

Addressing the Challenges of Romani Children's Education in Poland - Past and Current Trends and Possible Solutions

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Introduction

In recent decades the issue of Romani children's education has been neglected by most governments, although it urgently needs to be addressed. The existing legal provisions on minority education – on the language of instruction¹ \$\$, and the organization of a schooling system for minorities² \$\$ - do not address Romani children's educational issues in particular. In fact, those provisions do not respond to the needs of Roma and no efforts to date have been made by Romani organizations or parents to use them to their advantage. At the same time the Ministry of National Education was eager to adopt the controversial "Initial Teaching Program for Roma"³ \$\$ in 1992, a program prepared by groups of teachers in primary schools. This program strove to solve the educational problems of Romani children by setting up remedial classes for them. From its inception, Romani leaders and organizations have contested this program. While some Romani organizations submitted requests to the Ministry of National Education in the mid-nineties, no clear-cut program for improving the educational situation of Romani children has been developed.

Poland's recent self-government and public administration reforms place public education under the authority of local self-governments. Although the Ministry of National Education still holds its supervisory and subsidiary roles, the ministry's executive power is much more limited now. The education of Romani children falls under general public education rules implemented by local governments⁴ \$\$. Within these new arrangements, little attention is paid to the particular needs of Romani children.

¹ \$\$ Act of 7 September 1991, on the Educational System, Dziennik Ustaw [Journal of Law] of 1991, No 95, item 425. Article 13(1) and Article 13(2).

² \$\$ Resolution of the Ministry of National Education of March 24, 1992, on the organization of educational programs enabling minority pupils to retain their sense of national, ethnic and linguistic identity, Dziennik Ustaw [Journal of Law] of 1992, No 34, item 150. It provided that "[n]ative instruction for pupils as well as other classes [...] will be organized on a voluntary basis. These classes shall be organized by the school (pre-school) principal at the request of parents or legal guardians. If students above the elementary level express a desire to participate in such classes, the students themselves may submit this request". It stipulated that the minimum number of pupils required to form classes with minority language instruction is seven in primary schools and 14 at the secondary level. The resolution establishes four types of minority schools: with non-Polish language of instruction, bilingual, with additional study of mother tongue of minorities; and inter-school groups of pupils from different schools with additional study of the mother tongue.

³ \$\$ "Program nauczania początkowego dla Romów" (Initial Teaching Program for Roma), Ministry Of National Education, Warsaw 1992

⁴ \$\$ Act of January 8, 1999, on regulations introducing the reform of the school system, Dziennik Ustaw (Journal of Law) of 2000, No 122, item 1312 and other later Acts.

Public debates that began at the end of the 1990s on equalizing educational chances for children from rural and underdeveloped areas in Poland, as well as initiatives by political parties (i.e. the Freedom Union) to establish a national foundation supporting education, did not address the educational needs of minorities, especially the Roma. In general, neither the Ministry of National Education, nor the majority political parties and, especially Romani leaders, advocated for addressing and improving Romani children's education.

The 2001-2003 government pilot program for the Romani community in Malopolska province, adopted by the central government on March 13, 2001⁵ ^{\$\$}, provided new conditions for raising the issue of Romani children's education. In recent years, a significant number of Roma left Poland and asked for asylum in EU member states. Polish Romani migration caused serious concern and even a crisis in bilateral relations with some EU countries. The governmental program for the Romani community in Malopolska province was launched as a direct response to the asylum seekers crisis, mainly in relation to British authorities. It originated from a project conducted by the European Institute for Democracy, in co-operation with the British Embassy in Warsaw, and was financed by the British Know How Fund for Poland in 1999-2000.

As in many other countries in Europe, the issue of Romani education is considered important in the long-term as a means of solving problems that affect that minority. In the short-term, facilitating and enhancing educational levels among the Roma is aimed at integrating them and, intentionally or not, at reducing the level of Romani migration. Aside from the government's intention and the EC Agenda 2000 requirements for participating countries, the issue of Romani children's education remains an independent issue that needs to be discussed and remedied (see the Council of Europe recommendation on the education of Romani children⁶ ^{\$\$}). This report, therefore, will refrain from seeking connections between improvement in this sphere and the migration issue. Our view is that the government has to launch an adequate educational policy that will address the Romani community's needs and rights as an ethnic minority in Poland, along with all the factors that determine its present, unfavorable or disadvantaged situation. Whether it will improve the Roma's integration or diminish their desire to emigrate is another question.

This report is intended to contribute to a genuine dialogue with the Ministry of National Education that will result in setting a working program or long-term strategy to improve the educational situation of Romani children in Poland that will go beyond the government's pilot program for the Malopolska province.

⁵ ^{\$\$} Pilotazowy Program Rządowy na rzecz Społeczności Romskiej w Województwie Małopolskim na lata 2001 -2003 (Pilot Governmental Program for the Romani community in Malopolska Province for the years of 2001 to 2003), Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, Warsaw, February 2001.

⁶ ^{\$\$} Recommendation No 04/2000 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member States on Education of Roma/Gypsy Children in Europe, adopted on 3 February 2000.

The report will start with the overall characteristics of the Romani minority in Poland (historical, ethnographic, demographic, social and economic). Following these, as background information, the report will focus on State educational efforts during the socialist period outlined by the government decree of 1952⁷ ^{\$\$}. Measures, practices and achievements of that educational policy will be analyzed and compared with later developments in this sphere, that is, with the post-communist era of democratic transition in Poland. The report will conclude with some practical suggestions and recommendations regarding the educational policy for Romani children.

