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Desegregation of Romani Education in Bulgaria

During the past decade Romani education has always been among the problems which both governments and non-governmental organisations across Central and Eastern Europe have been trying to solve. After more than a decade, however, even the most serious, the most funded and the most comprehensive attempts to raise the educational status of Roma did not succeed. The worst tendencies affecting Romani education -- high drop-out rates, low educational achievement, and exclusion from school, persisted. The general status of Romani education did not improve, on the contrary it deteriorated. Hence, the prospects for Roma to overcome the social exclusion also dwindled.

Looking at the approaches to Romani education over these years, the explanation to this situation is simple. Most of the educational initiatives, be they governmental or non-governmental, operated within the status quo of the segregated educational systems. Purposefully or not, these initiatives have been striving to breathe life into a concept long dead -- the concept that separate can be equal. This has been taking place despite the fact that the results of the existence of separate educational systems for Roma have been all too obvious: an ever-growing number of uneducated Roma, an ever-growing number of Roma excluded from the life opportunities available for non-Roma, and an ever-deepening division along ethnic lines in society. Money and human resource have poured into the segregated schools for the Roma be they all-Romani ghetto schools or the schools for mentally handicapped, helping them to survive, keeping the Romani children there and multiplying from year to year the numbers of uneducated Roma.

In the recent years, a new movement is gaining ground in Europe. This movement has articulated segregated education of Roma as the root cause for the lack of equal educational opportunities for Roma. It is trying to channel the numerous yet haphazard initiatives for Romani education towards the dismantling of the segregated educational system. It is no wonder that the leaders of this movement are Roma who themselves enjoyed the benefits of integrated education. Their voices are becoming sharper, and their message is unequivocal -- Romani education should be desegregated. Most recently, during the Open Society/World Bank conference "Roma in an Expanding Europe", the Romani representatives of seven countries in Central and Eastern Europe addressed their governments and the international community with a declaration, stating: "In education, we want to integrate the school systems, to desegregate the schools and the classrooms, and to provide equal, and quality education to Roma in the domestic school system from preschool to university."

A serious impetus to this movement has been given by Romani non-governmental organisations which demonstrated in practice how the problem of Romani education should be dealt with. In the school year 2000-2001 the Open Society Institute Roma

Participation Program (RPP) initiated a pilot desegregation project in Vidin, Bulgaria, led by a local Romani non-governmental organisation. The goal of the project was to ensure equal education for the Romani children of the Vidin Nov Pat Romani settlement by transferring them to the Vidin's mainstream schools. The project started with the bussing of around 300 Romani children from the Romani ghetto school. This number grew in the following two years, reaching more than 700 children in the school year 2003-2004 or over 70% of all children attending school in the Romani neighbourhood of Vidin. In the meantime, the RPP supported another 6 desegregation initiatives in Bulgaria based on the Vidin model. Beyond their own value of ensuring equal education for more than 2000 Romani children in Bulgaria, these projects also have a strategic goal: They are meant to demonstrate that the desegregation of the Romani ghetto schools in Bulgaria is a feasible undertaking which, if carefully planned and executed, would not lead to social collisions or any further exclusion of Romani children from the educational system. The successful implementation of the desegregation projects in Bulgaria was used as a tool by Romani NGOs and human rights activists to pressure the Bulgarian government to take responsibility for a nation-wide desegregation process of Romani education. In other words, the grass-root desegregation initiatives were aimed at achieving a long-term, nation-wide effect on the educational status of Roma by providing a model for governmental policies on Romani education.

Currently all of this projects are supported by Roma Education Fund(REF).

For six years now, the success of the desegregation projects in Bulgaria has dispelled the fears and misconceptions accompanying the public debate about the possibility of integrating Romani children in education. Prior to the start of the Vidin desegregation project, the following misconceptions existed:

Romani parents will not allow their children to attend school outside the Romani neighbourhoods: Many people argued that because of fears of racist harassment and attacks on the Romani children in the majority environment, the Romani parents would obstruct the desegregation efforts. Another assertion was that due to their low educational aspirations, Roma are indifferent to the quality of education their children receive and would have no motivation to send them in a school offering higher quality education. The desegregation initiatives in Bulgaria, however, made obvious the fact that when Romani parents have certainty that their children will be taken good care of away from the Romani neighbourhoods, they are willing to change the all-Romani ghetto school for a better one even though it may be far away from their neighbourhood. Furthermore, it was obvious that when the Romani parents are aware of the inferior quality of the education their children would receive in the ghetto school and the disadvantages for the children, they do not object to desegregation. Moreover, many Romani parents did not need to be persuaded that their children would have a better future if they go to school together with non-Romani children; all they needed was support to transfer their children to non-Romani schools.

