

Spring 2006

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Shane Branon
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ROMA EDUCATION IN SERBIA:
The Implications of Prejudice and Ethnic Conflict
and the Potential for Change

Shane F. Branon

Spring 2006

S.I.T. Berlin

“The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education ... (and) the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth. Now this idea cannot be applied to all the members of a society except where intercourse of man with man is mutual, and except where there is adequate provision for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests. And this means a democratic society.”

-John Dewey

Cultural, religious and ethnic divisions are nothing new to the Slavic people of the southwest Balkans. The region once known as Yugoslavia has experienced periods of assimilation and peaceful coexistence as well as ethnic hatred and aggression. In recent years, the majority of this has been concentrated inside Serbia, the nucleus of the former Yugoslavia. While it may appear that Serbia has overcome the ethnic hatred that has plagued its social and political culture, there continues to be ethnic discrimination in both the social sphere and government institutions. This prejudice is most evident in the relationship between the Serbian majority population and the minorities living within Serbia.

This paper aims to illuminate several angles, and varying perspectives, of the situation of ethnic hatred that exists as an oppressive force against the Roma minority in Serbia in the education system.

While the Serbian government has developed initiatives with the supposed goal of creating equality within the education system, the initiatives have failed because they have been developed in an atmosphere of extreme nationalism and ethnic discrimination. This type of attitude, which pervades much of the country, is considerably detrimental to the advancement of education within Roma's population. In turn, it can be assumed rather easily that the lack of education corresponds with the Roma people's lowly status within Serbia. Although some of the most recent developments in the education system have the potential to benefit the Roma minority, the Serbian government has a blatant neglect for their plight, however muffled and unrepresented their voice may be.

Before Yugoslavia was a state, and before the Triune Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Yugoslavia was a concept: the product of urbanization and the intelligentsia. It was said that 'Yugoslavism' was to be a "union upon the basis of what was considered a common culture and history"¹. This common identity was believed to be shared by the various Slavic persons of the southwest Balkans. The belief of a shared identity among the people of the Balkans helped to lead to the creation of the first Yugoslav state. As a political state, Yugoslavia's origins derived from the exiled Yugoslav Committee which took up residence in London during the last year of the Great War in 1918, when the Triune Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was created². At this time most Serbians favored the Načertanije Plan³ for the creation of a state in the southwest Balkan region, a thought originating amongst the proponents that reasoned for

¹ R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century—And After*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21

² Library of Congress, "Yugoslavia: Formation of the South Slav State", 5 May 2006, <[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+yu0022\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+yu0022))> (December 1990)

³ Ilija Garašanin's plan for a predominantly Orthodox and Muslim union of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, the Vojvodina, and Northern Albania not including Croatia

Serbian aggrandizement. However, the first Yugoslav state was established instead and “was based on a new dualism, coalescence of the old Serbian kingdom and of the south Slavs of the former Hapsburg lands [who] had never been easy allies”⁴.

Two things were apparent from these developments. Indeed a south Slav state did exist; however a common south Slav identity did not exist.

The interwar period was subject to political instability and divisions in the Triune Kingdom which would become known as the Yugoslav Kingdom in 1929. “Throughout this time, ethnic minorities of all types were not free and discrimination was prevalent, both by the majority and between the minority groups”⁵. The discrimination of the 1930s would soon develop into extreme ethnic hatred and conflict, ultimately transcending into the persecution by the Ustaše in World War II⁶. This was an extreme case of ethnic conflict throughout Yugoslavia as the Ustaše, in accordance with the policies of the Third Reich, “executed and assassinated in the most atrocious manner almost 750,000 Serbs, 50,000 Jews and 25,000 Gypsies at Jasenovac and in the other death camps”⁷. It is clear from this that ethnic hatred did exist between majorities as between the majorities and minorities in Yugoslavia despite the fact that the Serbs and Croats had lived together under foreign domination for centuries along with Roma and Jews. Obviously there was still not a common Yugoslav identity enveloping the various south Slav people. Whether this spell of extreme ethnic conflict was the product of inherent prejudices, or it was

⁴ R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century—And After*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 15, 20, 22

⁵ Human Rights Library, “Ethnic Minorities”, University of Minnesota, 5 May 2006, <http://www.stopvaw.org/Ethnic_Minorities18.html>, 2 August 2005

⁶ The Fascist government of Croatia formed on April 10, 1941 as the NDH, under Ante Pavelić, which served as a puppet regime for the Axis powers.

⁷ Gerard Baudson, “The New World Order and Yugoslavia, Part II”, *Balkania.net*, 5 May 2006, <http://members.tripod.com/Balkania/resources/geostrategy/ baudson_nwo_yu/nwo_part2.html>, 1999

manipulated by radical nationalistic leaders, either way it is significant that such an extreme situation had the capacity to develop in Yugoslavia.

The victory of the Partisans in World War II marked a new age of multi-ethnic toleration among the various Yugoslav ethnic groups. Likewise, treatment of minorities also improved during the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia under the slogan "Unity and Brotherhood" of General Marshall Tito⁸. Tito's dominant practice of ethnic toleration extended far beyond the south Slavic ethnic populations, including minorities such as the Roma who are not Slavic and could easily be identified by their skin color. More importantly, Tito punished people who discriminated against ethnicities, especially ethnic minorities.⁹ In the public sphere the Roma were not only tolerated, but they were respected. However, only in the Republic of Macedonia did the Roma enjoy 'national' rights. In the other five Republics¹⁰, the Roma were only granted rights as individuals. "Nevertheless the position of Roma throughout ex-Yugoslavia was markedly better than in most other states of the world"¹¹.

