

Roma and Travellers in Public Education

An overview of the situation
in the EU Member States

Executive Summary

EUMC 2006

Country specific data and information contained in this report were provided by the National Focal Points of the Racism and Xenophobia European information Network (RAXEN). This report is provided for information purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or legal opinion.

Foreword

The objective of this report is to present an overview of the situation regarding access to education of Roma and Traveller pupils in the European Union focusing on primary and secondary public education. The report examines a range of available data and information on the education of Roma and Traveller pupils, as well as national educational strategies and policies in place, highlights problems of discrimination, exclusion and segregation, outlines the main relevant legal and policy initiatives, as well as perspectives and activities of other major actors, and presents conclusions and opinions addressing policy makers in the EU institutions and the Member States.

The national studies¹ and other sources which form the background material for this report show that there is very little up to date official data on the education of Roma and Travellers. While acknowledging and respecting concerns regarding data collection on ethnic identity and descent, the EUMC considers such data collection important for the development of appropriate and effective strategies at national and EU level. Such data can be collected anonymously and with adequate safeguards protecting any private and sensitive information.

Despite the overall paucity of official data, a variety of information from official and unofficial sources shows that, although education levels vary across countries and regions and across different Roma and Traveller communities, access to education by Roma and Travellers remains a serious problem. Some Member States have during recent years addressed the issue with varying degrees of success, but the situation remains unsatisfactory. Much remains to be done, particularly regarding segregation, which, in all its forms, remains the major obstacle for Roma and Traveller children in the education system. The Community and its Member States need to move forward towards a more comprehensive and coordinated approach addressing Roma and Traveller education and the complex array of factors influencing it.

The multiethnic European landscape requires the development of national education strategies that combat discrimination and prejudice, while encouraging cultural exchange and enrichment in order to strengthen social cohesion, improve equality of opportunities and develop social capital. This is not only necessary for improving the

¹ The national studies were drafted by the National Focal Points (NFPs) of the EUMC's RAXEN network. NFPs are organisations in each Member State of the European Union contracted by the EUMC to collect objective, reliable and comparable data on racism and xenophobia.

productive capacity of human capital and achieving greater economic prosperity, but primarily because equality of opportunity and access to services is a fundamental right and key value of the European Union.

Combating direct and systemic discrimination against Roma and Travellers and improving their education effectively presents a difficult challenge. However, strong and determined leadership, better and more coordinated efforts with active involvement of Roma and Traveller communities can bring about the necessary systemic changes in the national education structures that will improve Roma's and Travellers' education, which so crucially affects their future life chances.

Roma and Travellers emerge as the group most vulnerable to racism in the 2005 Annual Report of the EUMC. They face discrimination in employment, housing and education – as well as being regular victims of racial violence in all EU member states. The European Parliament Resolution on the situation of the Roma in the European Union, adopted in 2005, sent a strong signal to all of us. The Resolution represents a vision of a new partnership based on consultation, cooperation and collective action. It is a partnership united by principle and the rule of law and supported by an equitable sharing of both, cost and commitment.

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Director

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A key European value is equality of opportunity². This applies particularly in education, which influences future life chances and acts as the main vehicle for social mobility. It is therefore essential to ensure that educational systems are equitable so that their benefits can be enjoyed by all without any discrimination.

Education is a key instrument for promoting social cohesion, which is one of the main three objectives of the 2000 Lisbon strategy aiming at making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy", because, apart from providing knowledge and developing skills, education shapes attitudes and empowers young people to adapt to rapidly changing social and economic conditions. As the European Commission has stressed, efficiency and equity are mutually reinforcing.³

This report shows that the educational situation of Roma and Traveller pupils remains unsatisfactory despite efforts by the Community and the Member States, thus largely corroborating earlier report findings by other bodies, such as the Council of Europe. The present report, however, goes further and provides added value by bringing together available evidence from all Member States of the European Union in order to present an overview of the current situation and propose concrete measures.

Roma and Traveller pupils continue to be subject to direct and systemic discrimination and exclusion in education resulting from a variety of interrelated factors including poor conditions of life, especially high unemployment, substandard housing conditions and poor access to health services. While some Member States have introduced elements of cultural or intercultural education strategies and initiatives addressing minorities and migrants, including the Roma and Travellers, it is clear that more systemic changes have to be introduced to remedy the present situation.

The report also shows that the availability of official statistical data regarding Roma and Traveller education is poor. Most Member

² The European Commission has designated 2007 as the European Year on Equal Opportunities.

³ European Commission (2005) *Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe*, Brussels, 30.11.2005 COM(2005) 549 final available at http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/doc/progressreport06_en.pdf (12-10-2005)

States need to improve or develop data collection structures and mechanisms covering education, ideally in collaboration with the European Commission and EUROSTAT in order to improve data comparability by establishing common indicators. This will allow an effective and accurate assessment of the impact of policies, measures and initiatives taken at Community, national and local level. The EUMC acknowledges concerns voiced in different fora regarding the collection of ethnic data, but stresses the crucial importance of the collection and statistical elaboration of objective, reliable and comparable ethnic data that will allow robust and objective analyses supporting effectively the development of appropriate and effective strategies and measures at both national and EU level. Such data can be collected anonymously and with adequate safeguards protecting the identity of individuals and any private and sensitive information.

