POLICY BRIEF

ACCEPT PLURALISM

Roma in Bulgarian Schools: Desegregation Supported, Segregation Maintained

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This report analyses the **attitudes towards ethnic and cultural otherness** in Bulgarian education. Elementary and secondary schools are places, where children from different communities come together and are obliged to find ways to interact and coexist. At the same time, the age between 7 and 18, which are ideally the years needed to complete elementary and secondary education, is also the period of the most active development and formation of the personality. This is the time when it is possible to make an impact and influence the way an individual deals with the social stereotypes and prejudices towards the 'others' – they can be either embraced or rejected.

The issue of education of Roma children in Bulgarian schools provides an excellent opportunity to critically evaluate the attitude of the majority population towards the Roma community. There is **a significant discrepancy between the declared and publicly advocated policy of desegregation and the actually existing segregation**. On the one side, the state institutions and especially the school system have declared their commitment to integrate all Roma children and prevent their drop-out from schools by various measures – including lower requirements for passing onto the next grade. On the other side, most Roma children remain segregated in the exclusively Roma schools where the quality of education is low, which strengthens the **vicious circle in which many Roma are captured** (lack of proper education – unemployment – poverty).

Numerous attempts have been made to integrate the Roma children into desegregated, mixed schools. However, the application of the official state policy of desegregation usually fails because of **poor implementation**. The attempts initiated by the relevant state institutions often encounter **resistance on local level** – from schools' headteachers and teachers, and from the parents of non-Roma children. The problem has been worsened by the **ghettoisation of the Roma community**. The majority of Roma live in detached peripheral settlements and often do not want to send their children to schools, usually located a considerable distance away from their homes.

Education of Roma children: between declared policy of desegregation and practical segregation.

Roma are caught in a vicious circle: poor education, unemployment, poverty.

Obstacles to desegregation: resistance of non-Roma parents and teachers, apprehensions of Roma parents.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Desegregation – essential, inevitable, unwanted?

Question of Roma integration and above all the problem of their low level of education are among the most important challenges for the Bulgarian society. Practically all respondents agree that **desegregation of Roma children** in education **has no alternative**. It is seen as essential for their integration into the society. However, when discussing the policies and practices of desegregation and proposing different solutions, somewhat paradoxically most respondents propose solutions that are actually based on different forms of segregation. Among the main reasons for this are the widespread suspicions and intolerant attitudes towards Roma, which are often strengthened by the sensationalistic and non-professional media reporting.

"…even if we go to school and learn, then what? They still don't want us, they hate us, they don't respect us." – Interview with a Roma NGO activist.

The fundamental problem of desegregation policies is that the **dedication of the state institutions remains largely on a level of proclamation**, while they are much less active in the genuine realisation of this process. Many Roma activists believe that the passivity of the state administration is a consequence of a deliberate intention to disregard the Roma population. Marginalised and uneducated, Roma are more prone to manipulation and can be easily exploited – by the political parties, media, different economic actors and even by criminal groups.

Table 1: Ethnic structure of population (2011)			
All citizens	**Bulgarian**	**Turks**	**Roma**
100%	84.8%	8.8%	4.9%

Source: http://www.nsi.bg/EPDOCS/Census2011final.pdf

Secondary segregation and the 'white flight'

Desegregation is a long and complex process. Currently, it is most often understood and practiced as **a mechanical transfer of Roma children** from the Roma neighbourhood (or ghetto) and their transport to and from the 'integrated' school.

Desegregation is widely supported on a declarative level, but opposed in practice.

Suspicions and distrust are strong on both sides – among the majority population and in the Roma community.

Desegregation is a complex process. If implemented improperly, it only leads to secondary segregation.

One of the consequences of such mechanical transfer of children from one school to another is **the appearance of secondary segregation**. A few Roma children in a majority-Bulgarian class often find themselves **isolated from the rest of the children** and practically excluded from the education process. If a larger number of Roma of similar age are enrolled in a school, usually a 'Roma-only' class is established. With the explanation that their specific culture and educational needs necessitate such a measure, the Roma children are again **segregated inside the desegregated school**.

> *"The previous school year there was one entirely Roma class in a Bulgarian school, and this was the same as in a segregated school. This method is not a correct one." – Interview with a pedagogical adviser.*
>
> *"It actually has a negative effect." – Interview with a NGO activist.*

If the number of Roma children at a given mixed school becomes significantly large, the consequence is usually the 'white flight.' The majority of Bulgarian parents are not well disposed towards the presence of Roma children in the classes of their own children. If given a chance, many prefer to transfer them to another class or to a different school, which does not admit 'too many' Roma children.

