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NEWS

The Decade of Roma Inclusion:

Challenging Centuries of Discrimination

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SUMMER—FALL 2005

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Johan Lundberg, meeting of Romani refugees from Kosovo at the Greek-Macedonian border

The Open Society Institute, a private operating and grantmaking foundation based in New York City, aims to shape public policy to promote democratic governance, human rights and economic, legal and social reform. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to support the rule of law, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, OSI works to build alliances across borders and continents on issues such as combating corruption and rights abuses.

OSI was created in 1993 by investor and philanthropist George Soros to support his foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Those foundations were established, starting in 1984, to help countries make the transition from communism. OSI has expanded the activities of the Soros foundations network to other areas of the world where the transition to democracy is of particular concern. The Soros foundations network encompasses more than 60 countries, including the United States.

Open Society News, published by the Open Society Institute in New York, reports on programs and issues critical to advancing open society throughout the network and the world.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of *Open Society News* provides snapshots of where Europe's Romani communities stand in 2005—a potential watershed year for efforts to provide basic rights and social justice for the Roma. It covers some of OSI's continuing efforts to advance Romani rights and provides an overview of the recently launched Decade of Roma Inclusion. A number of stories go beyond OSI and the Decade to explore the question of Romani identity and the challenges that integration can pose.

Until her retirement in March of this year, OSI Vice President Deborah Harding was the guiding force behind OSI's Roma programs. While she will continue to be involved in Romani issues as a board member of the European Roman Rights Centre, her invaluable role in supporting Romani activists and in shepherding OSI's Roma programs will be long remembered and sorely missed. As Roma and their allies enter a new era of activism marked by the establishment of the Decade, OSI has established the Office of Roma Initiatives under the leadership of Andre Wilkens and Iulius Rostas.

In their introductory overview, Wilkens and Rostas summarize OSI's programs and advocacy for Roma and how they can inform the Decade. An interview with Romani activist Nicoleta Bitu discusses the role of Romani women's issues in the Decade and in the Romani community at large. Another article takes readers inside a Romani enclave in Bulgaria to examine the challenges and opportunities that come with integration, and stories from Hungary and the Czech Republic show how two landmark antidiscrimination cases could transform the social and political landscape in the region. The issue concludes with an account from European Roma Rights Centre Director Dimitrina Petrova highlighting the often overlooked plight of Romani communities in Putin's Russia.

These stories and others describe some of the issues and aspirations that are important to the Roma as they begin a decade that could finally lead to their acceptance in societies throughout Europe.

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Roma protesting against discrimination in Slovakia

Time for Europe

to Erase a Critical Democratic Deficit

The director and assistant director of OSI's Office of Roma Initiatives, Andre Wilkens and Iulius Rostas, assess what policymakers and activists can learn from OSI's efforts to end discrimination against the Roma.

ANDRE WILKENS AND IULIUS ROSTAS

As Europe's largest ethnic minority, the Roma have experienced few benefits from the dramatic transition, consolidation, and expansion of democracy in Europe since 1989. The continued ostracism and segregation they face is a critical democratic deficit in the European Union and neighboring countries.

“The Decade represents the fullest recognition to date that ensuring Roma equal access to education, housing, employment, and health care is a European issue requiring a multilateral and long-term approach.”

Over the last 12 years, the Open Society Institute (OSI) has spent more than \$35 million on efforts to improve the social, political, and economic situation of Romani populations while helping to build an indigenous Romani leadership. These efforts have included support for Romani rights NGOs such as the European Roma Rights Centre and OSI initiatives such as the Roma Participation Program, which have worked to combat discrimination and build alliances, particularly around the international Romani-led movement to desegregate schools. OSI's fellowships and its programs for women, children and youth, public health, media, justice, and education have also developed a wide range of initiatives to give Romani communities immediate assistance as well as empower them to secure their rights and end their marginalization.

OSI has had significant success working with Romani NGOs by following a strategy of investing directly in Roma; pursuing fast and flexible grantmaking with a focus on the younger generation of activists and students; ensuring direct participation of Roma in project implementation, design, and evaluation; and forging long-term partnerships based on coherent and sustainable strategies.

The February 2005 launch of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005–2015, an initiative supported by OSI and the World Bank, marked a new stage in the struggle for Romani rights. The Decade represents the fullest recognition to date that ensuring Roma equal access to education, housing, employment, and health care is a European issue requiring a multilateral and long-term approach. The initiative is endorsed by the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, and Slovakia, and is supported by the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Development Bank, and the United Nations Development Program.

At the Decade's launch, George Soros pledged to contribute \$30 million to the newly established Roma Education Fund, which will support education reform in conjunction with the Decade. Governments, multilateral and private organizations, and individuals have also contributed to the fund, which now has more than \$43 million in pledges.

As organizations and advocates working on Romani issues continue to pursue change at the national, local, and European level, OSI offers the following key lessons that reflect our experience as a grantmaker and policy advocate:

- ▶ Direct investment in Roma and Romani-led NGOs has built up a substantial number of Romani activists. OSI's Romani-related funding has combined strategic coherence with fast and flexible grantmaking. There continues to be a need for both sustainable, long-term institutional support for civic groups, and “enlightened opportunism” that uses imaginative and strategic grantmaking to take advantage of dynamic political situations.
- ▶ OSI has focused on younger Roma who are part of an emerging well-educated and politically active generation of Roma. These dedicated

men and women possess the requisite professional skills to engage in local grassroots campaigning and international advocacy.

