

# "The Responsibility for Educational Reform Lies Squarely with Elected Governments."

Text of a speech given by Bernard Rorke, Deputy Director of the Roma Participation Program, at the Conference of European Ombudsmen on "The Role of the Ombudsman in the Protection of the Human Rights," Vilnius, Lithuania, April 5-6, 2002

I would like to thank you, on behalf of the Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program, for the opportunity to participate in this conference. In broad terms, our program is committed to furthering the integration of Roma in society and pressing states to recognize Roma as equal rights-bearing citizens in the democratic process. We view integration in terms defined by Roy Jenkins over 30 years ago, "not as a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance."

We believe that all talk of integration is meaningless as long as Romani children are denied equal access to quality education. The de facto segregation which operates in the educational systems across Central and Eastern Europe is well documented, as is the disastrous impact this has on Roma communities. Whether Romani children are classified as mentally handicapped and sent to special schools, or are educated in so-called gypsy schools situated in Roma ghettos, the results are the same. They receive poor quality, substandard education which leaves them unable to progress beyond elementary levels of schooling, unqualified and ill-equipped to compete in the labor market. In addition, segregated schooling isolates Romani children from the wider society from an early age and perpetuates existing divisions and inequality in society.

Our program's strategy to challenge the lack of equal educational opportunities was to initiate high-impact civic campaigns around desegregation, led by Romani non-governmental organizations. The basic idea was to develop models of good practice to show that integration can work, to publicize these successes, advocate their replication, and build broad coalitions to press national governments to reform their educational policies and implement equal opportunities.

We began this initiative in Bulgaria. There, some 70 percent of Romani children attend the "gypsy schools," which are notorious for the inferior standard of education provided. These schools were established in the 1950s and were officially labeled "schools for children with inferior lifestyle and culture." The curriculum was designed to provide basic literacy and vocational skills. Educational reforms and the standardization of the curriculum in the early 1990s failed to have any impact on the dismal quality of education provided by these schools. The appalling standards reflected a wider neglect of the educational needs of Romani children. The schools are commonly staffed by ill-qualified and prejudiced teachers. The persistent features

are poor attendance and high drop-out rates. Many of those children who finish high school in these segregated environments are barely literate.

Currently in Bulgaria our program is supporting seven desegregation projects in towns across the country. Over 1000 Romani children are attending mainstream schools. The Romani NGOs are working in close partnership with the schools and the educational authorities to ensure the smooth implementation of the process, to promote understanding and consensus between Roma and non-Roma around the issue, and to take special care over the emotional and educational welfare of every child in adjusting to the new schooling environment.

The first and perhaps best known of these projects took place in the Bulgarian town of Vidin. The Romani NGO Drom succeeded not only in its immediate objective of integrating over 600 Romani children but—most importantly—in putting the issue of desegregation firmly on the national agenda. The project, which involved busing the children from the mahala to the schools in Vidin town, attracted much national and international media coverage. Wider campaigning around the issue of desegregation culminated in a major conference in Sofia on April 27, 2001. The conference opened with a speech by Petar Stoyanov, then President of the Republic of Bulgaria, who fully endorsed the initiative expressing the hope that very soon "the experience of Vidin will be common practice in the rest of Bulgaria." Following this conference, the Vidin Regional Educational Inspectorate set up a unit specifically to deal with desegregation and publicly signed a partnership contract with Drom to promote equal educational opportunities for Romani children.

The successful implementation of the "Vidin Model" and its replication in other towns in Bulgaria has resulted in the issue of desegregation becoming an international priority for the Romani movement. At the World Conference against Racism in Durban (WCAR, August 28 - September 3, 2001) the Romani contribution to the WCAR NGO Forum Declaration called upon states to "provide Romani children with equal access to quality education by the desegregation of the schooling systems." Following this, at the OSCE Conference "Equal Opportunities for Roma and Sinti: Translating Words into Action" (Bucharest, September 10-13, 2001), the issue of desegregation featured prominently, and the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRS) stressed the need for urgent reforms to eradicate racial

segregation in schools and to eliminate the practice of placing Romani children in special schools for the mentally disabled.

Work is already underway to extend our campaigns to other countries across Central and Eastern Europe. Our aim, as in Bulgaria, is to promote local models of good practice, to actively engage Roma communities in the process, and to make sure that equal access to quality education for Romani children becomes a reality. Towards this end we wish to build broad coalitions of support at local, national, and international levels. However, the responsibility for education reform lies not with the NGO or civil society sector. Indeed, with the best will

in the world it is beyond our capacity. The responsibility for substantive educational reform lies squarely with the elected governments in each nation-state in the region. To date, national policies have failed to address this democratic deficit in any meaningful way. We believe such reform is long overdue and would like to enlist your support towards this end, for we see ombudsmen as true democrats, who in Tocqueville's words "keep watch and ward for freedom." We greatly welcome your insights and value your support for our efforts to promote integration and equal opportunities and deepen the democratic revolution in Central and Eastern Europe.