With the death of Tito in 1980 the Yugoslav federation began to crumble. The nine-member rotating State Presidency replaced the former office of President for life¹². The death of Tito and the creation of the rotating presidency marked the beginning of another period of extreme ethnic conflict between the Yugoslav people. This was to some extent the product of nationalist leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo

⁸ Josip Broz, The leader of the Partisan forces in WWII and the President of socialist Yugoslavia from the end of WWII until his death in 1980

⁹ Rasid Kurtić, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 24 April 2006

¹⁰ Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro

¹¹ International Socialist Group, "The Murder of Bosnia", War In the Balkans 10, 5 May 2006, <<http://www.isg-fi.org.uk/archives/press/wib/wib10.htm#6.2>>

¹² Library of Congress, "Yugoslavia: Formation of the South Slav State", 5 May 2006, <[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstody:@field\(DOCID+yu0022\)>](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstody:@field(DOCID+yu0022)>) (December 1990)

Tudjman in Serbia and Croatia respectively, who took advantage of the political power vacuum created with the death of Tito. These leaders capitalized on both the growing desire for independence in outside of Serbia, and also the demand for a greater Serbian state to rise to the power and popularity. Serbia's attempt to preserve the borders of Yugoslavia until the development of a greater Serbia gained Serbia recognition as the primary aggressor in these conflicts. International intervention resolved this conflict for the better of worse and ended a period of ethnic hatred between various ethnic majority groups of the former Yugoslavia.

With the creation of five independent states out of the former Yugoslavia, to maintain its title as the aggressor, Serbia had to turn its ethnic hatred towards the minorities within its own borders. Serbia began to take actions against the Albanians majority in Kosovo which soon border-lined on ethnic cleansing¹³. The conflict was resolved fairly prematurely and lead to the indictment and arrest of Slobodan Milosevic by the War Crimes Tribunal in the Haag and UN intervention in Kosovo. Since then, severe acts of ethnic hatred on the part of Serbia have been practically subdued. Serbia has since signed several treaties and convention on the protection of human and minority Rights, and in April 2003, Serbia and Montenegro became the 64th member state to join the Council of Europe¹⁴.

It is pertinent to recognize the fact that it was not the Serbian government alone that attacked the ethnic minorities and violated the rights of other countrymen. The Serbian government under Milosevic was the government of the Serbian people. The

¹³ This situation was rather similar to what the Croats of the NDH government had done to the Serbs, Roma and Jews when following its declaration of independence during WWII.

¹⁴ Council of Europe <<http://www.coe.int>>, 5 May 2006

state was predominantly operated by ethnic Serbians from the top to the bottom, and it was supported by mostly Serbians too. In certain instances such as Kosovo, the government actually stole the thunder of nationalist ethnic Serbian citizens, and adopted the population's prejudices as their own. The point to be made here is that the Serbian government of the 1990s did not commit those ethnic atrocities alone; Milosevic could not have done so without the support of a majority Serbian population. Even with the creation of a new government and recent developments towards the protection of minority rights in Serbia, the society is not free of prejudice and discrimination. In recent years, even since the developments of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo¹⁵, Serbia has failed to adequately provide for the needs of its minority populations, specifically the Roma who are regarded as one of the most marginalized national minorities in Europe.

Considering all ethnic minorities living in Serbia, the circumstances surrounding the Roma are worse than any other. First, the Roma are not Slavic like most of the people in Serbia. Roma are generally darker skinned which makes them distinctive as a minority. Many of the Roma live in Roma "settlements" and are secluded from Serbians. They are surrounded only by the Roma language and the Roma culture. Having such limited contact to Serbians from day to day has created a barrier to integration for many Roma, leaving them without adequate knowledge of Serbian language and culture which is necessary for their assimilation. As a result, the status of Serbia's Roma population regarding education is alarming. In the field of education, the Roma have the highest rate of illiteracy than any other ethnic groups in Serbia. Nearly 80 percent of all Roma drop out of school before they graduate, and less than half a percent of Roma acquire

¹⁵ United Nations Mission In Kosovo refers to the current UN occupation mission in Kosovo which began in 1999 as result of Serbia's aggression towards the ethnic Albanians there.

university qualifications. These statistics help explain the significantly low economic activity and high unemployment rates which are characteristic of the Roma¹⁶. Poverty is endemic among the Roma, and it is estimated that only 10-15 percent of Roma are employed. The ominous circumstances facing the Roma community are largely the result of poor or no education by most Roma. Without proper education and knowledge of Serbian language and culture, or some form of specialized job training Roma youth will unlikely be unable to improve their social and economic status in the future. However, these low education rates can not reasonably be improved without first confronting and eliminating the prejudices that create them.¹⁷

A quality education for Roma in Serbia in Serbia is the most important step to improve their status and their living conditions. This requires sincere commitment effective policies strong initiatives from the government. These must be combined with a support structure, policy monitoring and adaptive mechanisms which can best be provided by International organizations and NGOs. However, a cooperative approach is necessary to efficiently tackle the multitude of problems in the current situation considering the position of Roma in Serbia. Quality education for Roma children means equality in education that is free of discrimination by both the institution and the

¹⁶ Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Federal Ministry of National and Ethnic Communities, "The First Report By The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the Implementation of the Framework Convention For the Protection of National Minorities", Council of Europe, 10 April, 2006, <[http://www.coe.int/T/E/human_rights/Minorities/2_FRAMEWORK_CONVENTION_\(MONITORING\)/2_Monitoring_mechanism/3_State_Reports_and_UNMIK_Kosovo_Report/1_First_cycle/1st_SR_FRY.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/T/E/human_rights/Minorities/2_FRAMEWORK_CONVENTION_(MONITORING)/2_Monitoring_mechanism/3_State_Reports_and_UNMIK_Kosovo_Report/1_First_cycle/1st_SR_FRY.asp#TopOfPage)>, October 2002.

