

*On April 11, the first trainees of the Roma Political Skills Development Program graduated, with their certificates awarded at a special ceremony at New Bulgarian University in Sofia. Twenty-one young Roma – representatives of political parties, nongovernmental organizations and media, were awarded their diplomas in Political Management by Mr. Borislav Velikov, Chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament, in the presence of Mr. Dobrin Kanev, Secretary of the Bulgarian President, Mr. Segej Ignatov, Rector of New Bulgarian University, representatives of political parties' leadership, nongovernmental organizations, and media.*

The graduation of the participants of NDI's program was a culmination of our efforts to encourage the Roma political participation in Bulgaria. NDI is not alone along this road. We are grateful to the nongovernmental organizations, which generously shared with us their lessons learnt and their good practices. We thank the School of Politics and the New Bulgarian University for their support and their contribution to the success of the Program.



We thank the Presidency and the Parliament for the example they have given as open institutions committed to the Roma community issues.

What is unique in the Bulgarian transition is the great importance of the political parties. They train cadres for leadership positions in the parties and the authorities, they develop the public policies, and mobilize resources for their management. The actual Roma inclusion starts within the parties and through the parties. The political parties participated in every step of the Program – its planning, the nomination of Roma participants, in whom the parties found the needed capacities, and wanted to develop them, the needs assessment, and the progress of the participants. The parties opened their headquarters to us, organized public debates on their platforms, and particularly the sections on the Roma issues, they listened to the suggestions and questions

In the framework of the program, we have established sustainable cooperation with the Presidency of the

Republic of Bulgaria, and personally with President Parvanov.

The presence of the Speaker of Parliament, Mr. Velikov, at the graduation ceremony of the program's participants is also a result of the good cooperation with the Bulgarian legislative institution.

During the training period, the participants initiated and implemented small individual projects in their communities. Our graduates headed the negotiations between the electric company and the Roma community in the town of Lom, raised the issue of the serious housing problem of a Roma neighbourhood in Veliko Tarnovo and brought it to a successful solution, they started a monitoring campaign on the Roma integration European programs, they initiated a petition and got public support for the bill on establishing a national fund for integrated education, they sought political responsibility concerning a discriminatory statement of a member of Parliament. They not only apply in practice what they have learnt, but they also show their community that adequate participation brings about improvement of the quality of life.



The biggest success of the Program is the participants themselves. It was privilege for us to take part in their political development and witness their first appearances for the national

media, their first polls in the Roma community, their first speeches at a high-level public forum.

We believe in you. Work for the empowerment and the equal participation of Roma in your parties and organizations, be leaders through your personal example.

We wish you success!

*Sevdalina Voynova, Country Director NDI/Bulgaria*

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***Associate Professor Borislav Velikov, Speaker of 39<sup>th</sup> National Assembly:***

I am happy to congratulate you on the occasion of your graduation from the Roma Political Development Skills Program of the National Democratic Institute in cooperation with the School of Politics and New Bulgarian University, and the awarding of your certificates. It is a pleasure for me to congratulate the organizers of the Program for their admirable initiative. I sincerely believe that the implementation of this Program considerably contributes to the integration of the young Roma and to the democratic development of the Bulgarian society. I assure you that your contribution and your role in the process of social integration of the Roma is highly appreciated.

It is even a greater pleasure for me to congratulate you only a few days after the Bulgarian Parliament adopted a declaration on the commitment of the state institutions to the goals of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. With this declaration, we confirmed the commitment of Parliament to the implementation of the Framework Program for integration of the Roma in the Bulgarian society. We declared the will of Bulgaria to follow a policy of social integration which aims at reducing poverty, and it is to the interest of both the Roma community, and the Bulgarian society as a whole.

I believe this act of the Bulgarian Parliament will be a significant contribution to the Bulgarian Roma and their rightful place as active participants in the social life of the country.



