



## SUCCESS STORY

### Citizenship Opens New Doors

#### Romas claim Macedonian citizenship and start new lives



Ali Mira's sister, Kamber, poses proudly with her new Macedonian citizenship documents near her home in Skopje.

***“There is hope for our family to have a better life,” says Ali Mira, now a Macedonian citizen who can receive health care and whose children can attend school.***

Telling Our Story  
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After 50 years Ali Mira finally has a place she can call home — and she hasn't even had to move. Because of a temporary amendment to Macedonia's Law on Citizenship, she and her family have become citizens.

Ali Mira's family belongs to one of the largest communities of Roma — an ethnic group often referred to as Gypsies — in Europe. They live in a settlement called Klanitza on the banks of the Vardar River in Skopje. Her life has not been easy. She moved to Macedonia from Serbia at the age of three. She grew up, married, and gave birth to her children in Macedonia. The family's daily struggle to survive meant the children spent their days collecting scrap metal and cardboard, begging and searching for food rather than attending school. But it was not just poverty that kept her children from attending school. Since the family was undocumented and considered “stateless,” they were barred from accessing education, social welfare, and employment benefits, as well as public health care.

Now, Ali is finally receiving the medical care she has needed for years and her younger children will go to school. “One of my daughters enjoys reading, and she is only nine years old,” says Ali. “I don't know how she learned, but I am happy she wants to go to school.”

The government temporarily amended the Law on Citizenship in 2002, revising naturalization requirements for long-term stateless residents. Upon hearing the news, USAID moved quickly to help this community, who otherwise might slip through the cracks. Working with U.S. legal organizations, USAID helped people with the application process and launched an information campaign. In addition, USAID and its partners provided financial assistance to those who could not afford the application fees. Finally, USAID provided funds to strengthen local Roma organizations that could continue supporting this process.

Citizenship is just the first step toward integration of Roma people into Macedonian society but it is a critical one. For many families, like Mira's, this is their first real opportunity to take part in the greater community.

Photo: ABA/CEELI/Carla Bachechi