

# Briefing :: Documentary Screening and Briefing on Roma School Desegregation

BRIEFING

Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission

Panel Discussion Following a Screening of "Our School"

Introduction and Moderator:

Erika Schlager,  
Counsel for International Law,  
Helsinki Commission

Panelists:

Costel Bercus,  
Chair,  
Roma Education Fund Board

Serban Brebenel,  
Embassy of Romania

Mona Nicoara,  
Director and Producer

The Panel Discussion Was Held From 3:00p.m. To 4:00 p.m. in Room 1539  
Longworth  
House Office Building, Washington, D.C., Erika Schlager, CSCE, Moderating

Wednesday, June 29, 2011

ERIKA SCHLAGER: I think everyone can see why this film won the Best Feature Film at the SilverDocs documentary festival this past week, and I want to thank

Mona again. (Applause.)

I'm just going to say a couple of words before we have some discussion - please have a seat - before we have a little bit of a discussion, and then I'd like to have a more open discussion. There's a mic back here that does work, and so we'll have an opportunity to take questions from people here.

My name is Erika Schlager. I work as counsel for international law at the Helsinki Commission. I wanted to say how very pleased I am that we were able to have this film screening here. I am very grateful that we have Costel Bercus, who has come from Europe, where he is chair of the Roma Education Fund

- very grateful that he has come here to be with us and speak about these important issues. We also have Serban Brebenel from the Romanian embassy with us to share with us any comments he'd like after Costel speaks. And I would add that Serban and the Romanian embassy have been great friends to the Helsinki Commission, not only as interlocutors on issues relating to the Roma minority but also on a range of issues in the OSCE region, and we very much appreciate that friendship.

And then of course Mona Nicoara, our fabulous director and producer, who has brought us this film, which puts a spotlight on these issues.

I also want to mention just a couple other people that are here with us: Adna Karamehic from the Open Society Institute. And OSI of course has a very long-standing engagement on Romany issues and helped facilitate, not only for this event, but some other events we've had, Roma speakers from Europe to come over.

We're very pleased to have Cristiana Grigore here. If you look at the materials we have out front, I did include the New York Times editorial that she wrote last fall. So thank you for joining us today.

Dan Nadel and Erin Spitzer from the Department of State in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Assistant Secretary Posner, who is in Europe right now, is a member of the Helsinki Commission, and his office has been extremely supportive of work on Romany human rights issues, so thank you for being here and the work that you all are doing on those issues.

And Catherine Pajic - I'm sorry - from NDI - National Democratic Institute, which has done some very important initiatives focusing on Romany political participation. So thank you all and everyone for being here today.

I did want to mention one other handout that's out front. It's a copy of a resolution adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in 2002, so that's almost a decade ago, and it's a resolution that was introduced by the chairman of the Helsinki Commission, Congressman Christopher Smith, and it's specifically on the subject of Roma education.

And I think it shows a couple of things: One, that this is not a new subject. It's a subject we've been talking about for a while now. That resolution talks about desegregation issues, it talks about the importance of early childhood education, and it talks about adult education issues. And I'm sorry to say that we haven't seen more progress in the last 10 years. If you look at the materials from the Roma - European Roma Rights Centre, you can see we've had a number of cases - and the European Court on Human Rights, but there's still a lot more work to do.

Now I'm going to ask Costel to make comments about this general subject, drawing on the breadth and depth of experience that he has working on Roma

education issues, and then ask our other colleagues to speak before turning it over. But I guess if there's one last observation I'd make before turning it over to Costel - is that this film is set in Romania, and it's about Roma education issues, but there's really something very universal in what's portrayed here.

As a parent of two children, you know, I think that there's nothing, you know, that I have seen in Washington politics that can hold a candle to the bare-knuckle street fighting of a parent-teacher meeting. You know, parents everywhere want their kids to have a good education. And so the cases described in the European Roma Rights Centre materials come from the Czech Republic, they come from Greece, they come from Croatia, and any day of the week that you open newspapers in the United States, you'll see stories about how people are struggling or fighting over education issues here.

So we do want to focus on specific challenges that relate to Romany minorities, but I think the desire for people to have a good education for their children and to give them a better future than they had themselves is really - really speaks to something universal in parents. Thank you.

