COMPARATIVE POLICY BRIEF

Education on the Edge: Roma Segregation in the Schools of Five EU Member States

INTRODUCTION

Racism is blocking progress toward integration of Roma in Europe's schools.

Europe is home to over 10 million Roma, many of whom are extremely marginalised and face deplorable socio-economic conditions. As the European Commission has noted: 'Roma exclusion entails not only significant human suffering but also significant direct costs for public budgets as well as indirect costs through losses in productivity'[1]. A central component of this problem is the continued segregation of Roma students in schools across Europe. Pupils in majority Roma classrooms typically receive substandard education, thus contributing to the perpetuation of their socio-economic disadvantages. Despite the launching in 2011 of an EU framework for national Roma strategies, the status quo confirms the Commission's stance that development of 'explicit desegregation policies, notably in education' remains a challenge.

This briefing document offers policy-oriented insights into Roma educational segregation in five European countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Our findings are based on a review of current literature complemented by a series of interviews with key informants from the spheres of education, government, and civil society in the countries concerned.

Intercultural education techniques could help.

The research shows that initiatives designed to integrate Roma into national education systems have so far failed to achieve their objectives. The main obstacles to inclusion appear to be racism and, to a lesser extent, the relative autonomy of educational institutions in implementing nation-wide policies. While there are no simple remedies, recommended measures for combating Roma segregation in schools include employment of cultural mediators, the use of intercultural education techniques and bussing.

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[1] European Commission. Communication on the social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe, 7 April 2010, COM(2010)133 final, available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0133:FIN:EN:PDF [accessed 3 May 2012]

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Many positive and progressive initiatives have been introduced to integrate Roma into national educational institutions. But by and large, these various programmes have not achieved their objectives. Roma pupils continue to be segregated in schools across the countries concerned. A sampling of country-specific integrationist measures and their outcomes is provided below (Table 1).

Table 1

What measures have been taken to integrate Roma into schools and what were the results?

Country	Roma Integrationist Measure	Outcome
Bulgaria	Roma students were put on buses and taken to majority schools.	Newly integrated schools created newly segregated classrooms for Roma.
Hungary	Voluntary scheme was devised with financial incentives for local schools to participate in a special Roma integration programme.	The voluntary scheme was viewed – and stridently opposed – as compulsory.
Romania	Legislation was passed as first step toward prohibiting segregationist practices in schools.	Anti-segregation laws were simply ignored.
Greece	Teacher training programmes were developed specifically aimed at Roma and cultural mediators were introduced in schools with Roma children.	High rates of school abandonment persisted.
Poland	Policies were developed to combat early school abandonment among Roma pupils while also integrating them into Polish majority classrooms.	Official efforts at integration failed to gain support of local Roma NGOs.

Despite a normative consensus of state authorities and civil society actors that socio-economic integration is the best way forward to remedy the problem, there remains widespread public opposition to integrating Roma children in 'mainstream' schools. This opposition is racially motivated.

Who opposes Roma integration and why?

Opposition to Roma integration in schools comes from three main stakeholder groups: teachers, parents and politicians.

Teachers

Teachers sometimes oppose integration because they believe that Roma children pose a discipline problem, disrupting their teaching in the classroom. They argue that this compromises the overall quality of education for all students. Discourses emphasising school quality, however, often disguise strong ethnic prejudices toward Roma (a phenomenon particularly evident in Greece).

Parents

Many parents oppose integration because they are concerned that it will have a negative impact on the quality of education their children

receive. Because of this opposition, integrationist efforts may result in cascading white flight (a phenomenon observed in Bulgaria) whereby a classroom with a few Roma students soon becomes an exclusively Roma classroom.

Politicians

Promoting Roma integration is politically unpopular

Politicians frequently either oppose integration or lack the political will to effectively promote it. Support for the Roma is viewed as a political liability by candidates facing an electorate opposed to integration. In Hungary and Romania, popular anxieties about integration have contributed to the rise of the radical right. Mainstream politicians, meanwhile, may pay lip service to integrationist measures, but few are willing to openly support policies that integrate Roma children in mainstream schools. Hungary offers a case in point. In that country integrationist measures developed by the coalition government's minority partner were half-hearted and received no support from the majority partner or the opposition; in such cases these policies lack legitimacy.

In other cases, competing minority or nationalist issues crowd out the Roma question in terms of political priority. In Greece, for instance, the question of the integration of migrant or native Muslim children dominates the agenda. In Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary, issues of integrating the Roma have to compete with (and ultimately be reconciled with) more pressing concerns about majority nationalism.