Although Member States provide detailed educational statistics for the general population, there is a marked absence of ethnically differentiated data on Roma and Travellers on basic indicators, such as school enrolment and attendance, as well as on school performance and attainment. The available demographic data may also under-record Roma and Travellers especially when group affiliation is established through ethnic or linguistic self-identification, because the social stigma and negative stereotypes associated with the Roma and Traveller identity can lead to refusal to identify openly with the group. Furthermore, educational statistics are not directly comparable between countries due to the different data collection methodologies employed and given the different structures of the educational systems.

Therefore, the EUMC considers as particularly commendable the recent decision taken in January 2006 by the government of the Czech Republic approving a new monitoring system for the collection of anonymous data on the Roma and Traveller community which covers the areas of education, school attendance, birth rate, migration, wages, unemployment and its length and the age of jobless people, business and shadow business activities of Roma and Travellers, their housing conditions, the equipment of their households and their debts.

1. Findings on enrolment and attendance in primary and secondary education

The existing data show that enrolment and attendance in primary education is low in most countries, although in some countries there are marked regional, lifestyle and other variations between different Roma and Traveller groups (e.g. in Belgium, France and Slovenia), while

absenteeism is a persistent, common and serious problem affecting all Roma and Traveller pupils. Low attendance and high absenteeism rates could indicate on the one hand that pupils and parents are not convinced of the importance of education and on the other hand that schools tend to have a more permissive attitude towards their attendance. It could also indicate that a number of Romani and Traveller children from poor families might have difficult access to schools. In many countries enrolment, especially in primary education, has reportedly improved in recent years, while in others it remains critical.

The available evidence indicates that transition to secondary education is low and that dropout rates increase with age, as a result of an effort to find gainful employment or because of low performance, possibly a combination of both. Statistical data on the educational performance of Roma and Traveller pupils especially in reference to the national average are particularly scarce, but the available evidence, mostly from surveys, indicate that they perform worse than average and thus have a lower chance of attaining an educational qualification leading to worthwhile employment opportunities.

2. Findings on segregation practices in Member States

Formal and informal practices of segregating Roma and Traveller pupils persist, despite strategies and policies that have been developed to combat them. Although systematic segregation no longer exists as educational policy, segregation is practised by schools and educational authorities in a number of different, mostly indirect, ways sometimes as the unintended effect of policies and practices and sometimes as a result of residential segregation. Segregation has taken place within a classroom by sitting Roma pupils in a different part of the room. Arrangements have also been made to instruct them in separate classrooms within the same school (following the same curriculum or a “simple version”). Schools and educational authorities may segregate pupils on the basis of a perception of “their different needs” and/or as a response to behavioural issues and learning difficulties. The latter could also lead to the frequent placement of Roma pupils in “special schools” for mentally handicapped children, which is still a worrying phenomenon in Member States like Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. However, steps are being taken to review testing and placement procedures taking into account the norms and behavioural patterns of the Roma and Traveller children’s social and cultural background.

3. Findings on factors influencing access to education and attainment

Access to education and the educational attainment of Roma and Travellers is affected by direct and systemic discrimination and exclusion in education and influenced by their overall conditions of life, which are invariably characterised by high unemployment, substandard housing and poor access to health services creating a vicious circle of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation that affects their ability to participate in and benefit from education. However, other factors are also critically important for educational attainment:

- Forms of exclusion related to the documentation required for enrolment or the direct and/or indirect costs of education;
- Forms of school or classroom segregation, including wrongful assignment to special education for the mentally handicapped;
- Absence of Roma and Traveller related material and information in curricula (particularly history and social science curricula) and lack of resources relating to pupils' experiences;
- Teachers, who are not properly trained to deal with ethnically mixed classes, not sufficiently supported in their work by intercultural mediators and not adequately paid risking early burnout and developing an indifferent attitude;
- Prejudice expressed in harassment, racial slurs and scapegoating at school;
- Lack of pre-school education crucial for early assimilation of school norms and expected behavioural patterns, but also for developing proficiency in language;
- Low educational level of parents affecting their ability to support their children in learning and lowering their aspirations;
- Parents' experiences of discrimination and prejudice preventing them from realising how formal educational qualifications can be translated into improved life and employment chances.

4. Challenges faced in a process of policy change

In their efforts to address these issues some Member States have taken steps to reform their educational provisions, as well as their overall Roma strategies. However, the evidence suggests that progress is often slow and difficult mainly due to resistance by local government and pressure of non-Roma parents. There are several reports of strong negative reactions by parents, as well as by school and local authorities (e.g. in Hungary, Slovakia, Greece, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Spain)

to an increase in the number of Roma pupils in mainstream schools. Where government policies on Roma and Travellers do exist, at times, lack of adequate budgetary planning leads to delayed or inadequate implementation of targeted educational measures. Member States differ in their approach to education policies for Roma and Travellers: some have developed and implement a variety of education policies specifically targeting Roma and Traveller pupils, while others address them within a wider anti-discrimination or intercultural education policy framework. In both cases, however, the information available regarding measurable impact and sustainability of these policies is very limited. A variety of innovative projects have also been implemented in several Member States often with EU Community financial support. In particular the PHARE programme was extensively used during the accession phase of the ten “new” Member States with some positive results, which eventually influenced policy decisions.

