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Social inequalities and innovative practices to address them: Case studies of Fakulteta and Hristo Botev

Young people in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev: Innovative practices for overcoming social inequalities

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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, 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 share 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 above the national average.

Fakulteta is widely known as the biggest Roma ghetto in Sofia. The data about the number of residents range from 15,000 (the 2011 census data) to expert estimates of about 35,000 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 the dark hours of the day. 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 2000

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residents. Since then, the population has boomed and is now estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000. 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 the censuses, which explains the official data about negligible number of Roma in Hristo Botev.

This is not the only difference between Fakulteta and Hristo Botev. The former had turned into an urban ghetto already in the socialist period. In contrast, Hristo Botev did not differ much from the rest of the city in terms of its socio-economic status 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 made.³ Six interviews were taken in Fakulteta area, five in Hristo Botev area, and three cover both neighbourhoods. The duration ranges 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 are women, and seven are men; five are of Roma origin. Their age ranges from 25 to 55. The sample includes people with secondary education, high education, and professors. For a detailed profile of the interviewees, see the table in Annex.

All respondents know well one or both neighbourhoods. Some live there, others either work there or are in contact with the residents on daily bases due to the nature of their work. Some have been visiting the areas less frequently, yet consistently over the past decades as experts conducting research. Most respondents were thus able to present not just a snapshot of the current moment, but to go back in time and put the present situation into a historical perspective.

In addition to interviews, desk research was used to obtain necessary statistical, demographic and economic data. Some information about the two case study areas was also obtained from various official documents and from scholarly books based on previous research work.

Fakulteta and Hristo Botev

Municipal Strategy within the Decade of Roma Inclusion in Sofia 2007-2013 defines Fakulteta and Hristo Botev as “territories with a look and housing standards, which are unacceptable for a European capital, unsightly, with amortized ramshackle housing, without zoning, and without basic public utilities.”⁴

In the perception of most Bulgarians, Fakulteta is an archetype of a Roma ghetto. It appeared in the 1920s, when the Sofia municipal authorities started to resettle Roma from the city centre to the

³ Interviews were made 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.

⁴ Public Council for the Implementation of the MSDRIS (2007), *Municipal Strategy within the Decade of Roma Inclusion in Sofia 2007 – 2013*, Sofia: Sofia Municipality, p. 10, http://sofia.bg/en/documents/STRATEGIA-2007-2013- Roma_EN.doc



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Fakulteta area. Over the years, Roma from all over Bulgaria have been coming to Sofia, many of them settling in Fakulteta.

Fakulteta is located relatively close to the centre of Sofia, and yet it feels a world away. Even the poor public transport connections underline the symbolic isolation.

Fakulteta has many faces – from relatively well laid out and urbanised central part to completely chaotic hamlets comprised of dwellings constructed from materials on hand. Despite the poverty, isolation and marginalisation, Fakulteta is one of the liveliest parts of Sofia. The streets are literally overflowing with activity and are full of people at any hour of the day. However, there are practically no squares or other well structured public spaces where young people could meet and socialise.

Like Fakulteta, Hristo Botev is today most commonly considered a “Roma neighbourhood.” However, its development has been quite different. The neighbourhood was established in the 1930s and populated by Bulgarian and Roma families from the nearby villages. After 1945, Hristo Botev became a typical socialist Sofia suburb, with all necessary infrastructure.

Today, Hristo Botev resembles a small and well-structured, albeit slightly neglected village. A typical rural / provincial appearance also creates a feeling of comfort and safety. Most of the Roma families, who have lived in Hristo Botev for generations, do not consider themselves as Roma, but self-identify as either Bulgarians or djorevci (descendants from mixed marriages between Bulgarians and Roma). They feel that they have always belonged to Sofia and rarely see themselves as an isolated and closed community. This, however, is not the case with the Roma from other parts of the country, who have settled in the area since 1989.

As the number of residents increased from 2,000 to 10,000, the appearance of the area visibly altered. Most newcomers live in small illegally constructed shacks on the fields at the outskirts of the “old” neighbourhood.