COSTEL BERCUS: Thank you, Erika. Just before presenting a few numbers about the education of - the situation of Roma in Europe and the - some indicators about education in some countries, I'd like to thank Mona for the great work that she has done in putting in all these images and her work over the years to show just a small piece of reality. And I think the story that we've just seen - it's actually the story of many others, a hundred or thousand of childrens that are living in different countries in Europe.

Now I know how many of you are familiar with the situation of Roma in Europe. I'm coming from Romania myself, and I'm the chairperson of the Roma Education Fund, which is a foundation established by the World Bank and Open Society Institute in 2005 to address specifically the education needs that Roma are - Roma children are needing - needed and to overcome the education gaps that do exist between Roma children and the rest of the childrens in the - in the majority society.

The foundation works throughout decade from 2005, and we hope that we will work beyond 2015. We are doing - which - we offer support for project and programs at all education levels, including from the very early stage - early childhood development, primary, secondary and tertiary education. And since the establishment, we already have spent about 20 millions euro in supporting this intervention.

We need to ensure an inclusive education, meaning that we are - we do support a lot of desegregation programs. You may ask me later how that goes in some countries.

But just a few numbers about the Roma, a minority in Europe: About 10 million of - 10 million of people are living in different countries in Central, Eastern, Southeastern European countries. Maybe I will name few of them: Bulgaria, 750,000 people, which is about 10 percent of the population; Czech Republic, close to 200,000 people.

Of course these are estimates number, and maybe I should just mention that there is a quite big difference between the official data from the official census and the estimates, due to a number of reasons why Roma do not assume the ethnic identity.

Hungary, about six - close to 600,000, which is 6 percent of the population.

Romania - the picture that we just saw - is maybe the country with the largest number of Roma population. It's close to 2 million people; it's about close to 7 percent. The entire population - the size of Romanian population is 23 million people.

Macedonia, 240,000, which is 12 percent.

Serbia, 400,000.

Slovakia, 500,000.

So the estimates in - the estimates of Roma population in most of the European countries are close to 10 million people.

Now some indicators about the education and the situation of Roma children from the education point of view - for example, high share of never-enrolled children in the system.

In Bulgaria, children who do not enroll in any kind of education, it's about 15 percent. So they are left - totally left out of the school.

The same data are similar with the Romanian situation.

Twenty-five percent in Serbia - 25 percent of the childrens, Roma children, never enroll in any form of education.

Participation in preschool: Again, under 7 percent of Roma children participate in the preschool education in Serbia, compared with 20 percent in Romania and less than 20 percent in Hungary and about 35 percent in Bulgaria. So only 35 percent of the children age - population of Roma children, that population, attend kind of a form of preschool education.

Transition from primary to secondary education: In Hungary, only 20 percent of Roma children are going to secondary education, and some of those are

finishing  
or graduating secondary education. And very low number of them are finishing  
higher education.

Completion rate - maybe I will give you some data about the segregation,  
because this was the subject of our film.

In Bulgaria, between 44 to 70 percent of Roma children are learning in  
segregated schools, and 51 of pupils in special education system are of Roma  
origin. So this is only in Bulgaria.

In Hungary, up to 25 percent of Roma in segregated primary school, and in  
catch-up classes, remedial classes, over 70 percent of the children who are  
in  
this, catch-up classes, are of Roma origin.

In Romania, between 20 to 45 percent of Roma children are studying in a  
segregated environment, either schools or classes or special education, as it  
was reflected in the film.

In Slovakia, over 60 percent of children that are studying in schools for  
children with mental disabilities are of Roma origin. So there is an  
overrepresentation of Roma children placed wrongly by assessment, which are  
mainly done by the psychologist or by teachers in class, are wrongly placed  
in  
schools for children with mental disabilities.

Serbia - we are on the way to collect data.

So these are just few information about the magnitude of the phenomenon that  
do  
exist in most of the European countries. And I'm very aware that a number of  
initiatives are - have been taken over the past years, but not very much  
progress has been done.

