

Current Attitudes Toward the Roma in Central Europe: A Report of Research with non-Roma and Roma Respondents

September, 2005

Objectives and Methodology

The Decade of the Roma – unveiled earlier this year - is an enormous undertaking. The Decade can only be effective if policy makers understand the drivers of the discrimination that the Roma face, and design strategies that can change these views, build support for change, and create an environment that allows Roma to flourish, as other populations do in these countries. The ultimate goal is to change prejudicial attitudes and develop support for government programs aimed at bettering the lives of Roma so these programs are effective on the ground.

In order to engender this support, it is essential to understand the drivers of these attitudes and perceptions among the general population in the eight countries committed to making a change. In addition, it is crucial to develop a more systematic and deeper understanding of the Roma population in these countries so that efforts are appropriately designed and targeted.

In order to develop this in-depth understanding, 8 focus groups were conducted in 8 countries (12 in Serbia-Montenegro) in June, 2005¹. In each country five focus groups were done with a randomly selected, representative sample of non-Roma and three focus groups were conducted with the Roma. Following this exercise a survey will be fielded so that perceptions and attitudes can be quantified and tracked over time in each country. Country specific reports are available on the qualitative phase of this research effort.

¹ Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia

Summary of Key Findings

Following is a summary of the key focus group findings from the Attitudinal Study of Roma and non-Roma Citizens in Central Europe.

The General Context: A pessimistic landscape

- Both Roma and non-Roma respondents exhibited a high level of pessimism regarding the current situation in their countries, perceiving a precipitous decline in social, economic and moral conditions and few prospects of improvement in the immediate future. Roma respondents feared that the current situation has the potential not only to diminish their own social and economic condition, but also to increase discrimination against the Roma community among non-Roma citizens whose stability and security has been threatened by the current conditions in their countries. *This pessimism transcends age, gender, and socio-economic level. It results in a fair amount of cynicism and a fear that things may in fact get worse.*
- Both Roma and non-Roma respondents placed the blame for the current situations in their countries squarely on the shoulders of the governments, who were repeatedly criticized for widespread corruption, incompetence and ineffectiveness. For Roma respondents, current social problems were also compounded by the anti-Roma biases of the national and local media, widespread social discrimination against the Roma and other minorities, and (a substantial number of male respondents) the failure of the Roma themselves to take responsibility for their own problems. *There is a clear sense of a leadership vacuum in many of these countries. This, coupled with the pessimism described above, results in an environment where citizens will be less eager to support change efforts because of their own fears.*
- Non-Roma do not necessarily aspire to be part of the EU and in fact have little interest in having their fates determined by countries like Germany and France. In fact, many believe that joining the EU will be of more value to the established members than to the new members. *Programs promoted and supported by the EU may be received with a fair amount of cynicism. Respondents do not want to feel as though the EU is telling them what to do or how to behave.*

National identity and pride

- Non-Roma respondents exhibited an uneasy mix of pride and self-criticism in relation to their respective national identities, with many respondents expressing concern that traditionally positive attributes (e.g., tolerance, adaptability, patience) had increasingly taken on negative meanings in their current social, political and economic environment. Roma respondents exhibited a similar balance of pride and misgiving regarding their own ethnic identity, with most respondents placing great value on their own culture and heritage but also

recognizing the stigmatization associated with being a Roma in contemporary society.

- Non-Roma respondents were divided in their assessments of their countries' tolerance and treatment of minorities, with Hungarian, Romanian and Bulgarian respondents describing their countries as highly tolerant and other respondents describing more complex and conflicted attitudes toward minorities and outsiders in their countries. While all Roma respondents reported that social discrimination is a routine part of their day-to-day lives, respondents were divided in their assessments of whether their countries had recently become more or less tolerant of Roma and other minorities.

Disdain drives the views that non-Roma have of Roma

- Non-Roma respondents consistently expressed negative views of the Roma overall, describing the Roma as dishonest, aggressive, un-hygienic, lacking work ethic, unemployed, poorly educated and prone to criminality. Non-Roma respondents were adamant that their attitudes toward the Roma are based on the characteristics and behavior of the Roma themselves – and not stereotypes resulting from racism and ethnic bias. Roma respondents acknowledged the role of some members of the Roma population in reinforcing the negative attributes and behaviors by which all Roma people are judged. They insisted, however – along with a substantial number of non-Roma respondents – that the Roma are a complex, heterogeneous population that cannot be realistically judged on the behavior of one segment of the community. *One of the most potent messages to emerge from the qualitative research is that non-Roma hold the Roma nearly fully accountable for their situation. If Roma did more to help themselves, the non-Roma believe that their quality of life would improve. The non-Roma do not feel accountable.*
- The majority of Roma and non-Roma respondents guardedly support the concept of Roma integration into mainstream society, with most explaining that it is the only sustainable solution to the current problems facing the Roma. In fact, most non-Roma speak positively about the relationships they have developed with Roma but lose sight of these individual encounters when describing the larger Roma community. For most non-Roma respondents, integration implies active assimilation, with the Roma adjusting their values, priorities and behaviors (but not necessarily their culture) to conform to the standards and expectations of mainstream society. Some Roma respondents resist the prospect of full assimilation, fearing that they will be expected to relinquish their “*values, language and tradition*” in favor of the increasingly materialist and consumer-based values of mainstream society. *The challenge is of course, for societies to truly embrace integration. Non-Roma say it is better for integration to take place but express discomfort with real integration: more Roma in their apartment buildings, schools, neighborhoods.*