¹⁷ Minority Rights, "Being Roma In Serbia", 5 May 2006, <http://www.minorityrights.org/Dev/mrg_dev_title5_roma/mrg_dev_title5_roma_2.htm>

individual. This is free of barriers which impede accessible education¹⁸, and free of segregation whether intentional or accidental.

In May 2001¹⁹ Serbia signed the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities²⁰ (appendix a). In signing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, "the state pledged itself to promote and exercise full equality of minority freedoms, as well as those of majorities regarding economic, social, political, and cultural rights"²¹. This implied a commitment on the part of the government to improve the conditions of the country's minorities. The convention consists of several articles which outline the rights guaranteed to minorities in the field of education. It seems as though Serbia would be interested in protecting the rights of its minorities. For the government, improving the country's internal minority rights problems brings them closer to more favorable conditions such as admittance to the European Union. However, Serbia²² has not ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities which would establish the document as legally binding²³. While the government is acknowledging its minorities and the fact that they deserve rights, the complete steps to guaranteeing these rights is being curbed by the Serbian government itself. This makes it apparent that a heightened sense of nationalism

¹⁸ Many of these "barriers" are exclusive to the Roma population.

¹⁹ Council of Europe, 5 May 2006,

<http://www.coe.int/T/E/human_rights/minorities/2_FRAMEWORK_CONVENTION_%28MONITORING%29/2_Monitoring_mechanism/Chart_sigs_rats.asp#TopOfPage>, 5 April 2006

²⁰ It is important to notice that this document was signed before the actual government of Serbia and Montenegro was formed and at a time when the government was not a member to the Council of Europe.

²¹ Serbian Government, "Protection of all minority rights", Serbia Info, 5 May 2006, <<http://www.serbia-info.com/news/2001-05/12/23451.html>>, 12 May 2001

²² For the remainder of this paper Serbia will refer to the state of Serbia, not the Federal Republic of Serbia and Montenegro.

²³ Council of Europe, 5 May 2006

<<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=157&CM=&DF=&CL=ENG>>, 5 April 2006

still dominates the political culture and continues to undermine any real potential for reform.

The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities confronts the internal conditions created by governments and societies that negatively affect the status of national minorities like the Roma in Serbia. It indirectly acknowledges equality in education as an essential element for resolving such conditions. Furthermore, it stipulates the conditions that must be orchestrated governments as well as the type of environment that must be achieved in societies to end the cycle of poverty and inequality which have continued to suppress national minorities (i.e. Roma). Articles 12 through 14 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities address such issues, stating that:

The Parties shall, where appropriate, take measures in the fields of education and research to foster knowledge of the culture, history, language and religion of their national minorities and of the majority (12.1). In this context the Parties shall inter alia provide adequate opportunities for teacher training and access to textbooks, and facilitate contacts among students and teachers of different communities (12.2).

The Parties undertake to promote equal opportunities for access to education at all levels for persons belonging to national minorities (12.3).

The Parties undertake to recognise that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to learn his or her minority language (14.1). In areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities traditionally or in substantial numbers, if there is sufficient demand, the Parties shall

endeavour to ensure, as far as possible and within the framework of their education systems, that persons belonging to those minorities have adequate opportunities for being taught the minority language or for receiving instruction in this language (14.2).²⁴

While the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities was intended to be a legally binding document it was never ratified by Serbia and Montenegro and therefore they can not be held legally accountable for their failure to uphold its principles. This implies the reluctance of the Serbian government to actually tackle the inequalities and discrimination towards the Roma community beyond casually acknowledging the problems on paper. If the government of Serbia had actually ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of Rights of National Minorities, significant improvements could be expected in the state of the Roma youth in education.

Although the Serbian government never ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of Rights of National Minorities it did develop some policies on minority rights in the field of education. Something that must be considered though is that not all aspects of the Framework Convention for the Protection of Rights of National Minorities would necessarily be beneficial in the specific case of the Roma minority. For instance, one of the barriers to education for the Roma is their lack of knowledge of the Serbian language and culture. If the government were to offer education completely in the Roma language it could provide Roma students with better access to education; however such a

²⁴ Council of Europe, "Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and Explanatory Report", 10 April 2006, <[http://www.coe.int/T/e/human_rights/Minorities/2_FRAMEWORK_CONVENTION_\(MONITORING\)/1_Texts/H\(1995\)010%20E%20FCNM%20and%20Explanatory%20Report.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/T/e/human_rights/Minorities/2_FRAMEWORK_CONVENTION_(MONITORING)/1_Texts/H(1995)010%20E%20FCNM%20and%20Explanatory%20Report.asp#TopOfPage)>, February 1995

program would not be helpful for the assimilation of the Roma into the Serbian society as equals. In fact, it would likely work against the integration process of Roma graduates into the Serbian workforce and would do little to end prejudice as schools would likely be segregated by language. Integration and assimilation into Serbian society must be achieved for the Roma community. This can best be accomplished through the education system and should be the greater goal of the education of Roma.

The decision by Serbia not to ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities does not equate to a complete failure on the part of the government. The government did respond to some aspects of the convention in the establishment of the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in February 2002²⁵ (appendix b). What is significant about the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities is that unlike the Framework Convention, it is a legally binding document. However, Serbia can not legitimately be held accountable to uphold this law by the Council of Europe or the international community, as would have been the case if the government had ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of Rights of National Minorities. Officially, the government of Serbia is only officially accountable to itself and its citizens regarding the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. This law is a landmark however, because it is the initial acknowledgement by the government that a Roma minority does officially exist in Serbia and it issues them status and therefore

²⁵ Anne-Marie Cukovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

rights as a “national minority”. This is the basis for minority education rights for the Roma in Serbia.²⁶

The Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, under the heading “*Measures Ensuring Equality*”, Article 4 legalizes the practice of affirmative action for “ensuring full and effective equality between members of national minorities and members of the majority population”. Article 4.2 continues on this foundation, committing the government to “pass legal acts and undertake measures...with the aim of improving positions of persons of the Roma national minority”²⁷. These two measures have the potential to benefit the Roma minority in education, yet they do not specifically mention education. This seems surprising since education is definitely one of the most effective mechanisms for improving the status of Roma Persons. Furthermore, it seems logical that affirmative action would apply primarily, if not completely to education. The bottom line is that neither paragraph of Article 4 necessarily refers to or implies education. This is concerning, that education is not acknowledged outright as an integral part of the strategy or an area of focus for achieving these goals for equality. What is most significant about this article is that paragraph two specifically says “persons of the Roma national minority”. The Roma minority is the only national minority out of

²⁶ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, “Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities”, Official Gazette of FRY No. 11 of 27 February 2002, translated from the Serbian by OSCE Mission to FRY Legal Translation Unit 5 March 2002, 10 April 2006, <<http://www.usig.org/countryinfo/laws/Serbia%20Montenegro/Serbian%20Law%20on%20the%20Protection%20of%20Ethnic%20Minorities.pdf>>, February 2002

²⁷ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, “Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities”, Official Gazette of FRY No. 11 of 27 February 2002, translated from the Serbian by OSCE Mission to FRY Legal Translation Unit 5 March 2002, 10 April 2006, <<http://www.usig.org/countryinfo/laws/Serbia%20Montenegro/Serbian%20Law%20on%20the%20Protection%20of%20Ethnic%20Minorities.pdf>>, February 2002, Article 4.1& 4.2 p2

twenty-eight which specific reference is made to in the entirety of Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities.

The Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities also includes the legal guidelines for the establishment of the Federal Council for National Minorities. According to the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, “the council shall represent the national minority in respect of official use of language, education, information in the language of the minority, culture, and participate in decision-making or decide on issues in these fields, as well as establish institutions in these fields”²⁸. This allows elected members of the Roma community to serve as advisors and consultants for the government on issues regarding Roma education. Effective operation of such a committee will enable the Roma to shape policy that can have a positive effect on the content and quality of education for students of their community. Members of the Roma National Council are also charged with assisting the government in the preparation of curricula that in some way will represent the character of the Roma minority to be used in schools.²⁹ This is part of the greater operation to include elements of the Roma culture, language, and history as a part of the education system. Such inclusions can help to build tolerance, understanding, and respect for Roma students and may eventually work to eliminate discrimination towards the Roma by their Serbian peers and teachers.

²⁸ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, “Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities”, Official Gazette of FRY No. 11 of 27 February 2002, translated from the Serbian by OSCE Mission to FRY Legal Translation Unit 5 March 2002, 10 April 2006, <<http://www.usig.org/countryinfo/laws/Serbia%20Montenegro/Serbian%20Law%20on%20the%20Protection%20of%20Ethnic%20Minorities.pdf>>, February 2002, Article 19.7 p9

²⁹ Ibid., Article 13.6 p6

Another educational right granted by the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities obligates the government to establish programs to educate teachers in the languages of national minorities.³⁰ As mentioned before, for the Roma in Serbia, education in the mother tongue would likely undermine the overall strategy of creating equality in education. Educating teachers in the Roma language on the other hand will serve a purpose. It will better enable teachers to communicate with Roma students and to hopefully gain a better understanding of them. This is most important during early years of education before most Roma students have a concrete grasp of the Serbian language. Furthermore, if Roma students can develop a quality relationship with their teachers it will almost certainly these students success in the education system.

The rights granted to the Roma in the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities offer a multitude of opportunities to advance and improve the Romas' circumstances regarding education. The law not only puts the rights of the Roma at par with those granted to Serbians; it makes a special commitment to the Roma minority above all other minorities and even possess the potential to put the Roma before Serbians via affirmative action. However, it is evident that since the Serbian government's adoption of this law in 2002, many measures have not been implemented. Others which have been implemented are not as grand as they had seemed on paper and some can not even be utilized. The current situation on the ground in Serbia involving the education of Roma, I discovered, is not what one would expected after having read Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities which was

³⁰ Ibid., Article 13 p6

implemented over four years ago. For example, teachers are still not being educated on the Romani language.

According to Jadranka Stojanovic³¹, the main barriers to education for Roma children are language, social deprivation, living conditions, and a lack of interest or knowledge.³² Even though this statement doesn't outwardly consider discrimination as a barrier to education, prejudice and discrimination are prevalent within many of these barriers. First and foremost, a serious language barrier exists between the Roma who speak Romani and the Serbians who speaking Serbian. Considering that Serbian is both the majority and official language of Serbia, many Roma are at a severe disadvantage. Very few Roma have an understanding of the Serbian language. Even among Roma adults, knowledge of the language is scarce since most of them have never attended primary school and can not read or write. Likewise, almost no Serbians can understand or speak Romani. This creates a situation where very few children have the opportunity to learn any Serbian before they begin school. The lack of understanding of each others language on both the part of the Roma and the Serbians creates a significant barrier to education, hindering both the Roma childrens' access to education as well as the quality of the education they will receive if they even receive one.

One of the most significant mechanisms restricting access to a quality education for Roma children is the school entrance examinations. All children must take this exam to enter the Serbian public school system at the age of seven. This exam is a screening process which checks the competency of the children to determine whether or not they

³¹ Jadranka Stojanovic is the Roma Program Coordinator at the Fund for an Open Society Serbia (FOSS), a subgroup of the Open Society Institute.

