

Update: Major Breakthrough on Education Reform in Bulgaria

After the Special Desegregation Issue of the Roma Participation Program Reporter went to press, the Bulgarian government issued a landmark Instruction concerning the integration of minority students.

On September 9, 2002, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science issued an Instruction for Integration of Minority Children and Pupils. The strategic tasks identified for integration of Roma include ending the placement of children in segregated schools in the Roma neighborhoods by creating opportunities for equal access to quality education; and halting the existing practice of enrolling Romani children into schools for the mentally retarded.

In the sections relating specifically to Roma, the Instruction (Ukazanie) states that in accordance with the "Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society," adopted by the Bulgarian government in 1999, the following problems must be resolved as a matter of urgency:

- (1) The de facto isolation of Roma children in so-called Gypsy schools and special classes, and the low quality of education they receive, compounded by general discrimination, poverty, and the lack of programs to compensate for lack of fluency in Bulgarian
- (2) The high number of students of Roma origin being directed to "special" schools or included in "special" study programs as a consequence of being diagnosed as mentally handicapped. The Instruction clearly describes this practice as deeply discriminatory and "a violation of the right of Roma children to equal access to education." Further, it calls for an immediate end to "these processes of social exclusion."
- (3) Racism in the classroom is identified as one factor contributing to non-attendance of Romani children. The Instruction acknowledges that in some instances Romani children are subjected to degrading and humiliating treatment in school and calls for comprehensive training for teachers, parents, pupils, and public officials to counter such manifestations of racism. Further it asserts that such manifestations are punishable by Bulgarian law.

The Ministry identified key strategic tasks that include setting a Consultative Council dealing with the education of ethnic minority children and pupils. This Council will be responsible for devising a national strategy for integration—a strategy to be devised in partnership with nongovernmental organizations to ensure that the transition from segregated to integrated education will be well-managed in a climate of tolerance. The Consultative Council would also be charged with attracting international funding for projects to support community-based projects to initiate the process of integration of Romani children into mainstream schools.

In response to the publication of the Instruction, RPP sent the following letter to the Ministry of Education and Science:

Mr. Vladimir Atanassov

Minister of Education and Science of Bulgaria

Budapest, September 19, 2002

Honorable Minister Atanassov,

On behalf of the Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program (RPP), I very much welcome the Instruction for Integration of Minority Children and Pupils issued by your ministry earlier this month. RPP views this document as a very important move towards the provision of equal access to quality education for Romani children in Bulgaria.

The declared commitment by the Ministry to phase out the all-Roma schools in Romani neighborhoods and to eliminate "the existing practice of routing normally developed children to schools for children with mental disability" is commendable. Such educational practices have had a deleterious effect on the Roma community in Bulgaria, further isolating Roma from the wider society, exacerbating existing inequalities, and preventing Roma from full and equal participation as citizens.

In our efforts to promote integration and equal opportunities, RPP supported a number of desegregation initiatives in Bulgaria, led by Romani nongovernmental organizations. These organizations have been successful in integrating Romani children into the mainstream schools, fostering close partnerships with the municipal and educational authorities, and harmonious relations between the Roma and non-Roma communities. The successes of these initiatives have attracted much international recognition and we believe they offer an excellent model that can be incorporated into the Ministry's strategy.

The RPP is willing to assist the efforts of the Consultative Council on the education of minority children in devising a national strategy for integration. We look forward to the prompt implementation of the measures announced in the Instruction for Integration of Minority Children and Pupils. We anticipate that with the cooperation of all interested parties and the full involvement of experts and activists from the Romani community that all obstacles to integration and equal educational opportunities for Roma will be eliminated.

Yours sincerely,

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