# 2. Education for a Multi-Cultural Society

*The ban on racial segregation under international law is unequivocal. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Article 3, stipulates, "States Parties particularly condemn racial segregation and apartheid and undertake to prevent, prohibit and eradicate all practices of this nature in territories under their jurisdiction." Romani children in Europe frequently suffer the grave harm of segregation in school. This problem notwithstanding, discussions on Romani children and education are by no means as simple and clear-cut as one might imagine. Below are materials related to that discussion, including:*

- ❖ *An article on issues surrounding Romani education in Central and Eastern Europe*
- ❖ *A response by Czech educator Laura Laubeová arguing that segregation is only one component of a wider problem of "tracking" or "streaming" in Central and Eastern European schools*
- ❖ *Statistics on the racial segregation of Romani children in the school system of one Czech city*
- ❖ *Details of recent desegregation action by non-governmental organisations in Bulgaria*
- ❖ *An article reflecting on the relevance of the segregation/desegregation debate for the education of Native American children in New York State, USA.*



## ROMA IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

by Claude Cahn, David Chirico, Christina McDonald, Viktória Mohácsi, Tatjana Perić and Ágnes Székely

The relation between Roma and the non-Romani educational systems of central and eastern Europe has historically been troubled. In the view of many Roma, school is traditionally the place where Romani children, stolen by the state, are "turned into gadje (non-Roma)." Early modern policies, such as those of the modernising Habsburg rulers Maria Theresa and Joseph II in the eighteenth century, attempted to change Roma into "Christians", "new citizens" and "new farmers" by removing them from Romani families, placing them with non-Romani ones, and sending them to schools to have their difference educated out of them. These strategies were echoed in the countries of central and eastern Europe after World War II as governments used schools to enforce policies of assimilation — Roma were forcibly settled, expected to conform closely to rigid standards of sameness, and display a demonstrative loyalty to the ethnic majority. Romani children were to learn such norms by having their Romaniness removed in school, and their culture itself was viewed as a package made up of social disadvantage and deviance which a tide of systematic schooling would cleanse.

Following the collapse of communism, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been characterised by both economic crisis and a dramatic rise in overt racism. The impact of both has important implications for the human rights situation of Roma in schools. First of all, Roma suffer abuse in the normal school system: teachers physically, verbally or emotionally harm Roma. Other pupils, or their parents,

also abuse Roma and school authorities such as teachers or school directors fail to act appropriately to curb, prevent and punish such behaviour. Secondly, most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe feature school systems which are segregated; Roma are educated in different classes or different schools. This arrangement bears no relation to the minority education called for by some Romani activists. Existing separate classes and schools are invariably worse in quality than classes where the student body is predominantly non-Romani. This effective segregation is more-or-less codified in some countries in the institution of so-called "special schools". Special schools are schools for the mentally disabled. Roma are so fabulously over-represented in such schools that many suspect that, as before in the history of Roma, Romani ethnicity is viewed by schooling authorities as synonymous with social and educational disability. Finally, in many countries Roma simply do not attend school at all or, if once enrolled, are forced back out of the schooling system.

## ABUSE IN SCHOOLS

Many Roma suffer abuse in schools including physical abuse by teachers. An *ERRC* interview with a ten-year-old Romani girl from the village of Bontida, near Cluj-Napoca in Romania, in March 1998 revealed that her schoolmaster had pulled her ear so hard that it had bled and medical assistance was required. Ms Annamarie Kovács, a primary school student from the Hungarian town of Dömsöd, approximately fifty kilometres south of Budapest, related similar problems to the *ERRC* when interviewed in November 1997:

> One day we laughed at the maths teacher in class. The maths teacher told Ms Ciboja, our form-teacher, about it. Ms Ciboja came to punish us for laughing at the maths teacher. She told us, 'You stinking little Gypsy whores!' Everyone heard it — she said it in front of our whole class. Ms Ciboja said all sorts of other bad things about us and she slapped Anita, the other Romani girl in our class, on the face. Then she told us to go home. I didn't go to school for about a month after that — why should I? I won't go someplace where they humiliate me like that. The headteacher didn't know about the incident though, and the school wanted us to pay a fine because I didn't go. So my mother went to school and explained why I hadn't gone. Still, nothing happened to that teacher. She wasn't reprimanded and she never apologised. I started to go to school again, but I didn't go to Ms Ciboja's classes and they failed me because of absences.



