



National Network for Children

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**TO THE ATTENTION OF:**

**BOYKO BORISOV**  
PRIME MINISTER  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

**TSVETAN TSVETANOV**  
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

**KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA**  
EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION,  
HUMANITARIAN AID & CRISIS RESPONSE

**CC:**

**TOTYU MLADENOV**  
MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL POLICY

**NADYA SHABANI**  
CHAIRPERSON OF THE STATE AGENCY FOR CHILD PROTECTION

**ROSEN PLEVNELIEV**  
MINISTER OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

**SIMEON DYANKOV**  
MINISTER OF FINANCE

**GEORGI SLAVOV**  
MAYOR OF YAMBOL MUNICIPALITY

**GINKA CHAVDAROVA**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NAMRB

**CARSTEN RASMUSSEN**  
EUROPEAN COMMISSION - DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR  
REGIONAL POLICY

**BISTRA VALCHANOVA**  
EUROPEAN COMMISSION - DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR  
EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

***Re:*** *The need for urgent commitment to solving the emergency situation resulting from the demolition of block 20 in Yambol, identifying of a sustainable solution for the children and their families, and setting up mechanisms for sustainable solution of similar imminent crises in other Bulgarian towns*

Dear Mr. Borisov,  
Dear Mr. Tsvetanov,  
Dear Mrs Georgieva,

The National network for the children is an association of 66 civic organizations from all over the country working with children and families. We would hereby like to express our strong concerns regarding the situation which arose with the residents of block 20 of the Rayna Knyaginya Neighbourhood in Yambol. Following the order to leave the residential building and its current demolishment, there are at present approximately 45 families and more than 200 children left homeless who live on the grounds in front of the block of flats without any shelter, medication, clothes, or basic living conditions.

As a result of the demolishing of the block, the increased tension within the community led to a total lack of trust to the Bulgarian community and the institutions. Adults' inability to deal with life's challenges has resulted in an ever increasing pressure on children and neglect of their needs. Both Bulgarian and international experience have shown that, lack of a clear plan for intervention in situations like these results in an increase in the incidence of child abuse. Even greater is the threat to their access to basic universal services such as education and health care. **At this point, it is the responsibility of the state and the public to make children visible and make sure it is not the children who pay the price for the conflict between their parents and the institutions.**

We insist that a multi-institution team be gathered urgently to prepare and implement an anti-crisis plan backed with the necessary resources. We hereby confirm our readiness to participate and collaborate in good will and with our full support in the search for a constructive solution of the situation in the best interest of the children.

The crisis in Yambol is also a big opportunity for Bulgarian society and institutions to gain actual expertise on solving the issue of the numerous Roma ghettos. It is high time we admit that we do not know how to tackle those issues in an efficient and humane manner and with a particular attention to children as the most vulnerable group. At the same time, for the Bulgarian society it is of utmost importance to believe that it is capable of creating an environment of acceptance and adequate inclusion of Roma. The ever increasing number of conflicts and more distinct outlining of Roma ghettos in most of Bulgaria's larger cities demonstrate a stable trend toward withdrawal of communities and distancing between Roma and Bulgarians. It is not too late to prevent the disaster of hatred and ethnic antagonism. It is not too late to find ways to build relations of respect and human acceptance.

We urge you to see this letter as a sign of hope; hope about Bulgaria's ability to become aware that our choosing to join the EU is primarily about choosing values.

Europe 2020 sets three interrelated priorities: smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. For us, it is obvious that the road to achieving these priorities includes overcoming the block 20 challenge. This is where we have to learn how to create normal conditions for the children, who were born and raised against the background of the terrible degradation of the place during the past 20 years, how to avoid the fate of their parents, who have lost belief in themselves and in their future.

