

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES FOR OVERCOMING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION IN “FAKULTETA” AND “HRISTO BOTEV” NEIGHBOURHOODS

Marko Hajdinjak, Maya Kosseva

International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR)

marko@imir-bg.org; mkosseva@yahoo.com

Abstract. *This article presents results of work, conducted within an international research project CITISPYCE – combating inequalities through innovative social practices of, and for, young people in cities across Europe. The research work was conducted in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev – two of the most marginalised and socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods in Sofia with an above average share of young people. The socio-economic status of two areas is presented, and the available social infrastructure relating to employment, education, health care, social assistance, leisure, culture, and religion is analysed. The focus is on the social inequalities affecting the young people in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev, and the available innovative social programmes and projects combating these inequalities.*

Key words: Roma youth, social inequalities, innovative social practices

This article is a result of work, conducted within an international research project CITISPYCE – combating inequalities through innovative social practices of, and for, young people in cities across Europe. CITISPYCE is a 3-year collaborative project funded by the European Commission under the FP7 Research and Development programme for Social Sciences and Humanities.¹ It is coordinated by Aston University in Birmingham, the UK, and implemented by a consortium of 13 partners from 10 countries across Europe.²

The main aim of the project is to explore and test socially innovative practices developed by and for young people in deprived urban areas to help them overcome multiple and changing inequalities.

INTRODUCTION OF CASE STUDY AREAS

The two case study areas analysed in this article are Fakulteta and Hristo Botev neighbourhoods in Sofia. Both areas have an above average propor-

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² Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

tion of young people (about 40% of residents are younger than 25). At the same time, the levels of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion are much higher than the national average.

Fakulteta is widely known as the biggest Roma ghetto in Sofia. The data about the number of residents range from 15 thousand (the 2011 census) to expert estimates of about 35 thousand people. The area is populated almost exclusively by Roma, with only several hundred Bulgarian residents. Fakulteta is a hotbed of social problems, including devastating levels of unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, poor or non-existing infrastructure, and low quality of housing, education and health care. Most people from other parts of Sofia consider Fakulteta a no-go area, especially in when it is dark. Fakulteta residents go to the rest of the city during the daytime for work, school or other reasons, but return to their homes before evening to avoid the risk of confrontation and possible conflicts.

Hristo Botev lies on the eastern edge of Sofia, just next to the Sofia airport. The neighbourhood has had mixed population (Roma and ethnic Bulgarians) since its formation. In 1991, it had about 2 thousand residents. Since then, the population has boomed and is now estimated between 8 thousand and 10 thousand people. Almost all new residents are Roma, who came from other parts of Bulgaria. Unlike Fakulteta, Hristo Botev used to be a model example of coexistence between Roma and Bulgarians. The local Roma were well integrated into the society – to the extent that most of them identify themselves as Bulgarians in censuses, which explains the official data about low number of Roma in Hristo Botev.

This is not the only difference between Fakulteta and Hristo Botev. The former had already turned into an urban ghetto during the socialist period. In contrast, Hristo Botev did not differ much from the rest of the city in terms of its socio-economic situation until the late 1990s. The closure of state-owned enterprises, which provided employment to most of the residents and the arrival of thousands of Roma from other parts of the country in the vain hope of finding livelihood in Sofia means that in recent years, Hristo Botev has started to resemble Fakulteta as far as the number and depth of social problems are concerned.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork was conducted in October and November 2013. Altogether 14 in-depth interviews based on semi-standardised questionnaire were conducted³. Six interviews were made in Fakulteta area, five in Hristo Botev area, and three covered both neighbourhoods. The duration interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes.

Respondents were selected with the intention of covering as wide as possible spectrum of expert information: scholars, NGO practitioners, municipal employees, local activists and community leaders. Seven respondents were women, and seven were men; five were of Roma origin. Their age varied from 25 to 55. The sample

³ Interviews were conducted by Antonina Zhelyazkova, Maya Kosseva and Marko Hajdinjak and recorded with the informed consent of the respondents. Audio files were transcribed by Maya Kosseva, Marko Hajdinjak and Lubomir Petkashev.