³²Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

are mentally challenged. Students who pass this test are placed in the mainstream schools, while those who don't pass are deemed mentally retarded and prescribed to special schools.³³ This screening process is administered by school psychologists in the Serbian language. Furthermore, the questions which are asked contain multiple elements of Serbian culture. With little or no understanding of the Serbian language and culture, Roma children generally do not pass this exam and are sent to the special schools. Since translators are generally not provided for the Roma children and the test administrators do not know Romani, Roma children generally don't respond to the questions at all, or answer the questions incorrectly.³⁴ Even in a case where a Roma child can understand what is being asked and is able to respond in Serbian, this child still often fails the exam because they give the wrong answer to the questions specific to Serbian culture. This mutual lack of understanding equates to a large number of Roma who are regarded as incompetent and placed in schools intended for the mentally retarded which is almost always incorrect.³⁵ Anne-Marie Cukovic³⁶ explains that "the school systems do not recognize the knowledge that Roma have when entering the education system". The result is that eighty percent of all students prescribed to special schools in Serbia are Roma, most of which don't belong there.³⁷

Aside from the language and cultural barriers that exist between the Roma children and the test administrators, it is apparent that there is deliberate prejudice on the

³³ Primary school begins at grade one in Serbia and Montenegro

³⁴ Only in a few instances in Vojvodina have translators been provided (by NGOs) for Roma students

³⁵ Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

³⁶ Anne-Marie Cukovic is the Head of the Roma National Strategy Secretariat (RNSS) for Serbia and Montenegro. The RNSS exists under the Federal Ministry for Human and Minority Rights. It is charged with coordinating the work of government institutions concerning the Roma in terms of international standards and laws on human rights.

³⁷ Anne-Marie Cukovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

part of many school psychologists. Cukovic believes that “most psychologists acknowledge that they are doing wrong but they feel that what they are doing is ok; this situation is completely wrong”.³⁸ What is clear though is that Serbian public education system as a whole is racist in nature and continually discriminates against Roma children time and time again. Some psychologists who have acknowledged that they are wrongly admitting Roma children to the special schools argue that they are doing these children a favor. They believe that the Roma children are better served in the special schools because of benefits that they receive there which are not offered in the mainstream schools. These benefits include free meals and snacks, free school supplies and books, and in many cases free clothes is offered by NGOs who work with children in these schools. This argument is used by the psychologists to convince Roma parents that their child is better off in the special schools and often these parents don’t know any better and agree to this. Special schools are an appealing alternative for some Roma parents though. Even some parents who realize its wrong agree to it because of the additional costs that they would endure if their children to attend mainstream schools. The result of these racist policies and manipulation of parents by the psychologists is that very few Roma children receive a legitimate primary education. Furthermore, only students who have attended mainstream primary schools can enter secondary school. There are no “special” secondary schools and the students who attend special schools will never be permitted to enter the mainstream schools. Through this system of entrance exams the school psychologists are orchestrating the exploitation of Roma and capitalizing on their already impoverished conditions.

³⁸ Ibid.

The discrimination and prejudice of the institutional entrance mechanism makes it clear that Roma are not wanted in the Serbian dominated mainstream school system. This blatant prejudice not only restricts the Romas' access to education; it also prevents most Roma from being qualified for nearly all jobs, keeping them out of the workforce for much of their life. They will only be considered for the most menial of jobs if they can even enter into the Serbian work force³⁹. Despite the government's acknowledgement that these entrance exams are detrimental to the education of the Roma and that they need to be changed, the funding to do so has yet to be approved⁴⁰. The government's failure to recognize the magnitude of such a scam which is being operated by one of its own institutions makes it clear that its priority is not creating equality in education for the Roma, like it had described on paper. Even with the implementation of a new process for screening students it is not certain that the situation will improve for Roma. Vesna Acković⁴¹ cites discrimination in the education system as the central problem impeding the educational development of Roma children. She believes that the discrimination is rooted in the system of entrance exams but even in changing these exams, discrimination will remain.⁴²

To help the Roma children overcome the cultural and language barriers created by primary school entrance exams, one strategy has been to educate them in both kindergartens⁴³ and pre-schools⁴⁴. Although the state currently operates public pre-

³⁹ Dragoljub Acković. 2003. *Roma in Serbia: Introducing Romany Language and Culture into Primary Schools*, January 2003, Minority Rights Group International, <<http://www.minorityrights.org/admin/Download/pdf/RomaMicro.pdf>> (7 April 2006)

⁴⁰ Anne-Marie Cukovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁴¹ Vesna Acković works as a Consultant for Roma issues in the Ministry of Education and Sport in Serbia. She is Roma, and her husband Dragoljub Acković is an elected member of the Roma National Council.

⁴² Vesna Acković, interview by Author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁴³ Kindergarten consists of any informal education and development programs for children up to age six.

schools and kindergartens, most Roma children do not have access to these. There is very limited space for students and they are not fully funded by the government. Parents who wish to send their children to state sponsored kindergartens and pre-schools are required to pay nearly half of the fees⁴⁵. While need based financial assistance is often available, parents must be employed in order to send their children to the state kindergartens and to receive financial assistance. The Roma are disadvantaged here because most Roma parents are not employed; they are often forced to find income through other means because of discrimination in the job market.⁴⁶ Again, this is a primary example of how the existing educational system discriminates against Roma. Without an education Roma won't become employed. If parents aren't employed then they aren't eligible for financial assistance for their children to attend pre-school. Without financial assistance Roma parents have no possibility of affording pre-school education. The cycle continues and Roma children repeatedly end up being shut out of the state pre-school system.

While the government acknowledges this, little work is being done to resolve this situation.⁴⁷ NGOs have recognized the challenges facing Roma children in light of the government's failure to satisfy their educational needs. Both NGOs and international organizations have therefore developed a number of community based pre-schools and kindergartens throughout Serbia. These community based schools for Roma are often located in or nearby the Roma settlements. The location of these schools and the fact that they are specifically for Roma students creates a very comfortable educational

⁴⁴ Pre-school is one year of education prior to first grad, usually from age 6-7.

