

Working Session 7: “Tolerance and Non-discrimination I – Implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti”

Delegation of Romania

Improving the Situation of the Roma – priority of Romanian Government

Addressing the issues of the Roma’s social exclusion has become a standing priority on the agenda of the Romanian authorities over the last decade. We realized that it was not an easy endeavour to overcome challenges consisting in long-life mentalities, stereotypes and practices of discrimination. Therefore we started to work to this end, together with the representatives of Roma organizations and to actively cooperate with governmental and nongovernmental partners, at national, European and international level.

Romania is fully committed to implement the *2003 OSCE Action Plan for Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti* in the OSCE area, one of the most comprehensive sets of international commitments in this field, as well as the provisions of the EU Strategy on Roma, in order to enhance the Roma’s social inclusion into society and to improve their quality of life, in Romania.

The *National Strategy for Improving the Situation of the Roma*, the policies and programmes carried out, in the last decade, by the Romanian Government - in Education, Social Protection and Employment, in Culture and Home Affairs, in combating discrimination and in promoting access to information, inter-cultural dialogue and interethnic relations – are proofs of the Romanian Government’s political will to fulfil, as any other European and OSCE participating State, its responsibility to work towards improving the situation of the Roma in the mainstream societal life.

The specialized governmental agency, the *National Agency for the Roma (NAR)*, has included, in its entire activity, OSCE Action Plan’s priorities and principles, by setting up a the comprehensive framework of policies and actions, as well as by involving the Roma representatives and civil society organizations in its efforts to improve the living standard of the Roma.

The Agency has drawn on the *EU Structural Funds*, a core resource for all NAR activities, in implementing the objectives of the National Strategies on Improving the Situation of the Roma, in the last decade, and in achieving the goals of EU Lisbon Strategy on Social Inclusion.

26 contracts financed by the EU Structural funds have been signed by the Romanian Government, until 31st July 2010. Projects target at improving the situation of Roma in various fields and have a value of approx. 85 mil Euro (70 mil Euro from the EU budget, and 15 mil Euro by the Romanian budget).

We are convinced that promoting school is a key factor in addressing the social exclusion. Furthermore, we share the belief that qualitative education can make a positive

contribution to ensuring, on the long term, improved opportunities for employment in better-paid jobs, more tolerance and a change in social attitudes and behaviour. In this vein, the Ministry of Education has embarked on a process of adapting the legislation on education, including the draft Law on National Education, in order to guarantee the equal access to education for all children and, in particular, for the Roma children.

Given the economic and social difficulties that some groups of population are confronted with, in particular, the Roma, as well as the disparities present in the educational system, **coherent policies on education** were designed by the Ministry of Education, in the last decade, in order to **improve the access to education of the Roma**, as a general principle and, in particular, the access to a **qualitative education**.

Good practices for improved access by Roma children to education

Affirmative actions were promoted in favour of the Roma children, by reserving a special number of places in high-schools and universities for Roma applicants, in accordance with the National Strategy of the Government for Improving the Situation of the Roma (e.g. G.O.no.430/2001 and G.O. no.522/2006). For example, the number of seats reserved for the Roma applicants has increased from 149 seats in 8 universities, in the academic year 1998 -1999 to approx. 500 seats reserved in 40 universities, in 2009.

Good practices resulted from the implementation of **PHARE program “Access to education for disadvantaged groups”** (PHARE 2001/RO 01.04.02) – carried out during 2002-2004, in 10 counties, and subsequently extended until 2007) - were integrated in the **general system of education**.

The program targeted, in particular, **Roma children**, and had as objectives: fighting discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities and respect for the fundamental rights of the child. The main goal of the program was to create “**inclusive schools**” as open, tolerant, friendly, comprehensive, free of discrimination schools where all children are integrated and valued.

The program focused on some main directions which may, also, represent **examples of good practices** in improving the access of Roma children to a qualitative education and in fighting discrimination and segregation in school:

- increasing the access of **Roma children to pre-school education**, in order to facilitate their enrolment in compulsory education; **intensive pre-school programs** were organized under the form of “**summer kindergardens**”, for Roma children who had not followed a form of early education;
- encouraging children to finish the compulsory education and *preventing the school drop-out trend*; **remedial education programs** were carried out in support of Roma children with learning difficulties, in reading, writing, mathematics etc. (the “**after-school school**” and the “**summer school**”);
- providing children and adults who did not finish their school study with the opportunities to finalize their basic studies (a policy to correct the drop-out phenomenon), under the form of “**The Second Chance**” program, in primary and secondary education;

