



**EQUAL  
OPPORTUNITIES  
INITIATIVE  
ASSOCIATION**

1373 Sofia, No 3q 313 str., [equal\\_opportunities@abv.bg](mailto:equal_opportunities@abv.bg)

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

## **2023**



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## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE ASSOCIATION

The non-profit association "Equal Opportunities Initiative" is a non-governmental organization registered under the Law on Non-Profit Legal Entities in 2006.

The organization's goals include promoting Roma rights by empowering the community to self-organize and participate in policy change initiatives aimed at ensuring public participation and equal rights. SNC "Initiative for Equal Opportunities" works in favor of democratic legal reforms and equal integration of the Roma. The work of the organization is carried out by using the tools of the law, strategic litigation and advocacy to improve the domestic legal framework in accordance with the standards of the European Community.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The supreme body of the Equal Opportunities Initiative Association is the General Assembly, uniting civil activists. The organization is managed by a three-person Board of Directors.

The organizational structure includes the Legal Department, the Education, Cultural and Social Activities Department and the Youth Volunteer Section. The team includes program coordinators, experts, community workers and volunteers. Team members are dedicated to their tasks and work collaboratively with the beneficiaries of our programs to reflect their needs and priorities.

We have built a partner network that includes organizations working both locally and nationally in areas that we also focus on.

## MEMBERSHIPS

Equal Opportunities Initiative Association is a member and co-founder of the informal civil coalition "Intellect", uniting leading Roma and pro-Roma organizations and experts with the aim of national advocacy and assistance to the legislative process in the field of social, educational, housing and other relevant questions.

## MISSION

Our mission is to promote the equality of the Roma. We work to support democratic legal reforms in the country and the integration of the Roma, respecting the values of the rule of law, democracy and pluralism.

In fulfillment of our mission, our guiding principles that we adhere to in the performance of our activities are transparency, accountability, cooperation and partnership.



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## EXPERIENCE

For almost twenty years, the Equal Opportunities Initiative Association has gained significant experience in the Roma inclusion process, providing ongoing support and services through various programs in the areas of access to justice, human rights and anti-discrimination, early childhood development, educational achievement and retention of Roma culture.

## PROGRAM ACTIVITIES IN 2023

### LEGAL INCUBATOR PROJECT – LABORATORY FOR LEGAL ENTREPRENEURS

Through this innovative project, the first Legal Incubator in Eastern Europe was created - an initiative to help young lawyers start their own practice. The project started at the end of 2019, adapting an American model for continuing practical training of young lawyers with the support of mentors. It is financially supported by the Foundation "Trust for a Social Alternative", with accompanying support from the Sigrid Rausing Trust. From the beginning of the project until now, three groups of young lawyers have gone through training, the first of which consisted of 12 participants, and the second and third - each of 15 participants. Applicants for participation in the program submit applications accompanied by motivational letters, documents proving their legal education and resumes. The selection of participants is made by a committee specially created for the purpose. In the first group, 11 of the participants were young people of Roma ethnic origin, in the second and third groups we achieved a balance in the participation of young lawyers of Roma and non-Roma origin. As part of the project, an office space was created and equipped to be used by young lawyers for 12 months to work with low-income clients. Mentors who advise them are actively involved in their ongoing practical training. The program also provides thematic training for young lawyers on topics identified as important and necessary for them. Graduated lawyers are trained in the incubator, and final year law students are also accepted, for whom supporting training is provided for taking the legal aptitude exams and admission to the bar. Students admitted to the incubator are committed to inclusion in the activities of the Youth Program of the Equal Opportunities Initiative. Scholarships are also provided for them to support the phase of successful completion of their education.

The program has created a Facebook page, facilitating communication with the participants and promoting the initiative.

In 2023, the team finished working with the second group in the program and is working with the third group. The group is inclusive, ethnically diverse and socially representative, comprising 7 4th and 5th year students and 8 law graduates, of which 7 are of Roma ethnicity, 2 are of Turkish ethnicity, 1 are of Armenian ethnicity and 5 are Bulgarian ethnic origin. When choosing participants, an effort was made to select motivated young people who have a desire for both professional growth and professional work with persons from vulnerable groups. According to the prepared methodology and training program, in 2023, the training cycle for group 2 was completed, and the following trainings were held: 1. On January 8, 2023, training on criminal law and process was held, and the participants received materials. The topics included in the training were: "The rights of the accused

