

Taking School Desegregation To Scale – The Way Ahead

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School desegregation as an organised Romani grassroots initiative began in Bulgaria in 2000 with the enrolment of several hundred Romani children from the ghetto school in the town of Vidin in the mainstream schools of the town. This initiative is not alien to the development of the Romani communities in Bulgaria. Living on Bulgarian lands for centuries, Roma have for some time now aspired to integrate in the institutions of the macro-society, including the educational system. Not only nowadays but also in the past decades, Romani parents who had the necessary knowledge and means, made efforts to enrol their children in mainstream schools. It is not a surprise that the majority of today's Romani activists have graduated from mainstream schools.

The efforts of activists of the Romani movement to draw the attention to the problem of confinement of Romani children to inferior segregated education and to the need to integrate Romani children in mainstream schools reflect the prevailing attitudes of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Actions to ensure equal access to education for Roma by desegregating schools are by no means limited to Bulgaria. In the past eight years, the issue of school desegregation gradually moved into the centre of policy discussions on Romani education in a number of countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In 2001, the first steps to desegregate Romani education in Hungary as part of government policy were initiated by Viktória Mohácsi in her capacity of Ministry of Education Commissioner for the Integration of Roma and Disadvantaged Children. In Romania, Romani activists lobbied the government for commitment to begin school desegregation action. As a result, in 2004, a notification by the Ministry of Education instructed regional educational authorities to prepare action plans for desegregation. A 2007 development in Romania led to a more serious intention to further efforts for school desegregation by a Ministry of Education order which banned school segregation of Romani children and approved methodology for its prevention and elimination. At the same time, practical efforts to desegregate schools are being made by Romani NGOs with support from the European Commission and the Roma Education Fund. In Bulgaria itself, school desegregation activities, supported first by the Open Society Institute and then by the Roma Education Fund, have expanded in the past several years. Their success led to formulating school desegregation as a goal of government policy in education in a number of government programmes in the period 1997-2006. Simultaneously, segregated education has been challenged before national courts in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and, in the case of the Czech Republic and Croatia, before the European Court of Human Rights. The movement to desegregate education of Roma at national level has been backed up by powerful statements of institutions such as the Council of Europe, the European Commission and Parliament, and the OSCE.

The eight years of successful implementation of school desegregation projects in Bulgaria, the emergence and development of similar initiatives in other countries, and the fact that the issue of school desegregation has made its way to the policy discourse at national and the international levels, are clear signs that there is a way ahead for school desegregation in Europe.

What was the context for policies in the field of education of Roma at the time when the school desegregation movement started taking shape? The dominant views among various actors in the majority society -- policy-makers, educationalists and other professionals dealing with Roma -- have been to a large extent shaped by two common stereotypical perceptions of Roma: the negative one, stigmatising Roma as backward and marginalised, with neither potential nor aspiration to integrate into society, and the “positive” one, romanticising Roma as an exotic addition to the majority society. In other words, whether negatively or positively, the popular perception of Roma has always overemphasised their difference from others and has placed them outside the mainstream society.

In relation to education, the stereotypical perceptions of Roma have predetermined the “understanding” that Roma are neither capable of, nor aspire to, mainstream education. Respectively, both policy and practice sought solutions to educate Roma outside the mainstream school system: in special schools for children with mental disabilities, in schools built for Roma in the Roma-only neighborhoods, and in separate classes based on “different needs”. The notion of the unfitness of Roma for mainstream education also influenced the policy goals with respect to the education of Roma. These goals emphasised the physical presence of Romani children at school and ignored the issue of access to quality education. Consequently, the measures undertaken did not challenge the existence of the segregated school systems but sought to improve them. Unfortunately, a number of otherwise well meant efforts by non-governmental organisations did not depart from the paradigm of seeking solutions to Romani education within the segregated school system. These activities deepened the deprivation of Roma and their exclusion from access to equal education.

What was missing in the field of Roma related policies all these years was what I would define as the “normal” perception of Roma -- the perception that Roma, despite their cultural differences, are as capable as non-Roma and are as attached to common human and civilisation values as non-Roma. The school desegregation actions initiated by grassroots Romani organisations in Bulgaria opened space for an alternative to the stereotypical views about Roma. They presented Roma adults and children who do not conform to the majority stereotypes – who value education and care about; who aspire to and achieve comparable results with their non-Romani peers. In my view, this potential for a progressive and lasting challenge to prejudice and stereotypes gives the school desegregation initiative an added value which is absent in most other initiatives in the field of Roma education.

The Difficulties

School desegregation in Bulgaria has grown in the past eight years from a single project started by a Romani NGO into a process that involves several thousand Romani children in nine towns, over sixty mainstream schools, and with a number of Romani organisations acting at local and national levels. The issue has also transcended the domain of NGO work was progressively endorsed by local government and appeared as a component of government programmes and funding schemes. The development of school desegregation initiatives showed that that Romani children could manage in a competitive environment, that they did not return to segregated schools in large numbers, that non-Romani children did not abandon the schools which enrolled Roma, and that conflicts between Roma and non-Roma were not serious enough to harm the whole process.

