

Roma Participation

Program **REPORTER**

August 2002



SPECIAL DESEGREGATION ISSUE

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OSI Roma Participation Program

Director

Rumyan Russinov

Deputy Director

Bernard Rorke

Reporter

Editor

Bernard Rorke

Contributing Editor

Andy Hauptert

Designer

Diana Szabo/Artemix Grafika

Photography

Endre Sebok, a doctoral student in the Department of Legal Studies at Central European University in Budapest, took all photographs included in this issue of the Reporter. He photographed the Baxtale Rom desegregation initiative (Kiskoros, Hungary) in January 2002, and the Drom desegregation project (Vidin, Bulgaria) in May 2002.

Cover Photos

Students and supervisors involved in the Drom desegregation project in Vidin, Bulgaria

The Open Society Institute–Budapest is a private operating and grantmaking foundation that develops and implements a range of programs in civil society, culture, education, media, public administration, public health, and human and women's rights, as well as social, legal, and economic reform. OSI–Budapest is part of the Soros foundations network, an informal network of organizations established and supported by investor and philanthropist George Soros, and active in more than 50 countries worldwide. OSI–Budapest operates network-wide programs and, together with the New York-based Open Society Institute, provides support and assistance to Soros foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Guatemala, Haiti, Mongolia, and Southern and West Africa

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The deleterious effects on Roma communities of educational segregation across Central and Eastern Europe have been exhaustively documented. As long as Romani children are classified as mentally handicapped and sent to special schools, or placed in "gypsy schools" situated in Roma ghettos, talk of integration amounts to nothing more than hollow rhetoric. Substandard, segregated education provision isolates Romani children from the wider society, exacerbates existing inequalities and leaves young Roma woefully ill-equipped to compete in the labor market and participate as equal citizens.

RPP's strategy to challenge the lack of equal educational opportunities took the form of high-impact civic desegregation campaigns led by Romani NGOs. The basic idea was to develop models of good practice to show that integration can work, to advocate their replication, and to build coalitions of support to advocate for substantive governmental reform to address the issue of segregation.

This issue of the Reporter includes a detailed case study by Evgeni Evgeniev, of the "Vidin Model," the most widely publicized of the desegregation projects launched in Bulgaria. Also included is a brief report on the role played by RPP grantees in Hungary in securing firm commitments from the newly elected government to accelerate the process of Roma integration. If implemented, these policy initiatives could prove to be among the most substantial ever undertaken by a government to address the situation of the Roma.

International advocacy has played an important role in raising awareness of the urgent need to address the scandal of separate and unequal educational provision for Roma. This issue of the Reporter contains the text of RPP Director Rumyan Russinov's address to the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe and a speech delivered by Deputy Director Bernard Rorke at the Conference of European Ombudsmen in Vilnius.

At the level of international advocacy RPP has been greatly assisted by the assiduous efforts of the European Roma Rights Center. A very special debt of gratitude is owed to Deborah Harding, whose commitment, inspiration, and intellectual input have been of immense value in advancing the cause of school desegregation and making equal access to quality education a reality for Romani children.

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About the

Roma Participation Program

The Roma Participation Program (RPP) at the Open Society Institute–Budapest was established in 1997. It is a unique and innovative Romani-led program that works to assist the Roma populations of Central and Eastern Europe in the struggle for greater integration. RPP is committed to empowering Roma to take charge of their lives, to use their own resources to become more self-sufficient, to participate in those decisions that affect them, and to demand that states recognize them as equal, rights-bearing citizens in the democratic process. RPP's strategy towards this end is represented by a dual approach: the first component is to support Roma-led, high-impact civic activism around issues such as school desegregation. These are led by Romani nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which have the requisite professionalism to undertake ambitious and innovative campaigns that can impact on policy making at a national level, and draw wider international attention and support to address the plight of the Roma. The second component is to assist the development of the Romani non-profit sector throughout the region by providing institutional support and training to grassroots Romani NGOs capable of advocating on behalf of their local communities; to link their grassroots activities to regional and national campaigns; to assist coalition building within each country and strengthen networking across borders.

Both aspects of this approach are complementary and are designed to stimulate wider civic participation among the Roma, to enable the voices of Roma activists and the Roma public to be heard and heeded by state institutions, to mount

Since its inception three years ago, RPP has provided institutional support grants to more than 40 Romani organizations in nine countries across the region. Currently its is funding NGOs in Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Romania, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Poland. This funding has enabled grantee organizations to establish community centers in Romani districts or areas with substantial Romani populations. Through their activities and practical achievements, these grantees have made considerable headway and raised awareness about Roma issues both domestically and abroad. Many RPP grantees have participated in building important advocacy-related networks in their countries.

Typically, institutional support takes the form of funding that allows a new NGO to establish, equip, and staff an

effective challenges to state policies of segregation and exclusion and to hasten the integration of Roma in civil society.

The current plight of the Roma derives from centuries-old state and societal hostility and racist exclusion. Across the region of Central and Eastern Europe today they face widespread discrimination and segregation, and are frequently the targets of racially motivated violence. The European Commission, in its report on European Union accession countries, concluded that "deep-rooted prejudice in many of the candidate countries continues to result in discrimination against the Roma in economic and social life." The report made specific mention of the slum-like conditions, chronic unemployment, poor health, and segregation in school systems. It also drew attention to the increase in racially motivated violence and the "lack of an unequivocal response from the authorities" to such incidents.

Even in those countries where recently there has been some nominal progress in developing more positive governmental policies towards Roma, implementation has been ineffective and slow, and there seems to be a lack of political will and courage to enact more visible and substantial policy measures to address these issues. Despite encouraging signs of the growing sophistication of demands for Roma rights and recognition at local, national, and transnational levels, the continued ostracism, the racist exclusion of Europe's most significant ethnic minority from meaningful and effective participation in political processes, registers as perhaps the most critical of democratic deficits.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

office. RPP also provides training in the form of seminars and workshops in human rights, advocacy, public relations, and other topics relevant to organizational development and capacity building. RPP maintains a close relationship with its grantees and devises training initiatives in direct response to priorities identified by the grantees themselves.