As we saw in the film, over the years, the solution - and the children was  
ending up in being sent to the schools for children with disabilities, which,  
from our view, this is the most aggressive form of discrimination. And this  
is  
the most, so to say - I mean it's - I've been visiting a number of schools in  
Romania, and some of those were supported with the preaccession funds during  
the time that Romania tried to catch up with the political condition and to  
improve the situation economically, socially, and Roma was within the  
political  
agenda, one of the priority. And some money was allocated by the European  
Union, visiting maybe hundreds of schools during that period. And the movie  
was - rightly reflect the situation. There was so much investment in the  
structure, in the infrastructure of the schools, and very less in the  
quality,  
very less in working with the teachers.

You notice the difference between the two teachers, and you notice how that's  
the first behave and operate with the same mentality that at the end reflects  
the overwhelming mentality of Romanians: How do they behave? How do they  
think about the Gypsies, yeah? And very small minority of teachers that are  
actually looking not to the colors or to the ethnicity of the children but

looking to them as human beings and trying to give - you know, to give help. Unfortunately, this is, again - it's a very small minority, but we have to keep our optimism that we - working with the - with teachers, we can - in this way, we can help more and more childrens.

In 2003 - and Mona is very aware about that case too - where we start monitoring the segregation in Romania and trying to build cases for court and taking the schools and taking the minister of education to court, there was one case - that was the first case that we - we take it to the court, and it was a decision that this is a discrimination, and this is one of the abuse that the states are doing against children. And as a matter of act, the school has to ensure inclusion and, you know, make sure that all children have access to the same quality and the same school facilities, no matter of ethnical or religious background.

And I remember during the interviews with the parents and with the children, one children actually was saying what Alin or Beni was saying: Everything that he wanted, nothing else than being together with the other kids, being in the same room, having the better facilities and playing with the other kids.

So it's not a big wish for - it shouldn't be. But actually, in reality, it is very difficult to achieve, because I was asking him: I mean, if you will meet the minister of education, what actually you will ask for him? Do you have any wish? And he was saying: Nothing. I just want to have better tables, school table, the room to be warmer - because during the winter, they was placed in a different class without windows and it was really cold - and everything that I want is to be with the others and nothing else. This is my wish.

So that makes me actually very motivated to do something for overcoming the situation. And I can tell you from the positive side, because we are - we are maybe in 2011 - and there are progress since 2003 until today. Minister of education has taken a number of steps to improve legislation and to make clear to each schools and county inspectorate that the segregation is forbidden. So we are not lacking legislation, we are not lacking political will.

What we are lacking and you notice in the movie is actually the public support, is the school principals who do not show any support of making sure that all kids are treated equally: first of all, teachers community - it's another critical factors in bringing this change; mayor - it's - again, I will say,

the  
one that he should leads and make sure that school are open to everyone; and  
the last but not least, the community, the non-Roma community. So these are  
the important actors to translate the existing legislation into practice,  
because this is what we are lacking after so many years.

I remember in 2003, the government, even they don't want to accept that we  
are  
facing this problem. They don't want to accept the reality; they deny it.  
So  
this is the first phase.

Second phase is that they acknowledge, yes, indeed, sorry, we have a problem;  
let's not longer hide that we have a problem.

Third phase is that, OK, what shall we do? And they elaborate legal norms,  
they elaborate paper, they elaborate ministerial order, they organize  
conference, they organize training with the school inspectorate.

But from this moment till - that we actually go back to Beni's or Alin's  
stories, it's - remain a huge distance, because the critical actors are again  
those that I already mentioned: parents, school principals, mayor and the  
community, the rest of the community, the majority community.

So our foundation is trying - I mean, we're working quite intensively in  
Bulgaria. Unfortunately, the process lies on the initiative of civil  
society,  
so there is no - not yet the governmental force to engage the institution and  
this process after 10 years. Romania, I describe already. Slovakia, from my  
view - maybe I have more information - for my view is the worst case.

And then Czech Republic is the situation where we have a decision of the  
European Human Rights Court condemning and sanctioning what the Czech  
government is doing. And after two years of this decision, the Czech  
government hasn't done anything to implement this decision, which is actually  
undermining the rule of law, undermining the obligation that the Czech  
government has towards the international laws, because - what we are talking?  
We are talking about the Gypsies. How shall the Czech government respect the  
law when we are talking the second-class citizens? Or are the Gypsies the  
citizens of our country?

