSR is related to community involvement and support for various charitable initiatives. But under this concept programmes supporting of specific groups are also easily accommodated, some of which are related to recruitment and retaining of staff.

Some companies among the main employers of Roma hold deeply biased but widely popular views against undertaking positive measures towards Roma employment. They are inclined to blame Roma for their own situation, claiming that Roma are not very active on the labour market.

We did not find any examples of companies having a strategic approach specifically to the recruitment of Roma. Some companies relying heavily on a Roma workforce had made special investments in transportation or packages of incentives geared mainly towards the needs of persons in the low skill segments of the labour force.

The companies do not have any specific communication activities intentionally targeting the Roma. There are however communication channels which could be more likely to reach out to Roma. Personal networks and Roma organizations and social networks appear to be important tools for job search for the educated young Roma. The educated young Roma engaged in job search were aware of and using web-based job-search platforms. Companies that employed participants of BtB regularly publish job announcements on their own website. But they too rely mostly on the most popular internet based job search platforms. The choice of these communication channels is related to their popularity and accessibility. Within the low-skills segment one of the most frequently used channels through which links are established between businesses and job seekers from Roma communities is the Labour Offices.

Another channel for recruitment of new staff is through the social networks of employees - relatives, friends and acquaintances. Some companies have a special strategy to explore this channel by offering rewards for bringing job applicants. The amount of the rewards indicated that they were targeting mainly the networks in the low-skill, low-pay segment.

Prejudices and discriminatory attitudes in fact require Roma job applicants to be much more convincing than representatives of other ethnic groups to refute preconceptions and clichés. While HR practitioners say they are seeking an individual "colour blind" approach, they recognize that labour market does not make an exception of society as a whole and the stigma on a group can affect each of its individual representatives.

In BtB several promising practices emerged in preventing and reducing prejudices against Roma when applying for a job are primarily related to offering the opportunity for meetings and short-term 'mini-internships' of young Roma. Mini-internships are a short introduction to the companies comprising training and 1-day visits to get to know the work process and meet members of the companies' teams. In the course of mini internships companies had the opportunity to meet Roma directly, and in the process members of the high and middle management of some companies had the chance to engage in discussions on discrimination, hate speech and diversity management.

There is no evidence of Bulgarian companies participating in BtB applying any specialized procedures for adaptation at the workplace. During the implementation of the programme there were no examples of sustainable employment of Roma job seekers in the partner companies.

In some companies, there is a clear set of rules for filing complaints and signals on various occasions, and each employee can also inform its supervisor informally about the existence of problems. But found little evidence of such procedures being used to report case of discrimination or bad treatment on the grounds of ethnicity.

According to the business, the BtB programme has the potential to develop soft skills which have not been previously formed within the education system. It can, for example, be very useful in overcoming the challenges such as the disposition towards mobility.

Companies also believe that it is good to start the promotion of diversity policies and practices among a small group of committed adherents first, like was the case in BtB, before attempting to expand.

It is very important to have the support of the company leadership before attempting any change of attitudes and practices concerning Roma and other vulnerable groups. Then there is a need of programmes, including training, for sensitizing the company staff to the issues of diversity and equal opportunity. This is the smoother route to codification of diversity policies in company rules and procedural guidelines.

Educated young Roma have the potential with their personal qualities and skills to contribute to changing the negative stereotypes towards the Roma.

Context in which the BtB Programme was implemented in Bulgaria

Implementation and Research of the programme

The Bridge to Business programme consists of an implementation part and research part. The first part of the implementation programme is focused on working with the program participants mostly on developing their soft skills, employability skills, practical labour rights knowledge and developing their inner confidence in working in an office environment, mentoring, finding and offering working position or volunteering positions for the participants, consultancy.

The Bridge to Business programme was working with partner NGOs in every region of Bulgaria in finding and recruiting participants for the programme. After the enrolment of participants, the first trainings were organized. They consisted of three different modules done during the course of 2017, 2018 and 2019 with different groups of participants.

The first trainings were focused on developing the participant's soft skills, their ability to present themselves on paper (e.g. CV) and in person (e.g. during a job interview). The trainings included modules on self- assessment, setting goals, finding the right job and legal advice for future employees. Another module of the training was focused on preparing the participants to write cover letters to companies and giving them practical advice on business communication. The third and final module of the trainings was a participation in a mini internship and job shadowing in the companies that participated in the Diversity Pays Off initiative. It was organized over the course of four days. The first day the participants were able to receive advice and coaching from experts on their career and life development.

The second part of the programme implementation is focused on finding high quality jobs for educated young Roma in private companies, providing support for hired programme participants and working with private business companies in creating public environment to openly talk about the policies and practices of diversity and inclusion on the Bulgarian labor market. As part of that, the „Diversity Pays Off“ event were created. Those events gave opportunity for members of the business community and policy makers to share experience in working towards diversity in the work place. Different DPO events had different audiences and different formats. The smaller events gave opportunity to talk more in-depth with companies about the policies of hiring diverse groups of people and creating safe workplace environment for their employees. During the process a core of companies was created that later contributed in creating a manual with practical advice for companies that want to start applying policies of diversity. In the longer run the implementation team aims at creating a diversity charter in Bulgaria.

The research part of the programme consisted of quasi-experimental quantitative survey with a comparison group and an incentive receiving group and qualitative interviews.

The current report is based on qualitative instruments: interviews with companies employing educated young Roma.

Economic and labour market context

After 2012 Bulgaria moved on a steady trend of positive changes in the macroeconomic indicators¹. GDP growth was positive and in 2018 GDP amounted to BGN 107,925 million in current prices (EUR 55,181 million), with 7,829 euros on average per person. According to preliminary data, the GDP in 2018, increased by 3.1% in real terms compared to 2017.²

Positive expectations led to a significant improvement of the business climate indicator in the period 2016-2018 compared to the previous 3 years, and only in March 2019 there was a slight decrease from the same month of the previous year.

Economic development had a positive impact on the labour market, where the number of people employed increased, the unemployment rate was decreasing and wages were rising.

In 2017 and 2018 the employment rate for the population aged over 15 was about 52%, which is a record value for the period since the beginning of the millennium, while in the age group 15-64 it increased significantly and reached 67.7% (with over 3 percentage points higher than the highest for the past decade, measured in 2008).³

The labour market in Bulgaria over the past 3 years was characterized by a low and constantly decreasing unemployment rate. According to data from the Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate continued to decline, from an average of 7.6% in 2016 to 6.2% on average in 2017 reaching in 2018 the record low level since the start of the new millennium of 5.2%. In 2018, the average annual unemployment rate was almost 2.5 times lower than in 2013.⁴

Improved indicators were registered in relation to youth employment. In 2018 the unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group was 8.3%. Compared to 2017, this ratio decreased by 1.6 percentage points. There is still considerable potential for bringing to the labour market young people who neither study nor work (NEETs). The relative share of non-employed and non-participating in education and training from the population aged 15-29 declined in 2018 and it is now 18.1% (against 18.9% in 2017). However, it remains among the highest in the European Union (along with those in Greece and Italy).

The economic growth however is mainly concentrated in large cities and their agglomerations and there are still deep regional inequalities. Correspondingly, the bulk of labour demand is primarily registered in large cities where there is a strong labour shortage – Sofia (1.8% unemployment rate), as well as in other big cities like Varna and Plovdiv (with unemployment rates respectively – 4.3% and 4.6%).⁵

Despite the government's targeted investment policies, direct investments remain significantly more limited in economically underdeveloped regions, which further reduces employment opportunities, incl. for the Roma communities in those regions.

The analysis of long-term unemployment trends shows that there are high levels of unemployment in the areas where the relative share of people of Roma descent are higher compared to other regions. (the Northwest, the North-East and the South-East regions). Combined with a widespread aversion to mobility among Roma youth, it becomes evident that there is a structural problem in the supply and demand of a labour force that significantly affects the Roma. Our survey carried out among 230 young Roma with at least secondary education from BtB and a comparison group shows that only 30% express readiness to move elsewhere in the country because of the work (BtB Program, Survey with participants in the program and with the comparison group in Bulgaria (2018 - 2019). According to data from Census 2011, most of

¹ Labour Market Survey 2015-2017, Employment Agency, Sofia, 2018, p. 11.

² NSI, Macroeconomic statistics data, www.nsi.bg, 2019.

³ NSI, Labour Force Survey data, www.nsi.bg, 2019.

⁴ NSI, Labour Force Survey data, www.nsi.bg, 2019.

⁵ Information on Unemployment, Active Employment Policy and Implementation of the Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" in February 2019, Employment Agency, Sofia, March 2019, Annex 1.

the Roma live in small villages and towns outside the district centres where the most employment is generated and this is an additional barrier to their realization on the labour market.