in pre-trial proceedings', 'Actions in pre-trial proceedings', 'Remand measures - determination, appeal, action' and 'European Arrest Warrant'. The training was conducted by trainers Adv. Andrei Terziyski and Adv. Iva Suleva; 2. On February 9 and 17, 2023, training on labor law was held, which included the topics: "Peculiarities of remote work", "Types of employment contracts, conclusion, amendments and termination", "Illegal dismissals and legal protection", "Worker's liability for damages". The training was conducted online by Radostina Hadjieva - managing partner at Dimitrova & Hadjieva Law Firm, which specializes in labor, competition and consumer law, intellectual property, permits and licensing procedures, as well as real estate transactions and Mihaela Dimitrova - managing partner at Dimitrova & Hadjieva Law Firm, which from 2012 to the present advises employers in the field of labor law as well as European companies trading online and offline within the European Union. It is organized by Master Events OOD, with which the program has contracted cooperation. On February 20, a training session was held on the topic "Law on Protection from Discrimination - Equal Opportunities for All". The training included familiarization with the procedures under the Anti-Discrimination Act, forms of discrimination, protected groups, responsible entities, protected areas and sanctions. The training was conducted by the chairperson of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, Assoc. Prof. Ana Djumalieva and experts from the CCP. The participants of the program participated in two of the planned additional trainings of the cycle "Discrimination and hate crimes, monitoring hate speech on social media": On 21 and 22 January 2023, training "Tackling Roma hate speech in the digital world and changing the narrative through online campaigns", held in Velingrad by Rositsa Dzekova and Hermina Emiryan. The participants also created their own video product, which they distributed on social networks. From March 24 to 26, 2023, an advocacy training was held, held in Sofia, with Diyan Dankov, a participant in group 1 of the Legal Incubator project, as the trainer.

In implementation of the training program of group 3 in 2023, the following trainings were held: 1. Training on the topic "Protection against discrimination", conducted by the team of the Commission for protection against discrimination on September 26, 2023; 2. Training on the topic "Ethics of the lawyer and relations with clients", held on September 30, 2023 with the trainer Alexander Kashamov, member of the Supreme Bar Council; 3. Training on the topic "Protection against forced evictions", held on November 12, 2023 with the trainer Daniela Mihailova; 4. Training on criminal law and process", held on November 19, 2023 with trainers Iva Suleva and Andrei Terziyski.

The participants of the program were also trained in legal English. 39 training sessions were conducted, of which 13 for the "beginner" group, 13 for the "advanced" group and 13 common for both groups of sessions. Prior to the start of the 2023 English sessions, meetings were held between the project team and the trainer, with the mentors involved, with a view to detailing topics for the sessions that would be most appropriate for the participants' progress.

Under the program, the young lawyers worked with 8 mentors, and each participant was assigned to a specific mentor. The rules for the participants' work with the mentors include setting monthly tasks, holding weekly meetings to discuss the implementation of the tasks, sharing the court schedule and the presence of the participants in court sessions of the mentors, carrying out regular communication between the mentors and the participants, including at least one general meeting monthly. Mentors and participants established a regular relationship with each other by holding regular meetings, mentors assigning tasks to participants, monitoring performance, giving instructions to improve the products that participants present, ensuring their presence in court hearings.

Young lawyers also participate in information campaigns for low- to middle-income people in places, providing legal advice during the campaigns with the assistance of their mentors. The participants in Legal Incubator-2 and 3 have provided a total of over 200 legal consultations.

With the active participation of the Bulgarian program, the first conference was held to internationalize the Legal Incubator initiative and create working contacts between legal incubators around the world. The conference was held online in February 2023, facilitated by consultant Fred Rooney and attended by legal incubators and fellow legal incubators from the US, Dominican Republic, Bulgaria, Palestine, India, Spain and Romania. At the conference, the achievements of the Bulgarian program were presented and a decision was made to hold a further forum in which common initiatives in Bulgaria will be discussed.

A second conference was held to internationalize the Legal Incubator initiative and create working contacts between legal incubators around the world. The conference was held in person, in May 2023, with the facilitation of consultant Fred Rooney and with the participation of legal incubators and colleagues aimed at creating such from Albania, the USA, the Dominican Republic, Palestine, India and Spain / included online via the zoom platform / and participants from Romania included in attendance. At the conference, the achievements of the Bulgarian program were presented and a common Balkan initiative for Legal Incubators was discussed, as we undertook the task of consulting the launch of Legal Incubators in Romania and Albania and cooperating with them.



During the reporting period, internships were also held for the participants in the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. Participants received certificates from the Anti-Discrimination Commission.

During their internships, they got to know and work in the different departments of the Commission, reviewed files, registered complaints and alerts, participated in open meetings and enriched their knowledge of both anti-discrimination legislation and the Commission's procedures and work. The participants were invited by the management of the Commission to apply for open positions in the Commission.



Three short video materials were prepared to promote the program.

#### LEGLS PROGRAM

The legal program of the Equal Opportunities Initiative has been operating since the organization's inception. It is supported by the Open Society Foundation and the British charity Sigrud Rousing Trust.

The main objective of the program is to provide legal advice and legal representation in cases of violations of fundamental human rights, as well as to analyze the results of its judicial practice and use them to prepare proposals for legislative changes to bring our domestic legislation in line with modern human rights protection standards. Advocacy activities in favor of the developed proposals are a major part of the program's tasks.

