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Council of Europe's Anti-Racism Commission report on Bulgaria: some progress achieved but problems remain

Strasbourg, 16.09.2014 - The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance ([ECRI](#)) today published a [report](#) on Bulgaria. The report notes steps forward, but also a number of outstanding issues, such as low achievement in education and disproportionately high drop-out rates among Roma pupils, and the climate of intolerance and xenophobia against refugees.

On the positive side, amendments to the Criminal Code introduced enhanced penalties for murder and causing bodily harm committed with hooligan, racist or xenophobic motives. A National Roma Integration Strategy, requiring every region to develop a strategy and action plan for the integration of Roma, and a National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration were adopted. A change in the law now allows illegally built houses to be legalised and no longer subject to demolition leaving Roma families homeless. Obligatory pre-schooling for two years has been introduced in order to ensure an equal start for every child and early socialisation.

However, hate speech or violence targeting sexual orientation or gender identity is not recognised as an offence in the Criminal Code. Racist and intolerant hate speech in political discourse is escalating, the main target now being refugees. A growing number of ultra-nationalist/fascist groups and political parties operate in Bulgaria; one such party is represented in Parliament. Racist violence continues to be perpetrated against Roma, Muslims, Jews and non-traditional religious groups and their property. It is seldom prosecuted under the criminal law provisions specifically enacted for this purpose.

In its report, ECRI has made a number of recommendations to the authorities, among which the following two require priority implementation and will be revisited by ECRI in two years' time:

- an awareness-raising campaign should be urgently organised promoting a positive image of and tolerance for asylum seekers and refugees and ensuring that the public understands the need for international protection;
- the Commission for Protection against Discrimination should produce and publish information about discrimination, explaining the procedures for discrimination complaints, in a variety of languages used in the country and disseminate it widely.

The report, including Government observations, was prepared following ECRI's [contact visit to Bulgaria in November 2013](#) and takes account of developments up to 21 March 2014.

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ECRI is a human rights body of the Council of Europe, composed of independent experts, which monitors problems of racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, intolerance and discrimination on grounds such as "race", national/ethnic origin, colour, citizenship, religion and language (racial discrimination); it prepares reports and issues recommendations to member States.

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