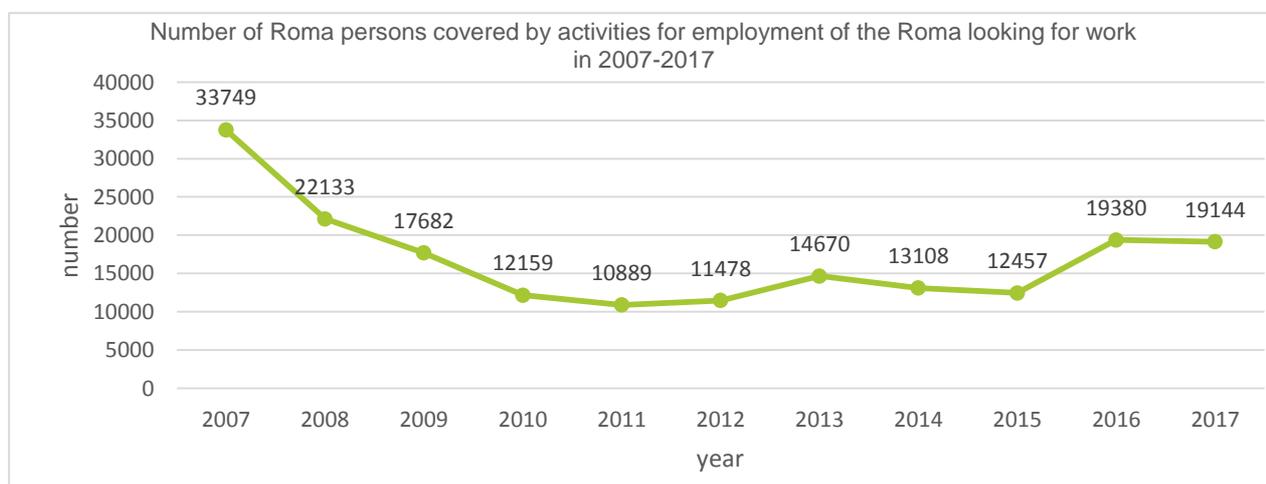
Moreover, despite the growing demand for less technically skilled labour in blooming sectors such as construction and personal services, the labour market dependence on education continues – the higher the education of individuals - the less likely it is for them to be unemployed. 1 out of 8 Roma in working age have secondary and higher education, hence the probability of unemployment among Roma remains very high. According to NSI data persons with lower-secondary education are much more likely to face serious seasonal differences in employment.⁶

Despite the very low qualification of almost 90% of Roma labour force economic growth has positive effects on Roma employment too.

The comparison between FRA data for the Roma in Bulgaria from Roma Survey 2011⁷ and EU MIDIS (2016)⁸ shows that that share of Roma with a paid work grew up by almost 18 percentage points – from 31 to 49.

According to the Employment Agency, in 2017 the number of registered unemployed people who identified themselves as Roma was on average 38,019 per month. Compared to 2016, the number of registered unemployed Roma declined by 6,273 persons or by 14.2%, however the rate of decrease of the number of registered Roma was by 2.6 percentage points lower than the average rate of decrease of the total number unemployed (16.8%) for that period.⁹

In the administrative monitoring reports the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues at the Council of Ministers also stressed that the number of Roma employed on the primary labour market remained significantly higher than that of those employed on public employment programs and projects¹⁰. However, these figures show that significant number of Roma yet need targeted policy measures to overcome the barriers for employment.



Source: Administrative monitoring report for 2017 for the implementation of the NRIS (2012-2020), p.43. and Administrative Monitoring Report for 2015 for the implementation of the NRIS (2012-2020), p. 39.

⁶ NSI, Labour Force Survey data, www.nsi.bg, 2019.

⁷ FRA Roma Survey 2011 - How would you describe your current job situation? - Paid work (full time, part time and ad hoc jobs) and self-employed.

⁸ EUMIDIS, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, FRA, 2016. -Main current activity is work or did any work in the last 4 weeks to earn some money (only working age population, 20-64 years) - Currently in paid work.

⁹ Administrative monitoring report for 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Integration of Roma (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.40.

¹⁰ Administrative monitoring report for 2016 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Integration of Roma (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.65.

According to FRA data from 2011 2/3 from Roma aged between 16 and 24 were neither employed nor in education or training¹¹. For comparison, according to Eurostat in 2016 approximately 18% of Roma were not employed.¹²

There are no official data on migratory attitudes and behavior among Roma, but according to the data from a survey of the BtB Programme 1 out of 5 Roma youth aged 18-35 with at least secondary education have already worked abroad.¹³

Among the major factors that affect employment are the ongoing migration processes. Bulgaria has had a negative migration balance for almost 3 decades. The high rate of mobility abroad is combined with low mobility within the country. It is often explained by the attachment to the home place or family. Bulgaria is among the top 7 EU Member States where over 82% of the population lives in their own homes.¹⁴

In regards to Roma, the risks of discrimination in accessing services such as renting decent housing may further hamper their mobility for employment purposes within the country. In addition to perceived lower levels of discrimination the higher wages abroad encourage emigration flows, too.

Regulatory environment and anti-discrimination law enforcement

Bulgarian legislation gives the right to equal access to a profession or activity to all persons. This right corresponds to the obligation of all persons in the public and private sectors not to allow unequal treatment in determining the conditions for access to employment. In particular, the Protection from Discrimination Act regulates the obligation of employers to prevent discrimination in announcing vacancies and encompasses the extended scope of the prohibition of discrimination in access to employment within the meaning of Directive 2000/78 / EC and states that the persons shall be entitled to equal conditions of access to a profession or activity, a possibility of their practicing and their development thereof”, regardless of their personal characteristics.

Furthermore, the Protection against Discrimination Act provides for positive discrimination measures to tackle gender and ethnicity based problems, both in hiring and in respect of employees. Article 24 (1) states that “the employer shall be obliged, if necessary to achieve the objectives of this Act, to encourage the application of persons belonging to the less represented sex or ethnic group, for the performance of a definite work or for occupation of a definite position. The law also states that “the employer shall be obliged, in equally other terms, to promote the professional development and participation of employees belonging to a definite sex or ethnic group less represented among the employees performing a definite job or occupying a defined position.” These texts can be interpreted as supporting positive discrimination at the work place focusing particularly on the gender and ethnic aspects.

In recent years protection against discrimination and the exercise of the right to work takes up a significant part of the Commission against discrimination's activities.¹⁵ Ethnicity however is given less emphasis than many other grounds for discrimination on the labour market mentioned in the Protection from Discrimination Act.¹⁶ According to the Commission, 8% of the 300 cases filed to

¹¹ EUMIDIS, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, FRA, 2016.

¹² Eurostat, Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and labour status (NEET rates), edat_lfse_20, 2019.

¹³ Bridge to Business Programme Survey comprising 230 young Roma in Bulgaria (2017 - 2019).

¹⁵ Annual Report of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination 2017, p. 5, 12. and the Annual Report of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination for 2015, p. 6, 69.

¹⁶ Annual Report of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination for 2015, pp. 64-65

address the complaints and signals by natural or legal entity for discrimination are on the grounds of "ethnicity", most of them concerning discrimination against people of Roma descent.¹⁷

A representative study commissioned by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in 2017 reveals that the following groups of people are in highest risk of discrimination in the context of employment: people belonging to an ethnic group different than the majority in Bulgaria; employees without a contract with an employer; persons performing unpaid labour; insufficiently qualified persons; workers in low-paid employment sectors (e. g. agricultural); persons with disabilities; persons aged 55+.¹⁸ According to people participating in the study, the most common reason for discrimination is that their ethnic identity differs from the majority of the population in Bulgaria (35,4%). Significantly lower number of people – 17,3% point out their age as being the main reason they have been discriminated against.

In the same survey, 79% of Roma reported being refused to be hired by an employer, while this share among the Bulgarians was 29%.¹⁹

The Employment Promotion Act envisages spending of resources for active policy for social integration of groups of people in an unequal situation on the labour market. The Additional provisions of the law define the "Groups in unequal position on the labour market" as "groups of unemployed persons with lower competitive ability on the labour market, which include: unemployed youths; unemployed youths with permanent disability; unemployed school graduates from specialized institutions or using social services in the community among other groups."

Between 2015 and 2017, the active labour market policy in Bulgaria is targeted to a broad list of target groups and sub-groups, which to a large extent also include young Roma aged 18 – 35, i.e. the target group of BtB²⁰. The target groups include unemployed young people up to 29 years of age, young people who are neither in education and training nor in employment (NEET's), long-term unemployed Roma persons, persons with a professional qualification not demanded on the labour market.