The extended program “Access to education for disadvantaged groups” for 2004 – 2005 redefined the targeted education intervention areas, to include “education for all children,

irrespective of their language, ethnicity, social and economic means, mental or physical disabilities". Other counties not covered by the previous programs were added, and a renewed focus on objectives, such as:

- **early enrolment of Roma children in pre-school education** in order to prevent the challenges in attendance and school drop-out trend in the later educational cycle;
- **combating segregation in school** - by means of ensuring that all children are taught "together" and not separated on social or ethnic criteria in groups or classes;
- **integrating children with special needs** - a national plan to integrate children with special needs was designed, as part of the Twinning Program (PHARE 2002: RO2002/IB/OT-02), during 2003-2004, as well as a training plan and support course for training the teachers of integrating schools. A **Guide of good practices of integrating children with special needs** in mainstream education was accomplished, as part of this program;
- setting up "**Resources Centres for Inclusive Education**", organizing training programs for teachers of "inclusive education", at local and national level;
- support measures provided to schools, for **adapting curricula to the local needs** and students/parents options;
- facilitating **parents' involvement in school decisions**;
- involving **representatives of the local communities** in supporting school activities (support groups, local authorities, parents, NGOs etc.).

Combating discrimination and segregation in school

In 2007, Romanian Ministry of Education took a series of measures to improve the access to education of Roma children and towards **fighting the challenges of discrimination and segregation in school**:

- Order no. 1540/19.07.2007 of the Minister of Education on the **prohibition of any form of school segregation of Roma children** in the pre-university education system. Subsequently, a Methodology for preventing and eliminating school segregation of Roma children was adopted and is currently implemented. An internal regulation was issued by the Minister of Education outlining that schools and school inspectors must take action in order to identify and eliminate any segregation practices.
- Order no. 1529/18.07.2007 of the Minister of Education on **developing the diversity issues in the national curricula**;
- Order no. 1539/19.07.2007 of the Minister of Education on the **norms of employment and activity of the School Mediator**.

395 school mediators benefitted from special accredited training programs. **113** young Roma were trained as teachers of Romani language.

A **national awareness-raising campaign** (*with the message: "There is no place for discrimination in school. Know me, before judging me!"*) was carried out in 2007, with the objectives of combating discrimination and eliminating segregation in schools, of promoting tolerance and multiculturalism.

Another campaign, run during September-November 2009 drew the attention of the public to the access of Roma children to education, qualitative education, non-discrimination and inclusion.

Monitoring the progress in improving access to quality education by the Roma

The progress made in implementing the PHARE program regarding the access to quality education for the Roma was monitored, from 2001 until 2005, in all counties involved in its implementation. An **Assessment Study** was carried out in 2006, with regard to the **impact of the program at the national level**, in improving the access to education of disadvantaged groups (PHARE/2006/018-147.01.01.02). 391 pilot schools and around 60,000 children from disadvantaged regions, in 36 counties took part in the program. All schools benefitted from rehabilitation and re-endowment to create a more attractive environment for the children.

Educational support programs, such as: the “after-school school” and the “summer kindergarden” recorded a real success, especially before the beginning of school and as regards the number of attending children who did not follow a pre-school program. The results of the research based on the Impact Study lead to the conclusion that the program “Access to education for disadvantaged groups” presents the **characteristics of a comprehensive cycle of educational change**. The statistical data reveal an increasing trend in school attendance, both by the Roma children and by the entire population of school children in the schools under the program.

Although the school drop out increased at national level, during the period assessed by the Impact Study, the attendance rate in the PHARE program schools recorded a decrease in the drop out trend. This tendency can be correlated with the educational programs of support initiated in schools and with the changed educational practice, with a better information and involvement of parents in the schools’ activities. “The Second Chance” program has lead to improving the image of school in the Roma communities.

As mentioned before, the results of this program and **the best practices recorded at the pilot projects level were integrated in the general system of education**, as they proved to bear the value of a comprehensive cycle of educational change.

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We look forward to the OSCE Summit not only as an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti, as provided for in the OSCE Action Plan, in Helsinki and Athens ministerial decisions, but also to take stock of the progress made and of existing challenges, as well as to reflect on common ways to improve the implementation of these commitments and to enhance the input of OSCE institutions, notably the ODIHR and the HCNM, in assisting the efforts made, in this respect, by the participating States.