Socio-economic status of two areas

In the socialist period, most of the residents were employed in large state-owned companies in and around Sofia. Today, eight out of ten Fakulteta residents are jobless, while in Hristo Botev, about two thirds are out of work. An overwhelming majority of the unemployed are not registered at the employment bureaus as they are convinced that they would never find jobs through official channels.

Most often, the only jobs available are low-paid and low-skilled jobs like cleaning and garbage collection, construction, taxi driving and similar. The main employers in both neighbourhoods are the municipal cleaning companies. Women work as cleaners also for different private companies, while men also find work in the construction. Typically, work for private companies is not based on proper labour contracts. As most people make their living in the grey sector, they are not entitled to unemployment benefits, have no health insurance and can rely only on the minimal social pension once they reach the retirement age.

According to the representative of the municipality, the massive unemployment is at the core of all other social problems in the area. It has the most devastating effect on the young. In the 1989-2013 period, an entire generation of permanently unemployed and unemployable young people has grown up in Fakulteta. They represent a youth underclass, in which unemployment and poverty are a norm, and the prevailing opinion is that they have been forsaken by the institutions and the society. As a result, they are not motivated to improve their education and qualification, since they



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think that all such efforts would be in vain. The low level of education, in turn, further decreases their chances of obtaining a decent and well-paid employment.

The role model for the young, which has emerged in the recent years, is a wealthy and influential “businessman” who has acquired his wealth through illegal and criminal activities. Many youngsters thus perceive crime as the fastest, if not the only way out of poverty.

Social Infrastructure

According to many respondents, the declared concern of state and municipal administration regarding the problems in the Roma neighbourhoods rarely translates into effective actions with clear purpose. Many accuse the authorities of completely abdicating from their responsibilities in Fakulteta, Hristo Botev and similar neighbourhoods. Respondents also believe that officials often talk about these neighbourhoods without ever setting foot there – in other words, they propose policies not based on actual knowledge of the situation. Some positive opinions were expressed only about the work of the district administration.

The civil society and the non-governmental sector try to fill the gap left by the disengaged authorities. Their projects have tangible results and a genuine impact on life of many people. However, sustainability is a permanent problem. Most initiatives are short-term and once the financing runs out, the projects come to an end. Cases when a given NGO stops operating once its main project is finished are not uncommon. The areas most NGOs work in are education, legal consulting, health care and social support.

Employment

There are no employment bureaus in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev. The nearest are located in the neighbouring districts. Despite the relative proximity, the bureaus are not used often by the Fakulteta and Hristo Botev residents. The interviews revealed a high level of distrust towards this institution. Red tape and unfriendly attitude of employees dishearten people from seeking assistance there.

Some young people participate in qualification courses organised by the bureau, although it seems that the prevailing opinion is that such courses are not helpful towards finding employment. The employment bureau is of little use also in terms of unemployment benefits, as not many people from these two areas are eligible.

Many young people, who have grown up in families where no one has had a permanent job for many years, are completely discouraged and convinced that their unemployment is a result of rejection and discrimination in the society.

One side of the problem are the disheartened young people, convinced that the official services refuse to help them. The other side of the problem are the actually ineffective employment bureaus and the very real stereotypes and prejudices that exist in the society and which influence the perceptions of state and municipal officials. They quite often believe that it is impossible to work with young Roma due to their unwillingness to integrate.

Trying to find a way to overcome this deeply rooted mutual distrust, one respondent proposes introduction of labour mediators, or mobile employment bureaus. They would visit Fakulteta and Hristo Botev once or twice a week and inform the residents about the possibilities for employment, offer assistance in establishing contacts with employers and help with filling up of application forms and other documents.



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Education

Although the children in Fakulteta are truly numerous, there is no municipal kindergarten. Experts on education in Bulgaria are unanimous that the fact that most Roma children do not go to kindergartens hampers their school progress. Enrolling a child in a kindergarten in Sofia is a significant obstacle for many parents from Fakulteta. An NGO “Initiative for Equal Opportunities”⁵ thus helps them and applies on their behalf for places in kindergartens close to the neighbourhood. Another NGO (Health and Social Development Foundation)⁶ has established a small kindergarten for 30 children in 2010. This private initiative is the first and to date the only facility for education of preschool children in the neighbourhood. The priority is given to children from the poorest families, who have absolutely no possibility of visiting other kindergartens. The aim is to prepare the children for the first grade and give them a chance to enrol in one of the better schools outside Fakulteta.