For further information and application forms please contact RPP at:

Tel: (36-1) 327-3855; Fax: (36-1) 327-3841; E-mail: brorke@osi.hu
www.osi.hu/rpp

Or write to:

Bernard Rorke, Deputy Director, Roma Participation Program,
Open Society Institute, P.O. Box 519, H-1397 Budapest, Hungary

Programo vaš e

romengi participacija

O Programo vaš e Romengi Participacija (RPP), ando Open Society Institute (Instituto vaš Putardo Sasoinipe) ani Budapest astardas te kerel buči an 1997 bers. O RPP si programo legardo kotar e Roma thaj kerel buči te žutil e Romen kotar Centralno thaj Čačuni - rigeski Europa, te saj e Roma te maren pes vaš bareder integracija pe Europake thema. E RPP-eski strategija džal pe duj riga: kotar jekh rig, o RPP zurarel o Romano na-profitisko sektoro ande regiono kodolesar so dela žutipen vas Romane NGO (NŠO: Na Štatoske Organizaciji) vas kodo so trubuj lenge te keren profesionalne buči (kompjuteru, faxo, telefono, renta thaj vaver), kerela lenge treningura vas e manusa so keren buči ande gasave Organizaciji te saj lokeder te keren influencia pe lokalno gaverno vas e Romane problemengero pharuvipe. Kotar e vaver rig lel sama upri kodo te kerel projektura Romane Organizacijencar save si len motivacija thaj ambicija te keren bareder kampanja vas keribe politika pe nacionalno nivelo thaj te lel sama pe sa so ovela e Romencar vi pe internacionalno nivelo.

O RPP kerela kodo kodolesar so kerel neve NŠO (Na Štatoske Organizaciji) so si legarde kotar e Roma thaj keren buči Romencar vas e Roma. O Programo si kerdo gjal te kerel stimulo vas buvleder participacija maskar e Roma, te sunel pes e Romengo glaso (krlo/hango) maskar sa e manusa thaj specijalno pe statoske institucije. E Programosko cilo si te žutil thaj te zorarel e Romen korkore te len sama thaj griza vas lengo dživdipe, te aven korkorutne, te keren participacija vas sa e decizije so si važno (importantno) e Romenge thaj o stato te

Akana o RPP, žutisarel pe buteder sar 40 Romane Organizacije an enja thema po kodo regiono. Pe kodo momento amen žutisaras Romane Organizaciji an Ungriko them, Slovakija, Čehiko, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Makedonia thaj Polanda. Kodo žutipen dela sajipen te putren pes Romane Centrura an romane mahali (getura, thana kote so dživen e Roma). Kodola Centrura len griza penge Romenge pe lokalno thaj nacionalno nivelo. But Organizaciji so lije love kotar o RPP kerde relacija maskar e but Romane Organizaciji an pengo them, cilosar te keren misteder buči upral romani problema.

So si kodo institucionalno žutipen? Normalne, kodo si žutipen e neve Romane Organizacijenge te šaj te pokinen peske lengo ofiso, kompjuteru, faxo, love vaš renta thaj vaver. O RPP dela vi

dikhel olen sar jekh, sa e vavere manuencar so dživen pe lengo them pe jekh demokratijako procesu.

Adadživesutni bilaci (nasul) situacija e Romencar avela kotar butebersengo rasizmo thaj crdipe e Romen pe rig. Pe regiono kotar Centralne thaj Čačuni-rigeski Europa avdive (adadžives) si bari diskriminacija, segregacija thaj butivar vi rasistikane atakura maumuj (upral) e Roma. Po 1999 bers, e Europaki Komisija ko plo raporto vas thema so khamen te oven an Europaki Unija phenel kaj: "ando but thema save so khamen te aven ki Europaki Unija vi majodorig si bari diskriminacija mamuj e Roma, sar an ekonomijako, vi ano socijalno dživdipen". O raporto majodorig phenel vi kodo kaj pe kodola thema si hronicno bibučaribe, naj lači sastipaski griza thaj si segregacija pe skolako sistem mamuj (vas) e Roma. Kodo raporto del sama vi vas kodo so si buteder rasistikane atakura upral e Roma thaj e lokalne thaj nacionalne gavernora či keren lači akcija te stopuil pe kodo.

Vi kodola thema kote so sas varesavo cino progreso pe kodola nekobor bersupral e gavernoski politika vas e Roma, ande praktika či kerde but. Von kerenas kodo but hari (pe cino nivelo) thaj vi majodorig či arakhle drom sar te protektuin e Romen kotar kodola rasistikane atakura. Si vi thema kote so del pes vorba vas Romenge čacipena, vi pe lokalno, vi pe nacionalno, vi transnacionalno nivelo, numa pe kodo momento Europako maj teluno minoriteto (e Roma) vi majodorig si dur kotar efektivno participacija pe politikako procesu thaj kodo si jekh kotar e majbare hibi (bilacipena) pe adadživesutni demokracija.

INSTITUCIONALNO ŽUTIPEN (ŽUTIPEN NEVE ROMANE ORGANIZACIJENGE)

sajipen vas treningura sar so si seminarura, vorkopura vas manusikane čacipena: sar kerela pes relacija e manuencar, sar te pizden e lokalno gaverno, thaj vaver treningura so si važne vas organizacijaki buvleder thaj

lačeder buči. O RPP kerel but pase thaj lače relacije peske Organizacijencar thaj sa e inicijativi vaš e treningura avena direktno kotar e Organizaciji.

Vaš buteder informacije vaj vaš aplikacijake lila šaj te dodžanen buteder pe kodola kontakt numerura:

Tel: (361) 327 3855, Fax: (361) 327 3841, E-mail: brorke@osi.hu
www.osi.hu/rpp

Vaj skrinisaren (pisinen, hramonen) amenge pe:
Roma Participation Program, Open Society Institute, P.O. Box 519,
H-1397 Budapest, Hungary

Foreword



By Rumyan Russinov, Director, RPP

Every group, every nation, that aspires to a better life needs to be aware of the resources available to it in order to make the best use of them. What resources do we, the Roma, possess to accomplish our goals, and what are these goals? It seems to me that after a decade of Romani activism we possess a clear vision concerning our futures. We are united in wanting to be treated as equal citizens, without discrimination, and to participate in the public life of the societies in which we live.

Let us try to identify those resources and capacities we possess that can help us accomplish our goals. Are we wealthy and powerful? Do we have a nation-state or the capacity to bring one into being so that we may take our place among the peoples of the world? Plainly the answers are negative. Our only resources have been our intelligence and our will to survive. Looking back on our blighted history, the evidence is that such resources are far from negligible. Our intelligence has helped us to adapt and survive in hostile environments; our intellect has enabled us to preserve our identity, our language, and our culture in the face of massive pressures to assimilate. Today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, in order to emancipate ourselves, the challenge is not merely to survive, but to thrive, to take our places and be respected as free and equal citizens of our states. To meet this formidable challenge we can no longer simply rely on the thin stratum of an educated Roma elite. For the mass of our people, and especially for future generations, education is the sine qua non for full and equal participation in society.