Research methods and challenges

Research methods

Three types of interviews with participants in the BtB program were done. The first interviews with participants were focused on their life story, experience with school, university and their goals and aims.

The second research interviews were done during the initial three day trainings that the participants received. They were case studies focused on participants that were little active or had shown almost no interest during the trainings. The topic was on their previous experience with going to school, their previous work experiences and how their experience had shaped their decision to enroll in the program and the ways that they were planning to use to program to benefit themselves.

The third type of interviews was done with participants when they were first hired, after receiving some services from the BtB implementation team. They were focused on their experience with their job so far, their experience with the program and the „perceived“ benefits of a program like BtB.

¹⁷ Administrative monitoring Report for 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.68-69.

¹⁸ Annual Report of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination for 2017, p. 186.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Labour Market Survey 2015-2017, Employment Agency, Sofia, 2018, p. 65-66.

The research team conducted also some additional case-study interviews with participants who have had followed different approaches towards finding a job during their participation in the BtB program and used those interviews to learn about companies which were not initially part of the BtB programme. We then tried to come in contact with those companies in order to learn whether there was something special about their recruitment policy that made it easier for Roma to be offered a job.

In-depth interviews were thus done with companies that were closer to the programme, companies that were more distanced and companies that happened to hire programme participants, which knew nothing about BtB prior to being contacted by the BtB research team. The interviews with partner companies were focused around their HR policies and their understanding of vulnerability and their approach to employees, who are or potentially could be considered vulnerable. In addition, research observations from public meetings organized by BtB program were also included in the investigation tools.

Some interviews with non-governmental organizations were done too. These NGOs were identified during meetings and conversations with participating companies as being involved with the cause of spreading CSR (corporate social responsibility) practices. Since CSR appeared the main vehicle of integrating into corporate practices at least some sensitivity about the needs of vulnerable communities and persons and in the view of the very limited number of such examples available in Bulgarian we decided to take a chance with pursuing this research route as well.

Challenges and methodological limitations

Quantitative methods were not widely applicable in the part of the research focused on the impact of BtB on companies. There were several impediments to that:

- 1) The companies participating in the BtB were a small number, even taking the whole pool of companies where programme participants found jobs make a very limited pool which is not suitable for the application of quantitative methods.
- 2) The companies were quite resistant even to apparently innocuous tools such as informal anonymous interviews. Being granted access for the deployment of any survey-type tools within companies was beyond reach at this stage, not least because companies feared, probably not fully without reason that prejudice, discriminative attitudes and a general unwelcoming environment might surface out.

The partner companies to the Bulgarian BtB program were not willing to have long conversations regarding their recruitment policies overall. Most of them were willing to have one interview that was mostly focused on their HR needs and how they approach finding human resources, but were not willing to have more or self-reflecting conversation on their equal opportunities approach. The main discourse in the ways that companies see working with members of the Roma community is that if they will be treated like anyone else if they are qualified for the job and outperform the other candidates they will be hired, if they aren't, they will not be hired. Any discussion about special support to guarantee equal opportunity is considered irrelevant by most of the companies.

Corporate strategies and approaches affecting the employment of Roma

Description of BtB partner companies

In the Bulgarian BtB programme there was no clear delineation between participating companies, companies that just happened to be interested in the programme and participate in some of the events and companies in which some of the programme participants ended up applying for jobs or being hired. In terms of typology we can distinguish three types of companies:

1) Companies that expressed interest in the programme, kept regular contact with the programme staff and participated more or less regularly in the events organized under the BtB under the logo “Diversity Pays Off”.

In this group BtB worked with relatively large companies for their respective sector, most often based in the capital, some of them owned by international corporations. The group includes companies from the media sector, the IT sector, production and sales of sports and outdoor equipment, retail sector (chains of supermarkets), international consulting business, recruitment and HR management, banking, telecommunications and service providers from different sectors such as recreational activities.

2) The second kind of companies from the pool of regular participants in the “Diversity Pays Off” events that actually invited programme participants for interviews or offered job positions. In all but a few cases the interviews did not lead to actual job offers. Usually in such cases job applicants also did not seem very attracted by the job or willing to take it even if it had been offered.

These companies are a limited subset of participating companies. We count invitations for interviews, whether candidates actually showed for the interview or whether they were actually offered a job. The number of these companies varies between 3 and 5. In any case it is a quite limited subset of those which expressed interest in BtB and joined public events.

3) The third kind of companies includes the ones in which programme participants were hired although they had not expressed any interest in joining the programme prior to that. Due to the very limited contacts of programme participants with companies, which actually knew about BtB and expressed explicit interest in considering job applicants sent by BtB, the research team took the opportunity to approach also these companies for interviews.

This is the largest number of companies. From 30 persons who found jobs in the course of implementing the BtB only three were placed in companies that had expressed prior interest in the BtB and had participated in BtB events. The rest of the participants found other jobs. Most of the good jobs were in the public sector, either in administrations or (in one case) in a large public owned company.

Profile of entities who are the actual employers for educated young Roma

Courier companies

Courier companies primarily offer jobs that do not require secondary education: courier drivers, front office employees receiving requests for shipments. The job can be quite stressful as it involves a lot of front office communication, coordination and strict deadlines.

One of the programme participants shared a story about previous negative experience with working for a courier company. The experience involved working extra hours as a replacement for colleagues, which were never paid nor returned.

“Sticky floor”²¹ jobs seem to be easily available for some of the Roma job applicants. These include low paid clerical jobs, jobs in the service sector such as bartender or waiter and some front office jobs in sales, courier services and others. Such jobs are known to offer little opportunities for career growth.

Companies from the retail sector

In the retail sector some low skilled jobs are more or less permanently on offer due to high staff turnover. There are two types of employment opportunities in retail sales which offer different working environments, require different skills and bring different risks in terms of communication.

Work in small retail facilities can be demanding in terms of long working hours, inconvenient and burdensome shifts and multitasking. The work often is done in separate without much interaction with co-workers but entails direct exposure to customers.

Medium sized retail shops and especially large hypermarkets offer jobs which entail working in large and diverse teams often under stress and constant pressure around distribution of sharable tasks. This is the type of work place with potentially very high risk of interpersonal conflicts if the situation is not properly managed and good team procedures are not in place. It appears that mid-level management does rarely take into account the risk of insulting speech or bullying based on ethnic prejudice within this potentially stressful work environment. We didn't find a system of reaction again such incidents in any of the companies we visited or interviewed. It should be noted that some of the companies did not have any staff from ethnic minority groups so they never had to face issues related to bigotry and stereotyping.

One of the programme participants spent just about a month working in hypermarket where she ended up overhearing demeaning and humiliating comments not delivered face-to-face but shared “in secret” among co-workers. The management failed to intervene and the programme participant quit the job. In their analysis of the situation the management failed to recognize that unacceptable behaviour might have occurred among their staff and insisted that the true reason for quitting the job were plans to move abroad.

Public sector

The public sector is considered by many young Roma as a competitive alternative of employment in the private companies. Most of the young Roma tend to look for jobs in the public sector, mainly in the caring professions such as nursing, social work, health and education mediation. Some of the jobs in this sector are “reserved” for the Roma such as mediation in Roma communities. Other professions such as teaching are increasingly competitive due to rising salaries and improving work conditions in the last years. Programme participants who found work as teachers were unable to secure a permanent job and were hardly pressed to continue searching for another one while working at the same time, which can be quite demanding.

²¹ <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64807/1/WP228.pdf>

In some cases, programme participants had to combine part-time work in caring professions within the public sector with work in the private sector at positions not requiring high skills such as retail trade in order to be able to sustain themselves.

Within the framework of the BtB programme other types of companies declared their willingness to hire educated young Roma and became partners to BtB but within only single cases of hiring took place after the field research under this report was completed. We can mention here companies such as software developers and accounting companies. These are sectors where some the higher quality jobs are available but skill requirements are also very high.

Software companies

There are two kinds of software companies on the Bulgarian market, regarding the level of skills they require from their employees. The biggest employers usually have some form of learning platform or academy that are aiming at developing coding skills for anyone who doesn't have formal education in writing code. There is a set of skills, however, that are required for the entry level in those academies – English and at least basic computer skills.

Other companies, usually foreign software companies, operating in Bulgaria hire mainly people who had been formally educated in math and coding by a higher educational institution. Software companies do usually offer career development for their employees.

Some of the foreign software companies publish annual sustainability reports, although they usually provide data on the gender ratio within the employees and senior employees of the company. Companies that work in the tech industry usually require high technical skills that most of the participants in the BtB programme did not possess.