Finally, we urge the Bulgarian Government not only to efficiently support local authorities in tackling the issue but also to ensure adequate involvement of the academic and research community and civic society, so as to make sure that, through cooperation and transparency, the resources<sup>1</sup> and tools employed, as well as their relevance to achieving the specific objectives, can be documented, analysed, and systematised. Such an instrument would allow the Government to review and significantly improve the current legislative framework, which should ensure the efficiency of investments toward adequate integration of Roma in Bulgarian society. We hereby confirm our readiness to be partners in identifying sustainable solutions for the issue, as well as defend the best interest of the children, as a starting point of this process.

Attached herein is a short report drafted by specialists of the National Network for Children during their working visits to Yambol.

Yours sincerely

A blue circular stamp with the text "НАЦИОНАЛНА МРЕЖА ЗА ДЕЦА" around the top edge and "НМД" in the center, with "СОФИЯ" at the bottom. To the right of the stamp is a handwritten signature in blue ink.

George Bogdanov  
Executive Director  
National Network for Children

<sup>1</sup> World Bank Institute: <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/urbanslums/>; Approaches to Urban Slums [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/CMUDLP/Resources/slum\\_cd\\_sourcebook.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/CMUDLP/Resources/slum_cd_sourcebook.pdf); UN HABITAT <http://www.unhabitat.org/>; Cities Alliance: <http://www.citiesalliance.org/ca/>

# Report

## Block 20 in Yambol

A successful action with a sad end!

24 September 2010  
National Network for Children



National Network for Children

## Background of the case

Block 20 in Yambol was built during the 1980s. According to local people, it was, at the time, one of the best blocks, with a total of 198 flats. Fifty-three of those flats were given to citizens who used to reside in the houses around, which were demolished in order to clear room for the block; the remaining flats were allocated to people living in extreme poverty at the time or workers from Communal Universe – the local waste collection company. Allocation and accommodation happened without preliminary preparation and without serious commitment on the part of new residents regarding rent payment.

In all the years since the construction of the block, none of the successive municipal authorities took legal measures to stop the neglect of the property. During the years of transition, Yambol suffered numerous crises that lead to increased unemployment. Poverty deepened in this part of the Roma neighbourhood and overcoming it became more and more impossible. Those who managed to overcome poverty and isolation, moved out of the unfortunate block, and thus, gradually, the block 20 ghetto started to emerge. For all these years, there has not been a single state or municipality initiated special programme, measure, or activity in the ghetto to break the cycle of poverty.

Continuously, local authorities neglected the property and they blame it mostly on the residents. Thus, the block's transformation into a ghetto, or the sore of the town, was blamed exclusively on those living in it. The sole initiative on the part of the municipality came about 5 years ago, when all housing contracts were unilaterally terminated due to failure to pay rent. There are a lot of problems in the block, such as high unemployment rate, crime, disease, prostitution, that is, all the attributes of a suburban ghetto known in many developing countries

Party leaders at local and national level often take advantage of the illiteracy and poverty of the people in the block. Election campaigns involve vote buying, handing out food and generous promises that people will not have to pay their electricity and water bills, etc. Once elected in the new local authorities, people fail to keep their promises and water and electricity have long gone. Thus, for years on end, 200 families have lived in extreme poverty and despair.

*...Then they let the utmost rejects of Yambol live there, hoping that things would get better ... People were placed without any obligation to pay rent for the property... and in a few years the block had become a ghetto.*

*None of the municipal administrations wanted to tackle this sore... it was all indifference ... come election time, party leaders would visit to promise free water, free electricity, then would just forget those people...*

***Roma community activist  
from Yambol***

## Government resolve and mayor leadership

Georgi Slavov, the current mayor, was elected in 2007 as a GERB party candidate. He was determined to tackle this particular problem, which is an 'eyesore at the town's entrance'. As early as March 2009, the mayor addressed a letter to the Prime Minister, other ministers, and institutions detailing the block's abhorrent state and the terrible conditions in which people live.

A year later, in mid-April 2010, a meeting took place with representatives of the State Agency for Child Protection, the Social Assistance Agency, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, UNICEF, the regional governor's administration, as well as two civic organizations – the Open Society Institute and C.E.G.A Foundation. The outcome was a decision to take well planned measures. Further meetings were held with the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers and the Open Society Institute which proposed the employment of community-based approaches to ensure sustainable change. There was no follow-up.