Educational segregation of Roma looks much the same in all countries examined

Why is the pattern of Roma segregation so consistent?

Roma segregation is strikingly similar in the schools of all the countries studied. This is remarkable given that the five countries have very different histories, political cultures, and demographic profiles. Greece, for example, did not experience a half century of state socialism as did the other countries; Hungary and Poland have historically been better off in economic terms than their Bulgarian and Romanian neighbours; and while Bulgaria and Romania have sizeable minority populations, Greece, Hungary and Poland are more ethnically homogenous. Yet, as mentioned, the ways in which the Roma continue to be segregated in educational institutions are very much the same.

Two main factors account for the cross-border consistency of Roma segregation as well as its general persistence. Those factors are racism and sometimes excessive autonomy of educational institutions.

Racism

The Roma are the object of scorn and contempt from the majority population (including mainstream politicians) in all countries examined. Racism also lies at the heart of arguments frequently used to explain the failures of integration. Two racist arguments are commonly heard by those seeking justification for continued segregation: (a) Roma do not want to integrate (a widely held view in Greece); and (b) Roma are incapable of integrating (an argument

commonly heard in Bulgaria). The failures of integration are thus placed on the shoulders of the Roma themselves.

The Roma are blamed for their own segregation

Racism treats the Roma as culturally inferior. Certain features of their culture are viewed as deficient: these features in turn are held to explain the Roma's poor educational attainment. The belief that this inferiority is innate means that it cannot be changed; it thus provides a convenient excuse for continued *de facto* segregation. From this perspective, the Roma are to blame for their own educational problems. They become scapegoats for the majority to use in absolving themselves of responsibility for addressing the problem.

Racism also treats the majority as culturally superior to the Roma. Hence, the majority nation may view itself as having a civilising mission to deliver the Roma from their cultural and socio-economic impoverishment. This strategy is used in Poland to make Poles look magnanimous for their patronising efforts to redeem the unredeemable Roma. Or the majority nation may see itself as having an obligation to preserve the (albeit inferior) cultural distinctiveness of the Roma. In Hungary, politicians invoke a discourse of multiculturalism to justify their 'protection' (i.e. segregation) of Roma culture.

Relative autonomy of educational institutions

Educational autonomy can be exploited to negative effect

Local educational institutions enjoy a degree of autonomy in applying nationally formulated education policies even in countries with centralised education systems. While this is meant to take account of the particular interests and concerns of local communities, it can sometimes be exploited to negative effect. In Greece and Poland, for instance, local autonomy has led communities to acknowledge (and, indeed, submit to) anti-Roma attitudes expressed by organised coalitions of parents, teachers, and even school administrators.

Local contextual factors pose other challenges to implementation of countrywide policies on Roma integration as well. Not only do the size and territorial concentration Roma populations vary along with their lifestyles (while some Roma are mobile, others are sedentary); local contexts also vary in terms of the non-Roma populations - which may include other minorities and immigrants. Accommodating such heterogeneity can be difficult.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

The segregation of Roma children in education remains a serious problem with no simple remedies. Below we propose three specific policies that can contribute towards addressing these issues at the local level.

I. Cultural mediators : First, we recommend the use of cultural mediators.

> ➢ **Recruit young women from the Roma community to accompany children to school and bring them back to the camp, village, or neighbourhood where they live.**

Their role is to (a) win the trust of the parents (who are often reluctant to send kids to school especially if the school is far away from the locality where they live), (b) accompany children and facilitate their integration in the classroom, (c) help teachers understand the specific Roma cultural and educational needs and (d) work intimately and meaningfully with the children.

Cultural mediators assist Roma children in their homework and in adapting to school life (often the school culture of sitting at a chair, listening to a teacher, doing some homework, not speaking with friends during class and other such simple habits, are alien to Roma children and their parents, as their parents have not attended school either). Cultural mediators have been used effectively in Greece in recent years.

The advantages of using cultural mediators are:
- They keep channels of communication open between Roma and majority communities;
- They can more quickly earn the trust and respect of Roma children than can majority teachers;
- They are an additional resource for teachers who often view Roma children as an extra burden;
- They become a long term and respected presence in schools and the community more widely.

II. Intercultural education : Secondly, we recommend an intercultural educational approach.

> ➢ **Adopt a curriculum of intercultural education in schools with a sizeable Roma presence.**

Intercultural education is supported by UNESCO. Integration through intercultural education is not a one way street to assimilation for the Roma; instead it is a two way street where different and equal cultures meet with mutual responsibility for integration. Intercultural education is also very resource intensive. It requires curriculum development, extensive training for majority teachers, hiring of and training for Roma teachers, and the development and dissemination of teaching materials across a range of subjects. The payoff, however, can be substantial: over time, a sustained and dedicated curriculum of intercultural education will produce concrete results. Programmes of intercultural education have enjoyed modest success (though on a small scale) in Greece and Hungary.