- ▶ Equal access to quality education for Romani children is essential to integration efforts. Governments need to produce action plans for school desegregation with fixed time frames, and to implement these plans at the local level with meaningful incentives and sanctions.
- ▶ The barriers between Romani communities and health care providers must be removed to ensure equal and adequate access to health care. More supportive programs are needed to increase opportunities for Roma to become nurses, doctors, and social workers, and health data and information about Romani populations must be collected to identify areas for improvement.
- ▶ To remedy decades of housing discrimination, national governments must pressure local authorities to meet their legal obligations, use all available funding resources, and find expeditious, effective means to legalize informal settlements and allow occupants to register for IDs.
- ▶ Widespread, devastating levels of unemployment among Roma, reaching up to 90 percent in some Romani communities, must be reduced. Romani communities have to be physically connected to the rest of the economy through infrastructure projects, with priority given to Romani contractors. Support for Romani business development and entrepreneurship offers another employment strategy.
- ▶ Gender mainstreaming must be an integral part of all Romani-related initiatives, with a special emphasis on empowering Romani women to become effective advocates for their issues. New Romani leaders, both male and female, need exposure to the EU and its member states to learn how policies are developed, implemented, and adjusted in mature democracies.
- ▶ EU antidiscrimination laws must be applied as equally to Roma as they are to other minorities. An important step is to improve information about the laws and strengthen equality commissions and ombudsman's offices. National governments should ensure that antidiscrimination laws provide compensation for victims and punishments that are effective deterrents.
- ▶ Changing popular attitudes toward Roma is critical to long-term public and government support for Romani policies. Governments, the European Union, and other donors should craft communications strategies that highlight issues critical to both Roma and the majority population, emphasize the contributions that Roma can make to society, and promote the benefits of tolerance and diversity in a democracy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To get comprehensive information about OSI's Romani activities and programs, go to: www.soros.org/initiatives/roma



Advancing Romani Rights in the Czech Republic and Europe

James A. Goldston, executive director of the Open Society Justice Initiative and senior legal counsel of the European Roma Rights Centre, examines a potential landmark discrimination case before the European Court of Human Rights.

Roma protesting against racial violence in the Czech Republic

JAMES A. GOLDSTON

The oral arguments presented to the European Court of Human Rights in March 2005 in the case of *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic* represent the first significant legal challenge to systemic discrimination in the education of Romani children in Europe.

As in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the case that outlawed school segregation in America half a century ago, the European Court is being asked

to give meaning to the fundamental principle of equality. The court's actions can also do much to prompt the Czech government to live up to its commitments under the Decade of Roma Inclusion—an initiative endorsed by eight Central and South Eastern European governments to ensure that Roma have equal access to education, housing, employment, and health care.

The case is based on a complaint filed by 18 Romani children from the northeastern city of Ostrava in the Czech Republic who were placed in “special” schools for children deemed mentally deficient. Czech Republic officials estimate that up to 75 percent of all Romani schoolchildren attend such schools. Evidence before the court indicates that, in some Czech communities, Romani children are 27 times more likely to be sent to special schools than non-Romani children. In March 2005, a U.S. State Department human rights report indicated that 90 percent of the children in Czech special schools were Roma.

Local counsel and staff from the European Roma Rights Centre representing the 18 children argue that many Roma are sent to special schools even though they show no sign of mental disability. According to the plaintiffs, this amounts to racial discrimination that provides Romani children with a markedly inferior education and prevents most Romani students from finishing high school or attending university. As a result, Romani unemployment rates in the Czech Republic, as in much of Europe, far exceed those of the rest of the population. Thus, while unemployment for the Czech Republic as a whole is less than 10 percent, the country’s 300,000 Roma have a 70 percent unemployment rate.

ularity of anti-immigrant and neo-Nazi political parties—enacted the most far-reaching antidiscrimination legislation in the world.

On the national level, the Czech Republic has taken some limited steps to address the educational inequalities that Roma face. In 1998, the aptitude tests that determined whether students entered special or mainstream schools were revised and standardized to eliminate cultural biases that worked against Romani students. Children in special schools now have opportunities to do additional coursework and apply to regular Czech high schools—even though in practice the substandard level of education in special schools bars most graduates from secondary education. And, in accordance with its Decade of Roma Inclusion commitments, the Czech Republic is increasing the number of Romani teaching assistants to help teachers integrate Romani students into mainstream classrooms. However, the reports of virtually all monitoring bodies make clear that over-representation of Romani children in special schools persists to this day.

Across Europe, much of the bold antidiscrimination legislation enacted in recent years has lain dormant. In many countries, lawyers and judges lack familiarity with legal concepts of discrimination. Perhaps not surprisingly, acts of exclusion, segregation, and violence often go unpunished.

“A European Court finding of discrimination would send a powerful signal that racism and xenophobia have no place in the new Europe.”

The case currently before the European Court offers a historic opportunity to use the law to challenge the destructive cycle of discrimination and school segregation that contributes to high levels of unemployment, crime, and poverty in Romani communities.

Relying on provisions from the European Convention of Human Rights, the Ostrava students’ representatives have argued that the assignment to special schools constituted “degrading treatment” in violation of Article 3, that the absence of adequate judicial review denied them due process in breach of Article 6, that they were denied the right to education in breach of Article 2 of the convention’s First Protocol, and that they suffered racial discrimination in the enjoyment of their right to education, in violation of Article 14. In April, the court ruled the principal claim of nondiscrimination in access to education as admissible and is expected to provide judgment on the merits in the near future.

These legal decisions will have growing importance in an increasingly diverse Europe. Over the past decade, immigration from Africa and the Middle East to Spain, Italy, and Greece has surged, increasing the long-standing immigrant populations in northern Europe and the so-called “guest workers” in Austria, Germany, and Luxembourg. The most recent stage of EU enlargement in May 2004 added millions of Roma from the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe.

Just as Europe’s ethnic makeup has been changing, so have its laws. In 2000, the EU’s executive arm—responding in part to the growing pop-

The data and research needed to advance many Romani legal cases and Decade of Roma Inclusion commitments remain sparse to nonexistent. At the local level, lack of resources, political will, and communication among officials and Romani and majority communities allow mistrust, fear, and bigotry to continue to hinder desegregation efforts.

Yet a European Court finding of discrimination would be a significant first step in addressing these problems by establishing a landmark legal precedent. It would help reinforce core values of nondiscrimination and equal justice at a time when EU expansion and initiatives like the Decade of Roma Inclusion are challenging Europe’s politicians to effectively integrate millions of new immigrants and minority members. Just as importantly, such a ruling would send a powerful signal that racism and xenophobia have no place in the new Europe.

