

The Desegregation of Romani Schools—A Condition for an Equal Start for Roma

Sofia, Bulgaria
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Conference Report

1. Foreword

On September 15, 2000, about 300 Romani children from the Romani neighborhood of Vidin, Bulgaria, started the school year by being bused to one of the six mixed regular schools in the town. The program for equal access of Romani children to education, initiated by the Vidin based nongovernmental organization DROM and supported by the Open Society Institute, was a major challenge to the pattern of continued educational segregation of Romani children in Bulgaria.

The successful implementation of the Vidin program which today includes some 460 Romani children has prompted a debate about using it throughout Bulgaria and was the focus of an April 27, 2001, conference in Sofia entitled “The Desegregation of the Romani Schools—A Condition for an Equal Start for Roma.” The conference was co-organized by the Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program (RPP), the European Roma Rights Center, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, and the Human Rights Project.

The conference was the first major forum focusing on Roma and school integration in Bulgaria and it allowed Romani educational experts and activists, government officials, diplomats, and representatives of the World Bank and human rights organizations to discuss the implications of desegregation in Vidin.

2. Executive Summary

According to the 1992 census, the general educational level of Roma in Bulgaria was much lower than that of the majority population. Roma with high school diplomas constituted 4.9 percent of the Roma population older than 6 years and those with university diplomas constituted only 0.1 percent of the same population. The respective shares for Bulgarians were 36.5 and 8.9 percent.

These low educational levels are the result of several decades of denial of equal educational opportunities to Roma. In 1998, 70 Romani organizations proposed the *Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society*, which included school desegregation plans. A year later, the government formally adopted this comprehensive policy plan, but authorities have failed to take action to end school segregation.

About 70 percent of school age Romani children in Bulgaria attend all-Romani schools located in segregated Romani neighborhoods throughout the country. These schools were established in Romani neighborhoods from the 1950s to the 1970s and were labeled by the authorities at the time as "schools for children with inferior lifestyle and culture." In the 1970s and 1980s the policy of the educational authorities was to channel all Romani children to these schools. Starting in 1966, the Ministry of Education established primary schools with special curricula for intensified manual skills training in Romani neighborhoods. The special curricula of these schools were not abolished until 1992.

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

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

Educational experts and Romani leaders have expressed concern about all-Romani schools for years, yet the state has failed to address the problem of educational segregation. Moreover, Bulgarian authorities did not interfere in numerous cases when Romani children were denied access to mixed regular schools and were tracked instead to the overcrowded "Gypsy schools".

The Desegregation of the 'Romani Schools—A Condition for an Equal Start for Roma conference examined recent civil society efforts in Vidin to challenge this legacy of segregation and government neglect in providing equal educational opportunities to Romani children in Bulgaria.

Some of the key issues and recommendations discussed at the conference were:

- Discriminatory school segregation of Roma puts them in a disadvantaged position compared with other children and raises barriers between the Romani community and the rest of society. The effects of segregated schooling have an impact on all of Bulgarian society, particularly its economic development and its chances for smooth accession to the European Union.
- Efforts to reform all-Romani schools have failed and many of the problems stem from indirect forms of discrimination such as chronic underfunding of Romani schools and unqualified teachers.

- The Bulgarian government could be vulnerable to legal action based on international and European antidiscrimination instruments and should commit all available resources to eliminating educational segregation.
- The public candor about discrimination and educational segregation by elected public officials such as Bulgarian President Petar Stoyanov is a very positive development and an opportunity for Romani advocacy organizations to increase cooperation with the government.
- Integration policies must consider the interests and concerns that government officials, teachers, parents, and children have about desegregation.
- Success of desegregation efforts in Vidin indicates that integration of Romani children in mainstream schools can be achieved and that the Romani community wants to integrate.
- High levels of transparency and participation by all interested parties were key to Vidin's success. Cooperation among international agencies and donors, the national government, local officials, NGOs, and parents and teachers is also critical.
- The government should be the primary actor in implementing the school desegregation process nationwide. Government and media outlets should become more active in raising awareness about discrimination and make it clear to the public that desegregation benefits all of Bulgarian society and is not a privilege bestowed upon a selected group.
- Obstacles to further desegregation efforts will range from Constitutional challenges to entrenched public prejudice to teachers and parents who may feel threatened by change to lack of cooperation among government officials, NGOs, and local communities.