The advantages of intercultural education are:
- It provides a basis for Roma children to nurture a knowledge of and pride in their own culture;
- It provides a basis for majority children to nurture a

knowledge of and respect for Roma culture;

- Where needed, it can provide early years instruction in the Romani language before teaching the majority language as a second language;
- It helps Roma children achieve better educational results, which contributes to their socio-economic integration as well; and,
- It goes beyond tolerance and promotes values of meaningful dialogue, exchange, and mutual respect, thus addressing fundamental problems of racism.
- Could add here perhaps something to the effect that intercultural education could work well with cultural mediators, ie, two go together?

III. Bussing : Thirdly, we recommend the limited and considered use of 'bussing'.

> ➤ **Provide dedicated forms of transport (buses or vehicles of similar function) to take Roma children to and from majority schools on a regular basis.**

Used effectively, bussing cannot only facilitate integration; it can also reduce absenteeism. Bussing serves two purposes. First, it can provide transport for Roma children who would otherwise not be able to go to school. Second, used in conjunction with other instruments (see above) it can help redress segregated imbalances in schools. Bussing is controversial and with good reason: it has a history of fuelling tensions with the majority population and alienating the minority population. Indeed, bussing in Bulgaria has not been an effective strategy: it has been opposed not only by majority Bulgarians but by Roma parents as well who resent the distances their children are expected to travel to school. Bussing should thus be used mainly to provide transport for Roma children in need of transport over reasonable distances. It can serve as a first step to address the problem of absenteeism. If it is to be used to redress segregated imbalances, it must first win the support of the majority community and the Roma.

If done properly, bussing can offer several advantages:
- It can bring an end to segregation of entire schools;
- It can provide a way to manage the balance between Roma and majority children in ways appropriate to the needs of particular schools;
- With cultural mediators and intercultural education, it can foster better relations between Roma and majority pupils;
- It can extend and ensure sustained and meaningful contact between Roma and the majority into majority only areas.

We recommend the widespread adoption of the first two policy recommendations: cultural mediators and intercultural education. We recommend a more cautious use of bussing. In all cases, these policies need to be developed, adopted, and implemented in ways that take into concern the concerns of both the Roma community and the majority population. If done so with their involvement, and with proper financial backing, these policies will begin to make inroads against racism and facilitate the integration of the Roma.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

About the Research

The ACCEPT PLURALISM project explores the ways tolerance is important in responding to diversity challenges across various European states. One of two focal points for empirical enquiry is the domain of education.   The aim of this focus on 'tolerance in education' was: 1) to investigate the meaning and practices of tolerance with respect to cultural diversity in school life and/or education-related issues; 2) to investigate what kind of cultural diversity is tolerated in schools – what practices are considered tolerant or intolerant and what values/norms are considered to promote or undermine tolerance in schools; and 3) to investigate how the embodiment of tolerance in school life (norm and) practices relates to concepts such as multiculturalism, liberalism, respect, understanding, national heritage and national traditions.

The research carried out in the field of education was aimed at analysing the meaning and practices of toleration in different countries by conducting qualitative case illustrative of diversity challenges for individual countries. One set of issues we examined concerned the ways educational systems as a whole institutionally addresses diversity.   Here we focused on the problem of Roma segregation in the educational institutions of Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. In particular, we were interested in:

- The structural forms of segregation (separate schools and parallel classes);
- the ways 'segregation' is seen as a solution and/or as a problem with regard to ethnic differences in education;
- the policies that encourage or discourage segregation in schools;
- the challenges faced by teachers, administrators, parents, and pupils in segregated and/or mixed schools; and
- the prevalence of quota systems in schools.

Research teams from the five participating partner countries conducted desk research and interviews on these and related topics. The desk research familiarised the teams with the main issues and key players in Roma education in each of the countries. Interviews were then conducted with key informants in politics, civil society, and education. Interview data were analysed to identify the main discursive strategies used by key informants to talk about the problem of Roma segregation in schools.

Further Readings

The five Country Reports on which this Policy Brief is based, are available at http://www.accept-pluralism.eu

European Commission. Communication on the social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe, 7 April 2010, COM(2010)133 final. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0133:FIN:EN:PDF.

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PROJECT IDENTITY

Acronym	**ACCEPT PLURALISM**
Title	**Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe**
Short description	ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups. Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition. In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices. The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.
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