
BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE FOR ALL
**URBAN PLANNING IN ROMA
SETTLEMENTS**

The Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority. For centuries, the Roma have lived in marginalization and poverty, often isolated in impoverished settlements on the edges of towns and cities.

More than half of Bulgaria's Roma population live in informal settlements. This is linked to a variety of factors, including:

- Historic context
- Poverty and lack of resources
- Limited legal status and documentation
- Limited state support
- Rural-urban migration
- Cultural factors



WHY DOES THE FORMALIZATION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS MATTER?

- Family stability
- Community stability
- Equity-building
- Wealth-building
- Incentive for compliance
- Poverty reduction





HISTORIC CONTEXT

Roma have been living in Bulgaria from as early as the 14th century. According to Ottoman tax registers, many Roma participated in itinerant trades and experienced a mix of sedentary and nomadic lifestyle up until the 19th century. When Bulgaria was liberated from Ottoman rule, a strong process of nation-building set in. Eventually, more than 75% of Bulgaria's population became small, rural landholders. It does not appear that many Roma participated in this trend.

After the Second World War, the Communist-led People's Republic of Bulgaria began restricting individual land ownership. The 1950s also saw the passage of a law that required all citizens to settle in one place and work. Many Roma were settled and built homes in the vicinity of cooperative farms or factories but did not own property. This means that they were not eligible to participate in the process of land restitution in the 1990s. In most cases, the status of Roma settlements throughout the country remains unresolved – with families allowed to continue to keep their residences, but with municipalities not taking steps to formalize or zone the neighborhoods.