The central theme of this edition is not just the problems facing Roma in the sphere of education, but the dramatic and innovative steps taken by Roma to address these inequities. Across the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe, the education of Romani children is characterized by two features: segregation from the mainstream system and an inferior quality of education in comparison to that delivered to children from the majority society. Whether or not governments have willfully conspired towards these ends—and expert opinion remains divided—it remains an obstinate fact that segregation in education exists everywhere in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia over 70 percent of the Romani children are placed in special schools for the mentally handicapped. Likewise, in Bulgaria about 70 percent of the Romani children attend inferior so-called gypsy schools located in the Romani neighborhoods. In Hungary, Romani children are placed both in special schools and in segregated classes in the mainstream schools. Despite the variety of forms of segregation, the effect is uniform: a huge disparity between the level of education among Roma and that of the majority populations. More than anything else, this is the obstacle to our advancement. Not only does it leave

our young ill-equipped and unprepared to compete in the labor market, but this results in an incalculable loss to our culture. Can anyone estimate how much human potential has been needlessly squandered as a result of these discriminatory practices? How many writers, scholars, poets, and doctors have been lost to us, because children who had the potential were denied the chance to develop their gifts, and were instead classified as mentally handicapped or sent to dead-end segregated schools? How can these losses be compensated? More importantly how long should we tolerate this systematic mutilation of our development as a people?

Over the past two years, RPP has directed its efforts towards the elimination of segregation and promoting full access to quality education for Roma. We have campaigned to raise awareness and elicit support for this issue at international and national levels. We have sought to involve the governments in the formulation of coherent desegregation strategies, because without their participation the desegregation process is not sustainable. We have supported Roma-led NGO initiatives to demonstrate in concrete terms that desegregation is possible and integration can work. The first such project was launched in the town of Vidin, Bulgaria, in 2000. This has proved to be a big success and has paved the way for five new desegregation projects in other towns across Bulgaria.

At this particular moment we have the empathy and support of the international community. We have their declared commitment to assist us, both financially and politically. European and international institutions support Romani nongovernmental organizations, which are the pillars of the Romani movement. We have on our side, some (but not very many) non-Roma liberals and progressives who are prepared to promote our cause for equality. In various forms and with varying degrees of efficacy, Romani organizations are involved in dialogues with the governments of their respective states. Some of these governments have already acknowledged the gravity of the problem concerning Roma and educational provision. In the last ten years the foundations of a Romani political class have been laid. If we take stock of all these factors, it can be said that we have made significant progress, for such opportunities simply did not exist at the beginning of the 1990s. Now, they do. Let us take the opportunity; this is an historic moment to advance our cause. I am optimistic that we will not fail, but rather that we will capitalize on these opportunities, for ultimately only we Roma can emancipate ourselves.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to Donka Panayotova, her team in Vidin—and all those involved in desegregation initiatives in Sliven, Pleven, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, and Montana—who, by their tireless efforts have inspired others and refuted the notion that we Roma do nothing but complain.

Case Study: School Desegregation in Vidin, Bulgaria

By Evgeni Evgeniev

This paper is a case study of the desegregation initiative in the town of Vidin (Bulgaria), which began in June 2000. The basic purpose of the desegregation project was to transfer Romani students from the segregated Roma school in the "Nov Pat" Roma neighborhood (mahala) to the mainstream schools in the town of Vidin. The Romani organization Drom led this ambitious initiative which has to date succeeded in successfully integrating over 600 children.

The paper is comprised of three parts. Section 1 provides background detail concerning the segregated schooling system in Bulgaria and outlines the goals of the project.

Introduction

Section 2 explains the social context, the structure of Drom, the specific measures adopted to launch the initiative and the successful campaign to build a broad-based coalition of local, national and international support around the issue of desegregation. Section 3 provides an analysis of the children's academic achievements at the end of one year in an integrated and competitive mainstream educational environment and a delineation of what has become known as the "Vidin Model." The conclusion asserts that this model can be feasibly replicated across Bulgaria.

About 70 percent of school age Romani children in Bulgaria attend all-Romani schools located in segregated Romani neighborhoods throughout the country.¹

The schools were established from the 1950s to the 1970s and were labeled by the official authorities as "schools for children with inferior lifestyle and culture." In 1966, the Ministry of Education introduced a special curriculum with a heavy emphasis on vocational skills for these segregated schools that remained in place until 1992.

Originally, the schools in Romani neighborhoods were perceived as a positive development since they contributed to the inclusion of Roma in the education system. However, the quality of education declined due to a combination of continued neglect, chronic under-funding and the practice of employing unqualified teaching staff in these schools. As Donka Panayotova, who taught in the Vidin school for fifteen years explained:

Section 1: "Roma" Schools and Segregation

In 1992, the Ministry of Education introduced standard curricula for the schools in the Romani neighborhoods, thus eliminating the focus on the vocational training

component. However, this measure did not improve the quality of education. High drop-out rates, poor attendance and drastic disparity in the educational achievement of the Romani children in comparison to their peers at the mixed schools persist to this day. Therefore, from a long-term perspective Romani children are doomed to exclusion.

The Drom organization began its initiative in June 2000 to ensure equal access for the Romani children from Nov Pat to the mainstream schools in Vidin.² The organization defined its objective as follows:

- To provide free access for Roma children, from first grade to eighth grade, to all schools in Vidin and support the efforts of Roma children to graduate from secondary school.

"...most of the non-Roma teachers, who were the prevailing part of the teaching staff, ignored their responsibilities and did not care about the progress of the children at school. They tended to underestimate the children's intellectual capacity and treated them without respect. The teachers' neglect of the educational process was also reflected in the children's attitude towards school—many Romani children gradually lost interest in schooling, did not attend regularly, and often dropped out. Only a small number of the children continued their education after primary school and none of them ever tried to apply at the university."

¹ The 1992 census showed that the general education level of Roma was much lower than that of the majority population in Bulgaria. Roma with high school diplomas constituted 4.9 percent of the Roma population older than 6 years and those with university diplomas represent only 0.1 percent of the same population. The figures for Bulgarians were 36.5 and 8.9 percent respectively. The reason for these low education levels is the denial of equal education opportunities for Roma for several decades.

² The Nov Pat neighborhood is situated on the periphery of Vidin. It has a population of approximately 15,000-20,000 Roma, about one third of the town's population.