Perhaps the greatest significance of the Czech Romani discrimination case is simply its presence on the docket of Europe’s highest rights tribunal. A decade ago, minority groups like the Roma would have had little inclination or ability to seek legal remedies for discrimination. The success of having Romani claims now heard is testimony to the growing power of law as a force for positive change in Europe.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about legal efforts to challenge discrimination against Roma and other minority groups in Europe, go to: www.justiceinitiative.org and www.errc.org

Giving Credit Where It's Overdue

Increasing economic opportunities and employment in Romani communities is a major focus for the Decade of Roma Inclusion. Georgi Breskovski, executive director of Mikrofond EAD in Bulgaria, and Mark Narron, program coordinator for OSI's Economic and Business Development Program, describe how providing a little capital can enable Romani entrepreneurs to help themselves and their communities.

GEORGI BRESKOVSKI AND MARK NARRON

"I was a professional driver for 18 years," said Portokal Portokalov, his usual cheerful demeanor turning serious. "Then, in 1990, I was fired."

Like many Roma in Bulgaria and other formerly socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Portokalov lost his job during the sweeping closure of state-owned industries that marked the transition to a market economy. The already disadvantaged economic position of Roma, who had often been forced by communist assimilation policies into menial jobs offering little training or education, suddenly gave way to rampant unemployment. Fifteen years later, there is now an entire generation of Roma who have never held a salaried job and who have lost the traditional skills and artisanship of their forebears.

In Nadezhda or "Hope," the Romani ghetto where Portokalov lives on the outskirts of the city of Sliven, over 90 percent of the community's 18,000 residents are unemployed. Faced with a segregated education system and widespread discrimination in the labor market, many of Nadezhda's residents turn to self-employment as the only viable means of survival.

After losing his job, Portokalov and his wife used their small savings to open a grocery stand. "We opened it right on our block," he said, a smile returning to his face.

Yet as they plunged into the world of entrepreneurship, they encountered a familiar problem.

"The banks," he said, "don't give loans to Roma. You have to prove that you're rich. Only then will they lend to you." He had no way of purchasing refrigerators, making repairs, or expanding the products on his shelves. The only sources of financing in Nadezhda were loan sharks who charged 400 percent interest for a three-month loan, and who beat borrowers who could not repay their loans.

The situation changed in 1999, when Portokalov heard an announcement on the radio about an entrepreneurship training and microlending program. It was offered by the Sliven branch of Mikrofond, a national organization founded by OSI's Economic and Business Development Program. Portokalov was the program's first client.

At first, he borrowed 2,000 Leva (\$1,250) at 10 percent interest, which

he used to stock his store. Seven years and six loans later, he now operates four markets, each fitted with modern refrigerators and display counters. His wife and two daughters work in the business. All told, he has borrowed and repaid 18,000 Leva. Over the years, his profits have allowed him to buy a car, a plot of land for one daughter's family, and pay tuition for his two grandsons' vocational education.

Portokalov's business skills have also made his stores a destination for customers from outside the ghetto. "They come because they know I have good prices," he said. "I know that a good merchant profits from turnover, not from overcharging."

Most importantly for his community, however, is the fact that Portokalov has become Mikrofond's unofficial ambassador in the ghetto. He has recommended 15 clients for loans and they, in turn, have started appliance repair companies, taxi services, and delivery businesses.

"I know who's creditworthy," he explained, "because many of my customers can't pay me until they receive their social relief checks. Those people who repay me on time, I recommend to Mikrofond."

All of the clients that Portokalov has sent to Mikrofond have become long-standing and dependable borrowers who have then vouched for others. It is an example of how a program can effectively work with a poor community by viewing its clients as assets and building strong relationships with leaders from within their target communities.

"My new ambition," Portokalov added, "is to build a medical center, with a clinic, a drug store, and baths. There's no such thing in our district."

By financing the entrepreneurial dreams of Roma like Portokalov, Mikrofond has helped bring trust and hope to Nadezhda, at last giving a measure of credence to its name.

With more capacity and funding, Mikrofond could reach other would-be Romani entrepreneurs and activists for whom trust, hope, and credit are long overdue.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Romani microfinance programs in Bulgaria and beyond, go to www.micro.ngorc.net/en/ and www.soros.org/initiatives/business



Romani schoolchildren in Hungary

Heading for a Showdown on Desegregation in Hungary

The Decade of Roma Inclusion is prompting ambitious national initiatives to combat segregation. However, as the following report from Hungary by *Financial Times* correspondent Christopher Condon indicates, the real challenges lie in achieving acceptance and implementation at the local level.

CHRISTOPHER CONDON

In the shadow of a dying steel mill in Miskolc, a city of 180,000 in Hungary's poor northeast, two nearly adjacent elementary schools may soon become ground zero in a battle to desegregate education in Hungary.

Despite their proximity, the Henrik Fazola School and the Komlos-teto School sit on opposite sides of a massive gulf that divides children not only in Miskolc, but across Hungary and much of Central and Eastern Europe. The Fazola School is almost exclusively Romani, while Komlos is almost exclusively white.

To rights activists, the de facto segregation in Miskolc results in inferior education for Romani students and perpetuates the grim poverty that

grips much of the Romani community here. It also, they say, violates laws banning segregation and discrimination in Hungary's schools.

In mid-June the Chance for Children Foundation, a Hungarian NGO, filed suit, asking a county court to declare illegal the division of schoolchildren on racial lines at three pairs of schools in Miskolc, including Fazola-Komlos. Lila Farkas, a lawyer for the group, says the court could take a year or more to decide the case. But a successful result would prove a "landmark precedent."

According to the Ministry of Education, at least a quarter of Hungary's Romani schoolchildren attend segregated classes, though this rarely stems

“ In 2003, Miskolc began collecting “integration quota” funds, without actually desegregating its schools. It did so, instead, by merging the administrations of several pairs of schools, including those at Fazola and Komlos. Today, the schools remain as segregated as before. ”

from heavy-handed intervention. Because Roma concentrate in poor neighborhoods and villages, geographical school zones produce segregated schools.