Such kindergarten undoubtedly represents a good innovative social practice, but its limited size is a problem in itself. Demand for a place is much larger than its capacity, and parents of those children left out might feel rejected and excluded.

The situation with kindergartens is similar in Hristo Botev. There is only one kindergarten in the area, which is absolutely not enough to accommodate all the children.

The only school in Fakulteta is the “Todor Kableshev” primary school (I - VIII grade).⁷ It accommodates 1100 pupils divided into 39 classes. The school is overcrowded. Although the classes are in two shifts, the number of children is too large, especially in the lower grades.

“Todor Kableshev” is a fully segregated school. All the children are Roma. The school has a bad reputation, the material base and teaching appliances are dated, and the quality of education is estimated as very low. Its pupils seldom continue their education in secondary schools or find a decent employment.

Similarly, there is only one school in Hristo Botev: “Dimitar Strashimirov” primary and secondary school (I – XII grade).⁸ Its capacity of 800 pupils is insufficient. Almost all of the students are *djorevci* or Roma. Secondary school used to be a professional school, where girls studied to become sewers, and boys auto-mechanics. Interviewees said that in the past, the school used to provide good quality education, and that its graduates easily managed to find decent employment.

The school changed its profile and became a general secondary school in 2004. All interviewees agree that the quality of education in “Dimitar Strashimirov” is on a low level. They say that even after finishing the 12th grade, many pupils remain practically semi-literate.

Due to the insufficient capacity and low quality of both schools, many parents enrol their children in schools in neighbouring areas. This tendency is supported also by the state and municipal policies on school desegregation.

The Sofia municipality runs in cooperation with local NGOs a bus service for transporting children from Fakulteta to their schools and back. Respondents from Fakulteta evaluate this practice very

⁵ <http://www.equalopportunities.eu/>

⁶ <http://www.hesed.bg/>

⁷ <http://www.75ou.com/?page=nachalo>

⁸ <http://www.soslantina.org/images/stories/Obrazovanie%20i%20kultura/Schools/94%20%D0%A1%D0%9E%D0%A3.doc>



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positively, as the children are given a chance to obtain a better education and to socialise with pupils from other parts of the city.

There is no such service in Hristo Botev, but many parents prefer to enrol their children in schools in other areas. The main motivation is a desire to provide children with better education and upbringing, and thus improve their chances for leading a better life.

Surprisingly, the representative of the municipal administration had a very negative and resentful comment about desegregation. He said that as a result of this process, other schools are becoming “gypsified,” which causes the Bulgarian parents to transfer their children to the central schools. His views are quite characteristic for the prevailing public opinion on the matter. The secondary segregation has been a significant problem and a tremendous obstacle for a successful desegregation process.

Experts, who have been researching desegregation in Fakulteta and other compact Roma settlements in Bulgaria, are very critical and believe that the results are very controversial. They fear that instead of helping the Roma children to catch up with their ethnic Bulgarian peers and thus decrease inequality and exclusion, desegregation brought exclusion into Fakulteta and deepened the inequalities there. In order to demonstrate that the process was successful, the best pupils with the highest grades were taken from Fakulteta and transferred to other schools, where they have graduated. However, the majority of children remained in their old school, where the quality of education dropped rapidly after the best pupils were moved elsewhere.

Different NGOs are trying to find a better approach to solving the educational problems of Roma kids. In Hristo Botev, the NGO “Positive 365”⁹ started in 2013 a project “School is Fun,” targeting children from pre-school age to those who are 14-15 years old. The project includes a Summer Vacation Programme, where children work with volunteers from different countries and practice sports, draw, acquire new communication skills and learn about tolerance. During the school year, children visit a Study Room, where they prepare their homework, catch up on the study material and acquire positive attitude towards learning.

A “Sunny School”¹⁰ initiative has started in 2012 in cooperation between the Sofia Municipality and the funding organization – Roma Education Fund. It targets pre-school age children, who never went to kindergartens or preschool. “Sunny School” is a summer school, attended by 120 future first graders, who gain knowledge and skills to successfully deal with the material during the coming school year.