Accounting companies

There are international accounting companies, operating in Bulgaria that provide accounting and financial services to other companies in Bulgaria and internationally. When looking for employees (at an entry level for the company) they always offer a paid internship for three to six months. Those internships are open for people who have completed their second year of higher education in a professional field of interest for the company.

Although that entry may be useful for getting accustomed to the work ethic and dynamic in the company, it may be particularly hard for people who depend on their personal finances to support themselves through that period. This could be one of the reasons that educated Roma are poorly represented in such companies.

Diversity and social corporate responsibility approach among companies hiring or expressing interest in hiring Roma

The studied private companies in Bulgaria do not have explicitly defined specialized policies aimed at vulnerable groups. In separate corporate governance documents, such as the Rules for internal order, it is noted that no discrimination is allowed. On the websites of some businesses, it is underlined that the companies stick to a "colour blind" approach that emphasizes individual rights and development, with a clear distance from positive or negative ethnic treatment:

"The company respects the human rights of each employee, values individual differences and provides opportunities for development and improvement regardless of nationality, belief, religion, ethnic origin and age." (Company web-site, Bulgaria)

Prejudices against the Roma are still socially acceptable and the companies choose strategy instead of fighting them rather reconciling with them. OSI-Sofia survey shows that Roma are the

most discriminated ethnic minority. Less than half of the population in Bulgaria would accept Roma living in their settlement and only ¼ would accept Roma living in their neighborhood²².

The companies prefer to adhere to the principle of equal treatment as they fear that development of a specific labour-targeting policy for Roma, would produce a "domino effect" and other minority groups could also reasonably raise the issue why they do not enjoy such a policy. According to the business, if it starts designing and implementing positive discrimination measures for the Roma it would pose risks to the public image of the companies²³:

"If we do not help everyone equally – It can negatively affect the public image of the company." (HR, Bulgaria)

In addition, private industry representatives are convinced that positive measures towards Roma inclusion are not the responsibility of business, but rather public institutions' assignment and the businesses are unduly burdened with expectations regarding the integration of Roma.

"I'm not sure the business has to do something. It provides jobs and working conditions." (HR, Bulgaria)

Even in the time of work force deficiency for companies, the incentives for hiring more Roma don't seem strong enough. Studies in the Balkan region show that, as a whole, the majority of SEE corporate leaders (69%) feel that Roma employees would have no impact on their sales or work environment. Also the share of employers who think there are risks of possible negative effects on companies as a result of hiring Roma are significantly higher than the proportion of those who are expecting rather positive results – employers assuming that Roma hires would be detrimental to their company's working environment (15%) outnumber by three times those who consider their employment beneficial (5%).²⁴

"There are studies carried out in the USA mainly, that diversity at the workplace can increase a company's profit and also increase the productiveness of the workforce. The logic behind it is that if someone doesn't have to focus on hiding their identity, they can focus on doing their job. Studies of that kind have not been carried out for our company in particular" (HR, Bulgaria).

Another major reason for companies to avoid targeted measures for the Roma and to give preferences to providing support for the Roma through a common corporate social responsibility policy is to avoid unpopular causes. The companies' leadership is aware and take into consideration the widespread prejudices and prevailing negative public attitudes towards the Roma minority in Bulgaria.

CSR is a buzz word among larger Bulgarian companies especially those with foreign shareholders. Even though some of the companies were seeing diversity at the workplace as an important part of their HRD and CSR strategy and some of them had even put it in their sustainability reports, none of the companies had directly addressed the topic of ethnic diversity within their teams. When talking about diversity, they usually are talking about women in their companies, LGBT, people from different age groups and people with physical disabilities. Only one company addresses the topic of ethnic diversity in their human resources policy, when talking about prevention of discrimination.

The companies develop corporate social responsibility policies by funding crèches, kindergartens, schools, community centres, NGOs, festivals and sports initiatives, building playgrounds, providing different types of donations such as equipment for hospitals. While part of

²² OSI-Sofia, Ominibus, 2016.

²³ The implementation of affirmative action is generally rejected not only by businesses but even by policymakers as another form of discrimination. See: *Patterns of Roma Employment in Europe, Vera Messing, Neujobs Policy Brief No. d19.4, March 2014, p. 11.*

²⁴ Balkan Barometer 2018, Analytical report, GfK, Council Secretariat (RCC) Sarajevo, 2018, p. 152.

this policy is to provide funding for Roma organizations too, corporate social responsibility is not focused on support for certain ethnic groups.

The examples mainly revolved around corporate grants for projects. Business that take up environmental resources should focus on doing a sustainable environmental policy and give back to the community where they work with investing in a better, more sustainable and more environmentally friendly ways of producing. International businesses and banking industry are usually advised to give back to the community of people that are their clients already by creating an environment where more diverse people could work, or create/fund causes that their employees recognize as important.

A telecommunication company developed a special programme for integration of persons with disabilities. The programme was proudly mentioned in company's 2017 report on sustainable development practices in the company and shared with other businesses also in the course of their participation in the BtB events. The company had aligned a multitude of practices which would naturally fall within the CSR domain under the concept of sustainable development. The corporate concept of sustainable development included a section on responsibility to the market, to society and to nature.

The corporate strategy included 4 sections focusing on different responsibilities: as employer, to the market, to society and to nature. Responsibility to society put a primary focus on several projects involving children and youngsters, while responsibility as employer mentioned the programme, which seeks to make the work environment more accessible to persons with disabilities along with providing some training. In the same section the company declares commitment to keeping a balance in terms of gender, age and education (between persons with secondary and higher education) and from the infographics it could be seen that this policy is quite successful. Ethnicity was mentioned nowhere in the corporate strategy. In the rich imagery used to illustrate the report there was also no any hint to ethnic diversity a web-site of telecommunication operator

During meetings with the business organized by BtB we were approached by NGOs that focus their efforts on the promotion of CSR policies, which we contacted and interviewed hoping to learn more about the overall sentiment about CSR and related practices. One NGO had developed expertise for consulting businesses how to create better CSR strategies and in particular how to reach out to communities that the business is working with. The examples of the advices that the business receives on the benefits of creating a working CSR strategy that contributes to local communities included concerns for the environment and communities.

The NGO representative thought also that "businesses literally earn a great deal from investing in social activities, not just financial gain, which is a fact but also in other aspects - calmness, tolerance, motivation of staff, reduction of turnover, being preferred as an employer, market security, consumer tolerance. That is, many, many things, which can hardly be measured in money. Socially responsible companies are less vulnerable to crises." (Interview with CSR expert).

However, the same expert recognized that he knew very few Roma persons who had found a good job in the companies supporting CSR, despite the fact that improving working conditions and workplace relations has become one of the topics under CSR policies. This unfortunate situation was explained by the expert mainly by the low self-confidence of Roma applicants who did not have enough trust in themselves.

Another interviewed NGO was offering courses on the basics of computer programming for disadvantaged children, living in segregated communities in Sofia. The NGO was supporting companies, which were looking for alternative routes to train disadvantaged youth as starting IT professionals. It appears that in the framework of short-term adult education it is possible in some cases to train potential employees which lack the technical qualifications necessary to start a job right away. The success rate of the program was around 7% and the implementing team was happy with that success rate, because, according to them "Academia courses such as ours,

but done by one of the biggest companies in the IT industry in Bulgaria have that exact same success rate. It might not seem much, but that isn't so little". In parallel the methodology of the small "IT academia" included the provision to Roma children of additional courses in some basic school subjects – Bulgarian, English and math. Of course, when bigger companies in the IT industry are creating a course and more than 200-300 people participate twice a year, there is some economies from scale, that a smaller education service provider cannot compete with in terms of the cost-benefit of the project. Of course, the NGO educational provider is not trying to achieve a business goal, but the cost of providing education to only one „student“ was unofficially stated as three-four times more expensive compared to the cost of education services for the IT industry's own courses. In parallel the methodology included the provision to Roma children of additional courses in some basic school subjects – Bulgarian, English and math.

In addition, companies acknowledge that they do not have enough public credit to bind to unpopular causes. In Bulgaria strong negative public attitudes towards private business persist²⁵. The public authority of private companies as a whole is weak and they are not capable of defending unpopular causes such as equal inclusion of Roma as the most discriminated ethnic minority. Some international companies display openly their support for initiatives related to other groups targeted by hate speech, i.e. LGBTI but even they shared that among their own staff sometimes there is reluctance to join and resentment. Open corporate support for Roma is even rarer.