Critics of the current mayor's administration claim that the action of evicting people and demolishing block 20 aimed to divert public attention from the lawsuits filed against the mayor. What is more, local councillors are not unanimous regarding the demolition of the block. Some experts believe that the block is in a good structural condition, while the committee appointed by the mayor claims the exact opposite. In a series of media appearances, the mayor claimed that the attacks on him originate from various party headquarters and political leaders. He sees this as a political play.

Beside the home interviews and handed warnings, no other work was done among the population to prepare them. There was no clear plan of action following the demolition of the block concerning its inhabitants. The mayor's directive is clear and explicit<sup>2</sup> - **the block must be demolished and the people must either be scattered across the villages or go back to where they came from.**

*Dear Mr. President, Mr. Prime-Minister, Dear Ministers, Members of Parliament and media representatives,*

*This letter is to alert you of the extremely severe problem of Yambol Municipality with regards to one apartment building, the so called Block 20 in Rayna Knyaginya Neighbourhood. This apartment building is a "unique" (in the most negative sense) facility in our town, in our country and most probably in the entire European Union...*

*It is my duty as a Mayor of Yambol to look for a solution of this painful problem; however this cannot happen without the participation of the state and the civil society...*

*Looking forward to your prompt response,*

*Georgi Slavov –Mayor of Yambol Municipality*

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<sup>2</sup> Video - Block 20 in Yambol to be demolished:

[http://www.btv.bg/news/bulgaria/obshtestvo/story/173375613-Sabaryat\\_proslovut\\_romski\\_blok\\_v\\_Yambol.html](http://www.btv.bg/news/bulgaria/obshtestvo/story/173375613-Sabaryat_proslovut_romski_blok_v_Yambol.html)

## The Problem

On 30 May 2010 an order was issued to demolish the “dangerous building”, and the people living in it were given notice to vacate. The mayor and Roma mediators insist that tenants were then provided further details. They, however, did not take the necessary steps to leave their flats.

Tension around the block started building around 15 September. The Roma tenants set out to demolish the block themselves; some of them explained that their actions were provoked by party leaders to exacerbate the situation. After the incident with a concrete slab falling on a child during the destroying of the block, Mayor Georgi Slavov declared state of emergency<sup>3</sup> on the site of block 20 in Yambol and the surrounding territory.

People were evicted from the building by the police then metal fence panels were propped up to secure it. Police presence on site was enhanced.

The evicted people set two camps on the grounds in front. Those were more than 900 people.

Then politicizing of the problem began. ‘Drom’ Party stood firmly against the demolition of the block and gave a press conference to that effect. According to the mayor and municipality staff members, the Movements for Rights and Freedoms gave money to people to remain in front of the block. However, the coming of politics to the fore diverted the attention from the actual situation of those evicted. A week after the demolition, about 250-300 people<sup>4</sup> were still living in makeshift shelters (huts). Two children had been hospitalized.

Lack of running water, falling temperatures, and the large number of very young children living in the open around the block render the situation particularly critical. Humanitarian aid was offered by various NGOs and other organisations, such as the Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas, the Parents Association, the National Network for Children, the Samaritans Association, and so on. The aid, however, was turned down, while the children continued to live in deprivation.

People are on edge due to the frequent visits by media and the lack of solution. As the mayor put it, it would be possible to provide accommodation for 3 months, but after that people would have to pay their own rent. No one-off social benefits were paid.