Other small-scale projects aim at improving the education and qualification of youth and young adults. For example, the *chitalishte* (community centre) “Stoyanka Sokolova” in Fakulteta provides vocational training and qualification (courses for sewing, hairdressing, gardening, construction and computer literacy) with the licence from the State Agency for Education and Training. Various protestant churches organise language courses with the help of volunteers.

Although appearing at regular intervals and popular with children and their parents alike, such projects have one major drawback: they are not sustainable and lasting. When the funding ends, so do the projects. The limited capacity also leaves the majority of children out of reach. Those who get involved are the children of better-educated parents, or those who live closer to the centre of the neighbourhoods. As a rule, the children who are in the direst need of assistance and who live in the most miserable conditions in slums on the edge of Fakulteta and Hristo Botev do not participate in such initiatives. This further deepens the inequality within the area and enhances the exclusion of the most disadvantaged ones.

⁹ http://www.pozitivni365.com/?page_id=331

¹⁰ <http://www.nccedi.government.bg/page.php?category=73&id=1766>



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Health care

Access to proper health care is another important problem. In the socialist period, there used to be a polyclinic in Hristo Botev, providing a wide range of medical services. The polyclinic has been closed down in 1993 and today, there is only a small health centre catering to pregnant women and newborn babies. There is no polyclinic in Fakulteta. If ill or injured, people seek medical assistance in polyclinics or hospitals located in adjacent neighbourhoods. According to the interviews, patients from Hristo Botev and Fakulteta are often subject to less than cordial treatment at the edge of discrimination.

In terms of physical distance, the medical aid is not far away from the residents. The distance is of a different essence. The majority of people are without health insurance and the only free medical care they are entitled to free of charge is the emergency aid. There have been numerous cases when an ambulance was called on the pretext that emergency health assistance was needed. For this reason, emergency units are often reluctant to answer calls from Roma neighbourhoods. In recent years, several incidents occurred in which an ambulance arrived with a considerable delay, only to be met by an angry crowd of friends and relatives of the patient.

Many people rely on advice of staff from several pharmacies located in the area. Those who can afford it, use the services of several general doctors, who run private medical practices.

When an operation or hospitalisation is needed and payment cannot be avoided, usually the entire extended family contributes money to cover the cost. If medical costs are unusually high, donations are collected in the entire neighbourhood.

As the access to state provided health care is difficult, several alternative initiatives have appeared. An NGO “Health and Social Development Foundation” has established a Health and Social Community Centre in 2003.¹¹ The Centre offers family support for improved childcare and development, consults on health issues and family planning, and works for prevention of infectious diseases. It also has an early drug use prevention programme. The work of the Centre is exceptionally important for the young people, as they are most likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour or drug use.

Health mediators are another innovative practice. In 2005, the Bulgarian government adopted the *Health Strategy for Disadvantaged Persons Belonging to Ethnic Minorities*.¹² The strategy envisaged the training and gradual introduction of health mediators into all large Roma neighbourhoods in the country.¹³ The role of health mediators is to bridge the divide between the most marginalised people and the health care system. Since the Strategy has been adopted, over 200 persons have received training, although not all of them were later appointed as health mediators by the respective institutions. The selection of candidates and the training are implemented by various NGOs. In 2013, there were about 140 health mediators in Bulgaria – two of them work in Fakulteta.¹⁴

¹¹ <http://www.hesed.bg/en/?pg=zscent>

¹² Council of Ministers (2005), *Здравната стратегия за лица в неравностойно положение, принадлежащи към етнически малцинства* (Health Strategy for Disadvantaged Persons Belonging to Ethnic Minorities), http://www.nccedi.government.bg/upload/docs/zdravna_strategia_prieta.doc

¹³ Health mediators have actually existed since 2001 as a project of various non-governmental organisations, and have been included in the state strategy as an already tested good practice.

¹⁴ See http://www.zdravenmediator.net/en/profiles.php?page_id=68



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There are no health mediators in Hristo Botev yet. According to one of the respondents, two young women have been trained as such and should start working in the near future. The respondent said that the discussions on this issue with the mayor of Slatina district have recently started and that hopefully they would result in an agreement.