⁴⁵ Rasid Kurtić, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 27 April 2006

⁴⁶ Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁴⁷ Vesna Acković, interview by Author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

environment for the Roma students and makes the schools highly attractive to Roma parents. Furthermore, Children at these schools have much freedom in what activities or work they will do in these schools on a day to day basis which, in comparison to the classical school program, is much more exciting and appealing to them. This is important because school attendance among Roma children is an issue. When Roma children are given the opportunity to go to school it is necessary to develop mechanisms that will assure their attendance, especially considering the many forces⁴⁸ that are working against them in the education system. Community based schools place an emphasis on development that is greatly needed by Roma children and is not found in state sponsored kindergartens⁴⁹. Even though these schools are segregated, they are extremely effective at preparing the Roma children for primary school because they are able to focus so much on the development of each child; something which is especially important for Roma. Such schools have been established by the Open Society Institute and have achieved a remarkably high rate of success among their pupils⁵⁰.

In 1996 OSI began a community based Roma program for Roma children known as Step by Step. Between 1996 and today 4,555 Roma students have completed this program. Step by Step uses a program model that was developed specifically for the educational needs of Roma children. One of the most important elements of this program is the use of Roma teacher's assistants⁵¹. Although the head teachers in Step by Step were specially trained by the Open Society Institute for educating Roma, they are often

⁴⁸ Roma students are often ostracized, or faced with discrimination and prejudice because of their ethnicity.

⁴⁹ Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁵⁰ The Open Society Institute (OSI) is a non-governmental organization which FOSS is part of. OSI is also a major donor to the Roma Education Fund (REF) which is the primary education initiative of the Decade of Roma (DoR).

⁵¹ Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

not Roma. Therefore, the role of Roma teacher's assistants is extremely important because of their superior understanding of the Roma children which makes them the best candidates for helping these children.⁵² These Roma teacher's assistants also act as the link between the schools and the Roma parents and community. According to a report issued by the Center for Interactive Pedagogy⁵³ on the operation of Step by Step:

Roma personnel in the kindergartens helped the development of the program by being the link between the program and the Roma community, which as a result helped the Roma culture and language integrate into the Program itself, and develop the family cooperation strategy⁵⁴.

This report stresses the high value of Roma teacher's assistants in the developmental and success of Roma children. In many cases these teacher's assistants play the same role as parents with respect to motivating and encouraging the children to succeed; too often this position is void in the lives of Roma children. One Roma student, Aleksandra Ognjanović⁵⁵ speaks of her extraordinary successful educational career, acknowledging that "everything I was taught since kindergarten my parents helped me with and pushed me to go further"⁵⁶. This serves as a clear illustration of how a strong support system can encourage and improve the education of Roma students. Through her experiences

⁵² Rasid Kurtić, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 27 April 2006

⁵³ The Center for Interactive Pedagogy is a professional NGO in Belgrade which took over the Step by Step (SbS) program from OSI and FOSS in 2003.

⁵⁴ Milena Mihajlovic, and Dragana Koruga, *Roma Education Research Project Local Research Plan: Kindergarten In Roma Settlements-Step by Step program*, The Center for Interactive Pedagogy, <http://www.osi.hu/iep/equity/yugoslavia_plan.pdf>, (7 April 2006)

⁵⁵ Aleksandra Ognjanović's mother is Roma and father is Serbian. She has attended state run schools all of her life in Serbia. She is unique among other Roma students because both of her parents are educated and understand the importance of education. She did not grow up in a settlement, rather a mixed ethnic environment.

⁵⁶ Aleksandra Ognjanović, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 27 April 2006

Acković has come to realize that “when Roma children begin their education they know nothing because their parents have no education”⁵⁷; hence the importance of the entire pre-school system⁵⁸. Without educated parents to help the children develop, the role of the Roma teacher’s assistants is vital to the success of most Roma children.

Step by Step has proved to be one of the most successful NGO Roma community based kindergarten programs in Serbia, helping to enroll over eighty-seven percent of its students into first grade in regular schools⁵⁹. This figure perhaps would be greater if Step by Step included a transitional mechanism. One downfall of this program is that it does not have included in its curriculum a strategy to help the transition of Roma students from a community based education system to the classical state-run system. Children who are educated in the Step By Step program often have a hard time adapting to the highly structured curriculum of classic education when they enter mainstream primary schools. Acković believes that “The solution to this problem is to establish one continuous education program with the same style of education curriculum and gradual adaptation”⁶⁰. Such a strategy for Roma education has been developed as a joint effort by the Roma National Strategy Secretariat, The Ministry of Education and Sport, Roma NGO’s, and members of the Roma National Council; however, this strategy was never approved by the Serbian parliament and therefore can not be implemented⁶¹. Without

⁵⁷ Vesna Acković, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁵⁸ Aside from her job in the Serbian Ministry of Education and Sport, Vesna Acković once operated a SbS kindergarten out of her home in Belgrade.

⁵⁹ Milena Mihajlovic, and Dragana Koruga, *Roma Education Research Project Local Research Plan: Kindergarten In Roma Settlements-Step by Step program*, The Center for Interactive Pedagogy, <http://www.osi.hu/iep/equity/yugoslavia_plan.pdf>, (7 April 2006)

⁶⁰ Vesna Acković, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁶¹ Anne-Marie Cukovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

a clear strategy in place for the overall education of the Roma, none of the individual education programs will achieve their full potential. This is the fault of the government.