In 2023, the team continued to consult with Roma communities in various localities, focusing their efforts on the prevention of forced evictions and protection against hate speech and ethnically motivated crimes. In 2023, 29 new court cases were opened, with the team continuing to work on pending proceedings. A total of 601 individual legal consultations were conducted for persons of Roma origin.

#### WE CARE PROGRAM

The Equal Opportunities Initiative participates in the We Care program of the "Trust for a Social Alternative" Foundation, uniting a network of organizations working on the topic of early childhood development. SNC "Equal Opportunities Initiative" and the other organizations - participants in the network participate in thematic trainings organized by the "Trust for a Social Alternative" Foundation and develop advocacy projects that are implemented with the financial support of the "Trust for a Social Alternative".

In 2023, the organization participated in a closing event, presenting the advocacy project "The Invisibles We See", which aims to increase the opportunities for pregnant women and mothers with children up to 3 years old to receive address registration and identity documents.



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Our experts participated in a working group established in the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works to prepare a project for amendments and additions to the Law on Civil Registration to facilitate registration at a permanent address for residents of Roma neighborhoods.

#### PROJECT CHALLENGING ONLINE AND OFFLINE HATE SPEECH

In 2023, the Equal Opportunities Initiative is working on an initiative to counter hate speech in online and offline environments against Roma. The initiative is implemented within the framework of a project in which the leading organization is the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), in cooperation with partner organizations from Slovakia and Romania. The project engages volunteers from different ethnic backgrounds to monitor and report incidents of hate speech. The ECPR initiative is implemented with the financial support of the European Union for direct countermeasures and legal protection of victims of hate speech in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Romania.

The objectives of the project include: To increase the number of Roma filing formal complaints and taking legal action in cases where they are victims of discrimination; to raise awareness of rights among Roma communities; to address anti-Roma hate speech and hate crimes by monitoring, reporting and filing complaints against individuals, media and news platforms that disseminate racist content both offline and online; to reduce the number of Roma victims of discrimination and restore community trust in institutions by improving access to justice.

5 trainings were held under the program in 2023. Volunteers have been researching and monitoring social media for posts of hate speech and preparing cases for legal defense.

5 strategic legal cases were initiated, with the aim of countering discrimination in the online and offline space.

#### MARIO PROJECT

In 2023, the team of young lawyers, participants in the Legal Incubator program, implemented a program for providing consultations in Roma neighborhoods and conducting training for active Roma in the cities of Dupnitsa, Peshtera and Kyustendil. According to the program, six trainings were held - two in each of the settlements, more than 100 free consultations were provided in the "Mobile Legal Laboratory" in the three settlements, as well as information campaigns aimed at the rights and obligations of the residents of the Roma neighborhoods were held in the three settlements. The

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program was supported by the Minority Rights Group.



## YOUTH PROGRAM

Equal Opportunities Initiative works with a network of youth volunteers who support our activities and organize their own initiatives. In 2023, the young people participated in a two-week international youth meeting in Portugal, organized under the Erasmus program with the leading organization European Play Work Association.





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#### PROJECT REDUCING POLLUTION FOR POOR COMMUNITIES IN SOFIA

The organization participates in the implementation of this project with the lead organization Foundation Trust for Social Alternative and with funding provided by the lead organization.

Within the framework of the project, the team participated in an information campaign aimed at ways to reduce air pollution in the "Faculty" district in Sofia, in organizing a public event in the community, together with the project partners, carried out an analysis of legal regulations and measures for social support that have an impact on pollutant emissions from the Fakulteta neighborhood in Sofia, an analysis of the regulations for access to social housing, an analysis of the regulations for social assistance for heating and an analysis of municipal programs for filtering chimneys and cleaner heating systems, by developing recommendations for the city of Sofia for short-term and long-term measures that will contribute to the reduction of domestic pollution from the Fakulteta district.

#### PROJECT ADVANCING THE SITUATION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN STATE CARE IN BULGARIA

The organization implements this project with the leading organization European Roma Rights Center with the financial support of the Tanya's Dream Fund.

A main aim of the project is to review and identify key obstacles in both the legal and policy framework that contribute to the over-representation of Roma children in state care institutions. Within the framework of the project, in 2023, the team developed a research assignment and working methodologies to carry out both legal and political reviews and research of violations of the rights of Roma children and their families within the state care system in Bulgaria. Field research was carried out, including both quantitative and qualitative research, involving relevant stakeholders and Roma communities in pre-selected settlements in Plovdiv, Stara Zagora and Montana. The terms of reference, together with the research methodologies, were reviewed and approved by the Steering Group Committee established by the European Roma Rights Centre. Training materials were prepared and face-to-face trainings were conducted with field researchers following the methodology recommended for field research. The project team developed a communication strategy that includes key objectives, milestones, an analysis of relevant stakeholders and a plan of activities to be implemented in the coming year. A legal analysis of the legal framework related to placement of children at risk outside their families was also carried out.

The project also includes strategic litigation, with two cases identified in 2023 for the legal team to work on.