The opinions of respondents on health mediators are largely positive, but there are also critical evaluations. One concern is that without proper supervision, some health mediators might try to take over the role of proper doctors. There is also an opinion that health mediators should be a temporary solution for reaching people, who have completely fallen out of the health care system.

Social services

There are no bureaus for social assistance in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev. The fact that the nearest bureau is located a few kilometres away and not in the area with the exceptionally high concentration of people in need of social assistance is practically and symbolically discouraging and excluding.

The bureaus are mostly used by people entitled to childcare benefits, social support for the poor, pensions and other social transfers. The respondents describe the relationship between clients and officials as largely problematic – for both sides. The interviewees complain that the bureau is a remote and unfriendly institution, and the work of the social services is unanimously described as ineffective, mostly due to the lack of interest and good communication. Many are discouraged from seeking assistance, even in cases when they are legally entitled to certain social benefits.

The employees of the bureau for social assistance agree that the relationship with the users is very difficult, even hostile. They admit that they are hardly more than distributors of social transfers and that they are forced to play a role of investigators in order to prevent cases of unjustified payments to those who are not eligible. However, they place all the blame on dishonest users, who allegedly employ a variety of tricks and lie to obtain money from the bureau. Many administration employees share the prevailing negative public attitude towards Roma.

If potential social service users feel intimidated by ill-disposed bureaucrats, the Bureau employees (most of who are women) feel even more afraid of their clients. They feel especially insecure if they have to visit the neighbourhood. They frequently visit the users unannounced to minimize the chances of encountering an organised and antagonistic reception.

Leisure / culture

Young people in Fakulteta have a very limited selection of facilities for leisure and culture inside the area. Several internet cafes and bars are practically the only public places where young can meet and socialise.

The only establishment catering to the cultural needs of the young is *chitalishte* “Stoyanka Sokolova,”¹⁵ founded in 1999 as a non-governmental organisation working in public benefit. It has a library, a computer room with internet access, and a hall, where musical and dance classes are held. *Chitalishte* has a dance troupe and two youth musical orchestras.

In Hristo Botev, well-maintained children playgrounds, pathways for walks and other areas for leisure activities sadly belong to the past. Most of the green areas in the neighbourhood are neglected and full of waste.

¹⁵ <http://www.communitycenter-sokolova.org/bg/index.html>



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The only official institution offering cultural and leisure activities for the children and youth is *chitalishte* “Asen Zlatarov,” founded in 1938.¹⁶ It includes a library, classrooms and area for social events like dances. Due to problems with funding, it considerably downsized its activities after 1989. In 2007, *chitalishte* was brought back to life mostly due to the enthusiasm of a small group of local people, who devoted their own financial resources and energy into renovating the building.

One of its most popular activities is a dance troupe for children aged 4 to 18, established in 2007, and which participated on various international dance festivals. One visit to *chitalishte* is enough to see that the main hall and the stage were made and are maintained with much love and enthusiasm. The corner with the awards won on various competitions and festivals is also very impressive. Such opportunities to travel not just out of the neighbourhood, but also out of Sofia or even Bulgaria, are immensely important for the self-esteem of the participating children. However, each such trip is accompanied by tremendous problems in raising the needed funds for the travel costs. Usually, the only support comes from accidental donors. In the summer of 2013, the employees of *chitalishte* donated their own salaries to pay for a trip and participation on a festival in Slovakia.

Although *chitalishte* could represent an excellent case of productive cooperation between the state and the local efforts, the actual situation is rather disappointing. The state (through the Ministry of Culture) provides the funds only for three modest salaries for the employees. This means that in winter months, *chitalishte* is practically not operational, as it has no money for the heating. The role of the municipality is largely restricted to supervision of activities organised in the *chitalishte*, and occasional support for particular projects. This support is not in the form of direct financing, but rather assistance in finding donors and establishing contacts.

Religion

A very interesting phenomenon in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev is proliferation of various protestant churches that have appeared in the 1990s. Some function in ordinary family houses and are barely distinguishable on the outside, others have erected conventional church buildings.

Apart from religious services, these churches are engaged in a wide range of social and educational activities, which have a very positive impact on the community. People joining the churches as a rule stop drinking and smoking, start taking care of their appearance, try to find work and send their children to school. A decrease in domestic violence and anti-social behaviour can also be attributed to the influence of the churches.