The guiding principle for the businesses is the principle of ignoring ethno-cultural or religious characteristics in the selection and management of the staff:

"I do not think that Roma should be treated as a special group on the labour market. Every new employee is treated in the same way – receives the same training, equally induction in the job. And it's up to him to be able to learn what is required for the job and keep working for the company." (HR, Bulgaria)

In addition, some companies use deeply biased but widely popular arguments against undertaking positive measures towards Roma employment which is related to "blaming the victim" thinking with the explanation that the vulnerability of certain groups on the labour market is only "their inaction", i.e. businesses rationalize avoiding affirmative action by claiming that finding a job is within the reach of unemployed Roma. Therefore, only Roma are blamed for being jobless:

"Normally, when I announce a vacancy, from the labour office send 10 candidates, among them there may not be any Roma. This makes me think that they are not registered themselves as job applicants and they are not actively looking for a job." (HR, Bulgaria)

Outreach and communication activities that make the company visible and accessible to Roma job seekers

In most cases when the programme participants found jobs with employers from the private sectors the companies were large. Such was also the case with one state owned company. HR departments in these companies were responsible for the whole process of recruitment, including communication, the organization of the selection process. Handling of work related conflicts also involved procedures requiring the engagement of mid-level management, HRs or even high management but we did not find any examples of such procedures actually being activated or used in any way. Programme participants who found jobs beyond the set of

²⁵ According to OSI-Sofia Omnibus held in 2016 (OSI-Sofia, Omnibus, 2016) "Businessman" is among the top 4 words associated with the word „criminal“ (after "politician", "Roma" and "immigrant/refugee"). According to 'Trend Research Center' in 2017 2/3 of Bulgarians aged 18+ believe that all millionaires in Bulgaria have accumulated their wealth in an illegal way and do not think that in Bulgaria one can become wealthy in an honest way (The Values of Bulgarians, National representative survey, Trend, Sofia, October 2017, <https://rctrend.bg/project/изследване-на-ценностните-нагласи-на/>).

companies which knew about BtB usually went through a general purpose recruitment pipeline designed to find labour force for jobs which generally do not require very high qualification. This means the process was automated and without deep involvement on behalf of the employer. Apart from talking to the company representatives we also relied on interviews with programme participants and on a review of feedback about recruitment procedures provided by other applicants on the web. For large companies finding such feedback was not a problem.

We did not find any examples of companies having a strategic approach specifically to the recruitment of Roma. Some companies relying heavily on a Roma workforce had made special investments in transportation or packages of incentives geared mainly towards the needs of persons in the low skill segments of the labour force. This includes various “social packages” of bonuses including cheaper food, free access to some outpatient health care services, bus line to villages and neighborhoods from which a significant number of workers had been recruited. One of the companies had developed a bonus scheme for not using sick leave during the month. These corporate incentives were not targeting specifically Roma but apparently there were a lot of Roma among the beneficiaries. Some companies had put in place also incentives for graduating from secondary education or acquiring a professional qualification. For this purpose, some companies had established partnerships with vocational schools.

The companies do not have any specific communication activities intentionally targeting the Roma. There are however communication channels which could be more likely to reach out to Roma. The vast majority of Roma who ended up joining the BtB programme learned about its existence either through one of the Roma partner organizations to BtB or through relatives, friends or acquaintances. We can safely assume that those relatives, friends or acquaintances learned about the programme from the Roma partner organizations. Facebook and Roma social networks are the other two sources mentioned infrequently by the programme participants as a primary source for their information about the BtB programme. Interviews with programme participants and observations made during the trainings showed that a lot of young Roma engaged in job search were aware of and using job-search web-sites such as Job Tiger.

Specific corporate outreach practices targeting the Roma

None of the companies in the BtB programme had specialized procedures for reaching out to Roma employees. In some cases, the search for potential job applicants is being carried out in rural areas in vicinity of cities where the companies are located²⁶. Since 45% of Roma live in concentrated numbers in villages there is a high probability that this approach ends up targeting large Roma communities too, as is the case with one of the interviewed companies, but this approach should still be defined as a regional rather than a Roma-specific one.

As a matter of fact, with few exceptions related mainly to temporary programmes no special effort is being undertaken or planned in the companies to reach workers from any vulnerable group. A leading criterion for selection and new job appointments are the skills needed to occupy the job position (mainly educational characteristics) and those criteria exclude discrimination but also do not compensate for the disadvantages of the various vulnerable social groups and individuals belonging to these groups.

"We offer a level playing field, an equal start for all who want to do something for themselves." (HR, Bulgaria)

It should be noted that it is very likely that in societies with greater jeopardies of populism and xenophobia the adoption of such specialized policies by companies owned by foreigners may further increase the risk of stigmatization and discrimination. For example, for some of the foreign-owned firms (especially if they belong to another ethnic group which is often scapegoated

²⁶ For example, there are several large companies surveyed in South-East Bulgaria.

– e.g. Turks or Muslims), management have to continually counteract the rumors that the owners have a policy of hiring workers from the Turkish minority or Muslims and discriminate against candidates for work from other ethnic groups.

Finally, most of the HR experts acknowledge that stigmatization of Roma exacerbates difficulties they face to equally access the labour market:

"There is a general assertion in our society that they are frivolous and uninvolved to some extent. But that does not apply to everyone. They should not be placed under one denominator." (HR, Bulgaria)

Prejudices and discriminatory attitudes in fact require Roma job applicants to be much more convincing than representatives of other ethnic groups to refute preconceptions and clichés for the ethnic group to which they belong. While HR practitioners say they are seeking an individual "colour blind" approach, they recognize that labour market does not make an exception of society as a whole and the stigma on a group can affect each of its individual representatives.

One of the most frequently used channels through which links are established between businesses and job seekers from Roma communities is the Labour Offices. In this case, however, the business is rather a passive user of the services of the employment agency. However, the results show that these are channels where many companies find workers from Roma communities. Labour Offices work primarily though not exclusively, with low qualified unemployed persons, so companies announcing job positions with a labour office are likely to be looking for persons with not so high education and qualification. In implementing the Roma employment measures for 2017 the Employment Agency reported to have found employment for 19,144 persons, with more than 4/5 starting work on the primary labour market – 15,438 persons, Another 4,114 persons were employed under the programs and measures for employment and training and under programmes funded by the European Social Fund²⁷. In the vast majority of cases those are jobs in the lower scale in terms of skill requirements.

A second main form of meeting businesses with Roma job seekers is the job-fairs. For example, in 2017 the Employment Agency organized and held 4 specialized job-fairs targeting the Roma community. They were attended by 405 jobseekers and 32 employers who announced 218 vacancies. The number of newly employed persons in result of job-fairs is 211.²⁸ Following this model BtB organized 2 meetings with regional businesses to present the programme and proceed with making links between businesses and potential job seekers. Results from these meetings based on the feedback from BtB management and staff were not very encouraging due to high level of prejudice and outright avoidance on behalf of the business.

Roma labour and educational mediators²⁹ were used by the BtB programme mainly to help in the process of finding participants for the programme. Some mediators were very useful in providing information about local businesses but we did not find any indication of businesses seeking their support in reaching out to Roma communities. Labour mediators also work primarily to find jobs for low qualified persons (in 2017 they managed to activate nationally more than 5 thousand

²⁷ Administrative monitoring report for 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Integration of Roma (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.44.

²⁸ Administrative monitoring report for 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Integration of Roma (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.45.

²⁹ Roma labour mediators are employees of the labour offices. In 2017 the number was 88. They carry out activities to motivate inactive and discouraged Roma people to register in the labour offices and enrol in trainings. They conduct information campaigns, individual and group meetings with inactive and discouraged people in the neighbourhoods and villages with a more compact Roma population. (Administrative monitoring report for 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Integration of Roma (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.46).

Roma persons)³⁰, a fact which determines the range of companies they have contacts with. Those are not companies of the type that actively partnered with the BtB programme.

Another channel often used for finding Roma workers are NGOs working with Roma and programs similar to BtB. In almost all such cases, the initiative comes from the relevant NGOs rather than from the business entities. Actually some of the employers that BtB tried to contact at regional level were already in touch with some of the Roma partner organizations.

Companies' recruitment activities, procedures that support of Roma workforce

Companies that employed participants of BtB regularly publish job announcements on their own website. But they rely mostly on typical internet based job listings – mainly Jobs.bg and Zaplata.bg. The choice of these communication channels is related to their popularity and accessibility. When companies seek to recruit qualified staff capable of using computers, telephones and the Internet, it can be assumed that Internet-based job-finding platforms also serve as a “preselection filter” for identifying better-educated staff, who have enough information about these platforms and possess technical means allowing for Internet access.

Interviewed companies, even those employing low skilled labour force did not give very positive feedback about labour office services.

