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Talk Show

by Marius Dragomir, Petru Zoltan, and Ognyan Isaev
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Two years into the Decade of Roma Inclusion, critics say the program has been a boon to think tanks and events organizers, less so to the Roma.

Imagine getting up every morning and having to walk to a creek in your village to wash your face, brush your teeth, and bring water back home to make your coffee. Imagine lining up every Monday for several hours just to wash your clothes.

If it sounds like life in some Third World desert region, it's not. It happens, in fact, in the European Union, in the southern Romanian villages of Bolovanu and Catunul Baiasului, where more than 150 families get potable water from a single well in each village. The two villages are inhabited entirely by Roma.

"Each family has between seven and 12 children and we all carry water from one well to drink, cook, or wash," said Maria Ursu, a resident of Bolovanu. When it rains heavily, the well's water gets turbid. In the summer, the well dries up and the villagers have to travel some five kilometers to the neighboring village of Balota to find water. Some of the "richer" villagers bring the water by cart, but the poor ones have to walk there and carry it in buckets.

Bolovanu is just an example of the dismal poverty in today's Romani communities in Romania. Squalid housing conditions, a lack of jobs and quality education, and limited access to health care have for years plagued the lives of many of the 2 million Roma living in this Eastern European country.

It was in this context that the Decade of Roma Inclusion was launched more than two years ago, to better the lives of the Romani minority in nine Central and Eastern European countries by 2015. But so far, despite a few scattered success stories, critics say the initiative has produced mostly sterile debates and a thicket of action plans in Romania and Bulgaria, the newest EU members.

THE BEST-LAID PLANS

The Decade of Roma Inclusion initiative includes Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro. Its fathers were the chairman of the Open Society Institute (OSI), George Soros, and then-World Bank President James Wolfensohn.



Representatives of the participating countries, including prime ministers and other leading politicians, pledged to put forward new policies for Romani inclusion. Before the Decade's launch, a committee of representatives from the participating governments, Romani activists, international donors, and other international organizations nailed down the four focuses for reform: education, employment, health, and housing.

In June 2006, the Decade countries adopted a set of goals and guidelines for the initiative at a meeting in Brussels. A year later, the initiative has produced mainly plans and papers and few tangible results.

"We need more concrete actions in this project," said Marko Bela, former Romanian vice premier, now senator and chairman of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, who participated in the drafting of the Decade's terms of reference.

In Romania, the section "Success stories" on the website of the country's National Agency for the Roma (ANR) promised on 1 August, "Here, you can see success stories soon."

PAPER MILL

In April 2006, the Romanian Parliament established a fund to receive money from donors interested in supporting the Decade, with the Romanian government kicking in the first 20,000 euros. Two months later, the government took out a 17-year, 47-million euro loan from the World Bank. The money is to be pumped into programs to integrate the country's poor into education and social protection schemes. The cash was shared among several institutions, including the ANR, the labor and education ministries, and the Romanian Social Development Fund, which provides community development grants.

Through 2011, Romania aims to improve the infrastructure and social services in 100 Romani settlements, improve access to education for poor children between 3 and 6 years old, and renovate health-care facilities for the disabled. The government's final goal is to see significant improvement in the living conditions of some 70 percent of the Romani population in the country in the next four years, according to government representatives in Bucharest.

Bulgaria has also been busy planning. It adopted an action plan for Romani integration in 2005, followed in December 2006 by a law on implementation of the Decade policy, and another action plan for 2007. The government set up a similar Decade trust fund, but representatives of the government refused to disclose how much it is spending on Romani integration. The Bulgarian Labor Ministry last year kicked off an informational campaign among Roma about programs for equal access to the labor market, social security, education, health care, reproductive health, and responsible parenting.

Aimed at eliminating discrimination and closing the gap between the Romani community and the rest of the society, Bulgaria's plan for 2007 includes vocational programs to qualify more Romani employees, modernization of the school system to fit the needs of the labor market, and campaigns for ensuring equal access to integrated education. "Significant funds are to be allocated for encouraging employment among Roma," said Baki Hyuseinov, Bulgaria's deputy labor minister and the country's coordinator for the Roma Decade.

But when asked about the country's long-term goals for the Decade, Hyuseinov did not point to any specifics.

Still, Bulgaria got relatively high marks in a June report prepared by teams of Romani civil society leaders, who ranked the country's Romani integration policy second only to Hungary's of the nine countries participating in the Decade. It was not a sterling performance, however. On a scale of 0, for no action, to 4, for best practices, Bulgaria scored 1.84, after Hungary's 2.29 points.