Pastor we have interviewed noted with regret that the official institutions do not want to establish contact and cooperate with them. The reason is a deep distrust and prejudices. Unfortunately, despite sharing a similar attitude regarding their social and educational role in the society, different churches do not cooperate with each other due to doctrinal differences.

One of the experts is concerned that despite all the positive influence and initiatives, churches might be harmful in a sense that most church members do not actually take an informed and free decision regarding their religious belonging. Most often, people (this is especially true for young people and women) are “drafted” into a certain church by the older male members of the family, or other influential figures in the community.

Despite the controversies and conflicting opinions, the work of protestant churches is beyond doubt among very few successful and sustainable social innovations at the moment. Active in a wide

¹⁶ <http://www.soslatina.org/images/stories/Obrazovanie%20i%20kultura/Chitalishta/%D0%90%D0%A1%D0%95%D0%9D%20%D0%97%D0%9B%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%A0%D0%9E%D0%92.doc>



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range of activities (from religious services to social and educational programmes), they fill numerous gaps left behind by non-existing or inefficient official service providers.

Key findings concerning social inequalities and social innovation to address them in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev

Fakulteta and Hristo Botev are two of the most marginalised and socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods in Sofia. They share many common characteristics. The majority (practically all in the case of Fakulteta) of population belongs to the Roma ethnic minority. Compared to the rest of the city, both areas have a larger share of the young population. The unemployment rates are drastically higher, as are the rates of social exclusion, poverty and risk-of-poverty. The average income is between one third and one half of the average Sofia income. The housing conditions are worse – cramped and of lower quality. “Low quality” mark can be attached to virtually everything in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev – from education to the condition of roads and streets. To outsiders, both neighbourhoods are black spots on the map of Sofia that are to be avoided at any cost. To residents, they are a home and often a safe haven from the rising tide of intolerance.

Yet, despite everything that unites them, Fakulteta and Hristo Botev are also very different. Fakulteta has been established as a ghetto in the interwar period. It was selected as a place to accommodate most, if not all of the Sofia Roma, and then largely left to develop following its own internal ghetto logic – even in the socialist period. Today, the neighbourhood is Pandora’s box of social problems.

In contrast, Hristo Botev used to be a modest, but pleasant and fully serviceable suburban neighbourhood until the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, the area and its residents fell prey to one of the less successful processes of transition from planned to market economy and today, Hristo Botev is a sad example of a good neighbourhood gone bad. Much of the previously existing social infrastructure has been closed down, and most of what remains is in poor condition and provides substandard services.

As a rule, people in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev do not trust the institutions. They have mostly negative experiences with them and are afraid to turn to them for assistance. All the positive encounters of citizens with the bureaucracy are based on helpful and constructive approach of certain individuals from state and municipal institutions, who have gained the trust of people from both neighbourhoods. Such cases, however, are exceptions and the general tendency is one of deepening mutual distrust and intolerance. The cases in point are the deeply pessimistic opinions of administration employees regarding the possibilities for solving the so-called “Roma problem.” The employees of the Bureau for social assistance in Hristo Botev and the secretary of Krasna polyana district were uniform in their belief that Roma cannot be integrated into the society because they do not want this to happen and have willingly decided to live the way they live (in poverty and marginalisation).

The vicious circle poverty-poor education-unemployment is very hard to break. Uneducated or poorly educated children are growing up into young girls and boys, unable to integrate into the dynamic social-economic realities of life outside their neighbourhood and thus remain trapped in the ever deepening marginalisation and exclusion. Most efforts of the state, municipality and civic sector in recent years have thus been devoted to improve the quality of education and qualification for the children and young people.



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Most experts underline that it is crucial to start with the pre-school age children. There are no public kindergartens in Fakulteta, while the only one in Hristo Botev is absolutely insufficient. Therefore, setting up kindergartens or helping the parents to get their children into childcare facilities outside the area is a very important innovative practice.

A kindergarten established by an NGO in Fakulteta and child-care facilities provided or planned by some churches can be considered as social innovation with potentially significant impact. The same can be said about another NGO initiative to help parents to enrol their children in kindergartens around Sofia.