21 Second-grade math class at "Hristo Botev" school



24 Second-grade math class at "Hristo Botev" school



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



25 Seventh-grade literature class at "Otets Paisiy" school



23 Fifth-grade English class at "Hristo Botev" school



26 Fifth-grade music class at "Otest Paisiy" school

# Hungary: Integration a Policy Priority for New Government

Former RPP grantee Laszlo Teleki has been appointed by Prime Minister Peter Medgyessy as Hungary's first Under Secretary for Roma Affairs. Medgyessy's coalition government has committed itself to a far-reaching and unprecedented program of policy reforms to improve the situation of Hungarian Roma. As reported by Agence France Presse, Medgyessy vowed to act against "anything that includes even the germ of racism, discrimination and anti-semitism." He declared that "This country needs its Roma people. They should have a strong identity and know their history well. Roma culture is part of Hungarian culture, and thus part of European culture" and pledged to appoint "more Roma compatriots to responsible positions."

Prior to the most bitterly contested general election in recent history, RPP and Partners Hungary organized a series of seminars on electoral strategy and high impact advocacy for their grantees. RPP grantees led by Teleki founded a broad-based civic Roma alliance, CSZOSZ, which

## LASZLO TELEKI

backed the campaign of the left-liberal opposition on condition that it agree to an 18-point declaration calling for equal educational opportunities, anti-discrimination measures, reform of local government and administration, and the appointment of Roma commissioners within key ministerial departments. Following his election victory Medgyessy announced that he will preside over a Roma Coordinating Committee (Roma Koordinacios Tanacs) with Teleki as his deputy. This 21-member body, composed of Roma and non-Roma experts will advise on issues of policy and implementation. In an interview with Andy Hauptert, Teleki spoke of his three-year collaboration with RPP:

"Without exaggeration I can say that about 60 percent of CSZOSZ board members are grantees of RPP. The fact that I, coming from Nagykanizsa, could reach this level owes a lot to the practical experience I gained over the last three years as a grantee of RPP. If there was no Open Society Institute, and without the professional and financial support of RPP, it would have been very difficult for me to move beyond working in the Minority Self-Government. It would have taken much longer. Speaking on behalf of CSZOSZ, I can say that RPP was a great help."

Viktoria Mohacsi, who was responsible for devising a joint RPP-European Roma Rights Center strategy for desegregation in Hungary, has been appointed as the new Roma ministerial commissioner responsible for promoting the integration of Roma and other disadvantaged children into the schooling system. Her appointment by the Minister for Education, Balint Magyar, was announced in the July 24 edition of Nepszabadsag. Magyar also announced the launch of the "21st Century School Program" with a budget of 6.6 billion forints (\$27 million) to support educational development in over 100 deprived settlements across the country. He stated that the situation of the Roma constitutes one of the biggest social problems in Hungary today and highlighted the fact that while the national high school graduation rate is 70 percent, by contrast the figure is less than 10 percent for Roma.

In a subsequent interview with Nepszabadsag, Mohacsi outlined her plans to set up an expert task force to implement educational reforms to challenge the pervasive inequalities in educational opportunities. She criticized the current use of "catch-up" (normativa) funding by schools for placing Roma children at even greater disadvantage: "There are many places where it is claimed that although these children are not mentally handicapped,

## VIKTORIA MOHACSI

their learning difficulties are such that if they were taught together with the other pupils, then they would have a negative influence on the class and could not keep up with the others. These pupils are taught separately, the idea being they can be eventually integrated into the normal classes... However, experience shows that schools claim this funding... for the whole duration of primary schooling... Thus schools get extra resources, but the pupils paradoxically find themselves in an even more disadvantageous situation, placed in catch-up classes for eight years... According to researchers, pupils attending catch-up classes accumulate such disadvantages compared to their peers that by the sixth grade it is already impossible to integrate them into the so-called normal classes." She intends to see that this funding be used more efficiently to accelerate the integration of children into normal classes and to set a fixed time period of two to three years for this catch-up process to be completed. When asked what she hopes to achieve in her new post, Mohacsi said:

"I will work with all the means at my disposal to accomplish the goals of this program, to see that anti-discriminatory legislation be enacted in the first years of this parliamentary period, and that people be made aware that they commit a crime by discriminating against Roma. If I manage to accomplish these things, then despite my young age, I could happily retire."

# Baxtale Rom:

## A Grassroots Desegregation Initiative

By Bernard Rorke

In Hungary, the vast majority of Romani children are placed in special schools or separated into remedial classes in mainstream schools. Culturally biased psychological testing results in de facto segregation whereby huge numbers of Romani children are labeled "mildly mentally handicapped" and sent to "elementary schools with differentiated curriculum." The Roma center Baxtale Rom, based in Kiskoros and funded by RPP, developed a pre-school initiative in 2001 to challenge this practice. As the center's director Laszlo Stojka explained, "The aim of our pre-school program is to provide an opportunity for Romani children to begin their education in the normal schools. Those children who do not attend kindergarten begin their education in the special schools. We want to avoid this because once they are placed in the special schools there is no possibility for our children to progress on to higher education."

Stojka and his team are working with a group of 20 children. Seven were enrolled in the mainstream school in September 2001, and the remaining 13 are due to begin attending school later this year. The Romani settlements are scattered around the outskirts of Kiskoros. Some of the children live as far as 10 kilometers from the center of town. There is virtually no public transport, and in winter Romani families are even more isolated by the harsh climates and heavy snowfalls.

Baxtale Rom secured partial funding from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Roma Participation Program to purchase a microbus to take the children to and from the schools and the center each day. They also approached the local municipality, which agreed to cover the costs of a driver's salary and gasoline.

The program was designed by professional teachers in cooperation with Roma educators who have close links with the local community. As Stojka comments, "The children love the daily routine very much as the methodology has a playful element to it. It has produced great results because of the amount of individual attention given to each child." The children who began in the mainstream school this year are making excellent progress and enjoy their studies. At the end of each school day the microbus takes them back to the center where they take part in an after-school program funded by AFSC. When asked about the future, Stojka replied, "Our main goal is for Romani children to get a proper education in the normal schools. There is no future for them in the special schools. Our immediate aim is to continue to support the educational development of these children. They come from very poor families so it will not be easy. But a proper education is the most important start they can have in life."



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# The Classic Strategy

## of Blaming the Victim

The Roma Participation Program responds to a special report about Roma in the Economist.

The Editor  
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25 St James's Street  
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May 21, 2001

SIR - Your special report, "Gypsies, Europe's Spectral Nation" (May 12, 2001), was a farrago of half-truths, replete with unsubstantiated generalizations and prejudiced asides. The report is peppered with references to a culture of petty criminality among the Roma and states that as a consequence "prejudice often seems justified." The racist stereotype of the "thieving gypsy" surfaces repeatedly and perhaps most crudely in the allegation that an entire village devoted itself to robbing passengers on the Prague-Kosice night train. The very notion of ascribing collective guilt, of criminalizing an entire community by virtue of its ethnicity, is incompatible with liberal-democratic norms and is no longer permissible in the context of ethnic minorities resident within the UK. Why are Roma still fair game? The crude comment that just like robbing trains completing school could be a good earner—"but it takes longer"—contradicts and can hardly be reconciled with your earlier mention of educational segregation whereby Romani children are dumped in schools for the mentally retarded and "that the best such a child can hope for is a career as a cleaner."

The improbable suggestion that due to high birth rates, the Roma "might even become a majority" in Slovakia is followed by an emphatic assertion that, as a consequence, "welfare payments to Gypsies" will bankrupt the country by 2020. This type of sub-Malthusian scare mongering is normally the preserve of far-right ideologues, and the prediction of impending national bankruptcy is absurd. What is beyond dispute, however, is that states in Central and Eastern Europe will continue to pay a high cost in social and economic terms as long as they continue to discriminate against the Roma—the experiences of the United States and other Western democracies provide an abundance of salutary lessons on the high toll exacted by racist and discriminatory public policy and practice.

The tone of your report is loaded with a sort of exasperated fatalism, that nothing can be done with these so-called Gypsies, that over the centuries not much has changed, that everything has been tried. Indeed many things have been tried—persecution, intimidation, mob violence, mass expulsions, sterilization programs, and as your report mentions, pogroms and genocide. The twentieth century bears eloquent

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Pe Majus 21-to, 2001 bers

RAJA- Tumaro specijalno reporto: E Roma, Europaki supernaturalno (načacuani, magijaki) nacija (kotar e majus 12-to, 2001 bers) si jekhe dopas-čacipe kotar jekh, thaj varesavi generalizacija kotar e stereotipija, kotar vaver rig. Ano reporto si chudine gasave sentenci savencar sikaven kaj pe Romengi kultura si normalne te coren thaj phenen kaj o stereotipura e Romenge si varesavo čacimos. E rasistikane stereotipija vas e "cigani - čora," sas pe situacija buteder drom bilache te phenen kaj o sasto gav sas amala mashkar peste te chorel e manushen ande e ratuno treno pe relacija Praga-Kosice. Pala gasavi slika pe kolektivno doshalipe, te keres kriminalcora katar e sasti komuniteta bazirimi upral lengo entiteto si mentalno mashkar e liberalno-democraticno normi vi nashti pobuter te mekhel pes ande e konteksto katar e etnikano minoretengero beshipen ande e U.K. Soske e Roma si egzibiciaki kelin? O bilacho nasul komento sar so si o choripen ande e treno kerel kompletne shkola shaj te avel seriozno—'numa, lel lungeder' kondenzacije vi shaj phareste te avel hachardo vakerdo sar edukaciako segregacijako zhutipen, e Romane chavorenge te chuden pes ande e mentalno retardirime shkoli godolesar so e chavora ka avel len kariera sar uzupaskoro manush.