Romani children will not be accepted in non-Romani schools: Although such fears were not unreasonable, hostility of the non-Roma towards Roma at school proved to be possible to control and overcome. Incidents of racial harassment of the Romani children were exceptions; with the interference of the Romani supervisors placed by the Romani

NGOs at each school such incidents had been prevented and remedied when necessary and their occurrence did not discourage Romani children from continuing their education in the integrated schools.

Non-Romani parents will withdraw their children from the schools which receive Romani children: No "white flight" of any significant proportions took place. Despite the tensions in the first months after the transfer of the Romani children to the integrated schools, the non-Romani parents did not react by withdrawing their children. After the first year, the issue of non-Romani parents protesting against the higher number of Romani children in the schools was forgotten. Similar had been the reaction on the part of the teachers in the integrated schools. Although they had reservations regarding the quality of the educational process after the enrolment of the Romani children and some of them even treated Romani children in a discriminatory way, the timely and adequate interference of representatives of the Romani organisations solved these problems.

Romani children will not be able to meet the higher standards of the mainstream schools: Fears that the Romani children would fail to meet the higher standards in the integrated schools, proved unjustified. With adequate academic support most of the Romani children reached the level of their non-Romani peers and by the end of the first year had success comparable to that of the non-Romani children.

The desegregation projects in Bulgaria operated in the specific context of educational segregation existing in this country. This context is characterised by the prevalence of all-Romani ghetto schools based in the Romani ghettos. The Bulgarian model can be implemented in other countries where ghetto schools exist like Romania and Slovakia. Other forms of segregated education such as the special schools for mentally handicapped children or the all-Romani classes in the mainstream schools require different types of action. The Bulgarian model, however, provides some essential rules, which are applicable to all countries, regardless of the patterns of segregation existing in them:

1. Romani-led desegregation action: Everywhere Romani organisations took the lead in carrying out the desegregation activities. This made possible building relations of trust with the Romani parents and eventually persuading them to enrol their children in the schools outside the Romani settlements. The role models that the Romani individuals themselves presented to the community were also important for the process. The leading role of the Romani organisations in the desegregation process has also a far-reaching effect of promoting the value of Romani participation in the implementation of policies which affect the Romani community. It was important to show to the public that Roma are taking responsibility for decisions affecting their lives.

2. All inclusive desegregation campaign and action: The process of desegregation has a direct impact on a number of groups in society. Apart from Romani parents and children, desegregation would also enter the lives of non-Romani parents, children and teachers. All these groups should be prepared to experience the process and participate in it. Romani parents and children; non-Romani parents and children; teachers in the integrated schools and teachers in the segregated schools, were all approached separately

and well in advance of the beginning of the desegregation actions. In the first place, it was necessary to persuade Romani parents to enrol their children in the mainstream schools. Secondly, the desegregation initiatives had to overcome the resistance of non-Romani parents to the placement of Roma in the schools where there were no Roma up to that moment. Thirdly, successful desegregation of Roma can take place if the school environment where the Romani children will go is prepared to accept them. Even if the school formally accepted to enrol Romani children, teachers and non-Romani children have to be sensitised and involved in activities which challenge the stereotypes towards Roma.

3. Continuous support for the Romani children transferred from segregated into integrated schools: Given the inferior quality of the education that Roma received in the segregated schools, it is not realistic to expect them to achieve the same results as their non-Romani peers without any support. The mere transfer of the children in the integrated schools without any further care for their adaptation to the new school could be counterproductive and undermine the success of the desegregation process. Academic support should come from the school itself in the form of supplementary school programs.

As a result of the desegregation process we already have several documents adopted by the government:

- National Strategy for Integration of the Minorities in Education
- Governmental Action Plan for Implementation of the Decade of Roma Inclusion – where the Desegregation is a main priority in the sphere of education.
- On the other hand there are governmental initiatives in Romania and Hungary and in Slovakia, Serbia and Croatia at NGO level.

It is clear that it is in the public interest to do away with a system which reproduces inequality and dependency of large groups of people and thus increases the burdens on the whole society. The new movement for desegregation of Romani education is committed to make explicit for the public and for the politicians this interdependence of the educational status of Roma and the prosperity of the whole society and to mobilise political will at different levels to desegregate Romani education. We are aware that desegregation of Romani education is not the only solution to the problems facing Roma in education. Yet desegregation is the only solution that makes a difference – the difference between good education and inferior education; the difference between life with dignity and life in humiliation; and finally, the difference between equality and inequality.