So these are maybe dilemmas that the Czech politician has to face by taking  
steps to fulfill and comply with the international obligation and with the  
international laws, because that was a violation of children's rights in  
accessing equally the education public system, at the end.

So just - I want to go farther - I can continue speaking about the problems  
in  
other countries as well, but I think we'll carry on. Romania, Hungary, Czech  
Republic and Slovakia has very similar - has the most similarities when it  
comes to how they treat childrens - first, how they treat Roma childrens. So  
if we take out the ethnicity, it's about that no matter of who these  
childrens  
are, no matter who allegiance they have, state has to ensure that all  
children  
has access in the same manner and to the same quality, to the same facilities

as all the others.

So actually, it's the states - are the state actors. I'm not trying to blame that it's, wherever, prime minister or the minister of education, because the complexity of this problem are based on different stakeholders. Who is the one managing the schools? Who is the one managing the community? And what is the reason? Why? It was one of the questions of the old men, the parents - he doesn't know why it's like this.

So we know - we have some answer and we know why it's happening, because most of the majority of population - for example in Romania, more than 70 percent of - this was a data from opinion polls - they don't want to have anything to do with the Gypsies, neither to have them as neighbors. So this shows how tolerant or intolerant the mainstream society are towards the Roma people in European countries.

So I will stop here by giving the other speaker a chance. And then maybe we can take some questions.

MS. SCHLAGER: Thank you so much. And Serban, did you want to add some comments or observations here?

SERBAN BREBENEL: Just a couple of very brief ones. Thank you so much, Mona, for putting this movie together. Perhaps like some of you, I was very happy that the lights went off and I was able to sit tearfully in my corner from time to time at some of the more candid scenes.

Costel has made some excellent points, and I only wanted to re-emphasize some of them and sort of make a couple of other comments.

I think one of the things that this movie greatly shows us is the fact that it's not always enough to have a legislative framework. And it's not always enough to have the commitment of the central government to do this and to implement this decision and to work on this. And it's not always enough to have the appropriate central programs and the funding that are directed towards implementing, you know, such solutions. It always sort of trickles down to the local level, and as you said, you know, to the school director and to the teachers and to the willingness of the teachers to commit to what they are there for: to teach the children, no matter what their ethnicity and level of knowledge is.

And I think, in the movie, one of the scenes that made the most impact on me was how two different teachers, addressing the same group of children with the same intellectual capacity and the same knowledge and so on, obtained different results. So basically, the end of your analysis is down to the individuals and how they're able to work on these issues at ground level, because it's - you



know, the political commitment is there and so on, but you got to have, you know, the people there who can actually do these things. And I think - I think this is something that I really liked in the movie, the way it's shown.

Another comment I would make was how the movie has showed - has shown us that discrimination is not something that you're born with; it's something that is societal, and it's community-based, and you learn it from the people that you live with. So we have Boga, who is, you know, 7 or 8 years old; he has no discrimination towards the Roma children, because he is at a young age where he's - he has not lived sufficient in the society to learn that.

So I think that's - one of the things that we should be doing and the Romanian government is doing is sort of intensify programs that are aimed to fight discrimination. And this obviously goes from, you know, bodies such as the National Council for Combating Discrimination that we have and that tackle cases of discrimination at national level, to write down projects on - you know, at local levels that aim to fight this.

And I think another point that I would make is Costel was very keen and very right to emphasize the fact that training is necessary for teachers. And we have several programs in the last couple of years, including a program that had school mediators trained working in schools to facilitate integration of Roma children and working with the Roma and non-Roma communities to do that. But always you want to have people as trained as possible to be able to do the right things in their place of work and so on.

So finally, I would say that the movie has also shown us that there is this very intrinsic relationship between the economic condition of the Roma communities and their level of education, and that these are sort linked both ways, as I see it from the movie, especially at a point where some of the Roma children can't complete their homework because of the economic condition that they live in. And on the other hand, you think about the fact that if, you know, they don't do their homework and they don't continue their education, this is going to affect their economic situation in the future. So I think that the way that these two elements are interlinked is something that is - is really something we need to work on as well.

So I think these are - just be a couple of points that I - that I wanted to make, and I'll let Mona take over.

MS. SCHLAGER: If I could just - before Mona starts, just to note: We do have a microphone back here. After Mona has made a few comments, I would invite anyone who has questions to ask them from the microphone and identify yourself.

And I already have a couple of questions, so if I don't see anyone at the mic when Mona is done, I'll start with my own. Thank you.

MONA NICOARA: I'll try to be brief and just give you a little bit of background of where this film came from and how it came about.

My own background is also as a human rights activist. Costel indicated that a little bit. We - in a way, we started working on the issue of Roma education around the same time and sort of grew up and educated ourselves about the issue around the same time.

And as we continued to work on the issue of Roma education, we realized that working with principles and working with statements of principle is sort of insufficient. It's one thing to work on the big picture and it's another thing to actually understand what these principles look like in practice. I'm myself a parent of two kids, so I became gradually interested in finding out what exactly segregation means for those kids most affected by it and what exactly integration means for all of the kids affected by it, because this is not an issue that affects only Roma kids; it also affects my kids, majority kids. It - the absence of integration means actually that we are poorer culturally, emotionally; that our kids grow without actually knowing how to deal with difference, without actually having friends that are different from them and that can enrich their lives.

So - because I have - I had some prior experience working in film, I kind of - when I - and I found out that there is batch of schools that were going to be integrated in my own home country, Romania, starting in 2005, I decided to just take a camera and see, almost as an experiment, what this thing called integration looks like up close.

We started filming in - I think it was May 2006. We thought we were going to film a story of success. We did not know what the film was going turn out like.

We also thought we were going to film only for one year. It turned into four.

And what we found was eventually sort of a primer - unfortunately, was a primer to the different kinds of discrimination and segregation that children experience in school. You have basically the whole range from, you know, separate classes, separate buildings, being set up in the last row and ignored by teachers, being sent to a special school for children with disabilities. It was - it was shocking and it was very disheartening to witness this in a very personal manner over a period of four years and to feel like you're witnessing - you're sitting there with a camera as time passes for these children and as an entire generation squanders the opportunity of using tremendous social capital and a tremendous cultural capital to its own advantage.

I do not know, actually, how representative statistically what we found is, but

I know that it's - as a Romanian and as an activist, I know that it's symptomatic. And that is more saddening, actually, than statistics. And it's symptomatic, precisely, of, you know, cultural issues.

I - there's no - there are no barriers to actually finding political and large picture solutions eventually, but there is a lot of - there is a lack of know-how at the local level. There is a lot (sic) of know-how about how to distribute and monitor resources when it comes to education for Roma. And there is - there is a lack of understanding about how to change our own cultures to actually make lasting change possible.

I'll stop here.

MS. SCHLAGER: Question. Please.

Q: Yeah. Sorry. Good afternoon. My name is Alison Hillman. I'm with the Open Society Foundation's Disability Rights Initiative. And it's striking to me how everything that all three of you have said - you know, children want to be included; children want to have quality education, quality teachers, quality classrooms - you could take out "Roma children" or "minority children" and insert "children with disabilities." And it's striking to me how you talk about inclusive education but then seem not to include children with disabilities. At least that's how I heard what you were saying. So that's just a comment to start with.

And then, wondering - with the Disability Rights Initiative and our colleagues at the Justice Initiative who have been very involved in this work, we've been working with them to finesse some of the advocacy language that they've used recently, so that - kind of have a "do no harm" - so that advocacy around Roma rights doesn't mean that, oh, they're segregated in second-class schools with those children with disabilities, you know. (Chuckles.) So that's one thing. And I guess it strikes me that if there were no schools for children with disabilities, we wouldn't have to be talking about having children who are from minorities being segregated into second-class schools.

So - and now a question, after my - (chuckles) - just wondering if the Roma Education Fund and Helsinki Commission are interested in or are actively building bridges to the disability rights community to be able to work on this issue in a coalition and really get at segregated schools, and that everyone has a right to be included in education, including children with disabilities.