HRISTO, KAVAKLIA SETTLEMENT, DUPNITSA

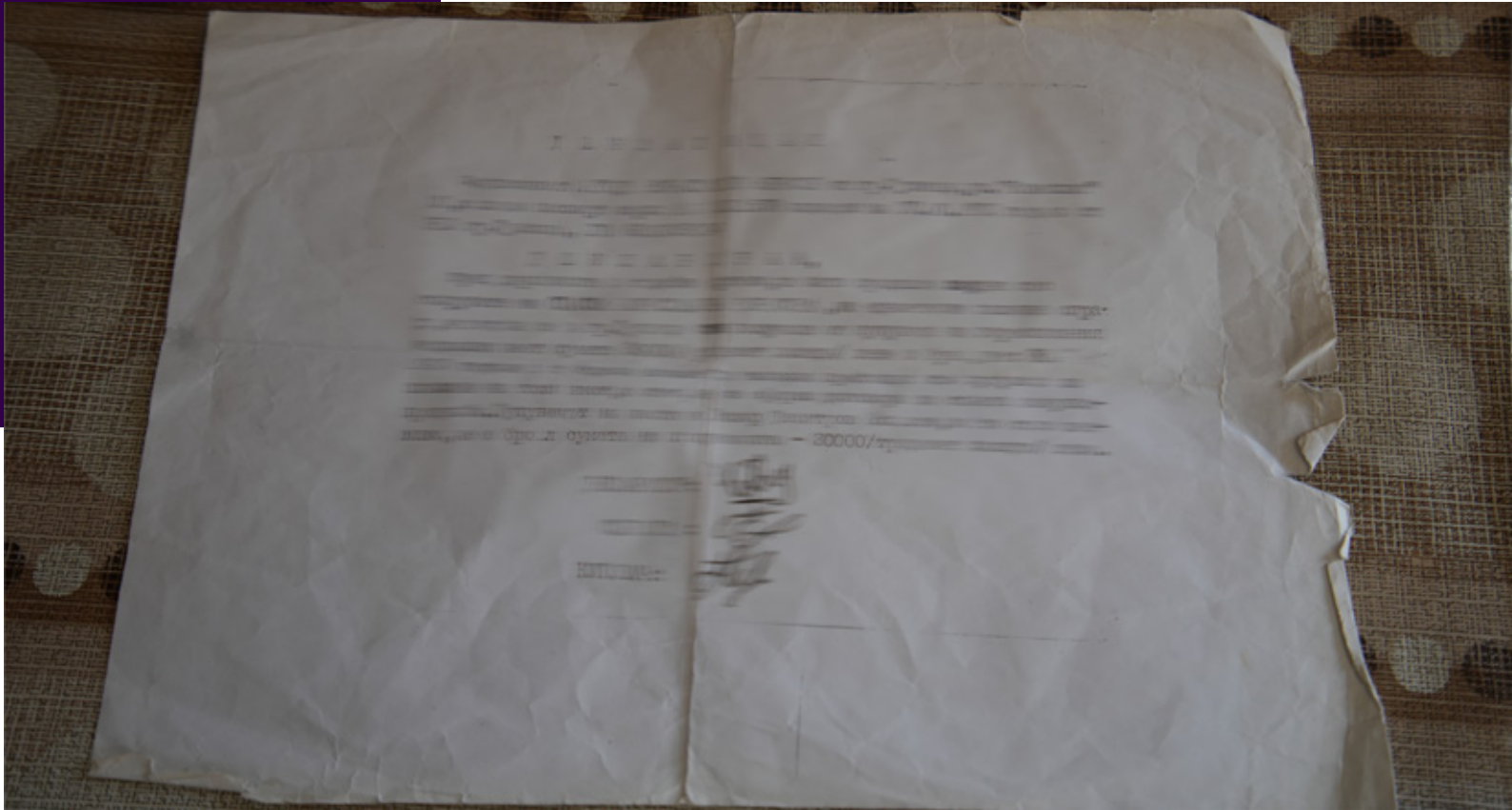


“This neighborhood used to be owned by two ethnic Bulgarians. It was a big plot of agricultural land. Two plots of this land were sold to two Roma brothers in 1928. They had large families, and more than five generations of these original settlers live in the neighborhood today.

The rest of the land still belonged to the original ethnic Bulgarian owners. When the land was nationalized during the Communist period, the state gave the owners apartments in the city. But these owners sold their land to other families, without them understanding that it was no longer theirs to sell, since it had been taken by the state.

Many families settled here to work. There was a tobacco factory near to this neighborhood. It was a good source of employment until 1993 when the privatization process began, and the factory started laying off people. By 1997 it was completely closed.

A few did manage to get the property that their families had purchased restituted to them in the 90s. But there are so many descendants, and the restituted plot is too small – just about 500 square meters. So, the regulation of this small plot is still unclear, and it’s not been included in the new zoning plan and sale of municipal land to local families”



“My grandfather bought about 600 square meters in 1931. I still have a document for the land, but it’s unfortunately not exactly on the place where my house is. Part of it is under the highway. When the state nationalized the land, they decided to build the highway and ignored the ownership. It’s possible that my grandfather did not declare it.

So, I have decided to let it go and to focus on the sale of zoned plots. I will buy the land plot under my home from the municipality and then work to regulate my house.”

POVERTY AND LACK OF RESOURCES

According to the World Bank, Roma make up nearly a quarter of all new entrants into Bulgaria's labor force, but continue to lag far behind in educational outcomes. In the EU, more than 90% of Roma children were found to live at risk of poverty in nine surveyed member states. In Bulgaria, the Roma community still has the highest percent of people living in poverty (58.8%) compared to the mainstream population (17%). The cost of formal housing is prohibitive for impoverished families, leading them to settle in informal or illegal settlements where housing is more affordable, but substandard.



PENKA, LUKOVITSA SETTLEMENT, PESHTERA

“I was born here. My parents were too. We lived together until my son was born 22 years ago and then I moved in with my mother-in-law. She’s also lived her whole life in this neighborhood. Right now, six adults and one young child live in two rooms.

I’ve been working as a street sweeper for 17 years, and I’m on a labor contract. My son is married, and the youngest child is his. He’s five months old. My son is working abroad – in Germany and other places. He works on a crew to demolish houses and he saved up money to buy this plot of land. He wants a place of his own for his family and he plans to keep working abroad. Everything is so expensive now, and he said he wants to scrape some more money together to build the house now that he has the land.

Why here? Because it’s legal. He’s afraid to invest elsewhere. What if they demolish what he builds? We know some people who built and then the house was demolished. He wants to feel secure. We just want to legalize the house and have our own place. That’s it.”



LIMITED STATE SUPPORT

Roma communities in Bulgaria often receive limited support from the government in terms of housing assistance and social services. This lack of support contributes to the existence of informal settlements as Roma families struggle to find affordable and adequate housing options.

More than 3000 Roma homes were demolished between 2017 – 2020. Bulgaria still does not require municipalities to provide alternative housing to families who have been evicted when their home is demolished. This creates instability for the family, especially children, and is not in compliance with European law.



LIMITED LEGAL STATUS AND DOCUMENTATION

More than 200,000 people in Bulgaria lack ID cards due to a legislative amendment, requiring that families demonstrate a legal address to obtain an ID card. Without an ID card, these individuals are effectively stateless and unable to access many public services. Without legal recognition, they also struggle to rent or purchase property legally, forcing them into informal settlements. Without a formal home, they are unable to register for a new ID card. This perpetuates a vicious cycle.



RASHKO, LUKOVITSA SETTLEMENT, PESHTERA

“My family moved here when I was eight years old – it was in 1983. We were living in one room with my grandparents and the city demolished their house and gave us a plot here. My father and his brother built two houses.

I’m living with my mother and children. There are nine of us in the house. We decided to buy the land for my son, since they have three children. Now that we own the land, we are hoping to build a house. We’ve submitted our project to construct the house and we’re ready to start building – bit by bit!

I’ve been working in construction since 1990, sometimes with a contract, sometimes without. My son helps me out and we managed to save up for the land. Our whole family pulled the money together; it’s too crowded at home, so we all decided to pitch in.

There are enormous advantages to owning a legal home. One of the biggest is that you can get an address registration. I have a big problem with this. My daughter-in-law is from Plovdiv. She’s legally married to my son, but now her ID card has expired. There are too many people registered in my house – by law a house has to provide nine square meters per person, excluding the kitchen and service rooms. There are already 16 people registered at my place, including my sister and her children. My sisters married and moved out, but their address registration stayed with us, and they can’t get it changed because they are moving to a house without a notary act.

If we build a new house, my son’s wife will be able to get a new ID card.”





RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION

Many Roma in Bulgaria have migrated from rural areas to urban centers in search of better opportunities. However, upon arrival, they often find themselves marginalized in cities, leading to the expansion of informal settlements on the outskirts.

CULTURAL FACTORS

In some cases, Roma cultural preferences for living in close-knit communities may also contribute to the formation of informal settlements. These settlements can serve as centers of Roma cultural identity and solidarity.





GERGANA, LUKOVITSA SETTLEMENT, PESHTERA

“My grandparents moved to this neighborhood. There wasn’t enough room at their parents’ house, so they got some money together and came here. My father was 13 years old when they moved here.

My parents got married 38 years ago; we still live together. My brothers are also there. There are 10 of us in the house. My husband and I are still young, and we want to build a place of our own for our children. We’ve been working hard to do this. I went to school in Bulgaria until the 5th grade and my husband never went to school. He doesn’t speak Bulgarian, just Turkish. But we found work abroad in Germany. My husband works with a group that cleans out buildings after there has been a fire or water damage. We saved up so that we could buy this land.

Why did we buy this land? We didn’t want to throw our money at something that is not legal. I want to spend it on something real, so that I can be at ease. It’s just normal to want to have a legal house, to pay for it, to pay for water, and to not have to worry that you don’t have water or electricity. My mother is sick, and I wanted to buy it so that we could be close to her. And I love Bulgaria, this is home.”



WHY THE FORMALIZATION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS MATTERS

Family and Community Stability: Homeownership provides stability, allowing families to establish roots in a community. A growing body of research suggests that stable housing may also increase a child's opportunities for educational success as the reduction of chronic, toxic stress is instrumental in a child's well-being and development.

Homeownership can lead to more stable and engaged communities, as homeowners often have a stronger interest in the well-being and upkeep of their neighborhoods. Legalizing informal assets means formalizing property rights. This provides individuals with legal protections, such as the ability to defend their property in court.

SERGEY AND ADELINA, KAVAKLIA SETTLEMENT, DUPNITSA

“We tried so many times to buy this land. But it wasn’t possible until now. When we found out that the neighborhood had been zoned and the municipality was selling plots, we decided to buy it. Now the land is ours. We’re planning to make a fence to mark our property off from our neighbors and we’re looking forward to living a normal life. We have a two-and-a-half-year-old child, and he’ll have a normal place to play.”



EQUITY-BUILDING:

Owning a home allows families to build equity over time, potentially creating a valuable asset that can be passed on to future generations. By legalizing informal assets, it becomes possible to unlock significant economic potential and by bringing these assets into the formal legal system, they can be used as collateral for loans and credit.



SERGEY AND ADELINA, KAVAKLIA SETTLEMENT, DUPNITSA

“We’re both musicians and we were able to save up enough to buy the land, but I have another house up the hill where my father and children from a prior relationship live. The plot is much larger, and we don’t have enough money to buy it. We’ve taken out quick credit before. It’s a normal thing to do if you need a larger sum, like if you want to buy a car. We have jobs, but not that kind of money! So, we’ve taken out loans from a quick lender, but not from a bank. Because if you want a loan from a bank you need to have a contract. The interest rates on quick credit are terrible, though!”



LAZAR, KAVAKLIA SETTLEMENT, DUPNITSA

“Lots of us worked in tobacco. There used to be at least 15 warehouses – I worked in one of them. Then I picked up the roofing trade from some boys. When I got married, my parents didn’t like my wife, so we left and found a rental. After that we moved to this neighborhood about 30 years ago. I bought this house from a family living here. Where were we supposed to go? There wasn’t any other place for my family to settle down. It felt like we finally had our own place. And we did pay for it. I signed a contract with the seller, and I have a declaration.

So, this will be the second time that I pay for the same piece of land. Why? Because this time I know that it’s official.

The procedure was slow, but we got a lot of help from the team. And the plot was large, so that made it expensive. But I had a little inheritance from my father and some help from my sister, which we’ll return bit by bit. I am not in debt to anyone, and I’d like to keep it that way. It’s easy enough to get a loan, but it’s far more difficult to pay it off!

Our next step is to formalize the house. I really want to wrap everything up **and transfer the ownership of the property to my daughter.** It’s true that nothing in life is certain, but if a bulldozer comes, we will have a document and I will show it. And that will be it. It’s mine; it’s not the state’s anymore.”



WEALTH BUILDING:

For many families, their home is their largest asset. As property values increase over time, homeowners can benefit from the appreciation of their home, further contributing to their financial stability. Banks and financial institutions are more likely to lend money when borrowers can offer formal collateral. This access to credit can stimulate entrepreneurship and economic growth.



ROSEN AND NIKOLINA, KAVAKLIA SETTLEMENT, DUPNITSA

“I work in construction, and we are doing well, but I don’t have a contract. My mother is a cleaner and was able to take out credit for us. We have seen the demolitions of other neighborhoods on television. It’s better to buy the land and to formalize the house. This way we can feel at ease, and we can leave our house to our children.”

Incentive for Compliance: legalizing informal assets provides an incentive for individuals to comply with regulations and pay taxes. When assets are brought into the formal system, owners are more likely to comply with legal requirements, contributing to government revenues and the overall economy.

Legalization of informal assets can help **reduce poverty** by enabling individuals and families to build wealth through property ownership and entrepreneurship. It can create pathways for social mobility and economic advancement.



Starting in 2017, the Trust for Social Achievement began its work to formalize informal settlements. TSA worked in close partnership with three municipalities to first zone informal settlements in Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, and Peshtera. In 2024, the Trust for Social Achievement also completed the construction of a sewage and water system in the Lukovitsa neighborhood in Peshtera.

To date, the Trust for Social Achievement in partnership with the Community Investment Fund Peshtera has helped municipalities to zone:

- 282 dka in Kyustendil with 1000 existing homes;
- 110 dka in Kavaklia with 156 existing homes;
- 26 dka in Lukovitsa with 65 land plots, zoned for single-family homes.

Twelve families have already purchased the land plot under their home from the municipality in Dupnitsa and 43 more are in the pipeline.

32 families have purchased their land plot from the Community Investment Fund in Peshtera.

More than 1221 families have improved housing security because of this work.





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