

Introduction

This set of policy papers is a direct result of the project “To Solve Our Problems Together”, undertaken in partnership by the ECHOSOC Foundation—Romania and the Open University Subotica—Serbia. The papers aim at portraying the situation of the Roma minority in the two countries, in various areas of social life. Moreover, they bring forth a series of recommendations meant to contribute to the identification of feasible intervention means for solving many of the different problems presented.

Funding for these publications has been provided by America’s Development Foundation (ADF), within the program “Regional Partnership for Democracy” (RPD), supported by USAID Romania.

Other organisations involved in the project:

- ◆ CATALACTICA Association, Bucharest;
- ◆ Phoenix Foundation, Bucharest;
- ◆ Agency for Community Development “Împreună” [Together], Bucharest;
- ◆ Aven Amentza Foundation, Bucharest;
- ◆ Ramses—Foundation for Social Development of the Roma, Dej;
- ◆ Cultural Democratic Union of Roma from Valea Jiului, Petroșani;
- ◆ Intercultural Institute, Timișoara;
- ◆ Rrominterpress, Belgrade;
- ◆ European Voivodina, Novi Sad;
- ◆ International Scientific Forum "Danube—River of Cooperation" (ISF “DRC”), Belgrade;
- ◆ The Modern Society Movement (MSM), Zemun.

We hope these materials contribute to a better knowledge regarding the situation of the Roma population in Romania and Serbia, as well as adequate support for needed interventions.

Agnes Medve
Sorin Cace

1. To whom is this *policy paper* addressed?

- International organisations;
- Central authorities (ministries);
- Local authorities (Mayors, local councils, medical units, culture inspectorates, schools etc.);
- Non-governmental organisations;
- Specialists in the field, students;
- Think-tanks from Romania, Serbia, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe;
- Funders and/or donors for programs in Roma communities.

2. Objectives

The main objective is to describe and analyse the situation of the Roma in regional, national and local contexts, and to provide efficient ways for the improvement of the respective Roma situations.

One specific objective is that of highlighting the fact that partnerships between central/local authorities and representatives of the civil society represent a solution in elaborating concrete measures (strategies) for the improvement of the situation of Roma.

3. Identification of the problem

In the process of designing and formulating strategies meant to improve the situation of the Roma, there is a risk that the majority of time and resources be granted for the preparation of studies, reports, academic research and creation of bureaucratic institutions, while implementation, monitoring and review remain weak.

A solution to such problems could be the empowerment of Roma, encouraging their participation to political processes undertaken by the governments of their countries and targeted upon themselves, thus contributing to a better degree of organisation amongst Roma, and consolidating their cultural and political identity.

Considering the diversity of representation and organisation forms amongst Roma, governments are encouraged to search for new working modalities with different

Roma groups and individuals. In this context, we should consider ways for civil Roma organisations to participate substantially, through their traditional community leaders and elected representatives, to different stages in the process of strategy formulation and implementation.

There is a risk that existing prejudices might influence the formulation of strategies related to Roma; it is possible that the nature of the problem remain rooted in negative conceptions about Roma, perceived as people with a chronic “anti-social behaviour”, or very commonly as lazy, dirty, mentally disadvantaged, unworthy of trust, criminal and violent. Such attitudes can hide behind state programs for the prevention of crime, for school education, health and family planning, where a series of measures appear to be taken rather for the protection and “security” of the majority population from the respective regions or localities.

4. Political recognition—a right of national minorities

The recognition of the Roma as a national minority represents one of the most remarkable achievements of the last years. Being part of a larger process, that of recognising several rights of the national minorities, it appeared as a result both of internal pressures from the most active minority groups, as well as of external pressures. In this respect, existing debates relate to the special situation of the Roma and their unique status, due to the accumulation of numerous and complex social problems.

In Slovakia:

At the moment, the Roma problem is not characterised by belonging to a national minority (the nationality principle). The problems related to the Roma national minority are perceived as a matter of social status and of social, cultural and educational assistance, according to the universal civic principle of social integration.

In Romania:

In post-December 1989 Romanian society, the Roma issue is considered to be one of the questions left without a proper response. Although this problem seems to have ethnic accents at first sight, a closer look reveals that, in fact, its essential dimension is social-economical: not the Roma population as a whole represents the problem, but those Roma who are poor, unqualified, jobless; otherwise said,

the Roma problem is not ethnic in nature, but social-economical with ethnic features.