Most education programs initiated by NGO's, despite their success, lack financial exit strategies. There are very few cases where local municipalities have continued to operate and fund education programs that were initially begun by NGOs⁶². Bojana Stankovic explains that the problem is that the Ministry of Education and Sport can not provide these NGO's with funding because they are not part of the legal education system. In the state education system programs are monitored and registered; by law they must fulfill certain conditions. Most of the NGO programs don't fall within the state guidelines on education because of issues such as segregation, curriculum, or education methodology⁶³. Stankovic⁶⁴ acknowledges that "it is possible to get funding from the Serbian government for such a project, but the project must be good and it must be approved on several levels"⁶⁵. In response to this situation, the Roma National Strategy Secretariat is attempting to develop safeguard mechanisms for when NGO's end their education programs.⁶⁶ This is the case with Step by Step which is scheduled to terminate in late 2006. If the Ministry of Education and Sport would adjust the regulation stipulating what type of education program it can either fund or administer, it would have multiple opportunities to simply walk into already established Roma pre-school programs and pick up where the NGOs were forced to leave, continuing the education of these Roma children. This could be accomplished at a fraction of the cost of developing new

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Bojana Stankovic, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 25 April 2006

⁶⁴ Bojana Stankovic is the Assistant to the Head of the Department in the Grad of Niš Department for Education Culture and Sport.

⁶⁵ Bojana Stankovic, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 25 April 2006

⁶⁶ Anne-Marie Cukovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

schools, but the government refuses to do so. They are allowing well established, successful programs to crumble before their eyes when NGO funding runs out for the Roma children, while the Serbian children continue to receive quality pre-school education mostly at the expense of the state. The government's decision to allow Roma pre-school programs to end one after another and not intervene, while Serbian children continue receive an education seems senseless and racially motivated.

Even with Roma pre-school programs like Step by Step, it is estimated that between forty and eighty percent of Roma children are not enveloped by any pre-school system, public or private.⁶⁷ One program that is in the developmental and early implementation stages is being administered by the Roma National Council in accordance with their education rights and responsibilities granted by the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. This pre-school initiative intends to increase the number of Roma students at existing state pre-schools rather than creating new community based schools. Although these state run pre-school have not been accessible to Roma children in the past, the situation is now appears to have changed. This program titled 'Expanding Access to Roma Pre-School Education,' is receiving the cooperation and support of the government. A majority of the funding for this program is contributed by the Ministry of Education and Sport. Currently the program is operating in thirty pre-schools in Serbia. These schools receive money to implement programs aimed at helping Roma students including, each of which will employ a Roma coordinator to help improve communication with Roma parents.⁶⁸ Since this program is funded by the Ministry of Education and Sport, it seems likely that it will

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

continue for some time and not fall victim to the funding shortages that NGO programs experience. Apart from this initial optimistic outlook on the program is the internal situation of the Roma National Council. While the council has definite potential to assist at improving the situation of Roma, Stojanovic believes that the Council is lacking a solid base in education.⁶⁹ The Council is highly unorganized, and has recently split into three feuding sects. Furthermore, the Roma National Council is at the center of a financial scandal involving the embezzlement of funds intended for Roma education programs⁷⁰. Vesna Acković⁷¹ strongly believes that the Roma National Council is unorganized to a point where it has become incompetent, declaring that:

The Roma National Council does not know its place and role in the State. They want to be in the government, but not a helper of the government. They want a duty but they don't know what they must do or how to do it. Many members do not understand basic education and there is an array of internal struggles. They are unspecialized in their duties. It is a case of the wrong people in the wrong positions. People who are not educated properly can't respond properly; this is the problem of the Roma National Council.⁷²

In developing their pre-school program, the Roma National Council demonstrated some level of knowledge of what is needed to improve education of Roma. This is evident by

⁶⁹ Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁷⁰ This has not been proven completely, but it is clear that the money intended for an education program is missing.

⁷¹ It is important to note the significance of Vesna Acković's statements on the RNC due to the fact that her husband Dragoljub Acković is a member and that she is an employee of the Ministry of Education and Sport.

⁷² Vesna Acković, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

their inclusion of Roma teacher's assistants which has proven very effective for other programs. However, given the current chaos and the financial problems, it is not clear that Roma National Council can remain a legitimate mechanism for operating Roma pre-school programs. Without some type of reformation or reelection of the council, it is possible that the Ministry of Education and Sport could capitalize on the turmoil, declaring the council inept, and eliminating the funding for the Roma pre-school initiative. It does not seem promising that Expanding Access to Roma Pre-School Education will be successful if drastic changes are not made soon within the Roma National Council.

In September of 2006 pre-school education in Serbia is scheduled to change when the new Law on Pre-School Education takes effect. This law mandates all children in Serbia to attend pre-school from the age of six to seven. This law implies that the Serbian government will allow all students to attend free public pre-schools. As mentioned before, pre-school is currently optional; however, there is not adequate room or financial resources to enable most Roma Children to attend. With the new law, the government is obligated to have the space and the finances enough for all children attend. This is a remarkable development since in theory all Roma children will now have access to and receive a quality pre-school education. This law conveniently goes into effect around the time that Step By Step is scheduled to terminate, unintentionally filling the void Step by Step was expected to create. According to the Department of Education in Niš, there will be no segregation among or within schools by nationality or ethnicity.⁷³ This gives Roma children an earlier beginning than before in multiethnic education.

⁷³ Bojana Stankovic, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 25 April 2006

Jadranka Stojanovic views the replacement of Step Bys Step with the new law quite optimistically, predicting that this new law “will be more effective for integration than the Step by Step program because students will no longer be segregated during pre-school education.”⁷⁴

Although this new law was not created for the situation of the Roma in education, it will surely have a significant effect on them. Although classical pre-schools might not be as attractive to Roma students and parents, the fact that they are mandatory will in theory ensure that these students receive a proper pre-school education. It is apparent though, that in this past the government has not taken proper steps to enforce mandatory attendance in primary and secondary schools. In the past it was only mandatory for students to attend school through primary and secondary school⁷⁵. It has been the responsibility of local municipality governments to enforce this law and to ensure that all students attend school and continue to do so until the completion of secondary school. By simply looking at the education rates of the Roma population in Serbia, it is clear that the government has not done this. The statistics show that roughly three-fourths of Roma in Serbia don't complete school. However, the local municipalities who will be charged with enforcing this law insist that they will monitor school attendance and commit that they will begin to punish the parents of children who don't attend school⁷⁶. Under such circumstances the new law on pre-school education will create an environment favorable to the education of all Roma.