I would like to use the opportunity, on behalf of Parliament, to assure you the problems of the Roma, related to education, unemployment, housing policy and discrimination, will be among the priorities of the Parliament, and I believe, these will be the priorities of all other Bulgarian institutions, which are open to the solution of the Roma problems and their acceptance as equal partners. NDI's Program is an evidence of this.

The future of our country as an equal member of the European Union is unthinkable without the integration and the improvement of the situation of the Roma community. Therefore I am sure that in future we shall work together for the achievement of the common goal – the building up a democratic European society.

Let me, once again, congratulate the organizers for their useful work, and wish the young people, who receive their certificates today, good health, happiness, and a lot of success in their future professional realization.

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***Associate Professor Sergey Ignatov, Rector of New Bulgarian University:***

It is a special pleasure for me to congratulate you on your graduation from the *Roma Political Skills Development Program*.

The training in leadership and management, international exchanges and cooperation with mainstream political parties and institution was successful for you, and I am sure you will make part of the political elite in the near future. Now you bear the responsibility to create a liberal understanding of the political life in this country. Since its very establishment, New Bulgarian University has been moving in the direction of

development of the liberal idea of education in Bulgaria. We offer modern methods of education, as well as new programs with a view to the demands of the labor market and the political situation. The fact that NBU is a private university gives us the opportunity for a quick reaction to every change in the environment, so that we offer adequate education to the needed specialists. I would put it like this: if we compare the labor market environment to a fast river, we show you the ways to swim successfully in it. Finally, I wish you a successful accomplishment of your professional and personal ambitions. Do not forget that the door to New Bulgarian University remain wide open to you. It is an institution you can always rely on.

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**Teodora Krumova, NDI Roma Program Participant:**

I am not sure I'll manage in such a short time to express all the gratitude we – the participants in the Program, feel for NDI. I am not sure I'll manage to mention all the successes we have achieved thanks to NDI. Yet I'll try to outline some of the things, which we find the most important.



Who were we before the Program? Six months ago, when we started the Program, I did not have an idea what I was going to do after it. I still remember Nikolai Kirilov's question during the interview: what are your expectations of the Program. My answer was: self-confidence. Confidence that I would not be just a passive consumer of what is happening, but one who, understanding the events, could take part and have a real say in their happening. The fact that I am now here before you, and that all of us are here, shows we managed to do it. We have the confidence that we are capable people, experts in what we are doing. I have tried to make an account to myself about everything that would not have been the same or

would not have happened in the same way had it not been for NDI's Program. It is difficult to put it in a few words. Some of us, including myself, for the first time managed to grasp the matter we were trained, others – to make more professional what they had already started doing. And once again: to achieve our basic goal – to become experts.

Coming from different places, we had the opportunity to check on what we had so far done, comparing it both to the situation in the different places – the achievements and failures of the others, as well as to what was happening at a national level. We could see where we stood in the whole process. We could change the perspective and see what our position was then and what would be in future.

Each one of us learned a lot. Certainly not everybody will use all the knowledge – this is up to us. Yet, we demonstrated we are capable. I believe we will do it in future, too.

It is natural, having in mind the situation of the Roma community, that we have the inferiority complex that we are not up to the scratch, that we are not expert enough, to wonder whether we are not just following behind the others. The road we have gone for six months showed us we are sometimes ahead of the others. In six months we managed to convince ourselves, and also those we met – at least, those who proved they had the will to change the stereotypes of the Roma political participation.

Our biggest achievements have already been mentioned. However, to us our biggest success was we managed to come together, though we come from different political parties and NGOs, and still we managed to unite round the hottest issues for the Roma community. This, I think, was the most important.

Our message to the Roma politicians is that they should try to be like us and unite round what is most important to the Roma community.

*At the beginning of March, NDI fielded the Roma Political Participation poll. You can find the results on NDI's website.*

**Upcoming events:**

- *May: Roma education forum under the auspices of President Parvanov;*
- *May: Roma candidates school*
- *June: Roma election observers school*