Towards this end the organization set itself the following tasks:

- To achieve an equitable distribution of Roma children in classes of all Vidin schools
- To provide busing free-of-charge for the students from the Roma neighborhood to the schools in the town
- To provide those children from the most impoverished backgrounds with free school textbooks and stationery and a daily breakfast
- To provide extra tuition for those students who perform below grade-level
- To prepare those outstanding students who wish to apply to specialized secondary schools for languages, mathematics and sciences

- To sponsor integration incentives such as "most ethnically tolerant" competitions between classes
- To recognize and reward students who regularly attend school and achieve high marks
- To run regular training courses and seminars for teachers working in ethnically mixed classes

From the outset, Drom believed that there was a clear and objective necessity to begin a desegregation initiative in Vidin. The Roma school, in existence for four decades, had performed a great disservice to the Roma community, failing to provide an acceptable standard of education and contributing to wider segregation of the Roma from Bulgarian society. The opportunities for integration were effectively closed off from early childhood.

Founded in 1997, the Drom organization began work as a human rights advocacy NGO, focusing on legal protection, media, and education. It has an impressive track record in providing free legal consultation and representation in court in defense of Roma rights. In the four years before the launch of the desegregation initiative Drom established itself as a formidable grassroots NGO with strong links to the Roma community. It developed a strong network of close working relationships with Roma leaders, local authorities, and NGO activists, and its successes were widely reported in the mainstream media.

Drom cultivated close contacts in the print and broadcast media, with journalists from the nationwide television stations Kanal 1 and bTV, the local TV Vidin, and TV Roma, the national and regional newspapers 24 Chasa, Trud, and Konkurent, and the local publications Nie and Vidin. These contacts proved hugely important in promoting open and transparent discussion concerning its role in the community and publicizing its activities and successes. Drom organized regular roundtables and seminars, providing open forums for deliberation and consultation among NGO activists, local authority representatives and media. Prior to the desegregation initiative Drom had established a widely acknowledged reputation as an effective and respected advocate of Roma interests.



A broad consensus emerged between Romani NGOs around the issue of equal access to quality education for Roma in the course of the dialogue between the Roma community and the Bulgarian government in 1998-1999. The historic campaign which led to the adoption of the "Framework Program for Equal Participation of Roma in the Public Life of Bulgaria" actually began in Vidin. In September 1998, Drom hosted the first official meeting between local Roma leaders, the Human Rights Project (HRP Sofia) and other

Section 2: Drom and the Campaign to Desegregate

leading NGOs. Following a nationwide campaign, the government and 70 Romani NGOs signed the document and formally committed them-

selves to the principles contained in the Framework Program in April 1999. One section of the document entitled "Desegregation of Roma Schools" states that:

"A long-term strategy must be developed for removal of segregated Roma schools in Roma areas and decisive measures taken to ensure free admission of Roma children to the 'normal' schools and prevent segregation of Roma children into separate classes..."

However, in the aftermath there was little evidence of political will from the government to honor this commitment. As Rumyan Russinov, Director of OSI's Roma Participation Program, stated, "two years following the adoption of the Framework Program, the government failed to start action on the desegregation of the Roma schools." What did exist was broad-based support among the Roma community and NGOs for an end to segregation and a tacit acceptance by the government of the principle of equal educational opportunities for Roma.

Vidin is situated on the Danube, close to the borders of neighboring Yugoslavia and Romania, and is home to many national minorities. In addition to a longstanding reputation for tolerance, there is a heightened awareness among the population about ethnic conflict and human rights in the wake of the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Issues around EU accession are also of great concern in Vidin. The accession process has resulted in pressure being applied on the government to respect human rights and reform public policy towards minorities. Because of Vidin's strategic location, it was unlikely that the government would obstruct a campaign for desegregation in the town. Vidin is the key point in the pivotal infrastructure project "Corridor No. 4" and in the construction of the Vidin-Kalafat Bridge. For this reason Günter Verheugen, EU Commissioner on Enlargement, visited Vidin in March 2001. In addition to his meetings with the local authorities, the commissioner also visited the Roma neighborhood and publicly expressed his interest and support for initiatives to improve the situation of the Roma in Bulgaria.

FIRST STEPS

One key to the success of the initiative is the strong team of six supervisors and two senior coordinators charged with the day-to-day implementation of the project. One of the senior coordinators is responsible for working with the Roma parents. The other, an experienced educator, acts as a liaison between Drom and the directors and teaching staff of the regular schools in Vidin. In addition, both oversee and support the team of six supervisors.

Following public advertisements, interviews, and assessments of all applicants, a team of educated Roma was selected to work as supervisors. Candidates were chosen who could project a positive image of Roma to the wider community and win the trust and respect of Romani parents. Additional preparatory training on working with children was provided by a psychologist from the Vidin Bureau of Labor, Dr. Netov, who was appointed by Drom. The responsibilities of the supervisors charged with overseeing the welfare of the children were as follows:

- To keep a daily attendance record of the children
- To report on the progress of each child and keep a record of their grades
- To work with those parent whose children were absent from school
- To report on progress made by teachers working with the children who were lagging behind



1

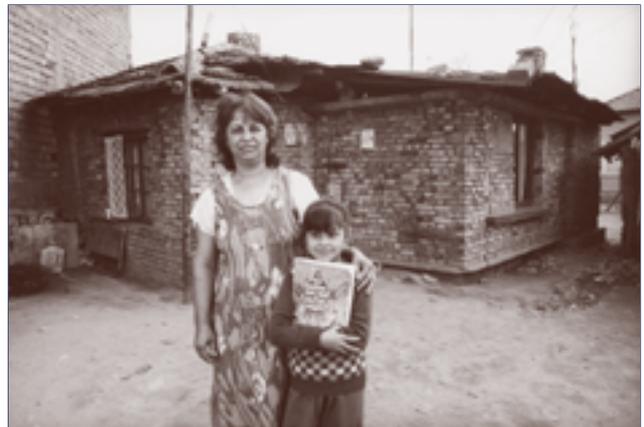
The supervisors accompanied the children to and from school each day and maintained a presence in the schools to deal with any difficulties that occurred. In addition, there were compulsory weekly meetings of the project team on Saturdays to discuss the past week's activities and to set new objectives and targets for the coming week.

PREPARATORY PHASE: JULY 1 – SEPTEMBER 15, 2000

In July the staff of the organization arranged meetings with representatives of the local authorities, nongovernmental organizations and political leaders from the Roma community. Drom explained the rationale, goals, and planned activities of the desegregation project and won the support of all parties.

On July 10, the Chairwoman of Drom, Donka Panayotova, was invited to a meeting with the directors of the mainstream Vidin schools where she outlined the plans for desegregation, and explained the necessity and importance of the project. The school directors supported her position with a unanimous vote. On the same day the local Vidin newspaper Nie published an extended interview with Panayotova informing the public about the proposed initiative and the issue of equal educational opportunities.