Another channel for looking for workers is through employees who directly inform their relatives, friends and acquaintances for the availability of respective vacancies. As businesses in the Balkan context are to a large extent recruiting staff thanks to the recommendations of their employees, the employed Roma can also be seen as a potential labour market capital for the community and means for attracting other Roma to their firms.³¹ One of the interviewed companies had developed an incentive scheme for bringing other potential employees. The scheme included a two-step cash reward, at job application and at actual contracting. The amount of the cash reward indicated that it was meant to incentivize persons with low income.

A number of companies invest in long-term recruitment projects by building partnerships with educational institutions.

Typical examples are conclusion of contracts with local vocational high schools and applying the principles of so-called “dual learning”. Some companies provide a number of benefits for youngsters in the supported VET classes: free textbooks, scholarships for school performances, free passes for public transport. Since many students enrolled in VET classes, among them many Roma and other ethnic minorities, live in the surrounding villages, the companies also provide for free accommodation in dormitories.

The practice of in-depth partnerships based on the model of dual education with schools is relatively new, and the business rather describes it as "experimental" projects and does not seem to put much hope on it.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that the students enrolled in the vocational classes will ever complete secondary education. Due to the high school dropout rate, it is not certain how many students will get diploma. Bulgaria firmly remains in the group of the top fifth EU Member States registering highest share of early school leavers – 12.7 in 2017.³²

³⁰ Administrative monitoring report for 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration (2012-2020), Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, 2018, p.44.

³¹ Balkan Barometer 2018, Analytical report, GfK, Council Secretariat (RCC) Sarajevo, 2018, p. 142.

³² Eurostat, Early Leavers from Education and Training (edatt1). In Hungary, this indicator is similar in 2017 – 12.5. The provisional data for 2018 show that both countries have identical indicators for early school leaving – 12.4.

In addition, poverty in vulnerable Roma groups leads to early employment for part of the learners, and many students from vulnerable households do not go to school or manufacturing practice in enterprises in order to help their families make a living from more profitable sources – e. g. spring and summer harvest collection in the country or abroad:

In the interview with a HR representative of a big retailer work in teams was described as “requiring a lot of energy”. Therefore, the company was not looking for persons with some special skills for team work but for energetic persons. The company was using channels that allowed reaching out to as many persons as possible and were ready to consider new applications any time due to their quick expansion and the opening of new stores.

For the positions in their shops they have no requirements regarding the knowledge of a language other than the Bulgarian language, computer literacy is also not explicitly demanded. Special training is provided in-house to work with warehouse and cashier programmes.

The company itself offers internships for students from vocational high schools who can work in the company for up to 6 months of paid internship. Such programs are offered at several locations in Bulgaria.

Selection procedures to help the Roma overcome the barriers they encounter when applying for a job

In BtB several promising practices emerged in preventing and reducing prejudices against Roma when applying for a job are primarily related to offering the opportunity for meetings and short-term internships of young Roma in 8 companies: a large producer of drinks, a company owning an international chain of coffee shops, global company, leader in audits and counselling in financial and legal issues, biggest retail company, one international leader and a Bulgarian leading company for business software, a start-up company with major international activity and one of the national platforms for job applications. In this practice, participants in Bridge to Business with the most appropriate qualification have the opportunity to visit partner companies and learn about their activities and to get information about possible vacancies and internship programs. Through a short stay in the company the young job seekers have the opportunity to try fulfilling some specific working tasks under the guidance of companies’ mentors.

A practice called by the BtB staff ‘mini-internships’ looked the most promising. A mini-internship is in reality a short introduction to the companies comprising training and 1-day visits to get to know the work process and meet members of the companies’ teams. In the course of mini-internships companies had the opportunity to meet Roma directly, and in the process members of the high and middle management of some companies had the chance to engage in discussions on discrimination, hate speech and diversity management.

One of the HR managers shared in its feedback “It was really satisfactory experience. My colleagues (from different departments), who initially were complaining for not having enough time to deal with the trainees, later on the day came to me and shared the this was really rewarding day and they felt motivated and satisfied” (Accounting company, HR)

For example, as a result of its partnership with the BtB, a partner company one of the international software development companies organized a meeting to familiarize its team with issues that Roma face when looking for jobs and to conduct a discussion on how to address Roma stereotypes and to look for opportunities to improve corporate policies in the field of diversity. Just before this report was finalized a Roma IT specialist from BtB was hired by the company.

The practice of mini-internships emerged late into BtB implementation which made it impossible to track its potential scope and long-term effects on programme participants and businesses, but it is a practice that looked promising from the outset.

Inclusion of Roma employed in companies

Challenges in adaptation

There is no evidence of Bulgarian companies participating in BtB applying any specialized procedures for adaptation at the workplace. During the implementation of the programme there were no examples of sustainable employment of Roma job seekers in the partner companies.

Together with some of the international Bridge to business partner companies, diversity management practices are collected, but they are mainly based on the experience of these companies abroad and can serve as a guide for local companies or branches.

Companies that happened to hire participants from BtB and which proved to have actually hired a lot of Roma were not part of BtB. We got in contact with some of these companies to see if there was something special about their recruitment procedures which improved chances of young Roma to find employment.

One of the most serious challenges for those businesses proved to be large the staff turnover and the prevalence of jobs which do not require secondary or higher education or any special qualification. It also affects people of Roma descent, as many of them have a personal experience of working abroad or relatives who can call them to work abroad – especially for seasonal employment – for example, gathering fruits and vegetables. Some of the employees prefer to leave work or take a long leave to go to Greece, Ireland, Finland for better-paid agricultural work throughout the summer season.

*"Many of them work abroad – all over the world – Greece, Spain, Italy, England, Germany."
(HR, Bulgaria)*

Employers, however, are reluctant to keep jobs for such a long period. With the rise of Bulgarian diasporas, this problem deepens and increases the risk of staff turnover in companies. It cannot be said, however, that this challenge affects disproportionately different ethnic groups.

However, many Roma look for a job abroad not only for the higher wages but since they have shared understanding that outside the country they face a lesser degree of discrimination based on their ethnic origin.

In the survey carried out under the BtB Programme with 230 young Roma in Bulgaria a Roma respondent wrote "I have not been discriminated against while I worked abroad. I am not discriminated here - it exists only in Bulgaria"³³. The same survey found that each fourth person experienced discrimination during the job search process or in the working place. Within the group of discriminated employees 42% revealed that they have been discriminated against by the company or the boss and 54% – by colleagues.

Another reason for staff turnover was the fact that most of the offered job positions did not require much skill and did not offer much career prospects. Some of the companies in which programme participants found jobs are among those that use to move globally in search of cheap labour, as most of their production line activities still require routine manual labour as the most efficient available option. Apart from that they need a small number of more qualified technical staff, which also preferably need to be found locally and just a few persons at highest

³³ Bridge to Business Programme Survey comprising 230 young Roma in Bulgaria (2017 - 2019).

managerial position or with top engineering or other professional skills who can be brought from abroad.

Procedures of complaint

In some companies, there is a clear set of rules for filing complaints and signals on various occasions, and each employee can also inform its supervisor informally about the existence of problems. But there has never been a complaint about discrimination or a signal of conflict or conflict risk on ethnic grounds – neither by Bulgarians, nor by Turks, nor by Roma.

Some companies share that they have a procedure of investigating accusations of discrimination by a person in the company who is trained to investigate cases of discrimination. That person has nothing to do with the HR of the company and is doing it voluntarily. Other companies have shared that they hire another company to investigate cases of discrimination.

"We have never had complaints of ethnic and racial basis." (HR, Bulgaria) This fact in itself shows that probably the existing formal and informal mechanisms are not working properly as it is hardly conceivable that a large company may never have had any issue with conflicts which involved at least some component of ethnic discrimination.

There is a significant ethnic diversity in some companies, which did not come as a result of any specific corporate policy but as mere reflection of ethnic diversity in the surrounding region. In times of labour force shortages companies are pressed to reach out to almost the whole available workforce but this does not seem to have created pressure for changing selection procedures in any other way or in making targeted efforts at managing diversity.

According to a head of an HR department, in areas where there is ethnic diversity, it has a positive influence on the attitude towards Roma and reduces the risk of discrimination against them.

"Diversity leads to a close relationship between different ethnicities." (HR, Bulgaria)

In general, however HRs tend to claim that in their companies there is no discrimination nor is there a need to know whether there are persons employed from any vulnerable groups. Managers and HRs would claim their staff policies are ethnically neutral and there are no reasons for either secreting or displaying ethnicities. Also the claim is that general policies regulating recruitment, wages and the working conditions such as the ones contained in sectoral agreements with trade unions are enough.