Other, perhaps more insidious, factors exacerbate the problem. Romani children who attend majority white schools are routinely categorized as “mentally disabled” if they show behavioral problems or fall behind in their studies. While only 2 percent of white Hungarian students are identified as mentally disabled, just below the EU average, a shocking 20 percent of Romani children are slapped with the label, according to government figures. Most are transferred to special classes, usually at majority Romani schools.

Romani parents also often help enforce segregation, a point Miskolc officials are keen to make.

Vilmos Kormos, the city’s department head for education, says Romani parents of children at the Fazola School are as resistant to integration as the white Komlos parents. “Integration would be good. But the Gypsies want to be segregated,” he says.

To a degree, Gabor Daroczi does not doubt this. Commissioner for the integration of Roma and disadvantaged schoolchildren in the Ministry of Education, Daroczi says Romani parents often want their children to attend a school close to home with relatives and friends, often the same schools they attended. But, he adds, most are also poorly informed and unaware of their right to choose another school.

Andras Ujlaky, director of Chance for Children, puts it more simply: “These are the poorest of the poor and the humblest of the humble. Most of them receive welfare benefits from the town, so they are afraid to complain. To expect them to protest against government institutions is silly.”

In all of this, Miskolc is hardly an exception in Hungary. But the city has especially irked central government officials and rights groups for two reasons.

The Ministry of Education operates an incentive program meant to encourage desegregation. Under the program, municipalities that integrate Roma and other underprivileged children with other students receive extra funds.

In 2003, Miskolc began taking part and collecting the “integration quota” funds, without actually desegregating its schools. It did so, instead, by merging the administrations of several pairs of schools, including those at Fazola and Komlos, and, on paper, combining the schools’ geographical catchment areas. Today, the schools remain as segregated as before, but Miskolc still receives funds for their “integration.”

Kormos, at Miskolc City Hall, insists that Fazola and Komlos are technically integrated because parents of Fazola students are free to send their children to Komlos. To Daroczi, however, this represents a misuse of the integration incentive funds that he called “not illegal, but immoral.”

Additionally, the Fazola-Komlos merger appears to have undermined

a progressive teaching program that had dramatically improved standards at Fazola.

For nearly a decade, the school has participated in Step by Step, a project established in dozens of countries by the Open Society Institute, that stresses child-centered teaching methods and family involvement. To many education reformers, the school was an inspiring example that had achieved results not seen anywhere else in the country. Of last year’s graduating class of eighth graders, 65 percent gained admittance to secondary schools that grant advanced diplomas. The average rate for Romani students countrywide is about 6 percent. The school also became a regional training center for other schools adopting the Step by Step methods.

By several accounts, the driving force behind Step by Step at Fazola was Judit Forgacs, the school’s principal. Her position, however, was eliminated in 2003, and the City Assembly passed her over for principal of the merged administration, choosing the Komlos principal instead. Forgacs, who also made clear her wish to truly integrate the schools, turned down the job of vice principal. Kormos flatly denied the suggestion that Forgacs’ stance on integration had anything to do with her failure to win the principal’s job, saying the other candidate had more experience.

According to Step by Step organizers and two Fazola teachers, since Forgacs’ departure the project at Fazola has all but collapsed. The new principal, they say, has shown little interest in Step by Step. One parent also reports that teachers have stopped home visits, which Forgacs had required of her staff.

City officials deny that anything has changed at the school, but Eva Deak, director of the Ec-Pec Foundation in Budapest, which runs Step by Step in Hungary, disagrees.

“They have lost their leader,” she says. “The school used to be a good place for learning, both for students and teachers. Now that is totally gone.”

Deak says Ec-Pec will likely soon revoke Fazola’s status as a regional training center for Step by Step if the situation does not change significantly.

The Chance for Children lawsuit, meanwhile, is headed for uncharted territory.

School systems in Hungary are the legal preserve of local municipalities. The state still sets basic educational standards—everything from curricula guidelines to antidiscrimination provisions—but the central government has never created a mechanism for enforcing such standards when municipalities fail to comply. “This has to be done by lawyers and courts,” admits Daroczi.

In Miskolc City Hall, Kormos has a different reaction to the Chance for Children lawsuit. “They are stupid. You cannot force the mixing of students. Democracy doesn’t work that way.”

Hungary’s courts will now decide.



Romani Women

No Longer Willing to Wait on Gender

Romani woman waiting to vote with her daughter

Nicoleta Bitu, senior policy consultant to the Roma Women's Initiative of OSI's Network Women's Program and regional program coordinator for the Romanian NGO, Romani CRISS, spoke to OSN about the challenges of incorporating gender issues into efforts to end discrimination and improve Romani rights.

What is the record of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in addressing issues important to ordinary Roma such as a family in Sliven, a man looking for work in Budapest, or a young woman living in Bucharest?

The Decade is just starting to mobilize resources and engage young Romani activists and states and governments. So I think it is too soon to know if it will have a real impact at the grassroots level.

The Decade's greatest strength is its flexibility. Initially, discussions about Romani education and poverty were articulated in terms of civil and human rights and abuses. Now, since the launch of the Decade, discussions about the Roma are starting to tackle issues of socio-economic rights. In the past, there were many initiatives from Romani and non-Romani associations on issues like lack of integration and education, but never with the kind of scale, structure, and government participation that the Decade brings. I hope that this political momentum can be maintained.

I have two fears, however. One is that governments will not use the Decade effectively and will be afraid to publicize it and make the public aware of its existence. I'm also concerned that the Decade produces not just a high-level policy debate, but also real, concrete policies and projects.

How can current efforts to obtain and expand basic rights mobilize ordinary Roma? What has mobilized them in the past?

In the 1990s, many Roma came together to challenge violations of their rights. There were interethnic conflicts in villages in Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. When houses were burned, people mobilized because the abuses were so visible. We felt we could tackle these problems with street protests. I think it was my outrage about what happened in these communities that prompted me to enter the Romani movement in 1991. The fact that some Roma were stealing did not give people the right to set other people's houses

on fire and intimidate entire communities. These events really made me wonder whether there was rule of law in my country. Since the mid-1990s, however, mobilization for political activity has come not from the grassroots but from what I'd call the middle class—the few Roma who were educated under the former communist regime, who had some schooling, who finished high school and entered universities.

I hope by the end of the Decade it will not be necessary for me to work as an activist, particularly since more young people and activists are joining us and speaking up for themselves.

In the past, you've said that the Decade of Roma Inclusion needed “gender awareness,” that gender issues could not be treated as peripheral to efforts to improve the status of Roma. How can the Decade incorporate gender awareness?

What I meant then, and still mean now, is that without the development of a women's component or gender equality component, the Decade cannot be successful. Both governments and intergovernmental organizations need to be aware of the existence of Romani women and address their needs. Right now, most local projects are led by men. I want to use the Decade as an opportunity to educate Romani activists about gender equality issues. The first step is to have Romani women formally involved, just to have their numbers there. Once these women are exposed to discussions, they will begin to participate and contribute.

Gender awareness still has to be worked into the Decade. I would have liked to have had gender awareness workshops for Decade steering committee members similar to those given on antidiscrimination, but some of my Romani colleagues said it was not a priority.

But aren't they correct to a certain degree? Would too much focus on gender awareness distract from the main goal? Shouldn't gender issues be dealt with later, once basic rights are established and protected?

It's already later! That's what I'm saying. Gender issues were put on the table in 1998 and 1999. Now the Decade offers a new chance to bring them up and address them systematically. The insistence that we need to keep waiting is one of my worst nightmares.

Despite these frustrations, I am getting more support from Romani male colleagues. I don't know if all of them fully believe in everything that they say, but at least they have started to speak about gender. Recently, one colleague had to present the national action plans for the Decade at a government meeting, and he didn't know that I was coming. He saw me walk through the door and I saw his face fall. He told me later that at that moment he thought, “Oh my God, I'm in trouble. I left out gender from the national plan!!!” He managed to incorporate it into his presentation. We talk all the time and I know he cares about these issues, but it was good that I was at that meeting!

I think we will have to continue our dialogue with men about issues that we disagree on, but we will always be allies when it comes to racism.

As Romani women, we also must struggle with some of the women's rights advocates and groups in Europe. They feel that bringing issues of racial discrimination into the women's rights movement reduces the focus on gender equality. My approach is more optimistic about the long term. I'm not giving up the idea that Romani rights can be brought into the women's movement, and that women's rights can be brought into the Romani movement.

Do you think about how to deal with other issues that can come up when building a political movement? Differences of race, class, and religion among Romani women?

Based on my experience as an activist, I'm not dreaming about a totally unified Romani women's movement. I'm just dreaming about a Romani women's movement that will have people with different interests and ideologies who will still cooperate and communicate with each other. Differences of religion will definitely lead to disagreements among Romani women on issues such as reproductive rights and lesbianism. Some Romani women consider these taboo issues and don't dare speak of them.

What are some of the greatest challenges facing Romani women today? What are some practical short-term and long-term actions to overcome these challenges?

The first is to figure out how all of us can develop a discourse about gender and equality within the Romani community without creating irreparable divisions and disruptions. We have to have discussions and carry out actions that signal our solidarity on issues of antiracism but also acknowledge gender as well. We also need to be wise enough to create coalitions with non-Romani women.

OSI's Network Women's Program has done a wonderful job in introducing us to their network and helping us foster these kinds of coalitions. We've been building connections with non-Romani women's groups for six years. Now there are women's groups in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia that developed around other issues but are also pressuring governments to work on the Decade.

In the short term, I think we have to take more responsibility in reacting to human rights violations in general and in other communities. We need to signal to colleagues who are not focused on feminist issues that we are in solidarity with them.

Along with the Decade, I'm also involved in the Beijing Platform for Action for women's empowerment. I brought young Romani women to New York for the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women so they could learn how UN agencies work and how to lobby. Providing and expanding opportunities like this for young Romani women is crucial. It helps us realize that we are not necessarily unique and that women who are immigrants or are members of certain castes in India or are from Muslim and African countries living in Europe sometimes face the same problems we do.

I'm optimistic about the power of forming coalitions to solve the problems that face us as Roma and as women. Yet, my recent experience at the UN left me with the sense that some of the energy is being drained from the fight for women's rights. Powerful countries like the United States tried to introduce amendments on abortion and other issues that would fundamentally alter the Beijing platform. It was really incredible. Instead of adding more issues and expanding the international agenda for women, here we were 10 years later, forced to spend most of our energy simply reaffirming the basic rights we had already won.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about Romani women's organizations and activism, go to: www.romawomensinitiatives.org and www.soros.org/initiatives/women



A Romani bride in Romania

Raising New Questions about an Old Tradition

In addition to promoting positive examples of Romani culture, efforts to organize Romani communities are empowering Romani women to challenge oppressive cultural practices like the “virginity cult.”

ENISA EMINOVA

When 13 young Romani women traveled to a college leadership conference in 2001 in Skopje, Macedonia, the last thing they imagined they'd be doing was talking about virginity during a coffee break.

Yet this is exactly what happened when these students got together and started discussing how Romani traditions affected the lives of Romani women. The “virginity cult” quickly became the number one topic of conversation.

While there are variations among different groups of Roma and across regions and countries, adherence to the practices of the virginity cult continues to this day in many Romani communities. According to the tradition, young Romani women engaged to be married are examined by either a physician or selected female elders and family members during the engagement period or after the first wedding night to determine if they were virgins up until the marriage. If the examiners find that the bride wasn't a virgin, the groom's family will often reject her and the marriage will be annulled, bringing shame upon the bride and her family.

The Macedonian college students discussed the kind of pressure that they and other Romani girls can feel as the virginity cult takes control of their bodies away from them and forces them to submit to the expectations of parents, boyfriends, potential husbands, in-laws, and elders in the community.

As the coffee break came to an end, the 13 students began asking each other why this tradition persisted and what they could do about it. They soon realized that developing and administering a survey about the virginity cult might give them some answers.

The students conducted their “On Virginity” survey in 10 Macedonian cities using questionnaires for Romani boys and girls ages 14 to 24 and their parents. In total, 628 questionnaires were completed, 220 from parents, 204 from girls, and 204 from boys.

Seventy-five percent of the boys thought that it was fine for boys to have premarital sex, yet 76 percent of these boys expected their future wives to

be virgins. Fifty-nine percent of the parents said they would reject a potential daughter-in-law, or even disown their own daughter, if she was not a virgin before marriage. Among girls, 31 percent expected that they would be abandoned by their husbands if they had had premarital sex and 68 percent had deep fears and anxiety about the issue. Yet despite the apparent acceptance of the virginity cult, over 60 percent of all those surveyed thought the tradition should be changed.

Embarrassment about discussing issues related to sex seems to allow the virginity cult to endure. Sixty-nine percent of parents and 70 percent of the boys and girls surveyed had never talked about sex with their children or parents. Yet among the parents who had discussed sex with their children, over 50 percent found out that their children thought decisions about premarital sex were a matter of individual choice. Additionally, of the boys and girls surveyed, 74 percent thought that the status of the fiancée's or bride's virginity was a private matter between the couple.

As the Decade of Roma Inclusion evolves and helps empower Romani communities to preserve and promote their traditions and heritage, it should also help Roma confront traditions like the virginity cult that can oppress Romani women and severely limit their options in life. Continued research and advocacy focused on the virginity cult can play a vital role in increasing communication between children and parents about sex and Romani traditions. They can also raise awareness among young Romani women about their right to make decisions about their own bodies, choose their spouses, and take more control over their lives.

Enisa Eminova is a consultant for the Roma Women's Initiative.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about the Romani women's rights organizations in Macedonia, Hungary, and Serbia that have conducted virginity surveys as well as virginity cult research groups in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia, go to: www.romawomensinitiatives.org

OUT OF THE TUNNEL

A Community Grapples with Desegregation in Bulgaria

Sociologist Petya Kabakchieva visited the city of Sliven, Bulgaria, to see how members of the Romani community were responding to school desegregation efforts. The following article is excerpted from the chapter she contributed to *Learning to Change: The Experience of Transforming Education in South East Europe*, a collection of first-person stories by education specialists about changes in education in the past 15 years. The book, edited by Terrice Bassler, director of OSI's Education Support Program (Ljubljana office), was published by CEU Press in July 2005.

PETYA KABAKCHIEVA

NADEZHDA

The Romani ghetto of Nadezhda, or “Hope,” is separated from the main area of Sliven, Bulgaria, by a set of railroad tracks that can only be crossed through an underground passage. Darkness fills the tunnel, day or night, and passing through it feels like entering another world. Stella Kostova, the Romani woman who heads a local youth NGO and OSI's desegregation project in Sliven, said some Roma in Nadezhda see the tunnel as a kind of gate, a portal that separates their ghetto from the frightening and chaotic world beyond. Who knows what will happen “over there” to Romani kids? According to Kostova, many Roma say that at least they feel safe on their side of the tunnel.

Nadezhda is a community of 14,000 to 20,000 inhabitants divided into sections where various groups of Roma live. The section of Nadezhda where conditions are worst belongs to a group the Roma call “the naked ones.” These people, the ones Kostova's desegregation project is trying to help, have almost nothing: no proper houses, no belongings, and practically no clothes. The area where they live consists of crude, crowded shelters, which are linked by a maze of pathways. Most of these shelters have no doors or windows and open directly onto the street.

“Every time I go to the ghetto, I become furious,” Kostova said. “Most of the people there are afraid. They say they have grown accustomed to this way of life. But why do the children have to follow in their footsteps?”





Family in front of their home in a Romani ghetto, Bulgaria

“ Every time I go to the ghetto, I become furious. Most of the adults say they have grown accustomed to this way of life. But why do the children have to follow in their footsteps? ”

PARENTS

If you sit with a group of parents in Nadezhda and ask them what they want for their children, you'll get a variety of responses.

“How can I send my son to school in these clothes and with no shoes on his feet?” asked one mother. “Here it is all right even if he runs around naked. But in the school . . .”

“This is total crap,” interjected another man in his 30s. “Our kids should be educated so that they can get out of this misery. No Romani schools should exist. Our kids should study together with Bulgarian kids in normal schools.”

“Well, I am afraid to let my children go to school,” said another mother. “They will be beaten up and mocked there. Girls can be raped or stolen.”

"I stopped my girl from going to school when she started maturing at 13. I had her married at 15," said one father. "Now look at her—she is unhappy, although she has a baby. She tells me: 'Dad, I had to continue studying. Now what am I supposed to do with this sixth grade education I have?' I think I made a mistake. I have left her sisters in school to study and go as high as they can."

CHILDREN

The children in Nadezhda are also trying to sort out what school and education can mean for them. Ziumbiulka, 11, attends the ghetto's elementary school, Public School No. 6, with her older sister, Ani, who is in seventh grade. They clearly have different attitudes toward education. Ani comes out only at recess and is quite diligent in her studies, while Ziumbiulka stays in the schoolyard or skips school. Ziumbiulka said her parents scold her and drag her out of bed and make her go to school but that she was not interested in learning.

"I'll raise children and I'll go to town to collect stuff," she said. For Ziumbiulka "stuff" means scraps and bottles salvaged for recycling deposit fees.

Ani singled out mathematics and physical education as her favorite subjects. "I like to go to school," she said. "But I don't want to study here. Our desks are old and broken. Other schools have computers; here—nothing. It's so dirty. And it isn't interesting at all." She said her goal was to go to another school—in the center of the town.

A couple of blocks away from Public School No. 6, a different group of seven- and eight-year-old Romani schoolchildren gathers on school-day mornings to meet the buses that take them to integrated schools outside of Nadezhda. They are led by an assistant teacher, a young Romani woman who is 1 of about 30 coordinators from the Romani youth organization that works with schoolchildren from this part of Nadezhda. The coordinators accompany the kids to school and back, monitor their behavior in class, and make sure all homework is done. Before school, coordinators take the kids from home, or from the streets that are their homes, to Stella Kostova's office, where the children who have not bathed can wash.