The start of these operations was, however, a difficult process. Especially in the early years when the school desegregation process did not have a supportive environment – both in its immediate environment and in larger circles. The actions undertaken by Romani organisations modified power structure, clashed with various interests, and, naturally, created some opposition.

Difficulties in implementation inevitably arose at the local level: some mainstream schools resisted when it came to enrolment of Romani children; teachers behaved improperly with Roma children in the classroom; motivational work with some Romani parents required more effort, and many others. These difficulties, however, did not thwarted the process of desegregation itself. Where local Romani organisations liaised closely with local authorities, school administrations and the local media, held awareness raising events for parents, educationalists, officers and councillors, a positive context was set for the implementation of school desegregation actions.

From the start, the school desegregation projects in Bulgaria moved into the centre of debates concerning education of Roma, both at national and the international levels. The projects were meticulously discussed in terms of methodology, implementation, implications for the Roma identity, applicability in various contexts, etc. Unlike any other Roma-related initiative to that moment, the actions undertaken by Romani organisations mobilised an unprecedented amount of criticism by various civil society groups. It is important to note, however, that, among Romani activists, there has been no ideological opposition to the process. Critics from the Romani activist circles questioned the actors in school desegregation, and sometimes the way it was carried out but never the idea of integrating Roma in mainstream education. The most outspoken critics of the process came from circles which worked to improve education in the segregated schools as well as professionals who saw the school desegregation projects as a challenge to their professional expertise. At the start of the desegregation process, lack of a clear support from the civil society threatened to discourage participants of the school desegregation process and to tip the balance at local level between the interests of the Romani communities, non-Romani communities and public officials, in favour of preserving the status quo. However, the visible and good results of the desegregation projects helped overcome these problems..

The Impact

The positive effect of the school desegregation process on school attendance and achievement of Romani children is unquestionable and has been documented in a number of studies. Regular attendance of Romani children and better achievement is not the product of a mechanical transfer of children from ghetto schools to mainstream schools, as some tend to describe the school desegregation process. Those who are familiar with the process know that the bussing of children to mainstream schools is a logistical detail in a much more complex operation aimed at creating a supportive educational environment for the Romani children in the mainstream schools and in the community. The successful transition of Romani children from segregated to integrated schools could not have been achieved without addressing several crucial factors, such as, parental involvement, school environment, and academic and social support. In fact, what made the difference between the school desegregation projects and many other initiatives to improve the education of Roma was the effort and the actual work of engaging the Romani communities in the process by motivational work carried out with Romani parents. The desegregation projects

demonstrated that the sustainability of the process depends on the involvement of Romani parents in it and that such involvement is achievable by consistent motivational work.

In addition to the impact on the education of Roma, the school desegregation process opened the way for far-reaching social changes. Although there is still a long way to go, there are several indications that the school desegregation process generates social changes. In the first place, Roma made it clear that they have aspirations and capabilities for participation in the mainstream education. The fact that Romani community activists initiated a process to give Romani children equal chances in education and engaged numerous supporters from the Romani communities presents Roma in a new light: although culturally different, they share the same values as the majority.

The desegregation projects have also demonstrated that appropriate interventions can influence the educational environment and help the non-Roma environment accept Romani children. It provoked educationalists and policy-makers to start thinking outside the cliché that Roma themselves are solely responsible for their low educational status and to look at the effects of segregated education on the quality of education. These facts demonstrate the viability of the process and the good prospects for its realisation on a larger scale.

The Future

There should be no illusions that desegregating educational systems in Europe can be achieved rapidly. School segregation is so pervasive, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, that challenging it requires long-term mobilization of resources at all levels of government, as well as the sustained efforts of Romani activists. At this moment, the school desegregation process goes at a very slow speed, driven mainly by NGO efforts with limited government involvement.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to be optimistic about the prospects. The school desegregation action itself generates the conditions which will carry it forward.

First and foremost, Romani children who have attended mainstream schools for several years will not go back to segregated education. Their siblings, relatives and friends have an example to follow and a larger scale action involving government resources has the potential to attract to mainstream education many more Romani children. Parents of those children have become more active in looking for better educational prospects for their children. A growing number of Romani organizations engage in advocacy for school desegregation as well as in direct school desegregation action. Civil society organisations are increasingly utilising legal mechanisms to challenge segregated education of Roma.

In Bulgaria the REF strategy for scaling up the desegregation progress includes four components, 1/ continue to support and monitor the successful experience of desegregation at 8 localities, 2/ensure that a special program in the EU structural fund is dedicated to school desegregation and that Roma NGOs can successfully apply , 3/support policy changes and government programs are supporting desegregation, 4/ reach out to public opinion and to political parties to show the population that

desegregation is cost effective and in the interest of all. The REF is financing projects and activities in all these with so far good outcomes

These actions, taken together with the recognition of the negative impact of school segregation by major intergovernmental organizations, are building up intolerance for the continued practice of segregation of Romani children in the educational systems in a number of European countries.