3. Conference Opening

*The Vidin Conference opened with addresses by **Rumyan Russinov**, director of the Roma Participation Project; **Petar Stoyanov**, president of the Republic of Bulgaria; **Deborah Harding**; vice president of the Open Society Institute; and **Nadezhda Mikhailova**, Bulgarian minister of foreign affairs.*

A key point emphasized by speakers during the opening was that discrimination against Roma held all of Bulgarian society back. Low levels of education among the Roma prevent them from fully participating in Bulgaria's development. Bulgaria's accession to the European Union could also be slowed if the country does not make a serious effort to apply international and EU norms regarding human rights to Roma. The speakers noted that dismantling Bulgaria's two separate but unequal school systems would be a fundamental and cost-effective way to improve the education of all its young people, stimulate long term development, and expedite Bulgaria's integration with Europe.

The initiative in Vidin was acknowledged as an example of effective desegregation and how integration efforts can help change public attitudes about race and ethnicity. Vidin also demonstrated that civil society organizations like DROM can cooperate with state

institutions to initiate change and could provide a template for further school desegregation and implementation of the *Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society* nationwide.

4. Roma in Bulgarian Society and the Principle of Equal Treatment

*The conference opening was followed by a presentation led by **Rumyan Russinov**, which provided background on the evolution of school segregation in Bulgaria and the challenges of implementing equal treatment and desegregation measures in Bulgaria.*

Although they were established in the 1950s and 1960s to involve Roma in education and focus on their specific educational needs, the all-Romani schools have deteriorated substantially in the decades since. Curriculum reform in 1992 did nothing to improve the schools, which are chronically underfunded and staffed by unqualified and/or unmotivated teachers. Despite the governments' adoption of the *Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society* in 1999, which envisages desegregation as a priority for the government, the state has taken no concrete action to implement the program. In Bulgaria, the driving force for desegregation has come from grass roots organizations like DROM.

Beyond government inaction, several other barriers have hindered desegregation and are likely to confront future efforts at school integration. Teachers at all-Romani schools have an interest in continuing the system and are afraid of losing their jobs if Romani students are integrated into Bulgarian schools. In turn, teachers in Bulgarian schools are skeptical of Romani students' abilities to adjust and keep up. Romani parents have also been resistant to integration because they feel it might subject their children to humiliation and ostracism.

The Vidin desegregation initiative took these legitimate concerns into consideration and worked with teachers and parents to overcome their fears and prejudices. The success of this initiative demonstrated that it was possible to overcome obstacles to change and opened the road for expansion of the desegregation efforts. The implementation of school desegregation at a national level, however, calls for greater support and involvement of the government, which must devise concrete policies to facilitate integration and ease the concerns of parents and teachers.

5. Racial Segregation, the New European Council Race Equality Instruments and their Implication for Bulgaria

*This presentation, led by **Dimitrina Petrova**, executive director of the European Roma Rights Center, examined school segregation from the perspective of international human rights standards.*

A case can be made that Bulgaria's school system violates the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the UN Convention against Discrimination in Education, both of which have been ratified by Bulgaria.

In addition, *European Council Directive 2000/43*: "implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin," which applies to EU member states and accession countries like Bulgaria, prohibits both direct and indirect forms of discrimination and provides for reversal of the burden of proof when persons establish before the court facts from which it may be presumed that there has been direct or indirect discrimination.

The terms of the Directive could allow Romani parents to prove discrimination in Bulgaria by providing statistics and showing disparities in knowledge levels between students at all-Romani schools and students at mixed schools, even though the students have the same marks upon graduating. While the grades are outwardly the same, they have different values depending on the school, indicating that the quality of education at the two types of schools is different, unequal, and can work to the disadvantage of a specific group. Inequality between the two school systems could also be shown by comparing the qualifications of teachers at all-Romani schools to those of teachers in mixed schools.

Based on the conventions it has ratified and its interest in complying with European Union norms, Bulgaria is obliged to protect and ensure the right to equal educational opportunities for Romani children.

6. Current Work of the Bulgarian Government on Comprehensive Anti-discrimination Legislation

Alexander Pramatarski, Bulgarian minister without portfolio and chairman of the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues, provided an overview about the government's international obligations regarding human rights and the rights of minorities. A follow-up discussion included **Petar Gheorghiev**, chairman of the Confederation of Roma "Europe;" Romani journalist **Gheorghi Parushev**; **Mikhail Ivanov**, an advisor on ethnic issues to the former Bulgarian president (1990-1997); **Boiko Boev**, representative of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee; and **Kalina Bozeva**, chairwoman of the "Interethnic Initiative for Human Rights" Foundation.

Currently, the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues does not have enough power. Its authority needs to be increased so it can more effectively participate in the formulation and implementation of policies related to minorities in Bulgaria. The Council has recently drafted an antidiscrimination law that will comply with the standards of European Council Directive 2000/43.

The segregated school system is a legacy of the communist regime. Ending discrimination and transitioning to integrated schools will require systematic efforts by

the government cooperating with NGOs and all groups affected by desegregation policies. However, providing children with integrated, quality schools where they can learn about and come to accept those who are different is fundamental to respecting a child's right to education.

In the follow up discussion representatives of Romani and other non-governmental organizations noted that while desegregation in Vidin has succeeded so far, the government must be pressured to continue school integration and make it irreversible. It was suggested that the government take other positive actions by extending scholarships and other forms of support to Romani students in primary and secondary schools. The government was criticized for failing to raise public awareness about discrimination and desegregation issues. The government should take the lead in making it clear to the public that desegregation policies will benefit all of Bulgaria, and are not privileges that only benefit selected groups.

7. First Steps Towards Desegregation of “Romani Schools”

*This panel discussion, led by **Donka Panayotova**, chairwoman of DROM, examined DROM's experience of initiating school desegregation in Vidin. Other panelists included **Dr. Hristo Kiuchukov**, chairman of the Balkan Foundation for Intercultural Education “Diversity” and a specialist in bilingual education; **Diliana Mikova**, from the Ministry of Education and Science; **Katia Trifonova**, director of the Petko Rachev Slaveikov School in Vidin; **Zhivka Ivanova**, a Romani teacher from Samokov; **Liliana Kovatcheva**, an expert on international relations at the National Council for the Ethnic and Demographic Issues; and **Krassimir Kanev**, chairman of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.*

One reason for the Vidin program's success was its high level of transparency and the amount of participation it gave to all the groups involved. DROM representatives built support for the desegregation initiative by first going from house to house in Romani neighborhoods. They discussed education issues with Romani parents and eased their concerns about sending their children to mixed schools. A media campaign informed the majority community in Vidin about the goals of the desegregation program. A system of gradual integration was used to allow students and teachers to adjust to change. Romani students having difficulties got extra classes and individual tutoring from teachers. Teachers received intercultural training. Romani students were enrolled in classes in numbers that would not be seen as a threat by Bulgarian students and parents. Young Romani people supervised the children at school and assisted their adjustment to the new environment. There was also a coordinator who met with Romani parents to discuss their children's progress. After one term, school attendance was close to 100 percent and only 10 percent of the Romani students had one or more poor marks.

Studies presented during the discussion showed that Romani students in mixed schools performed better on reading and writing tests than students in all-Romani schools. The studies also showed that Bulgarian students in mixed schools scored higher than Bulgarians in all-Bulgarian schools.

Larger desegregation efforts, however, will require greater involvement by local and national governments because only they have the resources to expand school desegregation. The Ministry of Education representative declared the ministry's commitment to the principles of equal opportunities in education, but also acknowledged that all-Romani schools can not be eliminated immediately. The ministry is currently pursuing education policy based on delegating responsibility to the local level and getting communities involved in education policy. It is also trying to involve Romani representatives in all stages of implementation as well as increase cooperation between civil organizations and state institutions. The ministry is creating the position of "assistant teacher" to help Romani children and is committed to hiring these teachers.

The Ministry of Education was criticized for being slow to appoint Romani experts to address Romani education and language issues. It was also suggested that integration start at early grades such as kindergarten. One panelist noted that present laws allow parents to choose the school they want their children to attend, but there are no laws requiring authorities to fulfil these choices. Laws may be needed to control education officials' enrollment decision-making power, and prevent discriminatory refusal to enroll Romani children in all-Bulgarian schools.

The ministry representative responded by noting that the ministry would appoint Romani experts soon, that it supported integration at earlier ages, and that it was discussing ways in which school directors can be made to respect the rights of children and their parents to choose their school.

8. Practical Aspects of the Desegregation of the "Romani Schools"

This panel discussion was started by Svetlana Vassileva, secretary of the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues and a former teacher. Other panelists included Yosif Nunev, chief expert on Romani issues at the Bulgarian Council of Ministers, and former director of an all-Romani school; Vassil Chaprazov, chairman of the Romani party "April 8;" Verguil Marinov, director of the Liuben Karavelov School in Vidin; Romani journalist Gheorghi Parushev; and Dimitar Gheorghiev, a consultant at the Human Rights Project.