Table 2: Illiteracy rates in Bulgaria – aged 9 or more (2011)			
All citizens	**Bulgarian**	**Turks**	**Roma**
1.5%	0.5%	4.7%	11.8%

Source: http://www.nsi.bg/EPDOCS/Census2011final.pdf

How many is too many, how few is too few?

The opinions about **an 'appropriate' number of Roma children** in a mixed class are very different. Some respondents are concerned that a larger number of Roma children would cause a discipline problem and delay the progress of the entire class. On the other hand, if they were too few, the Roma children would most likely end up isolated and dominated by the others, and would feel very uncomfortable.

> *"Five Roma children in a class is OK, but if they are more…." – Interview with a teacher in a school with numerous Roma children.*

Roma children in desegregated schools often end up in a segregated class.

If non-Roma parents feel that 'too many' Roma children attend the schools of their own children, they tend to transfer them to schools with 'less' Roma pupils.

Opinion of the teachers: too many Roma children in one class disrupt discipline, too few feel isolated and uncomfortable.

Roma parents – an obstacle or a neglected asset?

Roma parents are often seen as an important obstacle to desegregation policies. Experts and teachers believe that many of them do not comprehend and recognize the importance of education.

Roma parents are usually very reluctant to send their children to integrated schools because they are in most cases located at certain distance from the Roma ghettoes. The children are often absent from home for a better part of the day. The Roma parents are usually afraid to send them **into an unfamiliar and relatively hostile environment** and prefer to keep them closer to themselves. Sending children to integrated schools is also associated with considerable costs that many Roma parents are unable to cover.

> *"How can I send a child to school? Shoes are needed, I cannot provide even food in the morning, how can I send him to school?"* – *Interview with a Roma parent.*

The perceptions of the Roma parents and their distrust of the school system cannot be changed overnight. **Special programmes aimed at** informing **the Roma parents** about the importance of education and changing their attitudes are needed.

Table 3: Children aged 7 – 15 not attending school (2011)			
All citizens	**Bulgarian**	**Turks**	**Roma**
1.5%	5.6%	11.9%	23.2%

Source: http://www.nsi.bg/EPDOCS/Census2011final.pdf

Teachers and teacher-assistants

Teachers play an exceptionally important role in the attempts to achieve the desegregation. **Work in a multicultural environment demands special efforts**, for which appropriate skills, qualification and motivation are needed. At the moment, many teachers who work in integrated schools have insufficient qualification to work with the Roma children. This could be rectified through additional free-of-charge **training courses** and programmes, which would **increase their ability and motivation** for work in a multicultural environment. Additional qualification should also give them some advantage like better payment and higher professional standing.

Many Roma parents have a negative attitude towards the education system and are very reluctant to send their children to 'Bulgarian' schools.

Currently, almost no effort is made to explain the Roma parents why education of their children is important and needed.

Teachers are exceptionally important, but not all are sufficiently qualified and motivated to work with Roma children.

> *"I met very motivated teachers who understood the problem to its bones. They need to obtain additional qualification, but they also have to be motivated to obtain it." – Interview with an expert on Roma issues.*

A project, which showed good potential in the past, but was discontinued after the financing was terminated, was the programme for training and qualification of Roma as **teacher-assistants**. Teacher-assistants were supposed to act as mediators between the school and the Roma children and their families, and to **help the children to adapt to the school environment** and improve their Bulgarian language skills. However, in most cases their role was eventually reduced to enforcers of discipline in class and mediators in conflicts between Roma and non-Roma children. Experts believe that **if applied systematically**, over a long period of time and on the national level, such project would not only increase tolerance, but **could result in genuine acceptance** in the school environment.

Teacher-assistants project has a great potential and could lead not just to better integration, but also to genuine acceptance.

Is desegregation leading to tolerance and respect?

The answer seems to be negative. The ultimate **goal of desegregation is integration** in the sense of diminishing or even **erasing the differences** between Roma and the majority population. If differences are erased, there is nothing left to recognise and respect.

The issue of Roma education remains caught between two poles. One is the **declarative support for desegregation** (understood as the first step on the path towards making Roma more like "us"). On the other pole are openly intolerant public **preferences for maintaining the segregation**. The negative stereotypes about Roma are persistent and very strong. Roma can be tolerated only if they stop being what they are or if they remain confined to their segregated **parallel coexistence**. Difference and otherness are not tolerated, and recognition and respect are not even a theoretical possibility.

If goal of desegregation is to erase differences between Roma and non-Roma, can it be considered a path leading to tolerance and respect of otherness?