The director of the Roma school invited Panayotova for a discussion with the staff on July 28. It was far more difficult to convince them of the benefits of desegregation as this



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innovation directly threatened their interests because full integration of Roma children could result in the closure of the segregated school. The director claimed that his school had the best teaching staff in Vidin and, in his 15 years of experience, had delivered "high quality educational product." After a long debate the staff of the Roma school declared themselves to be supportive of the initiative, with one important proviso—which revealed something of their real attitude to integration. Their administrative body declared that any student who left the Roma school and entered the desegregation program would not be allowed to return.

At the end of July, TV Roma, an independent cable channel in the Roma neighborhood, produced short films on each of the mainstream schools in Vidin, with details of educational programs and facilities, and profiles of staff. These were broadcast between August 1 and 15 to enable the Roma parents to make informed choices concerning the best school for their children.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the preparatory phase was then undertaken by the Drom staff and supervisors. They went from door to door in the mahala, visiting all the parents and explaining the advantages of sending their children to the mixed regular schools in the town. Before this, no one had ever spoken with the parents about their children's education and future prospects. Many Romani parents initially feared that their children might be exposed to humiliating treatment in the majority environment. However, when the project was explained to them in detail they were reassured; many became convinced that sending their children to the segregated school is detrimental to their children's future and agreed to participate in the program. Before the beginning of the school year Drom, with the support of the Bulgarian Red Cross Youth Union, organized recreational activities for the participating children, such as dances and excursions, in order to build a rapport between them and the supervisors.

On September 9, Drom hosted a national conference on "The Education of Roma Children on a New Stage." (See www.drom.hit.bg for further information.) Participants included educational experts, prominent academics, government representatives, members of political parties and NGOs, and Roma community leaders. The event received extensive local and national media coverage that highlighted the very public support given by a coalition of prominent civil society and political figures for the desegregation project and the principle of equal access to quality education for Romani children.

◀ 1-4 From the very outset, Romani parents were closely involved in the desegregation process and for the first time they felt empowered to have some say in the education of their children. The parents are in close contact with the *Drom* supervisors and school teaching staff, and receive regular updates on their children's progress. Their enthusiasm and active participation refuted the prejudiced stereotype that Romani parents care little about their children's education.

MEDIA

The desegregation project was conceived as a high-impact civic initiative. The strategy was to prove that integration can work by providing a model that could be replicated, with a view to influencing government and bringing pressure to bear for substantial policy reform on Roma education. Towards this end the role of the media was of crucial importance. One of the main objectives was to actively engage the Roma community and win the support of the wider Bulgarian society for the provision of equal educational opportunities for Romani children. Public perceptions had been colored by the "Yambol incidents" which occurred one year earlier. In Yambol, a town in southeastern Bulgaria, a disorganized, mechanical transfer of Romani children into regular schools sparked a racist backlash and protests by white parents that resulted in Romani students being sent back to the segregated school.

Drom, with the support of Minority Rights Group, London, and the European Roma Rights Center, Budapest, launched a sustained media campaign targeting local, regional, and national print and broadcasting media. This campaign succeeded in attracting positive coverage and promoting a wider consensus concerning the desegregation process. Media reporting included a half-hour documentary on Drom and desegregation broadcast on the main Bulgarian television channel, bTV, on December 2000; a report by Nancy Durham shown by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in September 2000; and a full-page article—"Bulgaria Opens School Doors for Gypsy Children"—written by John Tagliabue for the New York Times on June 12, 2001, which also appeared in the International Herald Tribune two days later. In addition, throughout the process there have been regular news updates, interviews, and documentary features, and discussion and debate in the newspapers, on television, and on the radio.

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS: PARENTS, CHILDREN, EDUCATORS, AND THE AUTHORITIES

Before turning to the attitudes of the different groups involved in the process, it is important to define one of the main obstacles facing Drom at the very outset of the project in the summer of 2000. Decades of isolation, institutional racism, and the lack of any real notion of informed parental choice had resulted in a deep inertia and fatalism with regard to education provision. This was compounded by a sense in the community that "the Roma school has 'educated' several generations of Roma, and no matter how bad it is, it is still our school. It belongs to our neighborhood." From the outset, Drom had to break the inertia, and the feeling that it was somehow inevitable that children attend the segregated school, by showing that there was a real possibility for a better educational future for Romani children.

THE ROMANI PARENTS

While the official unemployment rate in the Vidin region is 27 percent, for Roma it is about 70 percent. Extreme poverty, compounded by residential segregation and a lack of educational and employment opportunities, deepened the sense of isola-

tion from mainstream society experienced by Roma. The result of this was that in Vidin many Roma were at first skeptical about the desegregation initiative or the possibility of it succeeding. However, following the initial house-to-house visits by the Drom supervisors, many parents were convinced, and when the school year began, on September 15, 2000, 275 Roma children began attending the six mainstream schools in Vidin.

Regular monthly meetings were held between the staff of Drom and the Romani parents. During these meetings the parents were given updates on the progress made by the children, with discussions covering any problems the children encountered and how they were adjusting to the new environment. Special seminars were provided for the parents by education experts dealing with topics such as the role of the school in society, how schools are managed, new teaching methods, and parental involvement in children's educational development. In addition, they attended a training seminar led by Dr. Netov, the psychologist, on attitudes towards "difficult" children, methods of decision making, and personality skills development. A training course was also organized for parents by one of the schools, "P.R. Slaveikov," in partnership with Drom, to familiarize the parents with the curriculum and learning requirements for each grade. One of the most interesting outcomes of this was that about 35 parents were motivated to enroll at the school as adult learners. In addition to these organized sessions, the parents and supervisors developed close personal contacts and cooperated closely on a day-to-day informal basis in overseeing the children's development and progress.

At the end of February 2001, Drom organized a meeting between the parents and the school directors. The parents expressed their satisfaction and support for the desegregation process. They were happy that the children had adjusted so well to the new and welcoming environment and with the progress the children had made in the first term. One of the most significant outcomes was the inclusion of Romani parents in the School Councils of the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" and "Tzar Simeon Veliki" high schools. This was an unprecedented development in the history of Vidin.

One of the most important factors in the success of the launch and first phase of the desegregation process was that the parents were highly motivated by being directly involved at every stage. In addition to the close contact with the team at Drom, the new and remarkable partnership formed between Romani parents and the staff and directors of the mainstream schools consolidated and legitimated the process among Roma and non-Roma alike.

THE SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

At the beginning of the school year, Drom organized a meeting between the directors of all six schools, the coordinators, and the supervisors to present a detailed account of their strategy and to coordinate activities for the coming year. The directors agreed to give the supervisors office space within each of the schools.