In Slovenia:

The Slovenian Constitution, adopted in 1991, stipulates that “the special position and rights of Roma communities living in Slovenia will be determined by law.” This provision ensures the legal basis for the adoption of special measures which would support the Roma, indicating at the same time that, given their specific nature, the position of the Roma will never be able to be considered equal to that of other minorities in Slovenia.

In Hungary:

We note here the distinction between national minorities and ethnic minorities, as provided for in the Hungarian Minorities Law, where the Roma are considered an ethnic minority; however, the rights guaranteed by this law are similar to those of the national minorities.

In Bulgaria:

The Council for Social and Demographic Issues has been transformed into the Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues. Following a period when Roma were recognised as national minority in the '90s, some of the current debates regarding the Roma aim at rediscovering social approaches and social integration problems. These social approaches and strategies eliminate the recognised dimensions of the fight against racism, discrimination, violence, intolerance and xenophobia.

5. Social strategies or strategies for the Roma?

As we already mentioned, the public strategies regarding the Roma can be based on either an ethnic approach or a social one, depending on the issue at stake or the respective situation. The strategies specifically designed for the Roma can lead to an approach that may include culture, identity and protection against prejudices and discrimination. The same strategies could lead to a negative reaction from the non-Roma, who do not benefit directly from these strategies.

Governments, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe, confront with the difficulties of preventing new forms of exclusion of the Roma, who depend on the social support, as well as with the tensions caused by the cost and the distribution of social assistance at local level. There is, also, the risk that resources provided

by various institutions, including international support for the Roma, be channelled towards public strategies with a preponderant social character, while strategic structural problems remain rooted in society and in certain sectors of the public administration.

Particularly, there is the risk that support coming from EU-Phare, through Agenda 2000, be domestically directed towards social integration strategies, related to the existing language, mentalities and practices of the majority population, especially among civil servants, at local level.

Equally, a dimension of the EU strategies for Roma could ensure and consolidate the affirmation chances for the civil society approach, with a large participation, of Roma and Sinti. Such an approach could be stimulated through investments in the replication of local initiatives that include in their actions local authorities, Roma and the majority population.

6. Regional approach

Such an example of the EU and CE strategies that include in their actions local authorities, Roma and the majority population, could be the Action Plan for local development and Roma communities. Organised under the aegis of the Council of Europe, in 5 countries from Eastern Europe: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania; the project preparations included the establishment of a Board of Administration, formed with officials of European institutions—OSCE, Council of Europe, European Union—and governmental representatives from Holland and the countries of Eastern Europe included in the project.

- Honorary chairman is Mr. Max van den Stoel, High Commissioner of OSCE for National Minorities;
- Chairperson is Mr. Josephine Verspaget, deputy in the European Parliament and president of the Group of Experts of the Council of Europe for Roma issues;
- Representatives of the European Commission in Brussels, European Union, OSCE and representatives of the Dutch government.

The purpose of the Action Plan for local development and Roma communities is the formulation and presentation to the governments of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania of plans to be accepted by each of the mentioned countries and included in the national Phare programs.

In order to achieve the proposed objective, the following actions have been planned:

1. Organisation of a working meeting with experts of the local development programs in Roma communities, from the Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania;
2. Formulation of national local development plans for the Roma communities and submission thereof to state institutions and non-governmental organisations, in national workshops.

6.1 Reaction of governments and national representatives

Bulgaria

The regional meetings organised in Montana and Ruse revealed an interest of the local/regional authorities in cooperating with Roma representatives in order to develop comprehensive development plans. The contribution of authorities to the formulation of such plans consists in offering land, facilities and rooms, trying thus to prevent future segregation. Roma individuals can contribute by offering their labour force on a voluntary basis and the NGOs can pay a part of the costs of materials.

Romania

Successes at local level have been essential for obtaining the involvement of politicians at a national level. A few projects, realised at a local level—cooperation between the representatives of the Roma and local authorities—were presented at the national conference on 28-29 June 2000. The Action Plan for local development and Roma communities was then included in the national Phare program “Improvement of the Situation of Roma”, approved by Government Decision.

Hungary

NGOs have attempted to create favourable conditions for inviting local authorities to have a reaction regarding the implementation of the Action Plan, but they were not successful.

Slovakia

Local meetings were organised in Kremnica, Lomnicka, Chminianske Jakubovany, Snina, Hostice and Zehra, with Roma representatives and local authorities, in order to draft comprehensive local development plans. The local representatives presented these plans during a two-day conference in Kremnica, on 14-15 June

2000. The Action Plan is, at the moment, part of the objectives of a new Phare program, implemented by the Dutch Federation of Municipalities.