The predominant opinion is that instead of raising the levels of tolerance towards Roma, the **desegregation** attempts have actually **provoked manifestations of intolerance**, leading to secondary segregation. The situation can be improved only through coordinated efforts and genuine cooperation of the state institutions, NGO sector, majority population and the Roma community, but the necessary precondition for this remains the **sincere political will** of the authorities **to implement concrete and effective measures** on the national level.

The way forward: genuine and effective cooperation of state institutions, NGO sector, society and Roma community.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

(1) Desegregation is a long and complex process and cannot be achieved through mechanical transfer of children from one school to another. The result of this is usually the appearance of secondary segregation.

(2) A large number of NGOs, often in cooperation or with funding from state institutions or the EU, have implemented numerous good and valuable projects. However, the majority of these projects were on ad-hoc basis and rarely had a lasting effect. The good practices from the past successful projects need to be used as an example for purposeful and active work on the national level. Future projects need to be sustainable and durable.

(3) Very often, the reasons for the failure of desegregation policies are connected to the negative attitude of the Roma parents towards schools and to the fact that many of them do not comprehend and recognize the importance of education. Much more attention needs to be devoted towards informing the Roma parents and changing their attitudes regarding the education of their children.

(4) Similar attention needs to be paid to changing the negative attitude of the Bulgarian parents. Information campaigns at schools, media and local communities targeting the parents of Bulgarian children are a necessary but insufficient short-term measure. In middle- and long-term, mixed schools should be made more attractive for the Bulgarian parents through 'incentives' like better services, higher teaching quality and more attractive extracurricular activities compared to other schools.

(5) A serious problem is also the insufficient qualification of teachers to work in multicultural schools. This can be rectified through additional free-of-charge training courses and programmes, which would increase their ability and motivation for work in a multicultural environment.

(6) One of the main obstacles Roma children face in school is their low command of Bulgarian. Special auxiliary Bulgarian language courses would increase the performance of the children in other subjects as well.

(7) The programmes for training and qualification of Roma as teacher-assistants, which proved successful in the past should be resumed, and the role and responsibilities of Roma teacher-assistants more clearly defined and implemented. If applied systematically, over a long period of time and on the national level, the teacher-assistants project could have very good results, not only increasing tolerance, but resulting in genuine acceptance in the school environment.

Methodology

The research took place between January and July 2011. It included a review and analysis of political documents and practices, and of media coverage of the studied issues, as well as a fieldwork. During the fieldwork, ten semi-standardised interviews were made. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. In addition, a discussion group with six participants (experts from different fields) was also organised.

Respondents were chosen with the motivation to obtain a well-informed opinion from people, who are directly involved with the question of Roma education. Four interviews were thus made in the town of Samokov and three in Pazardzhik – both towns with a sizable Roma community (Samokov – 10.2% and Pazardzhik – 8.3% of the population). Three of these respondents work at the local NGOs, two are teachers, one is a pedagogical adviser in a school, and one works at a cultural centre. Four of these seven respondents are Roma.

Another three interviews were conducted in Sofia. One respondent is an expert on ethnic and religious issues and has previously worked both for the state administration and in the NGO sector, the second is a Deputy Chief Mufti in charge of educational issues, and the third is an expert on Roma education with long-time experience both in the NGO sector and in state institutions. Five respondents are men, and five are women.

The analysis of the data collected through interviews and discussion group was based on the method of critical discourse analysis. Each interview was analysed in order to establish the specific contents and topics, and to understand the respondents' positions on all studied themes. Special attention was paid to the context and subjectivity of the respondents, messages they conveyed and attitudes they displayed. After it was established how respondents perceive and interpret various topics, the interviews were compared and a matrix of commonalities and differences was set up, making it possible to come up with analytical conclusions.

Further reading

Zhelyazkova, Antonina; Kosseva, Maya; Hajdinjak, Marko. *Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Bulgaria: Bulgarian Ethnic Model – Parallel Cohabitation or Multicultural Recognition?,* http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Diversity_Discourses_BG.pdf

Kosseva, Maya; Hajdinjak, Marko. *(In)Tolerance of Difference in Bulgarian Schools: Discourses and Practices.* http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/In-Tolerance_of_Difference.pdf

Kosseva, Maya; Hajdinjak, Marko. *Citizens and Modernities: Between National and European Paths in Bulgaria.* http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Citizens_and_Modernities.pdf

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.
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding Scheme:	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
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Consortium:	19 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator:	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
Person Responsible:	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
EC officer:	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer