

Els de Groen, Member of the European Parliament from the Netherlands:

When you see the walls around the ghettos, you understand that Bulgaria has not done much for its Roma

Ms. de Groen, is the European Parliament aware of what the Attack coalition is, and what its ideas are?

A small number of MEPs are familiar with these matters. The majority underestimate the number of people who support such political parties - not only in Bulgaria, but in other countries, too. They have no access; they have not heard about certain Internet pages, they don't read Bulgarian newspapers and they don't watch the Skat cable network. So the greater part of MEPs are not well-informed. They don't know that Attack has even denied the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the French nationalist Le Pen was ostracized by the parliament without ever even going that far. On the other hand, it is not appropriate to focus our attention only on parties of this kind. We need to solve the problems and to eliminate the causes leading to them. Only then will those parties lose the basis for their existence.

Would you say that Attack is a normal right-wing political party, like the rightist parties elsewhere in Europe?

We have a few parties like Attack, but they have been banned. There are also some representatives of these parties in prison for making statements that foment hatred and unrest or deny the Holocaust. There are also people in the West who feel they have been cheated due to budget reductions - in health care, for example, or other important spheres - and they are looking for someone to blame. We, too, have those trends in our countries, but not to such a degree, and not with such extreme public statements.

Do you think that a court case should be brought against the Attack coalition and Volen Siderov for their statements?

This is an issue that needs to be examined from two sides. Before the elections, many Bulgarians said that it would be better not to discuss such a move, since Attack would not pass the four-percent threshold for getting into parliament. But television is a very powerful medium, and we shouldn't underestimate the bombardment of statements broadcast by Skat TV. I think that those television programs were even more important than the web sites. A lot of people watch them. In speaking loudly about poverty, unemployment, and privatization, Attack touched on issues that people are very sensitive about. That is a populist approach, and a very dangerous one. But if we only focus on Attack, we will not achieve anything, because we will only be concentrating on the symptoms, and not on curing the disease. And that disease is the high level of corruption and privatization, which brought massive wealth into the hands of a small number of people allowing them to buy other people. In my opinion, this is the real problem. On the other hand, even though 16 years have gone by since the change of the regime, instead of improving, the position of many people has worsened. I am concerned by the fact that there are children who do not attend school, that health care is not readily accessible, that the conditions in children's homes and those for the elderly are deteriorating, that trafficking in women and children is continuing, and that crime is on the rise.

You are drafting a resolution for the European Parliament,

condemning the fascist parties in Bulgaria and Romania...

The European Parliament is made up of 732 people. All of them come from different cultures, religions, and so on. That is its charm, but sometimes it also creates difficulties, because when you are working with dogmatic people, it is difficult to achieve a compromise. When it comes to human rights, however, there is a large majority. That was made clear by the joint resolution on the Roma. If you are sincere in your desire for a strong, united Europe, you cannot have a poor Eastern Europe ridden with a lot of problems. A strong, secure European Union does not mean having people carrying weapons in the streets, but a mutual respect, and respect for traditions. The resolution we are drafting is aimed in that direction, but it is still at a very early stage. Before anything else, political groups have to gather together and reach an agreement on it.

The periodic reports on Bulgaria's progress towards EU accession say that the Roma should be integrated, but the state has done nothing about the issue. In the concluding report, however, it says that the Copenhagen political criteria for membership have been met. Why?

If you compare the individual reports on Bulgaria, you will see identical passages in them regarding the Roma. Every year, it has been stated that despite there having been many promises and plans, real steps still need to be taken, and the delay in fulfilling the made pledges has been huge. And now, everyone is in a hurry. Those are the facts, and for that reason the early conclusion that the criteria had been met was rather strange. Bulgaria has not done enough; it has many plans, but their execution has been severely delayed. For example, there's the Framework Program for Equal Integration of the Roma in Bulgarian Society, which was adopted six years ago. When you see the walls around the ghettos, though, like the one in Kyustendil, you understand that not much has been done. You can hide the poverty that way, but you can't solve the problems that led to it.

According to surveys the segregation of the Roma in the Bulgarian education system is worse than that in any other European country. At the same time, the recommendations the European Commission do not include any clearly-stated requirement for change in this sphere.

There has already been a positive change at the Commission. More and more people of Roma origin are working there, and they have convinced us that something needs to be done. If Bulgaria and Romania join the EU, that will mean an additional nine or ten million Roma in the EU, and if the process continues, that number will reach 12-15 million. If they are well-educated, keeping in mind that in the West people are having fewer and fewer children, then we will accept these dynamic, young, educated people with open arms. But now we are not giving them a chance. That is short-sighted. In this way we are neither caring for our own future, nor theirs. Instead of solving problems, we are surrounding them with walls and hiding them. ■

Interviewed by Rositsa STOYKOVA