One Romani boy who had been enrolled in both German and Macedonian schools told the *ERRC* in an interview conducted in August 1997 that he preferred German schools because, "in Macedonian schools, teachers hit me." Three former teachers interviewed by the *ERRC* in the Czech Republic recalled meeting with extensive and explicit racism from other teachers in the staffroom.

Abuse in schools comes not only from teachers. Non-Romani children also laugh at and humiliate Romani children in school and teachers do not intervene effectively. Education for tolerance is close to non-existent in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, a thirteen-year-old Romani girl from Alexandria, Romania, told the *ERRC* in a 2000 interview that, "[My schoolmates] said that I was Gypsy and that I was not supposed to be there." In another case reported to the *ERRC* in a school in northern Czech Republic in 1997, the parents of non-Romani children requested that their children not be seated next to the only Rom in the class. The teacher complied with the request and seated the Romani boy by himself. It was only when his mother, a social worker, went to the school and suggested that the teacher should not support racism in this way, that her son was returned to his seat.

Abuse in the normal school system leads to segregation. This process has been documented as far back as 1926, with the opening of the first of two "Gypsy schools" in the then-Czechoslovakia, the U?horod schools No. 13 and No. 14 in the Transcarpathian region of what is present day Ukraine. The 1938 doctoral thesis of Marie Nováková on these schools tells of one of the reasons for their establishment: "...the families of the other children protested that 'they didn't want their children to sit on the same bench as dirty and flea-ridden Gypsies'."

## SEGREGATING ROMA: SPECIAL SCHOOLS

The educational systems of Central and Eastern Europe are demanding and continue, with a few notable exceptions, to place an emphasis on the memorisation of large quantities of facts provided by the teacher, a figure who is often authoritarian. At the core of schooling philosophy in the region is streaming: rather than aim at the best education for all, schools aim quickly to differentiate between weaker students and would-be achievers. A small number are prepared for university education, and by the time children reach the end of the eighth class, most of them have their future clearly delineated. Romani children — for reasons ranging from early-age language differences to the cultural specificity of both curricula and pedagogical methods and the abuses described above — do not as a rule perform well early on in their schooling lives. They are, in the overwhelming majority of cases, streamed into classes offering substandard education. At worst, and in countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, commonly, Romani children are transferred early in their educational lives to so-called "special schools": schools for the mentally handicapped.

*ERRC* research in the Czech Republic in 1999 revealed that Romani children were twenty-seven times more likely to be found in schools for the mentally disabled than non-Roma. Pedagogues interviewed by the *ERRC* in the Czech Republic and Hungary agree that in most cases, placement of Romani children is made not on the basis of real mental disability, but rather because of racial discrimination. One special schoolteacher in the Czech Republic told the *ERRC*: "I have five or six Roma in my class. At least three or four could perfectly well be in elementary school."

In Hungary there are financial incentives for parents with children in special schools. In the current economic climate in Hungary, in which 60-80% of Roma are unemployed and are living in dire poverty, additional payments for children in special schooling are a mechanism for the perpetuation of separate, substandard schooling for Roma. *ERRC* research in the eastern Hungarian towns of Hajdúhadház in the year 2000 revealed that 90% of the special school



population in the town were Romani.

Once in such schools, children are rarely transferred back. In the Czech Republic there exists a mechanism called "the diagnostic stay", through which children are sent from normal schools to special schools for periods of up to six months to determine whether they have learning disabilities or not. In reality, children are rarely, if ever, transferred back to normal schools following the completion of the "diagnostic stay". The diagnostic stay is particularly insidious in that it is designed for so-called "borderline cases", children whom educational psychologists — the persons charged with recommending children for special schools — are unsure about. In practice, all Romani children are deemed borderline, since psychologically perfectly normal Romani students are frequently seen as candidates for failure in the Czech educational system. The situation is similar in Hungary, where educational experts have noted that Roma are simply much more likely to be recommended by teachers for evaluation by psychologists, than non-Roma. According to an educational psychologist at a special school in the city of Novi Sad in northern Yugoslavia, Roma are over-represented among students considered to be mildly mentally handicapped at the school at which he worked, but not among those students considered severely mentally handicapped because, "If both parents have not completed primary school or have been to special school themselves, are unemployed or do not speak Serbian properly, differences will appear when such children come to school." Such children were, according to this educational psychologist, "pseudo-retarded": although not developmentally handicapped, the educational system regarded them as such.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, children who finish primary school in special schools are in practice frequently blocked from continuing their education in anything other than remedial technical schools offering vocational training for future low skilled labour: the so-called "schools for mops and brooms". In Hungary, legislation stopping children who had graduated from special schools from continuing in anything other than a parallel system of substandard secondary schools was changed in 1992. In practice, however, children graduating from special schools in Hungary still do not cross the line from spe-

cial primary education into normal secondary education. Thus, in effect, those who attended such schools are condemned to a lifetime of unemployment or, where available, poorly paid unskilled labour.

Even where segregation does not involve the labeling of the greater part of the ethnic group as "mentally disabled", Roma are often relegated to separate, substandard schooling. For example, authorities in several towns in southern Poland took advantage of the existence of a private schooling project aimed at reducing illiteracy among Roma and transferred all local Romani children into the separate classes, literate or not. De facto segregation has existed in Hungary since the 1960s. From 1962, so-called "c-classes" were established for "socially deprived" children, with the "c" meaning lowest level on a scale of a-c. In 1971, sociologists István Kemény and Gábor Havas reported that these classes were predominantly Romani. According to a report by sociologist Péter Radó, in 1997 there were separate classes made up predominantly of Roma in 132 of 840 normal schools surveyed. An interview with an English-language teacher in the Hungarian town of Kecskemét suggests that the ideology underpinning separate classes is that of racial inferiority; Ms. J.H. told the *ERRC* in May 2001 that, "I have no Roma in my class. I think the reason is that I teach only the best children, only the cleverest children, so I don't have to teach the Romani children. The Roma always receive the lowest grades ... To tell you the truth I don't really like them. We have a lot of problems; they are very very different."

## ONE STEP BEYOND: ROMA OUT OF SCHOOL

While the issue of racial segregation in schools in the region is of major concern, the fact remains that many Romani children never have the opportunity to attend even sub-standard schooling. A combination of bureaucratic obstacles and poverty work effectively to exclude many Romani children from the schooling system entirely. A lack of identity documents, has been used by school authorities in Romania, for example, as a pretext for denying Romani children access to schools; it has been estimated by one NGO operating extensively in the field that 1200-6000 Roma in Romania may be stateless,



a situation which the authorities have been slow in tackling. Statelessness is a serious problem for Roma throughout the region, adversely affecting those without papers in many areas of life, education being just one. There is also often pressure on Romani children, those who have successfully negotiated the hurdles of registering, to leave school. Hungary features an arrangement, for example, whereby children may become "private students" and thereby be exempt from the "normal" school programme if, in the wording of the 1993 Hungarian Education Act, "it is justified by the student's abilities, disabilities or his or her special situation." This programme is, more often than not, used by teachers simply to remove Romani students from their classrooms. A headmistress of a school in Kecskemét explained to the *ERRC* in May 2001 that private students, "learn at home, and then every half a year [they] have to come into school and take an exam. The students who learn in this way ... are not successful. It is almost impossible to learn individually." *ERRC* research in the eastern Hungarian village of Berettyóújfalu in March 2000 discovered that all nine private students at the Toldi Miklós school were Romani, the majority of whom were repeatedly failing exams. There were no other private students at any of the other five schools in Berettyóújfalu at that time.

Moreover, although education until the mid-teenage years is compulsory in nearly all of the education systems of Central and Eastern Europe, school abandonment is alarmingly high among Romani children in comparison with their non-Romani peers. According to a Romanian government-sponsored study in 1998, approximately 40% of Romani children under the age of eight did not receive any education at all, and an expert in Romani education working at the Romanian Ministry of Education, Professor Gheorghe Sarau, told the *ERRC* that about 65% of Romani children had abandoned school by the 3rd and 4th grades of primary school. The reasons for the failure to attend school once the difficulties in registering have been overcome are several, ranging from a failure to deal with language difficulties in the early years of schooling to poverty. In much of the region, grinding poverty disproportionately affects Roma. The inability of Romani parents to afford to buy the necessary clothes, such as gym

shoes, textbooks or notebooks and pens for their children directly affects their children's success and attendance at school. In Macedonia, for example, where unemployment was recently registered at over 45%, nearly all Roma with whom the *ERRC* met were unemployed and many were living solely on social welfare payments of 4,100 denars (approximately 140 German marks) per month for a family of four, paid irregularly. Schoolbooks cost from 1,619 denars (approximately 55 German marks) for pupils in the first class, to 3,600 denars (approximately 120 German marks) for pupils in the eighth class. A family of four living on social welfare payments in Macedonia would therefore have to pay one month's salary a year simply for text- and notebooks for their children. Poverty affects other aspects of the education of Romani children as well. For example, in the Romani Veliki Rit settlement in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, the majority of houses in the settlement lack electricity and thus the children encounter significant difficulties in doing their homework in the evening. Such difficulties cause the children to fall behind their non-Romani peers, leading to the failing of exams and a general disinterest in school. The neglect of Romani history and culture in curricula is also a factor in a Romani child's continued attendance, as is the abuse they are likely to receive in the classroom.

## MINORITY RIGHTS: MINORITY SCHOOLING FOR ROMA

The rights of minorities in the states of Europe have become an issue of great concern in the years following the end of communism, especially in the light of the war in the former Yugoslavia and tensions emerging between minority groups and so-called nation-states in the wake of 1989. The issue of minority education resides at the centre of this debate. International concern over violence between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians in the region of Transylvania in Romania in 1990 spurred political demands that the Hungarian university in the city of Cluj be reopened. Concerns over the situation of ethnic Greeks in southern Albania has similarly played out in the provision of arrangements for minority schooling at the level of secondary



schools for Greeks in Albania. The legal basis for such arrangements was codified at European level when the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities entered into effect on February 1, 1998.

Minority schooling, especially at the level of primary and secondary education, is commonly of two kinds. In its minimal form, language and culture classes are provided so that members of the minority in question may learn their native language, history and customs. In its maximal form, members of the minority are taught "international" subjects such as maths and biology in the native language. Some states have undertaken minimal programmes in the Romani language. Since 1991, Hungarian universities have offered credit courses in Romani. Four primary schools in Skopje, Macedonia offer Romani language lessons to students. Such programmes need to be well funded and spread beyond the urban centres in which they are presently located. In Romania, much work is being done to create Romani-Romanian dictionaries and picture books to assist Romani children in becoming bilingual, a Romani language curriculum has been created for schools and a faculty exists at the University of Bucharest for the study of the Romani language and literature, in which Romani-language teachers are also being trained.

Roma-specific schooling programmes at present sometimes involve provision of Romani teaching assistants in the classroom. Such programmes exist, at present, in Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. They are often run and/or sponsored by non-governmental organisations, and systemisation of successful projects in this field is often called for by Romani activists and is currently taking place in Romania. There are also a number of private initiatives or non-governmental schools for Roma, such as the Ghandi School in Pécs, Hungary. The Ghandi School is a boarding school for high-achieving Romani secondary school pupils; the school has a distinctive philosophy involving the removal of the children from their homes and their training for Romani leadership. Yet, even in a seemingly maximal minority school, teaching is primarily in Hungarian. Minority schooling models developed elsewhere, such as bilingual schools educating tolerance for both

members of the minority and of the majority are rarely discussed and seem not to be part of the current mainstream discourse on Romani education in central and eastern Europe. Non-Roma with whom the ERRC has spoken see the idea of schools where Romani culture and language would receive equal weight as the national culture as anathema, and do not want to consider sending their children to such — at present, purely hypothetical — schools.

## ALIENATION AND EFFECTIVE CHANGE

Centuries of discrimination have alienated Roma from the present educational systems in the region in ways similar to their alienation from other areas of society. Discrimination in education reproduces the effects of discrimination across generations. Governments and authorities have not shown a willingness to act firmly to punish abuse in school or to desegregate schools. Most countries of the region remain without effective anti-discrimination legislation, or the will to tackle pervasive discriminatory practices. An end to or at least amelioration of the effects of the streaming system is similarly not envisioned anywhere. Thus, for the time being, the majority of Romani children within the education systems of central and eastern Europe are still at ground zero in the struggle to achieve equal access to quality education.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

More information on Roma and education at the European Roma Rights Center web site: errc.org/publications/indices/education.shtml

A general background to the importance of education for all is provided for by a UNICEF report, "No Excuses", available at: www.unicef.org/pubsgen/noexcuse/noexcuse.pdf

For more details concerning the education of Roma in the Slovak Republic, see: Eva Sobotka, "1+1 = 3: Roma in the Slovak educational system", Central European Review, Vol. 3, No. 2, 15 January 2001, available on-line at: www.ce-review.org/01/2/sobotka2.htm



## DEBATE POINTS

What is "segregation"? Can you give some examples?

Can you imagine segregation arising even without the active ill will of the segregators? Can you give some examples?

How intense do you believe objections would be to mixed Romani/non-Romani classes and schools in your country? Would your parents object to mixed classes? What about your teachers?

What other issues do the authors raise concerning Roma in education? What, do you believe, can be done to overcome problems described in the article?

## THE DESEGREGATION OF "ROMANI SCHOOLS": A CONDITION FOR AN EQUAL START FOR ROMA

On September 15, 2000, approximately 300 Romani children from the Romani neighborhood of Vidin, Bulgaria, started the school year by being bussed to one of the six mixed regular schools in the town. The program for equal access of Romani children to education, initiated by the Vidin based non-governmental organization *DROM* and supported by the *Open Society Institute*, was a major challenge to the pattern of continued educational segregation of Romani children in Bulgaria. The successful implementation of the Vidin program, which today includes some 600 Romani children, has prompted a debate about using it as a model throughout Bulgaria.

According to the 1992 census, the general educational level of Roma in Bulgaria was much lower than that of the majority population. Roma with high school diplomas constituted 4.9 percent of the Roma population older than 6 years and those with university diplomas constituted only 0.1 percent of the same population. The respective shares for Bulgarians were 36.5 and 8.9 percent. These low educational levels are the result of several decades of denial of equal educational opportunities to Roma. In 1998, 70 Romani organizations proposed the Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society, which included school desegregation plans. A year later, the government formally adopted this comprehensive policy plan, but authorities have to date failed to take action to end school segregation.

About 70 percent of school age Romani children in Bulgaria attend all-Romani schools located in segregated Romani neighborhoods throughout the country. These



schools were established in Romani neighborhoods from the 1950s to the 1970s and were labeled by the authorities at the time as "schools for children with inferior lifestyle and culture." In the 1970s and 1980s the policy of the educational authorities was to channel all Romani children to these schools. Starting in 1966, the Ministry of Education established primary schools with special curricula for intensified manual skills training in Romani neighborhoods. The special curriculum for these schools was not abolished until 1992.

The schools in Romani neighborhoods were initially seen as a positive development since they contributed to the inclusion of Roma in the educational system. Gradually, however, the quality of education declined because of the continual neglect of the educational needs of Romani children, a policy of tracking unqualified teaching staff to these schools, and failure to restore the standard educational process.

Despite their formal status as regular schools since 1992, all-Romani schools in fact remain "special schools" which offer low quality education and put the overwhelming number of Roma in a disadvantaged position compared to their peers at mixed schools. The all-Romani schools today are usually overcrowded and lack basic facilities; classes are not held regularly; some Romani students who graduate from these schools can hardly read or write; and in many cases teachers do not have the qualifications required by law. Underlying negative prejudices towards Roma held by non-Romani teaching staff often result in degrading treatment of Romani schoolchildren.

Educational experts and Romani leaders have expressed concern about all-Romani schools for years, yet the state has failed to address the problem of educational segregation. Moreover, Bulgarian authorities have not interfered effectively in the numerous cases in which Romani children have been denied access to mixed regular schools and were

tracked instead to the over-crowded "Roma schools".

A recent conference in Sofia, co-organized by the *Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program*, the *European Roma Rights Center*, the *Bulgarian Helsinki Committee*, and the *Human Rights Project* and attended by governmental and non-governmental actors involved in efforts to desegregate the Bulgarian school system, shed light on the following points:

❖ Discriminatory school segregation of Roma puts them in a disadvantaged position compared with other children and raises barriers between the Romani community and the rest of society. The effects of segregated schooling have an impact on all of Bulgarian society, particularly its economic development and its chances for smooth accession to the European Union.

❖ Efforts to reform all-Romani schools have failed and many of the problems stem from indirect forms of discrimination such as chronic under-funding of Romani schools and unqualified teachers.

❖ The Bulgarian government could be vulnerable to legal action based on international and European anti-discrimination instruments and should commit all available resources to eliminating educational segregation.

❖ The public candor about discrimination and educational segregation by elected public officials such as Bulgarian President Petar Stoyanov is a very positive development and an opportunity for Romani advocacy organizations to increase cooperation with the government.

❖ Integration policies must consider the interests and concerns that government officials, teachers, parents, and children have about desegregation.



❖ The success of desegregation efforts in Vidin indicates that the integration of Romani children in mainstream schools can be achieved and that the Romani community wants to integrate.

❖ High levels of transparency and participation by all interested parties were key to Vidin's success. Cooperation among international agencies and donors, the national government, local officials, NGOs, and parents and teachers is also critical.

❖ The government should be the primary actor in implementing the school desegregation process nationwide. Government and media outlets should become more active in raising awareness about discrimination and make it clear to the public that desegregation benefits all of Bulgarian society and is not a privilege bestowed upon a selected group.

❖ Obstacles to further desegregation efforts will range from Constitutional challenges, to entrenched public prejudice to teachers and parents who may feel threatened by change, to lack of co-operation among government officials, NGOs, and local communities.