And just to comment quickly on Serban's point that teachers are being taught to include everyone, you know, and to include Roma children and teach to Roma children, I mean, that's what we say from the disability rights movement as

well. Teachers need to be trained to teach to the range of human experience. And we are all - we all benefit when people are included. So I'll just stop there. It's -

MR. BERCUS: Maybe I will - I will start with asking to your comments. That there is - we have to be very correct and honest too, when we advocate for an issue. First, we have to have the understanding that those children are not mentally disabled. It's not to harm anybody. It's not to say that we are thinking about children with disabilities as being second-class children.

The

situation in Slovakia, that these children are placed in schools where they shouldn't be placed, there is assessments - there are assessments made by psychologists - wrongly - in order to find a way out of these children to be placed in schools for children with mental disabilities. So there are so many

situation that people wanted to confuse.

And this is not - I mean, it's sort of saying - from my point of view, it's undermining the role. It's actually - how to explain to you? At least from my

view, teachers, some teachers, the schools that I visited, they tell to me that

these children, they don't have any problem. But because they are - because they are coming from families which is not good families, they are placed in schools for children with mental disabilities. And they receive some incentives, and it's good for them because they are caring differently than the

others.

Now, the question is, do we agree to place children who do not have any problems, mentally speaking or physically speaking, in schools which are maybe

made for children who have these problems? Initially, the policy of Romanian government was to include the children with disabilities joining the mainstream

schools, and to have quota saying in the class we might have one or two children, and the working, let's say, efforts of the teacher would be much more

easy, and helping by other childrens to help the others.

So this was the concept. But I haven't seen children with disabilities being included in the mainstream schools, even though there was a clear policy.

But

I haven't - I've seen so many children who do not have any problems, from physical or mental problems, being placed wrongly in schools who are dedicated

for children with these problems. So I think - it's not to harm anybody.

But

do we accept that children, just because they are ethnically Roma, we have to place them - as it is in Slovakia; over 60 percent of Roma are placed wrongly in schools for mentally disabled children.

MS. SCHLAGER: Mona, did you want to -

MS. NICOARA: Yeah, yeah. I'm - I think - I think you're pointing to a very important problem. There's a general - inclusion is not really in the

vocabulary of, you know, education reform in Eastern Europe, and it really should be. And it's really an area where I think the Roma activists and disability rights activists could work together very well.

These schools don't fail just Roma children. They fail children with disabilities as well, from what I've seen. And there is - if anything, there is a move towards actually increasing segregation rather than increasing inclusion that I've seen over the years. And there's an understanding that the existence, in large numbers, of these vast networks of special schools, which are, you know, changing names in each country.

Now they're called, like, different things. They're like Practical Schools, called in the Czech Republic, or in Romania they're - I think there are call centers for inclusive education, which is a good thing because they're supposed to give support the mainstream schools for inclusion. However, they function as autonomous schools, and they have their own students, and basically it's the same deal with a different name.

And I think that these schools need very careful looking at by both sides. I think they fail in different ways, different populations. But they - my understanding - from what I've seen, my own experience -- is that they do fail absolutely everybody there and that they're in careful need of looking at.

MS. SCHLAGER: If I could just add one more observation on this. The - probably the most important desegregation case that's gone to the European Court on Human Rights, D.H. Lawrence and Others versus the Czech Republic, involved this practice of systematically channeling Romani children into so-called special schools. And I think it's important to understand, as I think Costal has suggested, that when you look at segregation of Roma there are a variety of segregation mechanisms.

And so it may be just flat out completely separate schools - segregated schools. It may be a single school with segregated classrooms, you know, where all the Roma kids are, you know. It may be putting them in the back row, and sort of within the classroom. One version is channeling Romani kids into the special schools. So all of these things need to be addressed together.

I think one of the things that came out as a byproduct of the D.H. case was that people also started to look at - a little bit more critically at the special school system. And in the - among parents of other children - not Romani kids, but other kids whose kids were being segregated out into these schools - I think people were saying, is this the best way we can serve our children? So I think you separately have this movement of questioning this kind of - you know, is this the best way to achieve educational goals?

In the Czech Republic, I think of the most interesting things I learned about the special schools was that, until fairly late in the 1990s, if you were - once you were channeled into a special school, you were prohibited by law from entering any - from gaining entry into any licensed profession - anything

that  
required a license: mechanic, barber, whatever - by law. So it was no  
longer  
a question of your qualifications. And I think it really illustrated to me  
that this was not about the abilities of people, but really a way to keep  
people in certain places.

So I think these two things are going on. And I think they can be  
complementary, and I think that's what you're trying to suggest, but I think  
we  
also have to understand that even if this kind of segregation of children  
with  
disabilities ends, we still have to address other forms of segregation of  
Roma  
at the same time because that's just one of the tools. So I think - I think  
we're really probably on the same page.

Catherine, did you have a question?

Q: I did. Catherine Messina Pajic. I'm with the National Democratic  
Institute.

Thank you so much, Erika, for screening the film. This was amazing.

And thank you, Mona, for giving us the film, which was really tremendously  
moving as well as educational.

I thought I'd just briefly address the last comment. The National Democratic  
Institute not only works with Roma across Central and Eastern Europe, but  
we've  
also started working with civil society groups that represent people with  
disabilities, the LGBT community, and other sort of groups that are  
discriminated against in society. And we have encouraged different types of  
civil society organizations to try to cooperate on specific pieces of  
legislation where they might share a common interest. And what we find  
throughout all of Eastern Europe is that those kinds of coalitions across  
sectors can be really difficult to bring together; that I think it's just not  
something that has been traditionally pursued.

You know, for example, working with women's groups, you would think there  
might  
be a natural interest in trying to help represent Romani women who are often  
sort of doubly discriminated against. And yet there are so many layers of  
discrimination within different societies that that often just doesn't  
happen.  
They don't really come together. But I think it's something that we're  
trying  
to help people understand is a more effective way of getting their issues  
addressed, if you have more voices coming into coalition.

I had a question I guess for maybe Mona, Costel or anyone who's interested in  
taking it on. What struck me in the film was the almost passivity of the  
parents of the Roma children. And I think it's something that's not  
necessarily unique to Roma culture, but in a lot of East European societies I  
think people are not necessarily used to going out and representing their own  
interests politically.

But I wonder if you had a sense of any of the parents really feeling sort of outraged or thinking there's something - you know, they should go talk to the mayor or they should talk to the school director. I know that the education mediators program is a really terrific way of getting parents and schools to understand each other better. But in terms of kind of organizing parents into what Erika referred to at the beginning - you know, these parent-teacher associations where parents really, you know, stand up for their kids - it just seems like that doesn't happen very much. And I wonder if you have any thoughts on how to try to motivate parents to understand how they can hold the schools and the local officials accountable.

MS. NICOARA: I'm going to take sort of the part of the question that's specific to the film, and then let Costel, maybe, answer the larger question.

The parents are very motivated to send their kids to a very good school. They would like that to happen very much. And they would like nothing better than to be empowered - to have their children to be empowered citizens.

Now, they themselves, however, have never experienced empowerment of any kind, at least in this particular town. And for them it is very difficult to even imagine actually taking action on their own and getting organized. And I think this is an area where, like, it's extremely important to have, you know, a lively civil society that can help along, to have role models, to have a sense of possibility. But in the absence of models, of precedence, of a history of empowerment, it is impossible for these people to actually fathom how they could begin to do that.

And I think it's - you know, the passivity is not something that they adopted consciously, but is something that has been built into their own history and into their own identity at this point. And it's something that we - you know, all of us need help to represent ourselves better. And I think that people who have been disenfranchised for generations need even more help to be able to do that.

MR. BERCUS: From my side, it's a - so to say - I think, communities do exist in countries, in many countries, and the situation is different, given there are a number of similarities also there are a number of differences. I have seen communities where parents' motivation in supporting children education is very high. And I can name some localities that I have been visiting and parents that I met, and also places where parents are losing hopes.

They don't see an added value in education because they haven't access to education too; they are lacking education. So they don't believe that - you

know, children should go to school maybe primary or not more than secondary. And then he or she have to find its own way in the life. This is what I hear sometimes from meeting with parents.