The desegregation process is not working and leads to secondary segregation, as the arrival of larger groups of Roma children to a given school often initiates a “white flight.” A more appropriate and productive approach would be to invest in the two schools in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev, significantly increasing the quality of education provided there.

It is still too soon to evaluate the effect of various new initiatives (for example the “Sunny School” project). Their potential, however, is quite large and gives reason for optimism.

Although the massive unemployment among the young is an overwhelming problem, there are no employment bureaus in two neighbourhoods. Many young people are absolutely discouraged and convinced that it is senseless even to sign up as a job-seeker. They do not attempt to find employment through official channels, but rely on other possibilities to make a living. The most influential role model is a person, who acquired wealth through crime. The flashy life-style demonstrated by such nouveau riches in Fakulteta is a much more powerful attraction than an offer of a low-paid manual work, which is practically the only option for the ill-qualified youth from the area. Unfortunately, apart from the very small-scale vocational courses, organised in the *chitalishte*, there are no innovative projects trying to empower the local youth and enhance their chances on the labour market.

The prejudices and stereotypes run strong on both sides – the young unemployed Roma and officials in employment bureaus. A possibly beneficial innovative practice would be an introduction of employment mediators or mobile employment units, which would periodically come to the neighbourhoods, providing information and assistance in job seeking.

Health mediators are an innovative practice applied in numerous Bulgarian municipalities since 2001 in an attempt to provide medical attention to the most disadvantaged communities. Health mediators are already active (albeit on a small-scale) in Fakulteta, but have yet to be introduced in Hristo Botev. Opinions on health mediators are divided. Some see them as an effective way of reaching out to people with little or no access to health care. There are also people who oppose the idea, as they question the competencies and skills of health mediators.

Nevertheless, this is an innovative social practice, which could potentially have a very positive impact in giving access to quality health care to people, who have been practically excluded from it for many years.

One important innovation in Fakulteta is the effort to regulate and legalise the illegally constructed homes (there is no similar initiative in Hristo Botev, but the problem with illegal buildings is on a much smaller scale there). The lack of basic infrastructure like running hot water, sewage, and electricity in some parts of the neighbourhood puts up significant obstacles for solving other pressing issues (hygiene, health, regular school attendance).

Chitalishte is practically the only existing institution able to provide the children and young people opportunities for engaging in meaningful leisure and cultural activities. However, much like all



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other social infrastructure, it suffers from permanent lack of funding. While it is true that the local people could invest more of their own energy and effort, the main problem remains the state, which has practically abdicated from its responsibilities towards institutions like *chitalishte* and left them entirely dependent on enthusiasm and resourcefulness of the *chitalishte* employees.

Almost all respondents note the very positive influence of numerous protestant churches (Seventh-day Adventist Church, Pentecostal Church, Church of God, Methodist Church and others), which are gaining popularity and attracting many people in both neighbourhoods. Apart from the religious services, they are engaged in a wide range of social and educational activities. On a small and limited scale, the churches fill many gaps left behind by non-existing or no longer functioning social infrastructure: education, counselling, order, social services, youth activities, culture. Young people, families, and adults from the deprived and marginalised community are attracted to these churches also because of the very informal and non-institutionalised manner in which they operate. Most of the protestant churches have adapted well to the social-economic realities within Roma neighbourhoods. Most importantly, their openness and inclusiveness has an immense symbolic value for people whose most common experiences in dealings with the outside world are rejection and exclusion. Yet, it needs to be noted that while churches are very inclusive on the one hand, as everyone is welcome to join the church, they are also very selective on the other hand, as educational and social services are based on the condition that a person accepts the doctrine of the church and becomes an active believer.

Due to mistrust and prejudices, churches are still rejected as a potential partner by most official institutions – from municipal authorities to schools. Overcoming this gap and exploiting numerous possibilities for successful and beneficial partnership could be an excellent innovative practice with long-term beneficial results.

This brings us to a problem, which in a way tops all other problems. A systematic and very damaging error in the operational mode of institutions that comprise the matrix of social infrastructure is – as one of the respondents named it – the “*Balkan syndrome*”. It refers to the practical inability or unwillingness of different institutions to cooperate. It seems that the most colossal obstacle is the mutual lack of trust.