On November 17, Drom hosted a seminar entitled "New Approaches in the Education of Roma Children." The participants included the Chief of the Regional Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education and Science; the Vice Mayor of Vidin Municipality; officials from the education, public relations, and regional development departments of the municipality; school

directors; parents; and media representatives. This event was very successful in provoking discussions and adding an impetus towards building partnerships with a shared goal to improve the quality of education and support for the process of desegregation. As a result of the seminar, Drom held further meetings with the school staff and, importantly, with the teachers working with the newly integrated classes. Formal agreements for cooperation were signed between Drom, the Regional Education Inspectorate, and the school directors for further organizational and educational support for the process. In December 2000 and January 2001, Drom, in cooperation with the Inspectorate, held a series of training seminars for the teachers on multicultural education, ethnic tolerance, and the history and culture of minority groups.



5 "Let your wishes come true" reads the sign above this fourth-grade class at its end-of-year celebration.

"Tolerance is part of our daily vocabulary.

We respect difference and can show that together we have achieved something marvelous," said teacher Svetla Despotova (back row center).

In December 2000, teachers of literature, math, and foreign languages began working with Drom to provide individual supplementary tuition for those children who needed extra support. The supervisors, together with the teachers, drew up monthly monitoring and progress reports for each



6

of the children in the desegregation project, enabling them to respond immediately and assist any child encountering difficulties.

Through a process of dialogue and partnership, the teachers became highly motivated and committed to the success of the project. They responded enthusiastically to the challenge and unique opportunity of working with ethnically mixed groups of children. Their positive reaction and commitment was a key factor in the success of the desegregation process.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES

From the very outset of the desegregation initiative Drom tried to establish a dialogue with the local authorities of Vidin, inviting them to the various roundtable discussions it held. Relationships were difficult at the outset because the authorities attempted to obstruct the process. The authorities wanted Drom to cede full control of the desegregation activities to them. Drom refused to do this, as the authorities had a close relationship with the management of the segregated Roma school. Instead, through public and media campaigning, and by building a broad coalition of civil society actors, educators, and the staff and directors of the mainstream schools, Drom succeeded in legitimating the desegregation process. Such was the success of the process, and the national and international media attention it attracted, that in October 2001 the Vidin municipality pledged its official support for desegregation by signing public agreements with Drom, the Regional Education Inspectorate, and regional governmental authorities.

ROMANI CHILDREN

One of the major concerns of everybody involved in the desegregation initiative was the emotional welfare of the children—that they would not suffer any stress or humiliation in the new schooling environment. Due to the attention of the supervisors and the positive attitude of the teachers involved, the process of adaptation was remarkably smooth. It became obvious very soon that the children enjoyed the change and thrived in their new learning environments. The students were distributed in six mainstream schools in Vidin, on the basis that there not be more than 30 percent of students of Roma origin in any one class.



7

Pupils file onto the bus at the end of another school day at "Otet Paisiy."

Free school materials, such as supplementary texts, notebooks, pens, and pencils, were provided for 220 children from the most impoverished backgrounds. Extra tuition was provided for the children to enable them to meet the required educational standards. Preparatory training was also provided for three seventh grade students to compete for places in the two elite secondary schools. One of them, Boris Nikolov, succeeded in winning a place at the prestigious Mathematics High School.



8

End of a day's journey as pupils arrive back in the neighborhood.

Drom also organized a host of extracurricular activities designed to bring Romani and non-Romani children together outside of the classroom and integrate the Roma children into the wider Vidin community. In cooperation with the Regional Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education and Science, Drom ran a competition for the "Most Tolerant Class." The criteria were defined in accordance with International Tolerance Year 2000. A special committee, including staff members from the school, the Inspectorate, and Drom, selected the winners. This helped to create a whole new spirit of togetherness. The prize for the winning classes was a one-week vacation in the mountains of Berkovitsa together. Two parents—one Roma and one Bulgarian—from each class were invited to help with the organization. As a result of these activities, for the first time, Roma and non-Roma, children and adults alike, were really together in their studies, games, excursions, and entertainment for a week.

During the winter vacation, another training camp in the mountains of Berkovitsa was organized (January 2-6, 2001) for those children who were experiencing difficulties in languages, math, and literature. Additional Bulgarian language tuition was provided by 10 teachers from the Vidin schools. English language classes were organized in two groups, and taught by US Peace Corps volunteers. Professor Christo Kyuchukov was invited to deliver a series of lectures for the teachers.

In March 2001, the Drom desegregation team was invited to open classes in all schools which had Roma students. This was a moment of celebration, not only for the staff of Drom, but also for the children themselves. The school directors acknowledged the contribution of the desegregation process in improving the attendance and the grades of all the students, Roma and non-Roma alike. On April 8, Drom organized celebrations of the International Day of the Roma in Vidin. The participants were predominantly children from the

desegregation project. In July 2001, Drom organized a summer camp for children from the desegregation program who finished the school year with excellent marks.

From the outset of the project, it was understood that the emotional security and well being of each child was paramount to the success of the desegregation process. In addition to educational support and incentives, extracurricular activities played a vital role in bringing Roma and non-Roma together in such a way that the integration process involved the whole community.

(Continued on page 14)

9

Donka Panayotova (below), Director of *Drom*



11



12



10

Ilia Evgeniev inspects the buses before the start of another school day.



13

"My knowledge of the Roma language is only superficial—the meaning of the word drom is 'road,' isn't it? There must be a certain symbolism in that the program is called 'Drom'... I believe the significance of this program lies in paving the way for a new mentality."

Petar Stoyanov, Former President of the Republic of Bulgaria (Sofia, April 27, 2001).



14

11-14 Escorted by Drom supervisors, the children board the morning bus that takes them from the "Nov Pat" *mahala* to school.

13-year-old Emilia Assenova, a sixth-grade pupil at "Hristo Botev" school, sent these verses with the message
"Ciao from Emilia, with love to all you good people!"

15



Sun

*You bright and clear sun
 Over the hearth of the land
 You shine all over the earth
 And give out your brilliance*

Rose

*Beautiful rose, you are so thorny, you are the
 Queen of flowers and all their beauty belongs to you*

School

*My dearest school, I'll always be faithful to you,
 You taught us to learn, to write, and to create*

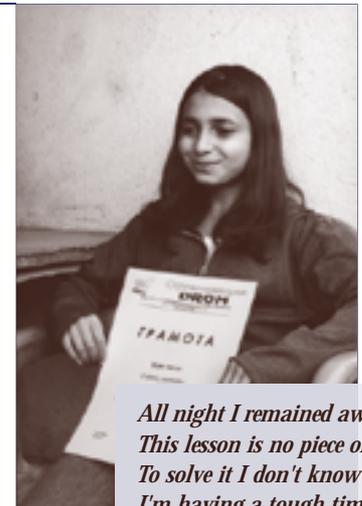


18

*"I have no problems at school
 and have many Bulgarian friends,"*
 says 8-year-old Valeria Yordanova,
 whose favorite subject is math.

19

Sabina Andreeva,
 a 13-year-old sixth-grader,
 showing the certificate
 she received from *Drom*,
 for coming second in an
 essay competition on the
 theme of "*Friendship
 between Roma and Non-
 Roma.*" Sabina also sent
 these two poems to RPP.



*All night I remained awake
 This lesson is no piece of cake
 To solve it I don't know how
 I'm having a tough time now*

16

Marsiela, a fifth-grader at
 "Otest Paisiy" school,
 prefers her new school
 because "*We learn far
 more things here than
 at the Roma school*"



Summer

*Summer is here
 With its noise and cheer
 Children play
 And flowers bloom*

*The air is fresh and warm
 The grass is green and lush
 Children everywhere are on the
 Run and rush*

*This season I cherish most of all
 And would never let it go
 Outside you hear the ringing
 Of cheerful voices singing*

*This problem is tough
 I don't know enough
 It can't wait, I know
 But out I want to go*

*I wish I could grow up quick
 Be like my mum and fix
 Every problem clear and fine
 Each one and in no time*



17 Stefani Valkova is seven years old and has just completed
 first grade in the integrated "Hristo Botev" school.

Tests conducted in all schools by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science for the academic year prior to the desegregation project confirmed the serious discrepancies between the quality of education provided at the mainstream schools and the segregated "gypsy" school in Vidin. These tests provided Drom with the opportunity to measure the level of educational disadvantage experienced by the Romani children as a consequence of segregation against the progress they made in the course of one year in an integrated and responsive schooling environment. The table below shows both the increase in children participating in the program and the marks obtained and progress made from the end of the first term to the completion of the first school year:

Grades	Number of Children	
	End of First Term	End of School Year
Excellent (6)	0	23
Very Good (5)	28	177
Good (4)	120	204
Satisfactory (3)	103	56
Poor (2)	24	0
Total	275	460

In May 2001, tests were conducted by the Regional Education Inspectorate, together with Drom, in three of the Vidin schools. The purpose was to test the level of education of three distinct classes. The first group consisted of 100 percent Romani students (from the Roma school in Vidin); the second one of 100 percent non-Romani students; and the third consisted of an integrated class of Roma and non-Roma students. In their analysis and summary of the tests, Professors Christo Kyuchukov and Encho Gerganov found that the best results were obtained by the integrated class of Romani and non-Romani pupils.

THE "VIDIN MODEL"

At a major conference in Sofia in April 2001, the President of Bulgaria, Petar Stoyanov congratulated Drom on its success, and made special mention of Donka Panayotova for her tireless efforts to "motivate others through compassion and warmth." He expressed his hope that the example of Vidin will spread fast in the rest of Bulgaria.³ This was a clear indication of the extent of the success of what had by then become widely known as the "Vidin Model."

Drom's priorities at the beginning of the school year were oriented towards integrating as many children as possible, motivating them, and enabling them to adjust to the new learning environment. By the end of the school year Drom was 100 percent successful in achieving these objectives. The number of

students participating in the program increased from 275 to 460 by the beginning of the second school term. This reflected the growing trust and confidence within the Roma community, and the willingness of the authorities and institutions to facilitate the process of integration. The improved results the children achieved by the end of the first year provided concrete evidence of how well they had adjusted to the new educational environment, and how welcoming this new environment proved to be. The second school year began on an even more positive note, with over 600 children registered to attend mainstream schools, as well as the signing of an official concordat by Drom and the Vidin Municipality, the Regional Education Inspectorate, and the regional authorities.

The Vidin Model as outlined in this paper is one that can be replicated across Bulgaria. The importance of the preparatory phase cannot be overemphasized: raising awareness among Roma parents, media campaigning, and open dialogue with the authorities, the teachers, and the broader public were absolutely vital components in building partnerships in support of desegregation between Roma and non-Roma. Within Drom, teamwork and detailed planning, down to the finest detail, was essential because one of the organization's main concerns was the emotional and physical well-being of each child participating in the initiative—to ensure that the new educational experience would be both rewarding and enjoyable for them. At all stages Romani parents were closely involved in the process and for the first time they felt empowered to have some say in the education of their children. Their enthusiasm and active participation refuted the pervasive stereotype that Romani parents care little about their children's education.



20 Seventh-grade math class at "Hristo Botev" school

Another distinctive feature of the Vidin Model was the efforts through the media campaign and public meetings to raise awareness and build consensus within the majority community around the issue of desegregation. The success of the initiative generated further positive national and international media coverage that projected a favorable image of the entire community of Vidin—Roma and non-Roma alike, the municipal and educational authorities, school directors, and staff—as forward-looking, well disposed, and committed to integration. This in turn served to further bolster and legitimize the process.

3 See the report of the conference "The Desegregation of 'Romani Schools' – A Condition for an Equal Start for Roma," Sofia, Bulgaria, April 27, 2001, published by the European Roma Rights Center and the Roma Participation Program.

The success of the Vidin Model has demonstrated that despite the complexities, reservations, and resistance to change, desegregation is possible. It has also paved the way for similar successful initiatives in Haskovo, Sliven, Stara Zagora, and Pleven. What is missing is a commitment from the

Conclusion

government to devise a coherent nationwide policy plan to facilitate integration and equal access to quality education for all Romani children in Bulgaria. The impact of the Vidin initiative has already extended beyond Bulgaria, and helped to focus international attention on the issue of educational

segregation across Central and Europe. Drom has, by its example, opened the way for constructive dialogue and cooperation with state institutions and educational authorities, and demonstrated that, if there is the political will to embrace a policy of substantive reforms, the goal of integration and full participation of Roma in Bulgarian society can become a reality.

"We cannot say that these issues concern only a small group of Bulgarian citizens, the Bulgarian Roma. On the contrary, these problems affect the whole of Bulgarian society ...a democratic society must not even contemplate, either unintentionally or intentionally, to segregate a part of its citizens. This is simply based on the principle of humanity."

Petar Stoyanov, former President of the Republic of Bulgaria
(Sofia, April 27, 2001)

"We Cannot Integrate without Equal Access to Education"

Rumyan Russinov appeared before the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation In Europe (Helsinki Commission) Hearing on Romani Human Rights In Bulgaria, April 9, 2002.

Chairman Smith, members of the commission, thank you very much for inviting me again to testify before you. Today I will speak about school desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe. This is the first major issue around which Romani activists from my country, Bulgaria, and from the other countries in the region in the region have coalesced.