Czech Republic

Regional workshops were organised and prepared in Brno (social houses project) and Semily, and the Action Plan was debated in the inter-ministerial committee. As in the case of Slovakia, the Action Plan is now part of the objectives of a new Phare program, implemented by the Dutch Federation of Municipalities.

6.2 A few conclusions:

- Depending on the specific conditions of each country, there are several ways of formulating the plans and strategies targeted on Roma;
- The support of local authorities is essential in stimulating local development projects in Roma communities, in gaining resources and attracting investors;
- International organisms and western authorities are more open with regard to supporting Roma expression—on the one hand, in order to achieve the equality of chances and, on the other hand, in order to prevent the migration of Roma to Western countries.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The European Union has a solid experience, institutional basis and resources (financial and human) for coping with problems such as integration into modern life and fight against social exclusion, or those related to the more specific area of training and education of the Roma from Member and Candidate States.

The process of enlargement of the European Union towards Central and Eastern Europe contributed to an increased visibility of actions related to Roma and Sinti. Agenda 2000 of the European Community emphasises the necessity of improving the situation of Roma in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, by fighting against racism and by promoting equal opportunities in day-to-day life. It is also recommended that governments update their indicators regarding the situation of Roma, in specific areas like: housing, employment and education.

The global interest for human rights and minority rights, from various international organisations, and the approach of Roma problems through consultations with Roma, bore a notable contribution in solving some of the education, culture and

social problems, offering guidance as to the necessary standards and innovating a series of practices and methodologies through various pilot projects which led to increased trust.

At the level of implementation review, progress was made regarding the level of knowledge concerning the multiple problems related to the Roma situation, which requires a comprehensive approach on behalf of the national governments.

Public strategies can be focused on a specific approach or can represent a mixture of different approaches, in various stages of the implementation process. The proposed institutional measures can be successive or simultaneous, separate or inter-dependent, sometimes consisting of “deals” among these dimensions, among those who support and oppose them, among social forces in competition and/or in cooperation.

If we are to examine the public strategies regarding Roma, we can distinguish the following approaches: “social problem”/”social integration”; protection of national minorities; and fight against discrimination, racism, intolerance, xenophobia and violence on ethnic grounds.

In Romania, the former Department for the Protection of National Minorities, now transformed in the Department for Inter-Ethnic Relations within the Ministry of Public Information, finalised a strategy for “the improvement of the situation of Roma”, a strategy for the protection of the Roma minority, on medium and long term. The elaboration of the White Book and of the preparatory documents considered the priorities expressed by the Working Group of Roma Associations, in the sense of eliminating all forms of racial discrimination.

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cancelled one of the previous recommendations suggesting the use of the term “gypsies” instead of “Roma” for the name of this ethnic group. A “partnership” fund was allocated for testing the directions for action from the strategy, for the first 4 years. In the case of Romania, Roma issues are approached especially from the perspective of protecting the rights of national minorities, which is being treated as a special category of human rights. Among the important issues, we note the preservation and affirmation of identity through language, culture, tradition etc.

Examining the process at a national and international level, we observe a positive evolution regarding the increasing level of knowledge on these issues and their

political recognition, as well as implementation of specific strategies to solve the problems. Meanwhile, in an attempt to influence the social-economic dynamic of the Participant States, there is a notable need to strengthen efforts and activities related to fighting prejudices against Roma, hostility, discrimination and violence. Such activities should be included, with an essential position, in the strategies regarding Roma.

In the presentation of trends related to Roma issues, both at national and international levels, a few key-areas should be emphasised, as they make up for a “new stage” of the process.

- Governments should elaborate, in partnership with Roma organisations, state strategies for the improvement of the situation of Roma;
- Roma issues should be approached from the civil society point of view, that of specific associations of the minorities, active at a local/national level;
- Legislation should be adopted, possibly in comprehensive codes, for combating discrimination, racism and racial acts, for monitoring and combating violence on ethnic and racial grounds;
- Mechanisms should be created for the severe application of the laws that stipulate the punishment of acts and facts of a discriminatory, racist nature;
- Cooperation with various organisations of the civil society is also desirable, whenever possible.

Bibliography

Gheorghe, Nicolae. *Romii în spațiul OSCE* [Roma in the OSCE Area].

Ionescu, Vasile. *Plan de Acțiune—Romii 2000* [Action Plan—Roma 2000].

Ionescu, Maria & Jef Helmer. *Plan de Acțiune pentru dezvoltare locală și comunități de romi* [Action Plan for Local Development and Roma Communities].