The Romani Minority in Poland: Overall Characteristics⁸ ^{\$\$}

In post-World War II Poland the Romani community was one of the smallest, internally divided, and “socially unstable” minorities according to State authorities. . In the 1950s their number might be estimated up to 15,000, of these, 75% led a nomadic life-style and the rest were traditionally settled. According to official data, based on evidence collected by the Ministry of Internal Affairs later on, they accounted for 17,534 persons in 1970. In 1983, the Romani community accounted for 21,311 people. Such low population growth was partly related to numerous attempts by Romani families to migrate to the West, and partly due to the incorrect counting of Roma by authorities. The Roma, like other minorities, were not included in the official state census. The special unit established within the Social and Administration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1964 has gathered information on Roma, including statistical data. However, this department was closed in 1984. The present number of Roma in Poland is unknown; according to some estimates, their number varies between 30,000 and 50,000.

The demographic profile of the Romani population remains specific. According to a case study undertaken in 1969 in one of the “voivodships,” 47% of that population was between the ages of 0-14; 50% were between 15-64; and only 3% were over 65 years old.⁹ ^{\$\$} This profile has not changed much since then, because early marriage continues and extended families are still dominant in the Romani community. This shows that the Romani population is predominately young, which further demonstrates the importance of the educational issue.

⁷ ^{\$\$} Decree No 452/52 from May 24, 1952 on state “[h]elp to Romani community in its transition towards a settled way of life” (from nomadic). More on it in the chapter entitled “The Romani Community under the Communist regime - the State Decree of 1952”.

⁸ ^{\$\$} The following chapters: “The Romani Minority in Poland: Overall Characteristics”, “The Romani Community under the Communist Regime- the State Decree of 1952”, and “The State’s Educational Policy Toward the Roma” are entirely based on the author’s earlier and detailed study, A. Mirga, Romowie - proces kształtowania się podmiotowości politycznej (Roma - A process of political identity formation), [in] Mniejszości Narodowe w Polsce (National Minorities in Poland), ed. Piotr Madajczyk, ISPAN Warsaw, 1998, pp. 110-180. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the author considers it unnecessary to quote and make references to all the archive materials and literature.

The Romani community in Poland consists of four major groups: 'Polska Roma,' the largest one; Lovara and Kelderara, (both so-called 'Vlach Roma);' and 'Bergitka Roma.' There are also a small number of Sinti families. From among those mentioned above, only the Bergitka Roma were traditionally settled; all the others led nomadic lives. The Roma in Poland have preserved their traditional culture, language, and social structure. Their basic organizational unit was the extended family (among so-called Polska Roma), and the clan or 'vitsa' (among Kelederara and Lovara). The other one was created by a so-called 'tabor' – a traveling unit of several families usually interrelated and led by a 'vojt' or leader. Among the settled communities of the Bergitka Roma, the so-called 'tsibalo' or local leader represented the community. The head of the extended family, leaders of the 'tabor' or 'tsibalo' at Romani settlements, performed intermediary roles between the local and state authorities. The internal life of Romani communities was regulated by taboos or moral codes dictated by the so-called 'mageripen' code, mostly among the Polska Roma and Vlach groups. Particular institutions served to maintain these codes, the 'Sero Rom,' or judge and chieftain, among the Polska Roma, and 'Kris,' or the court, among the Lovara and Kelderara communities. Many of these social structures and institutions have been preserved and are still functioning in those communities. Romani groups in Poland also maintain their different dialects of the Romani language. While these differences allow for easy identification of the speaker, they do not, however, prevent mutual communication and understanding.

The Romani Community Under the Communist Regime - The State Decree of 1952

During the Second Republic (1918-1939) Poland was a multiethnic state; national and ethnic minorities comprised over 1/3 of the total population. The Second World War and post-war border shifts caused dramatic changes in the ethnic composition of Polish society. The new socialist regime envisioned building a nationally and ethnically homogenous state. The implementation of that vision caused massive migration and resettlement of minority populations; in the 1960s those who remained comprised only 1.5% of the total population (according to official estimates). Once multiethnic, Poland transformed itself into a nearly monoethnic state. In the wake of ethnic homogenization, the Roma began to attract attention. They were not numerous but were visible and the so-called "Gypsy problem" was given special attention by the new authorities and labeled as an "important state task to be solved."

The post-war State policy toward the Roma was determined by the decree adopted on May 24, 1952 by the Council of Ministers ("On State help in the transition toward a settled way of life..."). It remained in force for over 30 years, becoming a major factor of social, economic and cultural change within the Romani community. The 1952 decree referred to them as a "population of Gypsy origin." In solving the so-called "Gypsy problem" the State rejected the "principle of nationality" and instead acknowledged the ultimate aim of its policy as "a deepening of the process of assimilation," that was - "to subject them to a Polish cultural impact." In light of the 1952 decree, education has been

treated as a major means of assimilation. Additionally, schooling of Romani children has been viewed as a source of improving opportunities for wage-labor, thus becoming a factor in making that population 'productive.'

Initially the state decree of 1952 was aimed at the eradication of the Roma's nomadic way of life. The authorities considered it extremely important to stop the wandering of Romani 'tabors' (small family-based economic units), who were viewed as leading a parasitic life-style. At the beginning, the State policy was based on persuasion and material help offered to those who decided to settle. Eventually, more rigid sanctions were implemented to stop the Roma's wandering. Coercive measures were introduced in 1964, after which the number of nomadic Roma gradually diminished, totally disappearing from the Polish landscape in the beginning of the 1980s. In the public opinion, the Romani life-style, nomadism, was associated with parasitism, criminality, cultural backwardness, a threat to social order, horrifying health and sanitation conditions, etc. The authorities and social scientists, as well as the majority of society commonly held such an attitude. The State ceased further implementing the decree in the mid-eighties having accomplished its basic aim – eradication of the Romani nomadic way of life. The political crisis and marshal law that followed the 1981 events in Poland marked the gradual withdrawal of the state from an active policy towards the Roma in the following decade.

State Education Policy Toward the Roma

During the socialist period Polish authorities did not issue any special measures regarding the schooling of Romani children. As in the case of other national minorities, the decrees of the Ministry of Education of 1952 and especially of 1956, enabled those minorities to establish ethnic schools, or classes, with teaching in their native language. The Romani community did not benefit from those provisions. They weren't treated as an eligible minority for such provisions. Thus, they were subjected to public education. The government decree of 1952 requested, however, that the local administration pay special attention to Romani education and provide, where needed, provisions to enable Romani families to send their children to school and actively combat Romani illiteracy. In this respect, a lot depended on the local authority's commitment to that request, as well as on the Romani family's response.

According to the authorities' estimates, only 25% of the Romani children attended school during the 1950s and the early 1960s. Those who attended were mostly children of Bergitka Roma families, representing the traditionally settled community. Together with growing state pressure for the settlement of nomadic families, indicators of children's education increased. In 1964, the State decided to stop the wandering of Romani nomadic families by forced registration at a permanent residence and outlawing further wandering. As a result, a radical change was seen in the 1964/65 school year. Out of 2,094 children of newly settled Romani families, 1,254 attended school regularly. Nearly 600 did not attend school for various reasons; however, the authorities did not penalize parents for not sending their children to school. Instead, school authorities offered material help for

those who attended school. Intensive healthcare was also offered to Romani children. Attempts to combat illiteracy among young and adult Roma were undertaken but with little success.

In general, during the 1966/67 school year, Romani children of school age numbered 4,710, 3,808 of whom attended school; 711 were not registered, and the rest attended irregularly. According to authorities, among those not registered, 87 children were placed in special schools for mentally retarded children. An additional 83 Romani children were sent to State Children's Homes. During the 1966/67 school year, 224 Romani parents were penalized for not sending their children to school. In 1970, 82% of all Romani children of school age attended school. In the 1983/84 school year, of 4,420 Romani children of school age, only 3,652 attended school, a mere increase to 82.6%. In that year, 111 Romani parents were penalized for not sending their children to school.

Despite this relatively high percentage of school attendance, Romani children have not made significant progress in their rate of promotion to the next grade. For example, in the 1966/67 school year, only 21 children attended eighth grade classes, and a year later only 27. At the same time, in the 1966/67 school year, nearly 30% of all Romani children attending schools did not advance to the next grade due to their high absentee rates and low level of achievement. In 1983, the figure reached 32%.

School authorities have always had trouble enrolling nomadic Romani children in schools. Prior to 1964, when Roma were forcibly settled, school attendance of Romani children was inconsistent. Romani families constantly moved their encampments which made permanent education of their children impossible. A majority of Roma did not consider education important, which they believed to be unnecessary or inaccessible for their children. After 1964, when Roma appeared in local communities with some degree of permanency, enrollment of their children became more possible. But Romani families still remained highly mobile. For example, from 1980 to 1983, about 750 families (over ¼ of the total number of Romani families) changed their place of residence from one district to another, not including those who migrated abroad. During that period, for example, 42 Romani families left Poland. Thus, despite formal settlement, they continued their tradition of wandering, now in cars, continuing the practice of periodic interruptions in their children's schooling.

School authorities issued various policies regarding the schooling of Romani children. In some cases, as for example, in the case of the Bergitka Roma community, children were enrolled in normal integrated classrooms. Additionally, courses for illiterate adults were organized (in the case of the Nowa Huta community in Krakow). For children of nomadic Romani family's special classrooms were opened. Those classes were segregated; usually children of different ages were all together since the majority of them were entering school for the first time. For Romani children, it was a totally new experience, and many of them, especially the younger children, did not understand the Polish language. The Romani children were singled out in school by their "Romani classrooms," and were faced with prejudices and stereotypes from other children, making them feel estranged.

Without support or encouragement from their parents, who were predominantly illiterate, the children were rarely able to make any progress in their education.

The State viewed education as an integral part of socialization and integration into Polish society. The rate of wage-labor employment of Roma has been considered its indicator. Education was supposed to provide them with better employment opportunities in skilled professions and wage-work. The employment rate showed that there was no direct correlation between schooling and employment levels. In 1970, the rate of employment of Roma of work age was very low - 26% - and it did not surpass 30% during the next two decades. In 1983, the rate of employment was 26.9%. In addition, that rate of employment was mainly due to the Bergitka Roma group, which traditionally was dependent on wage-labor and which made up one-fourth of the total population of Roma in Poland. This means that the majority of previously nomadic Roma continued to make their living by traditional means and this was not dependent on the level of education or professional skills acquired at schools.

There were also other cultural, social and economic factors, which counteracted the schooling process. For the Romani community at that time, the school remained an external institution, not rooted in their own tradition, somehow alien and alienating Romani children. The known case of Papusza-Bronisława Wajs, a Romani poet, whose family actively tried to prevent her from getting an education, and who learned to read and write only due to her personal sacrifices and dedication, was proof of the kind of educational difficulties facing Romani children, especially girls. Their cultural and social roles were not only different from that of the majority of society, but in fact sharply limited opportunities for the continuation or completion of their education. Early marriage effectively prevented them from completing their education. For many Romani families, especially the more traditional ones which by definition were those of nomadic origin, schooling of their children and schools in general, were viewed as a threat to their Romani identity, and thus, as something to be avoided.

Several factors worked to the disadvantage of Romani families and their children, decreasing their chances for a successful education. They included an irregular and often seasonal income, insufficient housing or living conditions, extended families living together, often in a single room, and a lack of proper furnishings or even clothes and shoes for children. In addition, Romani parents equated the schooling obligation with the children's presence in school but neither grades nor progress in school resulted in a significant increase in school attendance.

Local executive powers, political parties, youth organizations, and a public campaign actively participated in the state implementation of the 1952 decree. A system of "Gypsy care-takers," people who were mostly recruited from the local social-administration departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were appointed to help, mediate and control the Romani population. They were actively engaged in education, helping with school enrolment of Romani children. In some cases "Gypsy care-takers" proved to be helpful and effective in making Romani families comply with the schooling requirement, but they did not improve the overall educational situation of Romani pupils. Authorities

also strove to combat illiteracy among the adult Romani population. The first such project was implemented among the Romani community of Nowa Huta near Krakow in the 1960s, and later in Tarnow and Olsztyn. Those projects were short-lived and produced minor results. This system, in effect since 1964, gradually ceased to exist by the end of 1980s.

During this period only one Romani organization functioned. The Gypsy cultural and educational association known as “New Life” was established in Tarnow in 1963. The objectives of the Tarnow association were in full accordance with the aims of the government decree of 1952: to foster integration of the Romani community and to eliminate negative features of that community (“parasitic” wandering, begging, fortune-telling, illiteracy, etc.). Educational efforts were one of its priorities and some positive results were achieved. The association provided material help to families and their children, worked to maintain communication with school authorities, developed after-school programs for Romani children, and developed recreational activities for them during vacation. The Tarnow association was local and it had no visible impact on Romani communities elsewhere. By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a few new Romani organizations emerged (in Olsztyn, Zyrardow, Andrychow, Plock, and Nowa Biala), but they did not develop any significant activities in any field, especially in education.

Throughout the communist era, despite the strong and continuous state involvement (both with finances and enforcement) in solving the problems of Romani illiteracy and the schooling of Romani children, the results it produced were minor. Out of the entire Romani community in Poland prior to 1989, only a few students reached the university level, and the majority of them represented the Bergitka Roma. The number of those who completed a secondary education is unknown, but according to my personal view, its is not high. Some basic features of the Romani community remained unchanged. For the majority, education has neither been a basic social and cultural value nor a viable means to success nor a means to upgrade one’s social status. However, the need to complete at least primary school has become more widely recognized.

Less administrative pressure and less state assistance to the Roma led to the deterioration of the education of Romani children in the 1990s. Because the state authorities on Roma produced no reports or data after 1984 it is impossible to provide exact information on the subject. It can be claimed, however, that the number of Romani children who did not attend school grew during that period. In addition, the beginning of that decade and its end were marked by community violence against the Romani population, first in Konin and Oswiecim in 1981, and later in Mlawa in 1991, providing a strong incentive to emigrate.

The Dissolution of Communism and the Transition Period - New Initiatives in Educational Policy towards Romani Children

The dissolution of communism brought some basic changes in the legal position of national and ethnic minorities in Poland. First and foremost, the existence of minorities was publicly and politically acknowledged and institutions for them were established. In 1989, minority affairs were transferred from the ill-famed Ministry of Internal Affairs to the newly created Bureau for National Minorities within the Ministry of Culture and Art. In August 1989, the Commission for National and Ethnic Minorities was appointed in the newly elected Parliament, and in 1990 a similar Commission was established in the government as a consultative and advisory body. Among these, however, only the Bureau and the Parliamentary Commission were active^{10 §§}.

To date, Poland has not passed a parliamentary act on national and ethnic minorities. However since 1989, Poland has signed a number of treaties with neighboring countries on the protection of the rights of national minorities. In the absence of the act on minorities, those treaties and other acts became important for minorities (for example, those related to education, general elections, associations and other^{11 §§}).

None of those above-mentioned treaties and acts played a significant role for the Romani community, with maybe the exception of the act on associations of 1989 that gave minorities the opportunity to develop organizations. The Romani community benefited from this law as well. Regarding education, Article 13 of the 1991 act states that “public school renders possible to its students to preserve their national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity, and in particular to learn their mother-tongue and their history and culture.” This statutory provision was developed in the ordinance of the Ministry of National Education of 1992, concerning the organization of education for minorities. This provision was used and implemented by national minorities in Poland, but not by the Roma. Romani parents and Romani organizations never requested the application of this provision in relation to their children. At the same time, school authorities did not encourage Roma to move in this direction either. In fact, authorities held the opinion that Romani children’s poor command of Polish upon entering school was a major factor of their poor school performance. They considered the variety of Romani dialects to be an obstacle for introducing the teaching of the “Romani language.” In general, this provision to date remains irrelevant both to the Roma and the school authorities and hard to implement due to the absence of such a tradition in the past, the lack of teachers available to teach the Romani language or in Romani and no available manuals for teaching the language.

^{10 §§} S. Lodzinski, *The Protection of National Minorities in Poland: Law and Practice after 1989*, (in) *Law and practice of Central European Countries in the Field of National Minorities Protection after 1989*, ed. J. Kranz in cooperation with H. Kupper, Center for International Relations, Warsaw 1998, pp.162-168.

^{11 §§} For example: Act on the Commissioner for Citizens' Rights (Ombudsman) from 1987; Act on radio and television broadcasting from 1993.

In the case of the Romani minority, the other part of the statutory provision referring to learning minority history and culture has not been fulfilled. No attempt has been made either at the Ministry or by school authorities to accomplish this. But Romani organizations did not act on the issue either. Only the Society of Alternative Teaching from Opole taught about minorities, including the Roma, in its “Let meet with others” 1992-1993 project in a non-public primary school. Based on that experience, in 1995 a group of teachers from that school developed teaching materials for a curriculum on multicultural education at the primary school level, including a chapter on the Romani minority.^{12 §§} In 1992 the Helsinki Foundation stressed the need to include the history and culture of minorities in textbooks. In 1994, the Parliamentary Commission of National and Ethnic Minorities consulted minority organizations on the subject, but with no results on the inclusion of Romani history and culture in textbooks to date.

In the new reality of post-communism, the poor education of Romani children persists, and in some cases, is even worsening. This is due to the economic hardship of many Romani families (mainly Bergitka Roma), which face growing unemployment; to the revival of deeply rooted Gypsy stereotypes and prejudices; and to growing hostility against the Roma in many places. Those conditions have a direct impact on school attendance by Romani children and result in their higher dropout rate. Growing deprivation and hostility against the Roma, on the one hand, and the opening of borders to the West, on the other, led to a new migration wave of Roma, mostly to Germany, in the beginning of the 1990s. This included not only former nomadic families of Polska Roma, but also Bergitka who had a long tradition of settlement. One effect of that migration was that children of migrating families did not attend school and faced some difficulties with integration once they resumed their education.

The New Development – “Romani Classes” and the “Initial Teaching Program for Roma”

In the absence of a concrete State education policy toward the Roma, the vacuum has been filled by a church initiative. A priest, Father S. Opocki, came up with the idea of forming “Romani classes” in the Nowy Sacz province in 1991. He mobilized a group of teachers who had some experience teaching Romani children and together they worked out the “Initial Teaching Program for Roma.” In 1992, the Ministry on National Education adopted this program without consulting the Romani leaders or Romani organizations and without holding a public debate on the topic with experts. Its decision was based on a few reviews examining the Program for Roma. Since then, such Romani classes have been conducted in many schools with Romani children, in the Nowy Sacz province and in others. In the 1993-94 school year, there were already 14 such classes (in Nowy Sacz, Limanowa, Maruszyna, Maszkowice, Czarny Dunajec, Tarnow, Mielec,

^{12 §§} Mniejszości Narodowe w Polsce: Białorusini, Cyganie, Litwini, Niemcy, Ukraińcy, Żydzi. Program Edukacji Wielokulturowej w szkole podstawowej, (National Minorities in Poland: Belo Russians, Gypsies, Lithuanians, Germans. Ukrainians, Jewish. Program of Multicultural Education in primary school) (ed) B. Weigl and B. Maliszewicz, Gdanskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne 1997

Lublin, Stalowa Wola, Pulawy, Zabrze, and Suwalki). Later, new classes appeared in Radom and Olsztyn.

Initially, Father Opocki wanted to help those Romani children who, due to their particular family situations and educational problems, dropped out of school at an early age and remained illiterate. There was no objection to this effort. With the adoption of the 'Program' by school authorities, this initial idea was abandoned and "Romani classes" opened in schools, whether or not children in these 'classes' were real 'dropouts' or were transferred from 'integrated' classrooms into 'Romani' ones. The 'Program' approved by the Ministry did not entail any formal criteria for placement in such classes. As the authors of the 'Program' defined it - it is a remedial program adapted to the level of the Romani children's abilities, that is, by lowering educational standards and requirements. It covered only three initial school grades, with no suggestion as to what the school should do afterwards. In practice, nearly all Romani children, with only a few exceptions, and irrespective of their age, were enrolled into such "Romani classes" in localities where the Roma agreed to have them.

In 1993, the Roma Association in Poland questioned the idea of establishing "Romani classes," claiming that it is discriminatory and would lead to segregation of Romani pupils in school. The criticism of the Association was directed at the program, as well as its implementation. According to the Association, the Program approved by the Ministry was, in fact, "special" and reverted the Romani educational situation back to the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, it works against the very interest of Romani children, since it diminishes their chances for getting a normal education and deprives them of equal educational opportunities.^{13 \$\$}

The Ministry of National Education justified the approval of the Program as follows: "Romany children attend mostly integrated classes, together with Polish children. Adoption of such a solution (supported by organizations representing the Romany community in Poland) creates a series of problems. The most important is the poor command of the Polish language on the part of Romany children who are beginning schooling which accounts for many schools (sic.) failures and calls for greater attention of the teachers.... The aim of these activities (creation of Romany classes) is to allow Romany children to more easily overcome the educational and adaptation (sic.) barriers...and the preparation of children to continue education from class IV in the integrated system of Polish public schools.... At present (1997) the group of teachers teaching Romany children, on the basis of their own experience, wish to continue the experiment of the Romany children by expanding it onto (sic.) higher classes of primary schooling."^{14 \$\$}

¹³ \$\$ Pismo Stowarzyszenia Romow w Polsce do Janiny Gosciej, Wojewodzkiego Kuratora Oswiaty w Nowym Saczu, z dnia 20 lipca 1993 (Letter of the Roma Association in Poland to the regional educational superintendent in Nowy Sacz).

¹⁴ \$\$ From the letter of the Ministry of National Education, signed by Deputy Director of the Bureau for European Integration and International Cooperation, Ms Magdalena Mazinska to Ms Veronika Leila Szente, European Roma Rights Center, Budapest, from 20th of October 1997.

Despite continuous criticism of the “Romani classes” by Romani organizations and some leaders, the number of such classes increased, reaching over 30 at the end of the decade. It was pointed out that the problems are not with integrated classes, but with the educational methods in which, for example, teachers do not pay greater attention to those Romani children who encounter problems. It was asserted that lowering the level of education for a particular group of children due to their ethnic background, and the creation of special classrooms for them, is by definition discrimination.

The argument of the Roma’s poor command of Polish is misleading. First, not all Romani children have such problems. Secondly, the Romani children are living in Poland, watching Polish TV, and exposed to the Polish language outside their homes. With proper teaching methods, Romani children can overcome this handicap of a poor command of Polish in a given period of time. In this respect, integrated classes would only help. The belief that Romani classes are preparation for a successful continuation of education in fourth grade has no reasonable ground, due to the level of ‘special’ programs applied in those classes.

Starting in 1993 the Roma Association in Poland was engaged in a public debate with the Ministry, Father Opocki, some Romani leaders, and teachers teaching in “Romani classes” on education of the Roma. In 1995, the Roma Association proposed to the Ministry to conduct nation-wide research within the Romani community on the educational situation of Romani children against the background of other social, cultural and economic conditions. This was seen as a preparatory step for the adoption of a State education policy towards the Roma. The research, sponsored by the Ministry of National Education, was started in 1996 and a report was released in 1998.¹⁵ ^{§§} Due to its methodological and scholarly inadequacy, the report neither produced any valuable findings, nor triggered any serious consideration or debate.

In 1997, the Roma Cultural Center of Tarnow started an educational project in the Maszkowice, Nowy Sacz region, with a “Romani class” in the local public school. That project revealed more details of the reality of “Romani classes.” The small Romani community in Maszkowice is one of the few Romani settlements where people are most deprived, impoverished and isolated. Humiliating living conditions are coupled here with near total unemployment. All the children of school age (42) ordered to attend the local school were segregated into one classroom, a so-called “Romani class,” which was established by Father Opocki a few years ago. The Romani class’ room, which accommodated all children from 7 to 14 years of age, was about 20 square meters and the class had only one teacher.

A few visits to that class and a short examination of what has been accomplished in it revealed that the majority of the children do not even know how to read and cannot count. Organizers of the project found that the Romani community, and especially their children, face inequality and discrimination, that they are totally left out of school life,

¹⁵ ^{§§} M.G. Gerlich, Romowie o edukacji swoich dzieci - na przykladzie Cyganow Karpackich (The Roma on the education of their children -Based on the example of Carpathian Gypsies), (in) Dialog-Pheniben, No. 2 /1998, The Association of Roma in Poland, Oswiecim.

and that teacher competence in that class is questionable. They concluded the project with a number of recommendations, including a request for the dissolution of the Romani class there, integrating all the Romani children back into normal classes, or at least changing the teacher and dividing Romani children into several age groups.

The organizers provided the Romani children with financial assistance (purchasing school materials, shoes, dresses, etc. for them), which unexpectedly caused further tensions between the Polish majority and the Romani community. The Polish majority requested that the “Romani class” be kept since they do not want Romani children in classes with their children. To date the situation remains unchanged; the Romani classroom continues to exist and the same teacher is still teaching Romani children, but the local community has become more hostile towards the Roma. One outcome of this project has been a request by the Roma Cultural Center of Tarnow to the Ministry of National Education and voivodship education authorities to undertake field visits and evaluate the performance of Romani classes in all localities where such classes exist.^{16 §§}

While Romani leaders continue to oppose “Romani classes” some Romani communities are in favor of them. The Romani community’s protest against the effort to dissolve such classes in Czarny Dunajec, Nowy Sacz province, provides a case study. The “Romani class” was established there in 1992 after an agreement was reached between local self-government and Father Opocki. Since then, some of the Romani children have been attending integrated classrooms while others have been in the “Romani class.” In the 1999-2000 school year 18 out of 37 children were placed in the “Romani class.” Due to Romani migration the number of Romani pupils diminished during the year: 4 left the “Romani class” and 13 left the integrated class. Romani families requested that those 8 remaining in integrated classes be transferred to the “Romani” one. In the opinion of the director of primary schools, the level of education in the “Romani class” has been far from adequate, providing grounds for dissolving it. However, the Romani community issued a letter to the Office of Ombudsmen for Citizens Rights, protesting that decision. The Ombudsmen’s Office intervened on June 19, 2000, and an agreement was reached at a mediation meeting with all those concerned. The “Romani class” was dissolved and replaced by an integrated class for those who require special education. After one year of the new program, authorities will review the situation and decide whether to continue or to re-institute the “Romani class.” It is not surprising that Romani leaders and organizations contest such a solution. It is remarkable however, that the Ombudsmen’s Office did not find any proof of discrimination of the Roma in this locality.

Romani Organizations and their Standpoint on Education

One can rightly claim that the Ministry of National Education has no clear picture of the actual state of the education of Romani children and has no coherent and viable education

^{16 §§} The Center was coordinating the project "Roma Children of Maszkowice" sponsored by the Democracy Small Grants Program of the US Consulate in Krakow and Stefan Batory Foundation, in 1997.

policy towards the Roma.^{17 §§} It also has no institutions to deal specifically with Romani children's education. The only program adopted by the Ministry in this respect, the "Initial Teaching Program for Roma," is questioned by Romani organizations and sometimes causes tensions in local communities. The Romani organizations themselves however, did not work out any plans or education strategy to change the situation either. Strikingly, out of all of the Romani associations, not one focuses totally on Romani education, as is often the case with other national and ethnic minorities. Obviously, one of the main reasons is the lack of a Romani intelligentsia.

An overview of two Romani periodicals, '*Rom P-o Drom*' issued by the Romani Union and '*Dialog-Pheniben*' by the Association of Roma in Poland, confirms the observation that its editors pay little attention to the issue of the education of Romani children. For more than a decade since its inception in 1989, the '*Rom P-o Drom*' periodical devoted about 20 articles to education, including reports on some educational projects (summer schools organized by the Romani Union, '*Rom P-o Drom*' editor, and Pogranicze Foundation), meetings with the Ministry of National Education, interviews with teachers of "Romani classes" and a few editorials on education. In addition, one can find a few reports on education from other countries. The most frequent topic remains the issue of "Romani classes." In a few editorials on Romani children's education of the '*Rom P-o Drom*' known facts and arguments on the actual state of affairs in this area are repeated, but without a clear idea of how to remedy the situation.

Similarly, the quarterly periodical *Dialog-Pheniben*, published since 1995, did not contribute much in this respect. Among its various sections, such as "History," "Current Events," "Culture," etc., there is rarely an "Education" section. When it does appear, one can find reports on 'Romani schools.' Only Issue No 2 of 1998 was devoted exclusively to education - reporting on the above mentioned research among the Bergitka Roma undertaken by the Roma Association in Poland in 1996. The research and report itself did not offer any clear recommendations. It concluded with a request for more resources to continue research.

Some Romani associations have developed a more practical approach to educational issues. The Roma Association Krakow-Nowa Huta, established in 1994, ran several educational programs successfully:

- integrated kindergartens - to improve the competence of Romani children in Polish starting from pre-school age;
- extra-curricular tutorials for those Romani children who needed extra help with their schoolwork ;
- meals for Romani children;
- free school and educational materials for Romani children;
- summer camp for Romani children.

^{17 §§} For more on the subject, see: Information concerning the education of children and youths of Roma origin in Poland, Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Poland, presented at the OSCE Implementation Meeting, Warsaw 2000.

Other associations, including the Roma Cultural Center in Tarnow and the Roma Association of Nowy Sacz province (the latter having been in existence since 1996), developed similar activities. In their statutory objectives these few Romani associations stress the key issue of education. At the same time, they claim that Roma are in need of help from the State to make any progress in this field. They opt for integration of Roma with the Polish majority, but without losing their Romani traditions and ethnicity. No real efforts, however, are envisioned to ensure the protection and development of the Romani identity. While they consider it important, as the majority does, to keep Romani children in schools, improve their command of the Polish language and ensure further education, only some associations mention a need to counter the loss of Romani language by children. No demands have been formulated to introduce Romani history and culture or language teaching into the school curriculum.^{18 §§}

The Government Pilot Program for the Romani Community in Malopolska Province for the Years 2001-2003

After nearly a decade of inaction, the Polish Government has undertaken a series of steps to improve its policy towards minorities in general and towards the Roma in particular. A few factors played a decisive role. In 1998, the Parliamentary Committee on National and Ethnic Minorities adopted the Draft of the Act on Minorities and presented it to the Sejm (Polish Parliament). After the first reading of the Draft and a 1999 government opinion was issued, it was returned to the Committee for revisions. The Draft and a series of consultations on it that took place during and after its presentation mobilized minorities, including Romani representatives. At the same time, within the Sejm, preparations were underway to ratify the Framework Convention For The Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe; it was ratified in December 2000.

In 1998 and 1999, after several waves of Polish Romani migrations to EU member states, Polish authorities faced a strong reaction from abroad, especially from the British Government. Responding to the Polish Roma asylum-seekers crisis, in 1999/2000 the European Institute for Democracy, with the cooperation of the British Embassy, launched a project in Malopolska province with financing from the British Know How Fund. It concluded with the February 2000 conference “The Roma in Malopolska Region - Building a Local Society.” In the aftermath of this conference, the Interdepartmental Group for National Minorities, at its eighth session in March 2000, initiated work on a governmental pilot program for Roma in Malopolska province. In the meantime, on December 10, 1999 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) adopted and published its second report on Poland, with a critical overview of the situation of minorities, including a separate entry on the Romani community.^{19 §§}

^{18 §§} See for example: Raport o sytuacji Romow - 1999 r. (Report on the situation of Roma - 1999), Stowarzyszenie Romow Okreg Nowy Sacz, Laskowa 2000.

^{19 §§} ECRI, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance Second Report on Poland, CRI(2000)34.

Although the need to set up a coordinating body on minority issues emerged as early as September 1990, the Interdepartmental Group for National Minorities was not fully established until 1997. A new structure - the National Minorities Division at the Department of Citizenship of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration – was established on January 26, 2000. The head of that Division also serves as secretary of the Interdepartmental Group for National Minorities. Formally, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration is responsible for coordinating government policy on national minorities. The Minister delegates these tasks to the Under-Secretary of State, the chair of the Interdepartmental Group. Practically, however, the secretary of the Group, who is also the head of the National Minorities Division, performs this coordination task.²⁰ §§ At the level of voivodships (provinces), posts of plenipotentiaries and advisors on national minority affairs were appointed in 2000. Such posts were established in Podkarpacie, Malopolska, Pomorze and Lubelszczyzna provinces. In 2001, plenipotentiaries and advisors for Roma at the local and province levels of Malopolska were appointed.