"There is no trace of discrimination around ... I do not see any vulnerable groups with us. The attitude towards one person is the same to another. And so are their salaries. There is the policy of the company [on display on the walls] and everyone knows what the rewards are, what the bonuses are. We have a collective labour agreement and it is available in the workshops. And there's everything in it – leaves they have, wages, and bonuses – absolutely everything. And for everyone it is the same." (HR, Bulgaria)

Bridge to Business partnership with companies

Main added value of BtB type of programme from the business perspective

Businesses see the main contribution of programmes such as BtB to improving employment for Roma and other vulnerable groups, above all in improving qualifications, knowledge and skills. Most HR officers were convinced that if the BtB participants had the skill set they needed, they would have gladly hired them. When talking about the programme's trainings, an opinion was shared that the focus of the programme should be not only on the soft skills for writing a CV and successfully passing job interviews, but also on the development of more specialized knowledge – e. g. training on excel, basic computer literacy etc.

The interest of some companies in the programme is caused mainly by the worsening labour shortage:

"We do our best to look for workers in any way. Not to say that we have no choice, but nowadays, because of the lack of staff, it is getting harder. We have recently announced vacancies even for low skilled. There is a need to compromise on the selection with the hope that the employee will be trained and will remain in the company." (HR, Bulgaria)

Late in the development of the programme and just a few days before concluding the first version of this report BtB in Bulgaria introduced a new practice of mini-internships in some leading companies based in the capital. The mini internships take one or two days during which participants go to 8 companies. The internships are preceded by a full day of training and coaching, equipping participants with skills to adapt easier to new work environment and be more resistant to any challenges, including ones connected to their ethnic origin. Nevertheless, the feed-back from participants is clearly positive and underlines the openness of the selected partner companies to Roma interns:

"I really liked the real touch with the companies themselves – that we were accepted by the companies. It really happened. We entered the company itself – as if we were part of the company's team, and everyone had the opportunity to show as a person what he was capable of."

"The whole day I spent there inspired me a lot."

"I saw sincerity in their eyes. I do not think it was special because we belong to the minority."

Participants in mini internships

The direct results of the mini-internships include: one participant hired in a software company, another 3 applicants for IT and consulting companies, and two participants – who have decided to continue their education in university inspired by the career opportunities it would open.

Although the companies that participated in the mini internships shared that they were satisfied with how this initiative turned out, they share different ideas of how to develop the idea of those mini internships in the future. For those of them that specialize in software or accounting it would be more useful in the future if the participants in the mini internships are interested in their particular field of work, so that they could teach them something more specific or fill-in gaps in their understanding of the work specifics. The mini internships were challenging for the companies in terms of having to figure out what is appropriate and what would be interesting for the participants to experience in the very limited time that they had with the company. They

expressed desire to further work on the model of the mini internship to make it a bit longer and more work-related.

Other companies that are in the field of retail said that they would be able to accommodate even more participants and would be interested in placing them in different company units or making the mini internships longer and making them paid.

At this stage it is impossible to make any assessment to what extent this practice will be scalable and whether it will impact significantly chances for employment of young Roma but it is an innovation in the toolset of BtB.

Experiences of selection, placement and inclusion of Roma employees arriving from the programme

There is very limited experience with programme participants ending up employed in companies that actually knew about the BtB programme. Most of the programme participants who found jobs did so with employers who had not been in any contact with BtB prior to offering a job to the applicant. We were therefore able to track feedback on the specific performance of just one programme participant who found a job in a large international manufacturer who officially had not taken part in any events and had not expressed interest in joining the programme but happened to know that they got an applicant affiliated with BtB due to previous informal contacts. The HR department of the company gave very positive feedback about the programme participant employed by them. The company said they offered him opportunities to take regular leaves in order to complete his university studies. From the programme participant we learned that he was seeking promotion within the company which hitherto had not been offered as his current job position did not fully satisfy him in terms of skill requirements and qualification but in general it seemed that relations between the company and the candidate had developed positively and very likely this will be among the few sustainable jobs secured.

In another case an applicant was highly assessed by a bank and offered a job which he declined due to working time which was unsuitable for his family obligations. Obviously the employer also could not compromise on that. In other cases some of the participants were not able to travel to an available work place nearby due to lack of public transport from their location to where the retail shop was situated. The employer has a policy of changing the shifts that everyone gets assigned, so reliable transport at any time is very important. The employer themselves did not offer transportation for their employees, since their shop is situated within a big city borders.

Beyond that when approaching some of the companies which happened applicants from BtB who were not aware about having such persons hired in the company, the decision of the research team was not to reveal this fact as we could not be sure what impact this might have on the situation of the programme beneficiaries. In such cases we talked to company HRs about their overall practice of hiring Roma as well as about recent examples and experiences. However, in all the cases programme participants had found mostly jobs not in the high skill segments which didn't allow singling them out.

Cases of interviews which did not lead to employment exceeded job interviews which did. Cases of persons that got a job in companies knowing about BtB were scarce so challenges of selection could be assessed primarily on the basis of information on unsuccessful interviews. The research team managed to discuss the process of selection with some programme participants who found jobs with employers who are not affiliated with the BtB programme and they considered BtB had helped them by offering training on preparing their CV, writing letters related to job application and doing their best at job interviews. We didn't identify any specific recruitment practices within companies that happened to hire some of the programme participants apart from the fact that they happened to have a lot of Roma staff because of their geographic location or due to the experience of serious labour shortages especially in the low skills segment. Such companies did not have any reservations about hiring Roma but we did not find any special approach either. In some of the anecdotic cases of colour blindness HRs responding to a request from our

interviewer made a quick internal round of expert assessment and were surprised to learn apparently for the first time how many Roma they actually seemed to have on their staff.

There was one case of a participant who was hired and later left the position due to harassment based on her identity by her co-workers. Some programme participants chose to decline job offers due to logistic limitations and difficulties in combining family life and employment for addressing which there were no any public or corporate policy instruments.

Examples of good practices and lessons learned

The best cases of programme participants who found jobs are related to employment in the public sector or in NGOs. That specific position actually fitted their skills and education better and corresponded to their plans and intentions. Examples include a police investigating officer, psychotherapists, a social worker. Generally, jobs found by applicant in the private sector were much lower on the skill range and did not require secondary or higher education. Some of the persons who found jobs in private companies did not stay long for various reasons. Either they did not find the job attractive enough to stay or they moved abroad. In one case a person had quit after overhearing abusive remarks against Roma to which the company had no mechanisms to react.

There were some cases in which a programme participant was hired in a partner company working in software development or retail company, but usually that had not been the case for most of the participants.

Kalina was hired as a primary teacher in a school in large Bulgarian town. But she only got a temporary job, as a replacement to the main teacher. She was recommended to the employer by the labour office where she used to work. What Kalina misses from the programme as it is the lack of opportunities to meet employers at local level. She finds it very difficult to participate in meetings with employers organized in Sofia and to participate in trainings away from her place of work and residence. Kalina thinks that working as a teacher is a demanding job requiring long hours of work „from 7.30 in the morning up until 20 to 6 pm“. This does not leave much room to look for another job.

Alexander³⁴ submitted several job applications and was invited to two interviews: one in a local BtB partner bank. He couldn't take the job because it required taking Saturday shifts from time to time. Alexander had nobody to care for his young daughter on Saturdays so he had to decline the offer. He had very positive opinion about the head of the branch office „who was amazing but nothing could be done.“ In the course of the programme he got to know some persons who helped him find a job as a social worker and psychotherapist with an NGO working with persons with psychiatric problems. This job fits Alexander's education best.

Asen had started to develop his own small business based on an interesting entrepreneurial idea prior to starting in BtB. His main motivation to apply had not been so much to find a job for himself but to encourage his girlfriend to also apply. Along with his business Asen found a job as a psychologist working one day a week, which fits perfectly the area of his university studies but does not provide good income. Asen thinks that BtB needs to be run on a larger scale with much more partner companies and participants in order to become efficient. In latest development Asen went to 2 job interviews for the position of HR specialist at the national software development company, following his participation in mini-traineeship event.

Diversity Pays Off

³⁴ The participant's names have been changed. No name represents a true reference to any programme participant.

Diversity Pays Off is an initiative started by the implementing team of the Bulgaria BtB programme, alongside other NGOs with the initial purpose of creating a space for discussion between businesses and disadvantaged groups on topics of workplace inclusion. The initiative is supported by the presence and participation of several HR executives working in international companies in Bulgaria. As part of the initiative, two big meetings were organized with the idea that people who work in companies with diversity policies can exchange opinions, experiences and practices in developing, applying, adapting or practicing those diversity policies. Other, more informal and smaller meetings were held at different times with the core HR members of the initiative to consult and conduct a manual for companies that want, but do not know how to apply diversity policies. This product is yet to be distributed among companies and stakeholders and at this time its usefulness cannot be evaluated.