Now, indeed it's true that the Roma mobilization - you know, the Roma, the self - the way that Romas organize themselves, it's very low from any point of view, including political view - from the political point of view. And you are very aware about these realities; that actually Roma do not make a big difference for themselves when it comes to go for voting. They are indeed vulnerable by being easily sell or buy votes in the political campaigns, but they do not make a difference when it comes to mobilized politically around one organization. You know that there are a lot of fights between Roma and politicians. And this is unfortunately the situation, the reality.

So I think parents, if you - we have a study, recently was published, on early childhood development. And the question of the study was, if you were to send your children earlier than primary or preschool to care center or to have day education, what will be the answer? And 98 percent of the parents in four countries that were asked the question was answering that they would like to send their kids at a very early age to have access to education, even at a care center or the preschool education.

So it's actually contradicting the opinion that Roma, they don't want to send the kids to school. In fact, they do want. But we saw the condition of the - of the schools today. I mean, even if they send it to the segregated ones, or even they don't have any facilities, or the school facilities are far away from the - from the community.

MR. BREBENEL: Can I just add something? (Comes on mic.) Thank you.

I thought there was actually a moment in the movie when the community was empowered to go after something that was a priority for them, and that was I think the moment when they were talking with the major about the lack of water in their community. And I thought that was the - obviously, probably the fact that somebody was filming the scene greatly helped - but the fact that they were able to stand there and sort of ask for water, that moment then, because they needed it and because the kids are going to school and so on. And that immediately produced results: they brought water there.

So I'm probably nuancing what Mona has said, that there is no empowerment in the Roma communities, and probably am thinking that, you know, there are cases when this can happen. So -



MS. SCHLAGER: Christina (ph), did you want to make a comment? Or could you -  
could I actually -

Q: Actually, I wanted to add something to -

MS. SCHLAGER: If you could use the microphone is my only request. Thanks.

Q: OK. (Comes on mic.)

So I want to add the comment that this - the question that was mentioned before. So I'm Romani myself, and I set education policy. And I asked myself the same thing when I saw the movie, you know, when I saw that father who was so powerless. And I also visited a community - a very similar community - when I went to Romania a few weeks ago. And what I realized, that these people take their condition as a given. And even to be outraged, even to be furious, it's a form of empowerment - like to think that it's not right not to have access to education, not to have access to your basic conditions.

And that was so striking for me. That was so striking for me because one of my questions was, do you hide your ethnicity? I was particularly interested in that because I hide my ethnicity for a long time. And they were like, no, they didn't even think about that. So I realized, wow - (chuckles) - it takes a lot of guts to even hide your identity. So as Mona said, they don't have - they cannot even imagine things can be different. They don't have a representation of a different way of doing things, and they're not aware of their rights at all.

And a solution that I could see here is to expose them to a different form of reality, to show them that things could be differently. Like I study in the United States right now, and I give my own example. When I go in a restaurant now it's very normal for me to be treated immediately, if I don't like the food to be changed, and everything. When I go back to Romania, things are not always the same.

And I - (chuckles) - before, it was very natural for me. You know, I was like, OK, I don't like the food, whatever. But now I'm like, no, this is not right. So you have to have a different representation in order to fight for your rights. I was even joking with some of my American friends - I was like - they were like, man, you've really become - you've really become aware of your rights and, you know. So, yeah, anyway, thank you.

MS. SCHLAGER: Thanks.

I think it's probably time for me to wrap it up. We've been here for a while.

And I thank everyone for coming to see this great film and hearing our excellent panelists.

I would leave you with one thought as we close. A couple of years ago, we had a public member to a human rights meeting who was Romani-American, Dr. Petra Gelbart. And in remarks that she made to the - to the meeting there, she quoted from the former president of her alma mater, Derek Bok from Harvard. And one of his observations was, well, if you think education is expensive, you should try ignorance. And I think - (chuckles) - the message there is none of our countries, particularly in the economy that we have now, can afford to have significant numbers of our citizens undereducated and underengaged, at anything less than their full potential. So I think this is an issue that all of us will continue to remain very engaged in.

And again, I thank all of our panelists for being here and all of you for coming out today to see this great film. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)