The European Union and its Member States face a difficult challenge in combating discrimination against Roma and Travellers and improving their equal access to education. However, more balanced, sufficiently resourced policies with active involvement of the Roma and Traveller communities can bring about the necessary systemic changes in the national education structures and improve their education, which so crucially affects their future life chances.

5. EUMC Opinions

The opinions of the EUMC, addressing the major factors influencing the situation of Roma and Travellers in education and highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive and focused action at national and local levels with the active participation of representatives from Roma and Traveller communities are mainly⁴:

General policies and measures

- Member States and local authorities should address factors affecting Roma and Travellers in areas such as education, housing, employment, health, and the attainment of personal documents in a comprehensive manner through the implementation of action plans targeting these groups. The National Equality Bodies should be responsible for monitoring the situation systematically;

⁴ A detailed presentation of the EUMC’s opinions is available at the end of the report.

- Member States should develop specific policies and measures promoting respect and appreciation of Roma and Traveller history and culture particularly by involving journalists and the media.

Educational policies and measures

- Member States must also ensure that the legal measures expressly prohibiting any form of direct or indirect segregation into different schools or classes with effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions are in place and implemented by the relevant authorities.
- Member States should deploy specific desegregation measures where segregation of Roma and Traveller children exists ensuring that desegregation measures are properly implemented at the local level.
- Member States should actively encourage Roma and Travellers to enrol by removing unnecessary administrative barriers and ensuring that they are provided with the necessary documentation.
- Member States must ensure that schools with Roma and Traveller pupils receive the appropriate, if necessary additional, funding that allows them to provide education of equal quality as all other public schools.
- Member States should provide practical incentives such as additional social benefits to Roma and Traveller families to promote enrolment to pre-school education, which indirectly also supports the development of women's employment opportunities.
- Education authorities should ensure that all Roma and Traveller pupils have free access to compulsory and post compulsory education, including higher education, meaning that costs (e.g. tuition fees, cost of books, other educational material, transportation, etc) should be covered by scholarship and tuition fee support schemes.
- Education authorities should establish special disengagement programmes in order to transfer and integrate Roma and Traveller pupils to regular education.
- Education authorities should ensure that pupils of travelling communities be supported by special pedagogical measures designed to integrate them into the local schools of their temporary residence, to monitor their progress systematically, and to promote the use of distance education.

- Education authorities should consider making Romani language classes available as an optional course for all pupils in areas with a particularly high concentration of Roma. The Roma community should be consulted regarding the use of Romani in school, since opinions are sometimes divided.
- Educational authorities should design and implement awareness raising campaigns promoting pre-school education at local level, involving Roma and Traveller representatives and local authorities. The focus should be on concrete measures to involve Roma and Traveller parents in pre-school education in order to alleviate fears of assimilation or harassment.
- Educational authorities should ensure that any discriminatory practices that result in the placement of a disproportionately high number of Roma and Traveller pupils in special education are replaced by assessment procedures and psycho-pedagogical testing, which take into account language issues and different socio-cultural norms, and are developed involving Roma and Traveller representatives.
- Educational authorities should ensure that assessment procedures and psycho-pedagogical testing are systematically monitored with the direct involvement of parents.
- Educational authorities should ensure that Roma and Traveller history and culture are included in textbooks with particular consideration given to the experience of Roma during the Holocaust. Material on important contributions Roma and Travellers made in individual countries and Europe should be provided.
- Educational authorities should ensure that teachers working in ethnically mixed classes receive special training, be adequately paid and supported by experts and intercultural mediators. Teachers should also be made aware that they need to engage Roma and Traveller pupils more in class and not de-motivate them by placing lower demands upon them.
- Schools should monitor systematically non-attendance or truancy and involve actively the parents in ensuring that children attend school regularly. Thus schools will also come to understand the reasons for non-attendance and develop appropriate responses.
- Schools should highlight successful educational attainment by Roma and Traveller pupils, and relevant authorities should ensure that qualified individuals are supported in their search for appropriate

employment in order to show the link between educational attainment and improved life chances.

- Schools should make strong efforts to engage Roma and Traveller parents in school related activities in order to enhance mutual understanding. Schools must attract parents by respecting their values and culture and acknowledging their contribution to the education of their children.
- Local authorities need to provide travelling communities with facilities to improve their standard of living. Schools need to develop pedagogical measures to integrate them into the school population by acknowledging nomadism as a legitimate and respected lifestyle.

Monitoring and data collection

- Educational authorities should collect systematically ethnically differentiated statistical data on the educational situation of Roma and Travellers which also gauges the impact of policies and measures.
- Member States should consider in this respect cooperating with the European Commission and Eurostat in order to develop common statistical indicators for monitoring effectively the education of Roma and Traveller pupils.