In the past decade, Central and Eastern Europe has undergone significant efforts toward democratic reform. Alongside this process, however, we have witnessed a reverse tendency affecting the Roma, who number some 10 million in the region. The Roma alone became even more isolated, even more segregated, even more excluded from opportunities and prospects enjoyed by the other members of our societies.

Dimitrina Petrova has just presented a comprehensive analysis of the situation with regards to school segregation in Central and Eastern Europe. I would like to focus on Romani actions to challenge school segregation and what is needed to ensure the sustainability of the process.

The first initiative to challenge school segregation was made in 2000 in the city of Vidin, as it was mentioned in the beginning. This is a Bulgarian city and the action was made by Roma. The Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program, which I direct, supported a local Romani organization to initiate the desegregation of the local all-Romani school.

Some 400 Romani children from the segregated school were bused to the mainstream schools, to the seven mainstream schools in the city of Vidin. Adult Roma monitors were placed in the receiving school to address any problems which might arise. Pupils were given extracurricular lessons and structured homework sessions, and the very poorest children received a daily lunch bag to take to school. This effort was reported in the June 14 issue of the New York Times by John Tagliabue.

This initiative raised several general questions which we wanted to answer. Would the Roma community accept the process or not? How will the majority non-Roma community react to this transition? Will the school authorities and teaching staff accept this initiative? Will the Romani children be successful in the new competitive environment?

I can say that after the first year the answers to all these questions were positive. We showed that this transition is possible. Of course, this is a complex process and there were some problems, but we showed that this is truly possible and we passed a lot of theoretical discussions on this issue.

The successful integration of some 600 Romani children into the mainstream Vidin schools continues to this day. The Vidin initiative provided a viable model upon which to build a strategy for national school desegregation in Bulgaria and thereby to ensure equal access to quality education for Romani children. In 2001, Romani NGOs in five cities in Bulgaria have made impressive efforts to initiate school desegregation by introducing the "Vidin Model." With the support of the Roman Participation Program, efforts to ensure equal education opportunities for Romani children have also started in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

The initial steps in these countries involve preparatory preschool activities for Romani children in order to prepare them to pass the tests for mainstream school entrants. Several recent international fora highlighted the growing consensus among Romani activists and Romani parents for school desegregation.

At the World Conference Against Racism, the Romani delegates called for desegregation and put the issue in the final conference document. The OSCE conference in Bucharest in September 2001 also highlighted the issue.

At the domestic level, however, our efforts to translate the political will among Roma for desegregation have been only partially successful to date. Although many governments adopted policies and programs for Roma dealing with the issue of education, these programs remain largely unimplemented. Nowhere in Central and Eastern Europe have governments undertaken concrete measures to eradicate school segregation.

The nationwide desegregation of schools cannot be carried out by grassroots initiatives or NGOs alone. It will take comprehensive strategies, mechanisms, and resources that can be only provided by the government. The sustainability of the desegregation initiatives we have undertaken depends on the full involvement of the government.

And, in the end, with the recommendations, we need the support of your commission, and of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Government commission, and government agencies such as USAID, to fight this fundamental inequality. We ask you for immediate political, financial, and technical support to help us achieve equal educational opportunities.

We have much to learn from your experience in the United States with school desegregation. We need American civil rights leaders to visit our countries and address the issue at the highest governmental levels and with the public.

We need the World Bank and the U.S. Government to show these countries the exorbitant costs of running parallel school systems and to find ways, through loans and grants, to help our governments finance systemic school desegregation. We need the World Food Program's school lunch program to provide lunches to Roma children whose families are too poor to do so themselves.

We need the presence of groups like the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute in the region to help build Roma political capacity in the national elections. We need also the direct support of the U.S. Congress, and we ask you to keep the pressure on your counterparts in our national parliaments and in the European Parliament, and on your own American ambassadors to support school desegregation for Roma people.

This country has gone through the nightmare of racial segregation. The political leaders and the people of the United States know better than anyone else the human and social costs of school segregation, and this makes me believe that our calls for equal educational opportunities will find strong allies here.

Chairman Smith, thank you very much for your continuing support.

Rep. Christopher J. Smith, Co-Chairman, United States Helsinki Commission: Thank you both for your excellent testimony and for the great work you do.

In response to questions from the commission members about the Vidin experience, Russinov explained how the NGO Drom managed to overcome 50 years of inertia and prejudice;

how for 50 years Romani parents were denied the opportunity to make informed choices about their children's educational options and had long become accustomed to sending their children to the segregated school situated in the ghetto. He explained that "Drom spent a lot of time convincing the parents of the Romani children of the benefits of attending mainstream schools. After that, this Romani NGO worked to convince the local authorities, started to convince the local educational authorities of the merits of this transition."

He emphasized the importance of careful and thorough preparation, and that the projects underway provided concrete evidence that integration is possible when there is consensus among all parties to the process, Roma and non-Roma, children and parents, teachers, authorities, and the wider public.

In response to questions about drop-out rates and parental involvement in tackling this problem, Russinov once again emphasized the legacy of institutionalized neglect: "For 50 years the biggest percentage of Romani children attended the so-called Romani schools or special schools. Roma were really isolated from the mainstream education." As a consequence little of value could be achieved from such schooling, and unfortunately education came to be seen by many as less important: "And that's why it's really important that the Roma community and the Romani parents have to be prepared for this process... I know that some NGOs, some experts actually claim that education is not part of the values of Roma. I think this is a racist statement. This is not true. When we explain to these people what are the benefits, and when we show with concrete examples that this is possible, I think we can overcome this huge barrier."

On the issue of Roma identity and assimilation: "We don't want to be assimilated. We want to keep, preserve, and develop our culture and our language, and to know our history. And it is important not only for Romani children to know their history and their culture, but also for majority children to be aware of these things." Integration into the mainstream educational system does not simply lead to assimilation: "It is evident that the small number of Roma who are well integrated, and well educated, are not assimilated. They have their Roma identity. They have their culture. They know their history." There is no necessary contradiction between equal access to education and preservation of Romani culture, Romani history, and Romani language. Such topics can be incorporated into the mainstream curriculum. He stressed that the main issue is that we cannot construct a broad Romani elite with such huge numbers of uneducated or poorly educated Roma:

"I can say that in the majority societies of most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, almost 10 percent of the population has university education. For Roma, the figure is less than one percent. How can we extract an elite from this 0.567? We cannot. How can we talk about equal participation in society, which is the core of the Romani cause, when we have this large number, large percentage, of uneducated or poorly educated Roma, the result of segregation in education? That's why I think that this is really a very critical moment to have governmental programs and strategies for desegregation. We cannot integrate without equal access to education."