

A LOOK BACK AND A LOOK AHEAD

In July of last year, the Roma Education Fund (REF) – together with the European Roma Rights Centre, the Open Society Fund – Prague and the Open Society Justice Initiative, sent an open letter to the Czech Minister of Education, Youth and Sport concerning implementation of the European Court of Human Rights judgment in the case of D.H. and Others v The Czech Republic.

The letter made note of the lack of evidence of a decreased number of Romani children in special education or otherwise segregated environments since the judgment of the Court in November 2007. Perhaps more important, the letter offered a set of recommendations of concrete steps to be taken toward implementation of the judgment. These recommendations included:

1. Enacting legislation requiring that Romani children be integrated into standard schools using a standard curriculum and amending the National Action Plan on Inclusive Education to include transparent and specific indicators as well as resources to achieve that objective by 2015;
2. Ensuring the provision of early childhood education for disadvantaged children to assist entry to standard primary schools;
3. Developing a curriculum to support integration, together with measures to change attitudes within the teaching profession;
4. Continuing to provide educational support (e.g. in the form of teacher's assistants, language training) for children whose home language is not Czech;
5. Disseminating the judgment of the Court to educational and legal professions as well as the judiciary and the general public;
6. Issuing an immediate moratorium on new admissions to practical schools or special education for children with "mild mental disabilities" pending the adoption and enforcement of adequate safeguards to ensure that no child is incorrectly tracked; and
7. Eliminating entry testing for primary schools and reforming the system of diagnostic tests which currently channel Romani children disproportionately into special education.

I have repeated most of the recommendations from the letter here because there has been very, very little progress toward implementation of the Court's judgment since the letter was sent: Roma in the Czech Republic continue to be enrolled in schools and classes which deliver a reduced curriculum that severely limits their options for further study and employment. Yesterday morning's session with two of the plaintiffs in the DH case made this disturbingly concrete: Despite the domestic and international attention to the DH case, more than three years after the judgment, both Julek Mika and Veronika Šindečarová have close relatives who attend special schools today.

The current situation in the Czech Republic is clearly unacceptable:

- in the first place as a **violation of human rights** which grows more egregious as the total number of children who receive inferior education continues to increase

- for lack of concrete action to change the day-to-day practices of education institutions; and
- in the second place as a **violation of a decision rendered by the European Court of Human Rights.**

Of course, the segregation of Romani children in various forms of inferior education is not a problem only in the Czech Republic. With this in mind, I would respectfully ask the representatives of the governments of the other Decade countries present at this conference to reflect on how recommendations like those offered to the Czech Minister of Education might apply to their own countries.

For REF's part, we continue to stand behind not only the recommendations contained in the letter addressed to Minister Dobeš, but also our offer of support to the Government of the Czech Republic in the form of technical assistance and input on draft policy measures, as well as by co-organizing joint learning events with the Government and domestic and international partners from outside government. One such event is this conference, which we thank the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic for coming through in planning, organizing and hosting in a difficult social and political environment. I would also like to thank the other organizing partners – Slovo 21 and the Decade Secretariat – for putting together this event in record time.

At the Roma Education Fund, we had hoped that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic would make use of this event to broaden its perspective on possibilities for desegregation by learning from other Decade countries which have been more successful in this endeavor, as well as by learning from Romani NGOs based in the Czech Republic. For this reason, we were particularly disappointed by the Ministry's absence from yesterday's discussion of good practice in desegregation in the Decade countries. Nonetheless, REF hopes that this conference will serve as a basis for more sustained and intensive cooperation with the Ministry. At the same time, REF offers its support – technical and financial, as well as moral – not only to the Czech Republic, but also to other Decade countries which express a commitment to dismantling segregation.

Finally (and this is a real case of 'last but not least'), I would like to thank all presenters, facilitators, and participants for making time to be here for the last two days and to wish a safe and pleasant trip home.