TEACHERS

Nicky, a 20-year-old coordinator, graduated from a vocational school in construction and is now studying economics at a private college in Sliven. He is from a "Bulgarian" Romani family. His parents are literate and have always had jobs. He has never lived in the ghetto, only in Bulgarian neighborhoods, and he studied in Bulgarian schools. He is well dressed and eager to succeed. He is also a fervent supporter of desegregation. Nicky hates the ghetto. If he had his way, it would be torn down and all its residents would be put in decent homes in Bulgarian neighborhoods. Nicky has good intentions for the children of Nadezhda, but many people there treat him coldly, even with hostility. His anger at the practice of desegregation

can seem like disdain for their way of life. He is not considered one of their own.

Julian, Nicky's colleague, grew up in the ghetto, and is the main coordinator for the desegregation project. "I'm here because people know me and trust me," he said. Yet Julian, in his late 40s with a family to support, is worried that when the project ends and the municipality starts appointing Roma to be assistant teachers, he will be dismissed because his primary-school education does not qualify him for such a position. "I am perfectly capable of helping a first grader," he said.

The desegregation project seeks out six- and seven-year olds who are doing well in school and whose parents want them to attend a Bulgarian school. The children attend preparatory classes, and are then sent in groups of five to first grade classrooms in a dozen mainstream schools throughout Sliven.

According to Julian, in the three years since the integration project started, 354 Romani kids have entered and stayed in Sliven's mainstream schools, with an average dropout rate of 20 children a year. The project does not currently have plans to integrate older children who do not go to school or are beyond the first grade. "Unfortunately, we cannot help everybody," Julian said.

Stella Kostova believes that the Roma living in the ghetto must first help themselves. "They have to take their fate in their own hands," she said. "And the best solution for this is education."

But some parents have questioned whether Kostova, who did not grow up in the ghetto, understands how hard it is to escape. Kostova is from a family of musicians in an "upper-class" Romani neighborhood in Sliven. She went to mainstream schools where she faced prejudice but managed to excel. She went on to work as a political activist on Romani issues and started a family—experiences that have made Kostova a determined advocate for school desegregation in Bulgaria. Even though she is helping the poorest children in the ghetto, Kostova knows that some people there see her as a divisive figure.

"You have to be a person with an attitude in order to be acknowledged as a citizen with equal rights," she said. "To me, desegregation does not mean assimilation; it means equality and fair competition."

Kostova's approach may seem severe to some, but her experience working on desegregation issues has actually tempered some of her views.

"I am not as radical as I used to be," she said. "For a long time I was against the Romani school because I felt it reinforced the ghetto. Now I realize that at this stage we can't just put all Romani kids in Bulgarian schools yet. But the quality of education and the expectations for students in Romani schools must be raised."

Ultimately, Kostova hopes that desegregation efforts will change Romani perceptions of the tunnel as a frightening passageway out of their marginalized but familiar existence in Nadezhda. "Getting our children out of the ghetto is the only right way," she said. "Even if they are mocked, even if it is difficult. They have to pass through the tunnel in order to fight it."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about OSI's Education Support Program, go to: www.soros.org/initiatives/esp



The Challenge of Finding a Place in Two Worlds

Bulgarian journalist Violeta Draganova reflects on the difficulties and opportunities that integration efforts can bring to many Roma.

VIOLETA DRAGANOVA

Traveling on a slow bus in Bulgaria allows me time to think and reflect. The familiar landscape stretching across the window gives me a warm, secure feeling, reminding me of when I was a little girl and my mother would sing to me in a swirl of languages—Bulgarian, Macedonian, Romany.

As the bus plods along, the different songs echo in my head, and my thoughts wander toward the topic of identity. One question I am often asked is whether it is possible for Roma to go out into the world without denying their origins and culture. Although I can only base my argument on faith and conviction, I believe that yes, it is possible. But it is not happening yet.

In reality, integration turns into assimilation. Romani integration today means that Roma feel they must deny their ethnicity—pursuing integration by cutting off relations with their roots and community, turning into different people. Once this has happened, there is no turning back. These assimilated Roma appear to be happy, but they do not convince me.

Romani integration so far has failed for several reasons. Roma have almost no political representation; according to unofficial data, there are close to 1 million Roma in Bulgaria, yet there are only two Romani deputies in the 240-seat Parliament. The prevalence of racism in Bulgarian society is an equally significant obstacle to progress. Newspapers and electronic media portray Roma as violent and criminal, fueling popular negative stereotypes.

Currently, I am the only Romani journalist in the national media working on equal footing with other journalists. My boss and most of my co-workers treat me as “the Roma on TV.” I am looked upon as exotic, like something akin to a talking monkey. I just try to be a professional journalist. But instead I’m expected to be almost exclusively involved in Romani issues. After proving myself as a reporter, editor, and anchorwoman dealing with a variety of issues, I am now kept on the “ethnic” beat. If I do that, everything is O.K., but if I try to go beyond this topic, it is as if I am covering stories I am not supposed to cover or know anything about.

Roma who succeed by the larger society’s standards while acknowledging their Romani heritage are treated as “exceptions to the rule.” When Roma apply for jobs in Bulgaria they often face distrust and resistance

from potential employers. Many educated people hide their origin, because they know that they will encounter hostility regardless of their skills.

Difficulties of a different nature await the Roma who remain in the ghettos. They are afraid of being rejected by the wider society. These feelings often drive them to respond to the outside world with fear and suspicion. Roma in these communities want to continue the familiar life they have lived for many years, and are apprehensive of how they will preserve the family traditions and values that shape their identity if they let others into their small world.

Some Roma are stuck between the two worlds. I met Zhana Bushnakova when she was 21. She was the only Romani student at the University of Plovdiv, or at least the only one whose ethnic origin was widely known. She didn’t hide the fact that she was Romani. “I want them to see and know that we, Roma, can do things, too,” she told me.

Zhana was different from the other girls her age in the Romani community. They got married, stayed at home, and didn’t understand her drive to study. But immediately after graduation, Zhana married. She is now a housewife. As a university student, she had tried to live in two worlds, and was an outsider in both. At some point, she had to make a choice.