The monitoring effort, called Decade Watch, assesses government policies but not their outcomes because it considers it too early to speak about results.

WHAT'S THE REALITY?



But besides planning and paperwork, not much has happened on the ground in the two countries.

"I think the Decade is only on paper," said Antonina Zhelyazkova, chairwoman of the board at the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, a Sofia-based think tank. "There's a lot of noise around it, but little is actually happening." Zhelyazkova said the Decade has so far been a round of money-wasting seminars and conferences.

"Nothing has happened since the start of the Roma Decade," said Maria Metodieva, Roma Program Director with the OSI office in Sofia. "A great number of activities are planned, there are also measurement indicators, but nothing gets done in practice. Moreover, the government is not allocating any funds for the implementation of the action plan."

The concrete projects that do exist in Romania and Bulgaria have had limited scope, and many are carried out by civil-society organizations. Metodieva said work on school desegregation has been done mainly by nongovernmental organizations. "We constantly try to help the government, so that at least some of each task can be fulfilled. Unfortunately, that is not happening."

In Bulgaria, the government decided to guarantee free school materials for all Bulgarian children until the fourth grade, mindful that many students from poor families cannot afford to pay for their own. The government is now considering extending the program to the eighth grade. But the Decade Watch report stressed that in spite of the progress in "advancing Roma inclusion" since 2005, the Decade countries must move from such "sporadic measures based on pilot projects to integrated policies and programs."

Zhelyazkova called for Romani schools to be banned. "It's time for all children to study together. The belief that people oppose desegregation is absolutely wrong. Everybody agrees that their children can study with the Romani children. People have grown up, unlike politicians." Zhelyazkova said teachers should be given incentives to work with Romani children.

Segregation has proved to be a headache for Romanian policy-makers as well. According to an OSI June report, "most ethnic Roma [in Romania] are being isolated or excluded from the education process, despite strategies and anti-discriminatory laws in that respect." The survey showed that education policies and programs are only partly enforced. The number of ethnic Roma registered at schools has risen sharply, from 138,000 in 1990 to 250,000 in 2007. Still, the report states, 25 percent of the Roma in the country have never been to school and 95 percent have not graduated from high school. Over 13 percent of Romani children study in segregated schools or classes.

Equal education is a major goal, but Zhelyazkova said health care remains the most neglected focus area in Bulgaria. "The state is doing almost nothing in this area," she said. The only concrete project, financed from Finance Ministry coffers, was development of a network of 80

health mediators in Romani communities across the country who mediate between ghettoized Roma and hospitals.

The official unemployment rate among Roma reaches 90 percent in some communities in Bulgaria, a country that, ironically, desperately needs workers. Employers have even begun to talk about importing laborers. "Apparently, we can't break the closed circle," Zhelyazkova said. "Roma should be enrolled in a broad network of qualification courses. Then private employers will be willing to hire them," she said.

Bulgaria counts among its successes an international conference on good employment practices held in Sofia in May. The event helped participants share lessons from various European countries on the employment of minorities, said Hyuseinov, of the Labor Ministry.

But the OSI's Metodieva said that even the action plan has become obsolete. "To a great extent it's already out of date," she said. "It needs to be rewritten, updated, and funded. In the plan's current version there are columns saying 'no funding needed.'" For his part, Hyuseinov said there is "intensive" implementation of the policy, but he would not elaborate.

THE EU FACTOR

Metodieva praised development projects in several Romani neighborhoods, but noted that funding for them came from the EU. Even that route presents difficulties, she said, given that many Bulgarian institutions lack the savvy or know-how to get and use EU funds effectively. "Most of the ruling parties are from the old generation and don't have the necessary skills for EU funds absorption," Metodieva said. Speaking in June at a Decade event in Sofia, Soros stressed that local governments must be capable of putting in quality applications for EU funds.

Part of Romania's 47 million euro loan will be used to improve the ANR's capacity for accessing EU funds.

Gruia Bumbu, recently appointed president of the ANR, said the EU's financial contributions to Romani inclusion projects have been paltry.

He said the European Commission claims to have spent some 240 million euros over the past decade on such programs. "It seems like a very big sum," Bumbu said, "but if we calculate, it turns out that for a Romani person, [the EU] spent around 3 euros per year, while for a cow the EU offers a subsidy of 32 to 35 euros per year."

But Sonia Iliescu has pinned her hopes on getting EU cash. The mayor of Racovita, which includes Bolovanu and Catunul Baiasului villages, wants to ask the EU for half a million euros to build a water system there. For the villagers, the Roma Decade might mean nothing, but if their basic living conditions improve, the ANR could finally have a success story to post on its website.

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