⁷⁴ Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁷⁵ It is not mandatory nor is it permitted to attend secondary school for students who attend the special schools for the mentally retarded.

⁷⁶ Bojana Stankovic, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 25 April 2006

For Roma parents, being punished when their children don't attend school might seem harsh, especially considering that for many Roma, an education is somewhat out of the ordinary. Contrary to this belief, Rasid Kurtić is confident that if the government enforces the new law as they claim they will, it will be a better overall situation for Roma.

It is good for the Roma children to be forced to go to school and it is good to punish these parents if they don't send their children to school. The government must give the parents an incentive to send their children to school; it needs to stimulate them. This should be the government's role according to the new law.⁷⁷

There is alarming potential for this new law to fail the Roma students if the mandatory attendance is not enforced by the various municipalities. Discrimination and prejudice in these integrated schools are also threats. They could significantly decrease the attendance levels among Roma students as they have in primary and secondary schools. There is hope that this will not be the case and that bringing large groups of children together in a mixed cultural environment when they are this young will be good for assimilation and will ease the prejudice that often ejects Roma students from the public school system.⁷⁸ When the law goes into effect, legally speaking there will be no need for non state pre-schools to continue operating in Serbia because all students will be provided this by the government. If this is the case and the government does not stand completely behind its commitment to effectively envelope all students, especially the Roma, in its pre-school system and the NGO pre-school programs discontinue as is expected, the situation for Roma with regards to education will be dire.

⁷⁷ □ Rasid Kurtić, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 27 April 2006

⁷⁸ Vesna Acković, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

Vesna Acković has serious concerns about the implications of the new law and claims that the main problem for Roma in education in Serbia is that the Roma children are not included or considered in any government models for education. She believes that the new law on pre-schools will worsen the situation of the Roma because in comparison to other students, Roma children will be farther behind than before. Without Step by Sep, Roma children will not have the same start in pre-school as other children. They are already behind in their language skills and understanding of the Serbian culture. It will be like taking a step back to several years ago when there was absolutely no kindergarten or pre-school for Roma. If all students will now attend pre-school, then Roma children must attend two or three years of kindergarten prior if they are going to achieve equality in education.⁷⁹ It is not likely that the government will partake in any kindergarten education programs for Roma children. The current position of the government is to focus primary on the implementation of existing policies to develop equal education and opportunity for Roma in the existing public school system.⁸⁰ This is congruent with the belief that “the best way for children to be taught is to be in a mixed education with the Serbian majority language”.⁸¹ Even though this statement is true, completely integrated schools from beginning to end will not allow equality in education for the Roma minority. Roma children, because their current social and economic situation, require more education and developmental assistance than Serbian children do.

The government has created additional policies which it intends will help with the integration process of the Roma population in the education system under the new

⁷⁹ Vesna Acković, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁸⁰ Anne-Marie Cukovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

⁸¹ Bojana Stankovic, interview by author, Niš, Serbia and Montenegro, 25 April 2006

law on pre-schools. The government has made a commitment to cap the number of Roma students at every educational institution at about thirty-three percent of the entire student body. Not only will this help with assimilation, but it will also prevent some other forms of discrimination that have traditionally been allowed for by the system. Since most students generally attend the schools closest to their home, there are some instances where a school has a majority Roma population because it is nearby a Roma settlement. The problem here is that if the Roma are going to assimilate to the Serbian culture, conditions like these will not do. To make this situation more complicated is the fact that students and parents can choose which school they will attend regardless of where they live. While most students simply attend the closest school to their home, some Serbians who live in heavily Roma populated areas send their children elsewhere because most of them don't want to attend a school full of Roma children. When the few Serbian students leave these schools with a majority Roma population to attend other Serbian majority schools it creates an unintentional process of segregation. An environment is created where segregation is rampant in the education system with most schools being all Serbian and a few schools being all Roma. If conditions like this are allowed forming then it creates an even more complicated dilemma for achieving equality in education. Any segregated public schools, whether intentionally or unintentionally created, enable education quality and standards to be lowered in their application to the Roma Students. It offers teachers and the school system opportunity to project their prejudice and to easily discriminate against Roma students.⁸²

⁸² Jadranka Stojanovic, interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 26 April 2006

Although some of the Serbian government's policies in education will benefit the Roma community, the reality is that practically none of these policies were developed with the educational needs of the Roma community in mind. The government will remain unable to improve the situation of the Roma as long as it remains consumed with nationalistic tendencies. The Ministry of Education and Sport has failed time and time again to develop policies that will remove barriers to the education system for the Roma. Even today, after the passage of Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, prejudice continues to engulf both the Serbian society and government. The current conditions of the Roma community can not improve without a quality education. While the government acknowledges that quality education is the key to social advancement of the Roma community, the current conditions make it so that not even a mediocre education is available to most Roma students. A quality education for the Roma in Serbia is not being obtained because of the discrimination and prejudice in the education system by both society and the government. Even with the upcoming developments in the field of education, these abovementioned insensitivities will continue to prevent the Roma from obtaining equality in education. The government must adjust the current education system with consideration to the Roma through legitimate policies and programs. The absence of such initiatives permits the continuation of discrimination and prejudice and their disruption of education of the Roma community. The Serbian government and the society together possess the only hope for the improvement of the status and conditions of the Roma community which they continue prevent. As long as they continue this suppression of the Roma, restricting

them from the education system, social and economic improvement of the condition of the Roma remains impossible.

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