Another product that the implementation team created with the help of business HRs is a learning material/booklet for participants on how to write a CV, what the HRs are looking for in a CV or cover letter, how to get ready for a job interview. The booklet has been distributed among participants and had been well received, according to informal conversation and research observation during the trainings provided by the programme.

The initiative started with the support of other NGOs who were already working with different companies on topics of diversity and inclusion. The ambition of this initiative, according to the implementation team members was to start a diversity charter in Bulgaria.

The BtB programme in Bulgaria has not yet reached a stage at which mature results with companies can be demonstrated. At this stage of the programme it is very early to discuss any form of sustainability. The programme has to keep the momentum of meetings within the small community of businesses and NGOs which started to meet around the agenda of "Diversity Pays Off".

Conclusions and recommendations to enhance Roma employment in private companies

In the text below our main conclusions and recommendations are grouped into several thematic areas, which we find most relevant for the future development of BtB and BtB-like programmes in Bulgaria.

Overcoming barriers to mobility

According to the business, the BtB programme has the potential to develop soft skills which have not been previously formed within the education system. It can, for example, be very useful in overcoming the challenges such as the disposition towards mobility. This aspect of the work of the program is important and promising, given that about only 1/4 of the participants in BtB are inclined to move elsewhere in the country for work and the fact that the greatest opportunities for qualified young Roma are provided by companies located in the largest urban centres (Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora and Burgas³⁵ where Roma are relatively small share of population.

From the feedback given by programme participants in Bulgaria, BtB seems to have contributed to raising self-esteem and confidence in young Roma person's own strengths and abilities. According to the participants, the biggest effect of their being in the programme is improved self-confidence³⁶. This is an important prerequisite for encouraging the empowerment and mobility of young people.³⁷

Approach of the small circles of adherents

At the beginning of the programme the initial pool of partnering companies was quite limited and careful selection of participating companies was required. In Bulgaria, the programme had started with business partners, with whom partnering NGOs had long been cooperating and had already built trust. International companies have “policies with history” the spirit of which is transferred between generations of workers and shared between employees from different branches in different countries. This is why international companies are much more likely to embrace diversity. They also usually have some good examples of corporate policies to share. It was expected that high-prestige of those companies within business circles would act as a prompt for other companies to join BtB community. These expectations did not materialize in full within the period of implementation of BtB and the pool of companies which regularly attended BtB events remained limited, although gradually expanding. The number of companies which invited programme participants for interviews was even more limited. A small group of 5-6 HRs was formed which had several meetings trying to find common ground and develop joint initiatives with NGOs.

³⁵ According to data from the Employment Agency, unemployment in the beginning of 2019 was much lower than the national average and almost half of the new jobs were announced

³⁶ B2B Programme, Survey with participants in Bulgaria (2018 - 2019).

³⁷ More information about the ways in which the B2B programme had impact the life of its participants can be read in the “Report on the impact of the BtB programme on participant young Roma in Bulgaria”.

Top down approach

Companies' leadership and management usually showcase values cherished within the companies. This makes a top-down approach applied by business leaders a strong driving force for opening to diversity through personal example.

The first step in the change is the recognition by company leadership and HR management levels themselves that the company needs to address the problem of unfair access to jobs within the company for the most vulnerable groups like the Roma. For this purpose, the first necessary step is sensitizing the top-management for the significance of the problem.

*"We do not feel prepared - we need support from the NGOs – we ourselves must be trained to work with such a type of vulnerable people – what approach should be taken to them. We have unconscious prejudices and bias."*³⁸

Often, strong political messages from authoritative leaders are needed such as encouraging statements of high level officials or representatives of the government, European Commission and businesses:

*"I myself have been an entrepreneur and I realize that business prefers to talk about prices, not values. But the topic of diversity and inclusion will become more and more relevant, and the people who are currently dealing with it can now be characterized as pioneers. I'm sure that diversity is not just working. It is inevitable. We need to take into account the vast human potential that is not being used. This is an army of people that is not being fully used because there are prejudices against them."*³⁹

At the same time, it is especially important for business to be inspired by public institutions that implement diversity policies and, besides messages and legislation in favour of diversity, public institutions should conduct and promote their own recruitment policies targeted at vulnerable groups, incl. Roma.

Sensitizing and training

Practices in Bulgaria confirm that in the bulk of small and medium-sized companies do not have effective internal corporate communication. This makes the promotion of values of diversity within the company, if such attempt is made at all, awkward. These values generally remain unknown to the staff or yet efforts are not perceived as serious and the values are in no way internalized.

*"People must accept diversity and tolerance as part of their own value system. It has to be started from politics and strategy – from the people who manage at the highest level. Management should put the subject to discussion – employees at all levels should be involved in these projects – they should also be involved with ideas. This increases the level of engagement."*⁴⁰

*„If companies do not make a determined effort to maintain the values of diversity and tolerance as a corporate ethos that employees at all levels seek to share, it is impossible, despite favourable attitudes and open doors by HR and management, to accept and adapt diversity to the corporate environment."*⁴¹

³⁸ Nadia Mihova, HR Manager at Ernst & Young Bulgaria, Third Diversity Pays Off Initiative, Sofia, 28 March 2019.

³⁹ Denitsa Sacheva, Deputy Minister of Education, during the second annual meeting of the Diversity Pays Off initiative; Sofia, 28 November 2018.

⁴⁰ Nadia Mihova, HR Manager at Ernst & Young Bulgaria, Third Diversity Pays Off Initiative, Sofia, 28 March 2019.

⁴¹ See also the case with Lidl in Bulgaria.

Codification of Diversity Policies

At the same time, it is necessary to promote the codification of values to support diversity in corporate governance and strategy papers.

"Especially in large organizations, it is difficult to get together. And then only rules and monitoring compliance can change things."⁴²

But internalizing these values requires discussion and training for employees from all levels and hierarchies of the business in order to ensure that both the average and low levels of the company accept these values as their own. In this respect, the industries claim they are ready to rely on NGOs to help them in training employees. But such training actually happens rarely and despite claims for openness in practice seems to be met with suspicion.

Roma role models

Every change takes time, but the one about prejudices is among the most difficult. A rational approach involves small and consistent steps and striving for small victories in terms of overcoming prejudices. Special meetings and discussions with successful Roma or young Roma visiting the companies like those organized in BtB programme as well as short internships of Roma in the companies provide a good chance for change in the negative mind set through "human touch". Successful Roma are not solely a role model to be shown as an inspiring example only in Roma communities. As a lot of the Roma are under-qualified, many of the companies have created a stereotyped image of the Roma as an inadequate low-skilled workforce. Therefore, direct contacts with well-qualified young Roma is a chance to challenge the stereotyped thinking about Roma and other marginalized groups.

Clusters for Diversity

BtB programme in Bulgaria experimented with approaching some companies by creating clusters of diversity where Roma are considered not as the only beneficiaries but as part of other vulnerable groups. Focus on just one group limits the chances for positive responses from businesses, especially if there are particularly strong prejudices to it. In Bulgaria the chance of a business designing and implementing specific corporate policy for different vulnerable groups is very small. Among the advantages of this approach is the combined efforts and exchange of ideas and practices between civil society organizations and the business supporting the inclusion of different vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, this approach requires taking into consideration the specifics of different vulnerable groups, including Roma. An example is the initiative, in which the Open Society Institute – Sofia cooperate with other NGOs to seek support for the full realization on the labour market for both Roma and others vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, LGBT, mothers of young children, etc. An initiative bearing the logo **Diversity Pays Off** initiative became part of the "Bridge to Business" project **in Bulgaria. It was developed after the start of the project and was not part of the initial plan.** Under this initiative which is modelled around the idea of general workplace diversity without specific focus on any vulnerable group, Bulgarian non-governmental organizations and private businesses discuss the development and implementation of diversity politics and inclusion of diverse groups of people. The **Diversity Pays Off** events opened a space which facilitates more in-depth with companies and among companies about diversity policies. Some of the companies contributed to a manual with practical advice on how to implement diversity in a corporate context. It may be the case that within such a generalized approach it is easy to conceal an actual lack of ambition to improve the chances for the most discriminated groups staying at the level of declarative commitment not substantiated by practice. Moreover, special approaches should be put in place to avoid the very real risk of choosing the most publicly acceptable vulnerable groups and

⁴² Milen Velikov, HR specialist, Third Diversity Pays Off Initiative, Sofia, 28 March 2019.

ignoring the rest. Nevertheless, it seems that this type of initiatives are a necessary stage in developing deeper understanding of fairness and its effects on employment and jobs for Roma.



Open Society Institute – Sofia is a non-governmental organization, acting for the public benefit, defending the values of the open society in Bulgaria and supporting the integration of the country to the European Union. The Institute is founded in 1990.

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