*“...They’d better bomb us and kill us all... this is unheard of ...”*

*“Where am I to go will these 6 children? My husband is in prison, I am alone, and I have a sick person to take care of ...”*

*“It is hell in house around the neighbourhood... good people took some of us in, but that meant 10-12 people sleeping in the same room ... What kind of life is this?”*

*“They want to take away our children ... They say they’ll cut our benefits because our children don’t go to school ... How do I send him like this?! See how he looks living in this poverty.”*

*“We are selling our souls for a loaf of bread here... I have no words to describe the suffering of people here”*

*„I had 100 jars of preserves in there... it’s all gone now... I am not going anywhere, even if it means death!”*

***Evicted families staying in shelters near the block***

<sup>3</sup> Demolishing of Block .20 under way (video)

<http://novinitepro.bg/bulgaria/zapochna-razrushavaneto-na-zlopoluchniya-blok-20.html>

<sup>4</sup> As of 24 September 2010

## Emergency Action

The manner in which the eviction of the tenants and the demolition of block 20 were carried out poses a number of potential risks for both those immediately affected by the emergency situation, and society in general. On the one hand, although block 20 offered horrible living conditions, the forced eviction is bound to traumatise the children, who used to live in it and who see it as their home.

On the other hand, measures enacted in this way lead to confrontation between Bulgarians and Roma, and between those living in poverty and the rest, while also risking continued discrimination against these groups and hindering integration.

Our goal as a National Network for Children is to help today! That was the reason we visited Yambol and for two days looked into possibilities to help overcome this humanitarian crisis. At the same time, as civic organisations, we committed to provide assistance over longer term. During our two-hour meeting with the mayor, we reached agreement on the following three key points:

- 1) Immediate **placement of children aged 0 to 1.5** with their mothers in social services. Identifying priority cases and referring mothers and their children to crisis centres and 'Mother and Baby' units across the country. Two social workers from the Samaritans Association in Stara Zagora can be deployed to work on the cases.
- 2) Parents Association, jointly with Caritas – Yambol and Foundation "People Suffering from Asthma" – Yambol will set on developing a plan for working in local schools, so as to provide **emergency humanitarian aid to poor children at school and prevention of their dropping out from school.**
- 3) **Securing social housing** in Yambol at least for those families from block 20 at the greatest risk. These should be assigned well-trained social workers specialising in working with extremely poor people and people with low social skills.

„Over the years, next to nothing has been done to tackle the problems of marginalized communities in the country.

At the same time, it is widely believed that Bulgaria is a country of generous social benefits and numerous social services, where those in need receive excessive care.

While the truth is that we are a country with virtually no social housing policy – social housing accounts for under 3 per cent.

Some fundamental rights (and obligations) of the state are non-transferrable – you cannot trade obligations for rights. For instance, children's right to adequate housing, healthy nutrition, medication, and many others does not depend on who they are and what they are, or what their parents have or have not done."

**Independent social policy and social inclusion expert**

## *Initiative for Revival of Suburban Neighbourhoods*

### **Lessons Learned or Initiatives for Neighbourhood Revival**

The main conclusion to be drawn from the Yambol experience is that ghetto dispersal requires thorough and professional preparation work, since failure to do so would put children, and especially the youngest, at a significant risk.

Transforming housing and suburban neighbourhoods should be implemented in the most efficient and safest way possible, based on a holistic approach.

Each transformation should take place once local authorities and government structures have joined efforts with civic organisations, neighbourhood residents, the businesses, and the community as a whole, so as to ensure a shared vision for the revival of the neighbourhood.

The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works should envisage, for the current and the next programming period for *Regional Development Operational Programme*, measures for revival of suburban neighbourhoods and ensuring sufficiently secure and accessible housing for people living in poverty and isolation.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, together with the Social Assistance Agency and the Ministry of Finance, should shortly provide and allocate the necessary resources for social housing for the people from block 20. In this case of emergency, families must be placed in crisis centres and 'Mother and Baby' units until the local administration has prepared its social services for their long-term placement.

- *Collaboration with all stakeholders and development of individual projects with clear vision and objectives for each Bulgarian ghettos.*
- *Building formal and informal partnerships at local level to help achieve project objectives.*
- *Rallying the support of everyone in the neighbourhood for better and more secure housing.*
- *Universal participation in the implementation of the project for building accessible and secure housing.*

*Habitat for Humanity*

*[www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)*