Such a choice would not be necessary if Roma were given the opportunities to get an education and explore the outside world, and if politicians would take steps toward real reform, instead of spouting the rhetoric of compassion. The outside world must learn more about Romani culture and people, and we must challenge the verdict that Roma are born guilty. This is the only way we can come to terms with our Romani identity, which has long been treated as a shameful secret by Roma who strive for success. Ultimately, Romani integration will only be a reality when we can confidently pursue our dreams and openly preserve our culture while living in both worlds.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following websites provide information and resources about human rights, Romani culture, and ethnic diversity issues in Bulgaria and beyond: www.ric-bg.info, www.bghelsinki.org, www.ethnos.bg, www.eaf-bg.org and www.ncedi.government.bg

Marginalization of Roma in Russia: Less Noticed But No Less Oppressive

While the Decade of Roma Inclusion has brought new and needed attention to the situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, Roma in Russia continue to be targets for harassment and discrimination. In May 2005, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) helped address these problems by publishing *In Search of Happy Gypsies: Persecution of Pariah Minorities in Russia*. ERRC Executive Director Dimitrina Petrova provides an overview on the status of Roma and other marginalized groups in Russia.

DIMITRINA PETROVA

When people examine the many challenges facing the Roma, they often look to Central and South Eastern Europe, where about 6 million of the continent's estimated 10 million Roma live. Yet farther to the east, Russia's estimated 1.2 million Roma face racism and discrimination that are as entrenched and virulent as anything found elsewhere in Europe.

Russia's enormous geographic scale and ethnic diversity are major reasons why the plight of Russia's Roma is somewhat less apparent. Many of Russia's approximately 160 ethnic groups or nationalities suffer human rights abuses. Unlike the localized and sometimes fluctuating prejudices directed against other groups, however, the racism and discrimination faced by Roma, Jews, and persons of Caucasian nationality is widespread and enduring.

Extensive monitoring of Romani rights in Russia conducted since July 2000 by the European Roma Rights Centre indicates that the weakness of the rule of law and lack of comprehensive human rights protections in Russia have led to significant abuse of Roma. ERRC publications like *In Search of Happy Gypsies: Persecution of Pariah Minorities in Russia*, as well as research and statements presented by the ERRC and the International Helsinki Federation to the U.S. Congress and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2004, document how Russian law

enforcement officials have tortured and abused Roma, conducted arbitrary raids on Romani settlements, and abducted individuals and extorted money from Romani communities for years.

Within Russia's criminal justice system, authorities practice racial profiling against Roma and routinely deny Roma access to fair trials and justice. Government agencies at the local and federal level either ignore or do little to help Roma obtain crucial personal documents and often deny them the education, housing, and economic rights that other Russian residents and citizens are legally entitled to. Vigilante and extremist groups that launch violent attacks against Roma are rarely investigated or prosecuted.

The ERRC has also documented dozens of cases in which Roma have been victims of violence committed by law enforcement officials. In several instances, Roma detainees have died as a result of physical abuse. One such case involved Fatima Aleksandrovich, a 23-year-old Romani woman who in May 2002 died in a hospital in northwestern Russia, after an apparent beating by officers in the local police station. Several hours after taking Aleksandrovich into custody on suspicion of larceny, the police called her husband and told him she had been hospitalized and was in a coma after attempting suicide by jumping out of a police station window. Four days





Passerby confronts Romani family in Russia

“ Russian law enforcement officials have tortured and abused Roma, conducted arbitrary raids on Romani settlements, and abducted individuals and extorted money from Romani communities for years. ”

later, Aleksandrovich was dead. The doctor who examined her body expressed doubts that she had committed suicide. According to a lawyer involved in the initial investigation of Aleksandrovich's death, the numerous bruises on her body did not fit the injury pattern of a fall victim. Although Aleksandrovich's family filed a criminal complaint urging a criminal investigation into her death, no official inquiry was ever initiated. After two years of appeals and a court order to conduct a pretrial investigation, the prosecutor continues to refuse to open a criminal case, citing lack of evidence. As of this writing, the ERRC is preparing further legal action.

The violence and abuse directed by Russian authorities against individual Roma like Fatima Aleksandrovich occur within a broader context of Russian policies toward the serious problems of terrorism, corruption, and drugs. Unfortunately, long-established stereotypes coupled with racially biased information in the Russian mass media have led many officials and members of the general public to associate terrorism with persons of Caucasian nationality, corruption with Jews, and drugs with Roma.

The stigmatization of Roma as drug dealers has led to increased racial profiling and special operations by police antidrug units. In 2002 and 2004, a series of police raids called “Operation Tabor” targeted Romani communities in Russia. The use of the term “tabor,” which refers to a Romani settlement or encampment, clearly indicated that Roma were the focus of these operations. Russian authorities officially deny that Roma were specifically targeted. Many law enforcement officials, however, including staff at the Ministry of Justice, acknowledged during ERRC-organized discussions and training seminars that the operation was discriminatory and that they had disapproved of this racial profiling.

To improve the situation in Russia, international actors such as the European Union, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe should use their economic and political weight to protect and ensure the human rights of Roma and other groups vulnerable to discrimination in Russia. Such international actors can work with civil society organizations and concerned officials within Russia to prompt the government to adopt comprehensive antidiscrimination legislation and ratify Protocol No. 12 to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Russian law enforcement officials and agencies must promptly and impartially investigate incidents of violence and racial bias against Roma and prosecute the perpetrators, regardless of who they may be, to the fullest extent of the law. Justice agencies need to produce public guidelines to help officials identify, investigate, and punish racially motivated crime. The government also needs to publish detailed annual statistics that simply and clearly document the occurrence and prosecution of racially motivated crimes.

The Russian government must also start to address long-term issues by immediately developing policies and programs to give Roma access to education, health care, housing, and employment. Part of this would include curbing discriminatory practices in issuing residency permits and protecting Romani communities from arbitrary and forced evictions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about efforts to advance Romani rights in Russia, go to: www.errc.org



Romani musician sending photo of Romani community center jam session to friends, Albania



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