I importantno sugestija sar rezultato taro uchi Romengeri bijamutni skala' shaj numa, te avel madzoriteto'ande Slovakia so si registririme katar e emfaticno fakto kaj, sar konsenfencija, 'kaj e Romengo socialno statuso'ka anel themengero bankroto ande e 2020 berh. Gasavo tipo si sub-Maltuziansko dar so buvljarela pes normalno te achovel durano chachipen ideologikane te kerel pashe o nacionalno bankrostvo si apsurdno. So majdur te has tut, (phenes), sar te si ande e thema katar e Chahuni rigeski vi Centralno Europa ka dzal vi ponaodori te pokinel o ucho pokin ande e socialno vi ekonomikano termino sa dzi kote von vi ponaodorig keren diskriminacija mamuj e Roma-i eksperienca katar e Jekhetane Thema U.S. vi stingo demokratie dena prebud zutipaske lekciipe uchi taksa so mangela bud katar e rasistikani thaj diskriminaciaki javutni politika vi praktika.

O tono katar tiro reporto si prebud sortirimo katar o bilacho fatalizmo, kodolesar dzanindoj sar so akares Cigan, mashkar sa akala shelbershipa naj bud vaver, vi pal kodo so si sa zumavdo. Chachipnasar bud bucha sas zumavde paldipe zorasar, daravipaja, ganstersko bilachipaja, masivno tradipen, sterilizaciake programora, vi sar tu phendan ande tire reporto-

and terrible witness to gadge endeavours to grapple with the "Gypsy problem." Your descriptions of the forced assimilation programs of the Communist regimes as "well-intentioned but damaging paternalism," and present-day government policies of slashing benefits as "well meaning attempts to reduce Gypsy welfare dependency" are absurdities worthy of a latter-day Jonathan Swift.

Much effort in your report is devoted to the classic strategy of blaming the victim, by pathologizing all aspects of Romani culture as insurmountable obstacles to progress and by resorting to vicious caricature on the question of political leadership. In our work at the Roma Participation Program, we collaborate closely with a large number of Roma representatives, community leaders and civic activists, from across the region of Central and Eastern Europe, who bear no resemblance to the image you conjure up of a motley "tribe" of venal, ineffectual inebriates. Rather they are dedicated and responsible men and women, committed, in the face of daunting odds, to improving inter-ethnic relations, promoting awareness and civic participation among Roma communities, campaigning for civil rights, against all forms of discrimination, and combatting exactly the sort of anti-Roma prejudice that regrettably surfaced in your report.

Yours sincerely

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ra dukavibasko genocido. Ande e bishengo shel bershipe te nakes o nasulipe elokventno vi bud manusha gadze so dikle i endemija soja marel pes o 'Cigansko problemo'.

Kiri deskripcija pe forsirimi asimilacijako programo katar e Komunisticko rezimo sas lacho pharuvipe numa,pe bilachipa katar e paternalizmo. ' vi ande e avdunipaske divesa e gavernengi politika katar chinavibaski beneficija sar so si i vizita te kerel pes redukcija pe Romengi socialno situacija si apsurdno. Naj validno katar o majphaluno dive katar o Jonathan Swift.

Ande kiro reporto mangljan nas te sikaves i klasicko strategija. Te blamirine e viktime manushe, e patologijaja katar e sa aspektora katar e Romani kultura sar bariera vash e sakseso te keres progresija vi katar o nemoralno chino pe phuchiba katar e politkako lidersvo. Ande e avutni vrama ande amari buti o Romano Participako Programo, pashe keras buti e bare numerosar katar e Romane reprezentatora, komunake lidera vi civilno aktivistora. Katar i Chachutni rigaki vi Centralno Evropako regiono, akarel pes najekhipe sar slika so ka ingajrel upre vavera 'grupi pleme' pod-mitliv, koruptivno na uspesno (mishto). Majanglal von len decizija vi responsibiliteta (griza) o mursh vi i dzuvli te keren provokacija, te lacharen i inter-etnikani relacija, te keren promocija gogjaver pakivales, civilno participacija mashkar e Romane komune, kampanja vash e civilno chachipena, mamuj sa e formi katar e diskriminacija vi maripen egzatno pe anti-Roma stereotipija so keren pregrupacii so si povrsno provizorno ande tumaro reporto

Respektosar

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