The pilot program's documents, adopted by the government on March 13, 2001, consist of two separate documents. The explanatory report covers such issues as the current situation of the Roma, especially in the Malopolska province, including the principles, tasks and objectives of the program and its particular issues of concern, such as education, unemployment, housing, health, security, culture and knowledge about Roma.²¹ §§ The second document consists of a detailed schedule of activities and financing for the program for the years 2001-2003. It enumerates localities where the program will be implemented, details of tasks and responsible institutions, and sources of financing and their costs in subsequent years. The program will be implemented based on resources from the budget; for 2001 c. 1,500,000 Polish zloty will be allocated, and will increase over the next two years to 6,000,000 Pzl, supplemented by local self-governments resources (1,369,990 Pzl for 2001).²² §§

The program is directed at both local self-governments and their Romani communities. Its goals are to integrate Roma, and to support local initiatives carried out in partnership relations. The task of implementing the program falls on local authorities. The pilot program's resources are marked so they cannot be used for other purposes. Local self-governments, in cooperation with Roma, will prepare projects to be submitted to the office of Malopolska voivode, who will approve them based on their merit. The next step is for the local authorities to sign a contract with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Administration on National Education, which will release the funds. The deadlines for the application and signing of agreements were set for May 11 and June 10, respectively. A group of five persons (plenipotentiaries on Roma and their advisors, including two Roma) will monitor the applications, and communications with Roma and local

²⁰ §§ Sprawozdanie z dzialalnosci Miedzyresortowego Zespolu do Spraw Mniejszosci Narodowych w pierwszym polroczu 2000 r. (Report from activities of the Interdepartmental Group...) Warszawa, z dnia 18 wrzesnia 2000 r.

²¹ §§ Pilotazowy Program Rzadowy na rzecz spolecznosci Romskiej w wojewodztwie malopolskim na lata 2001-2003, Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnetrznych I Administracji, Warszawa, luty 2001, p. 25.

²² §§ Pilotazowy Program Rzadowy na rzecz spolecznosci Romskiej w wojewodztwie malopolskim na lata 2001-2003, Harmonogram wykonania I finansowania zadan, Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnetrznych I Administracji.

authorities. In evaluating the governmental program one has to admit that it has been worked out in a relatively short period of time. The Romani leaders have identified issues that it covers, helping to ensure that it responds to the needs of Romani communities. It makes education a priority. To ensure full implementation of its educational objectives, the Ministry of National Education has established its own Interdepartmental Group. In fact, several meetings held by the secretary of the Interdepartmental Group on National Minorities focused on the implementation of the educational tasks of the pilot program. At its last meeting, on March 28, 2001, the Group made the following issues priorities:

- employment of Romani assistants and supporting teachers;
- financing “0” class teaching with a possibility of extension of “0” class teaching beyond the one year period if there is a need;
- providing tutorials for Romani students in some subjects;
- providing Romani pupils with school materials free of charge;
- implementing training-courses for school directors, teachers, assistant teachers and Romani assistants.^{23 §§}

Obviously, the pilot program is welcomed and fills the existing gap in the state’s policy towards minorities, especially the Romani minority. While a lot can be stated in its favor, the pilot program also requires a critical review. It does not address the issue of “Romani classes,” the major point of contention and disagreement between school authorities and Romani leaders. In principle, as government representatives have stated, the pilot program is designed for integrated classrooms, but one can expect that the existing “Romani classes” will interfere with this principle, particularly because they are most numerous in the Malopolska province. No provisions are foreseen on Romani history, culture and language teaching. While the government has undertaken steps to establish coordinating structures (the above mentioned Interdepartmental Groups within the government and the Ministry of National Education), Romani representatives are not part of either of them. The pilot program does not address the issues of discrimination and racism, neither does it design any steps to counter them. An open question remains as to what extent local self-governments are ready to submit applications, especially when it means sharing some resources from their own budget.

What can be further recommended?

- In close cooperation with Romani representatives, a holistic approach to Romani education should be developed, based on an acknowledgement that the issue of Romani children’s schooling is linked with other factors and pre-conditions, such as cultural, economic, social, and other factors.

^{23 §§} Notatka ze spotkania w sprawie zadan edukacyjnych, w ramach Pilotazowego programu rządowego...Warszawa, 28 marca 2001, (A note from the meeting on education tasks in the framework of Pilot program...), Miedzyresortowy Zespol do Spraw Mniejszosci Narodowych, Warszawa 26 kwietnia 2001.

- Through its respective institutions, the State should ensure that Romani children have equal opportunities in education. In this respect, the State should recognize the importance of positive steps to enhance the quality and effectiveness of education for Romani children.
- School authorities should eliminate all forms of discrimination and racism at school, and a monitoring mechanism should be established.
- “Romani classes,” which are segregated classrooms, should be dismantled and Romani children must be integrated into classrooms according to their age and educational level.
- Intercultural models of education should be introduced in schools with national and ethnic minorities, including the inclusion of Romani history and language teaching in the curriculum. This would limit the threat of Romani children losing their identity, and would help them to build positive self-esteem about their Romani identity.
- A scholarship system for Romani pupils should be developed.
- Consultative structures for dialogue and participation of Romani representatives in the decision-making process should be established, i.e. incorporation of Romani representatives into the Ministry of National Education Interdepartmental Group.
- Conditions should be created for involving the Romani educated elite in the implementation of education policy.
- Incentives should be provided to Romani students who actually are completing their higher education and to future university students since they can contribute effectively to the realization of the state’s program.
- Pre-school education and the inclusion of Romani children into kindergartens should be encouraged and facilitated, including the possibility of opening kindergartens in Romani settlements.
- The creation of Romani educational organizations should be encouraged and supported.
- A campaign on the education of Romani children should be undertaken in the public media.
- Romani parents should be more involved in their children’s education.
- School authorities and teachers have to play a more active role in providing a friendlier environment for Romani pupils.
- More experienced and trained teachers should be attracted (through financial incentives) to work in schools where Romani pupils are present.