The economic crisis has further cut the already insufficient funding and closed down or downsized numerous social services. And yet, the few remaining providers, regardless of whether they are run by the state or by the civil society, find it impossible to come together and join their efforts even when they aspire towards the same goals. The examples of successful and productive partnerships are few and far between.

Furthermore, the state and municipal authorities are often not interested in genuine cooperation, but prefer outsourcing – working with NGOs or civil society organisations able to “relieve” them of some of their responsibilities and solve certain problems instead of them. This demotivates grass-root activists. Not finding support and understanding on the institutional side, they operate on a very limited scale, isolated within their own family or friendship networks.

Finding an effective and sustainable way to tackle the multitude of social inequalities in two of the most marginalised and deprived neighbourhoods in the capital of the poorest EU member-state is a formidable challenge. The financial and human resources are limited, while the problems facing the young people in Fakulteta and Hristo Botev seem to be limitless.

Most people engaged in various efforts to fight the inequalities are facing a very difficult dilemma: should the priority be given to the most vulnerable and most marginalised ones, who live in the most extreme deprivation and poverty, or should the efforts be concentrated to help the ones with



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the potential to get out of the ghetto? Mostly, the latter option is selected and almost all innovative practices and projects are used by people who can be described as “the middle class” of Fakulteta and Hristo Botev. They are the ones with motivation and ability to take advantage of the helping hand offered to them, and make a meaningful change – first in their own lives and potentially in the life of the community. At the same time, they are also “easier to work with” – they are the “acceptable” Roma, who live in presentable houses, speak Bulgarian, are educated and have employment (or had it in the past). The newcomers, many of whom live in the slums at the edge of the neighbourhoods, are rarely involved and remain entrapped in the ever deepening exclusion and poverty. Thus, while trying to bridge the widening divide between Roma neighbourhoods and the rest of Sofia, many innovative social practices fighting discrimination, in fact generate inequality within Fakulteta and Hristo Botev as an unintentional side effect.

It cannot be denied that many of these initiatives are successful and have been a genuine glimmer of hope for many people in these two deprived areas. But at the same time, they also deepen inequalities within Fakulteta and Hristo Botev and bring forth the inevitable question: when social innovation finally becomes an established official practice – will it not be too late for all those who have been left to fall by the wayside?

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Annex: List of respondents

Code	Position	Organization	Ethnicity	Gender
WP3-Bulgaria-1	Professor in Sociology, researcher on Roma issues	Institute for Population and Human Studies at Bulgarian Academy of Science	Bulgarian	F
WP3-Bulgaria-2	Expert in Roma health issues	Ethnic Minorities Health Problems Foundation	Bulgarian	M
WP3-Bulgaria-3	Professor in Sociology, researcher on Roma issues	Department of Sociology at Sofia University	Bulgarian	F
WP3-Bulgaria-4	Psychologist	Health and Social Development Foundation, Fakulteta	Bulgarian	F
WP3-Bulgaria-5	Expert in Roma issues	Equal Opportunities Initiative Association, Fakulteta	Roma	M
WP3-Bulgaria-6	Chief secretary	Sofia Municipality – Krasna Polyana district, Fakulteta	Bulgarian	M
WP3-Bulgaria-7	Priest	Seventh-day Adventist Church, Fakulteta	Bulgarian	M
WP3-Bulgaria-8	Children courses teacher	Chitalishte “Stoyanka Sokolova”, Fakulteta	Roma	M
WP3-Bulgaria-9	Anthropologist, researcher on Roma issues	Open Society Foundation; New Bulgarian University, Sofia	Bulgarian	M
WP3-Bulgaria-10	Expert in Roma issues	Open Society Foundation, Sofia	Roma/ Djorevec	F
WP3-Bulgaria-11	Psychologist, family therapist	“Positive 365”, Hristo Botev	Bulgarian	F
WP3-Bulgaria-12	Priest	United Evangelist Church, Hristo Botev	Roma/ Djorevec	M
WP3-Bulgaria-13	Expert	Ministry of Labour and Social Policies –Social Assistance Department at Slatina district, Hristo Botev	Bulgarian	F
WP3-Bulgaria-14	Head of the community centre	Chitalishte “Asen Zlatarov”, Hristo Botev	Roma/ Djorevec	F