NGOs were commended for their activism and the fact that Bulgaria's desegregation initiatives were coming from them. This fact also highlighted the state's passivity about desegregation and the need for government to become more involved in integrating schools. However, policy makers must be careful about desegregation efforts that could prompt large numbers of Bulgarians to leave schools that enroll Romani students. Teachers must also be reassured that desegregation is not a threat to their jobs.

Panelists noted that efforts should be made to involve the media more in the desegregation process. Educational programs about integration should be developed and aired on private and public TV channels. It was also suggested that, as part of fulfilling the *Framework Program* requirements and as a means of fostering understanding and tolerance, information about Romani history and culture must be included in textbooks.

The Ministry of Education was criticized for not creating a Romani consultative body and not appointing local experts to work on the desegregation process. The ministry must be more involved in all aspects of the process and not try to address the multiple problems in Romani education with just one or two appointments.

Some panelists suggested that Vidin showed that local schools and NGOs are more effective at integrating schools than laws and large government agencies. Other panelists pointed out that the state has a responsibility to meet its obligation to provide equal education opportunities to all children and that it should be the primary actor in desegregation efforts. The state should not be allowed to transfer the task of carrying out desegregation to NGOs. The best role for NGOs is to act as lobbying and advocacy groups to force the state to provide and ensure equal education opportunities.

9. Prospects for Desegregation of the “Romani Schools” in Bulgaria

*This panel discussion began with a presentation by **Krassimir Kanev**. Other panelists included **Deborah Harding**; **Hristo Kiuchukov**; **Dimitrina Petrova**; and **Mikhail Ivanov**. **Rumyan Russinov** then followed with the closing remarks of the conference.*

One possible obstacle to further school desegregation is the Bulgarian Constitution. Although Bulgaria has ratified international treaties that allow states to take positive action to address discrimination, the Bulgarian Constitution does not allow the state to take positive action on behalf of one ethnic group, and the Bulgarian Constitution takes precedence over the international treaties.

Another factor that could hinder desegregation efforts would be rising ethnic tension due to increased economic and social polarization and the perception that desegregation is special treatment for the Roma. Desegregation is also likely to encounter opposition from both Romani and non-Romani groups such as parents, teachers, and officials who may feel threatened by integration or unable to deal with the responsibility of working with other groups to make it succeed.

The slow pace of implementing the *Framework Program* indicates the government’s fragile political will. Yet desegregation efforts will require a commitment of all its possible intellectual, financial, and political resources. It was noted that international organizations and NGOs such as the EU, the Council of Europe, the ERRC, OSI and leaders at the World Bank are all interested in desegregation and many have specific programs and ideas that they could implement in Bulgaria.

Despite the challenges, panelists acknowledged the significance in the fact that prominent elected Bulgarian leaders such as President Stoyanov are willing to speak out on behalf of the Roma. This is a good sign and could be a first step towards building an alliance among Romani advocacy organizations, the Bulgarian government, international NGOs, citizens, the press, local organizations, parents, and teachers to carry successful initiatives like Vidin to the national level. Yet it was also noted that supporters of desegregation

need to get the government to produce a strategic desegregation plan with a budget and timetable as well as develop mechanisms to allocate funds from foreign donors to address the priorities established by the *Framework Program*.

10. Site Visit to Vidin

On April 28, 2001, the discussion on the desegregation of Romani schools was continued in Vidin. Representatives of the Open Society Institute and the European Roma Rights Center visited several schools in Vidin, where Romani children from the all-Romani school in the Nov Pat neighborhood were enrolled for the first time in the school year 2000/2001. The Liuben Karavelov School hosted the discussion with the participation of dozens of Romani children, their parents, teachers, directors of schools and journalists. They debated various aspects of the desegregation process and shared their concerns and hopes for the future.

The Romani children said that in integrated schools they were encouraged to study hard; had opportunities to work with computers; got along well with the Bulgarian students; and had begun to think about college and pursuing careers. Romani parents were glad their children could learn under normal conditions and that this type of education offered their children a better future. Teachers reiterated the need for continued close relations between parents, teachers, and those implementing desegregation programs. And local Ministry of Education officials wanted more human rights training for teachers as well as permanent school supervisors who had worked with DROM to facilitate future desegregation efforts.

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