



SUCCESS STORY

Photography Project Keeps Communal Memory Alive

Young photographers offer outsiders an insider's peek into Roma traditions



Photo: Mustafa Sevim

The talented photographers captured the emotions of even the youngest residents of Borovets district in Kardzhali.

At the insistence of the Kardzhali Mayor, Hasan Azis, the exhibition of photos from the Roma community was put on temporary display at the Kardzhali City Hall.

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Societal prejudice persists regarding Bulgaria's Roma minority, and many non-Roma Bulgarians are unaware of Roma traditions and customs. A recent project in the town of Kardzhali in southern Bulgaria sought to bring the Roma community out of its isolation. The project preserves a visual chronicle of the colorful lifestyle and customs of the Roma who live in Kardzhali's Borovets district and identify themselves as Turkish and Muslim. Partners Bulgaria Foundation, implementer of the USAID Interethnic Interaction Program, funded the initiative.

A local company, Spektar M&L, organized photography classes for 18 people, mostly from Borovets district. For ten months the young participants learned about the history of photography, techniques of taking pictures, composition and lighting, and had practical training in shooting film and video. They went out into their community and captured simple and celebratory moments in the lives of local residents, such as children playing, women making traditional foods, and young brides preparing for their weddings.

Many of the pictures were published in the Kardzhali newspaper *Spectrum*. The best photos became an official exhibition at the community center in Borovets. The Kardzhali city website provided information about the exhibit and stimulated widespread interest, including from the mayor of the 76,000-people city, Hasan Azis. On his insistence, the exhibition was put on temporary display at the Kardzhali City Hall in July 2006, where it attracted positive feedback from visitors.

Spektar M&L owner Mladen Savov hired two of the best-performing participants in the course to work full time for his company. Mesut Ahmed was trained to be a cameraman and has already received requests to film Roma weddings. Mustafa Sevim, who previously considered photography only a hobby, gained the professional skills to work for the local newspaper as a photo reporter.

In order to become sustainable, the project intends to open a small photo lab in Borovets neighborhood to serve the needs of local inhabitants for quality photo printing, photos for official documents, weddings and other events. Mesut and Mustafa will staff the shop. Furthermore, the hugely successful photo exhibit may travel to Sofia.