The state's responsibility to improve the lives of the Roma

- As described earlier, respondents in all countries expressed overwhelming feelings of pessimism about their futures and the current environments in which they live. Hence, any discussion of government assisting particular groups of people within a country, in contrast to helping all of those who need assistance, is unacceptable. Non-Roma believe that while the Roma may need additional assistance, they are not alone. Others in their countries equally need. They expressed little tolerance for helping just the Roma – and did not believe that helping the Roma community helped the greater society at large. *The qualitative research suggests that it will be very difficult to build support for programs that only affect the Roma. If the efforts can be tied to programs that affect the greater society at large there will be greater chance of success. In any case the governments will need to take responsibility and move forward aggressively with any programs because building support in a cynical environment will be extremely challenging.*

Decade of the Roma

- Both Roma and non-Roma respondents exhibited little or no awareness of the Decade of the Roma. When introduced to the concept, most respondents expressed support for the initiative's potential to reduce the social and economic problems of the Roma and reduce discrimination and misunderstanding throughout society. Both Roma and non-Roma respondents insisted (as demonstrated above) that the program should also address the needs and concerns of other citizens in the region suffering from similar social and economic disadvantage. Programs and services that are perceived as “*preferential*” are seen by both Roma and non-Roma respondents to be counterproductive – with the potential to increase discrimination and hostility toward the Roma over time.
- Qualitative research findings suggest that citizens are extremely cost sensitive and that spending a few million euro per year on this program would be considered too much by many respondents.

Changing perceptions and building support

- Employing guilt or shame will not help build support for Roma related programs in these countries. Non-Roma are particularly sensitive about being held accountable for the current conditions of Roma. They believe strongly that the Roma are responsible for their quality of life and they reject wholeheartedly any suggestion that they, the Non-Roma, are to blame.
- At the same time, there are glimmerings of the view that some action needs to be taken – that the situation will worsen rather than improve if the Roma do not receive assistance – and it is only fair to ensure that equal opportunity exists for all.

- A potent message revolves around discrimination. Research indicates a potential to build support through a message that supports equal opportunity for all. If all else is equal, respondents strongly believe that Roma candidates should have the same chance at a job as non-Roma.
- Everyone agrees that education provides the greatest opportunity for Roma to improve the quality of their lives. It can be tied to another potent message related to helping Roma children who everyone agrees are merely products of their own environment.
- There is very little hope amongst Roma that the leadership necessary to move the Roma forward currently exists within the confines of their own communities. The attitudes toward Roma leaders tend to be extremely cynical. There is a clear need to develop a credible generation of Roma leaders in each country who can lead and who can be trusted.

Non-Roma Views: General Research Findings

Following is a brief description of the findings from the research conducted with non-Roma respondents.

Assessment of the Current Situation

Research for the study revealed a high level of pessimism from all countries and groups regarding the current situation in their countries. Non-Roma respondents repeatedly reported that their countries and communities are in a situation of social and economic decline, with few prospects of improvement in the immediate future.

“Croatia is moving in the wrong direction.” (Croatia)

“It’s a catastrophe. I follow what’s going on, and the situation makes you want to cry.”
(Macedonia)

“I don’t think that things are looking that great at all. I doubt that things are going to change. Since the revolutions, I didn’t notice any changes for the best.” (Romania)

Among the specific problems and concerns identified by respondents from all countries and groups included:

- Unemployment;
- Impoverishment of the middle class – *“My older sister’s boyfriend is a university graduate, and now he packages fish fillet at Billa. And my sister answers phone calls at a pizza restaurant, even though she has a master’s degree from a French college.”* (Bulgaria)
- Soaring prices;
- Poor public health system;
- A disturbing decline in traditional values, precipitated by the public’s growing fascination with materialism and consumerism.

Respondents in Slovakia described current negative and positive social and economic experiences are seen as going *“hand and hand.”* Many respondents regarded the disadvantages of the current situation (unemployment, poor schools and health care, displacement of traditional values and the *“brain drain”* resulting from the ease in travel and immigration requirements) as temporary and short-term, compared to the long-term benefits (economic growth, political and judicial reform) following EU membership.

“We are only at the beginning, and beginnings are usually difficult.” (Slovakia)

Respondents from Croatia also emphasized a variety of positive changes that parallel the problems in their country, including: increased democracy, increased tourism, road construction and greater attention to Croatia throughout the world.

Other respondents shared the concerns about the potential short-term negative impact of EU membership and comprehensive social and economic change – but without the corresponding optimism toward the longer-term future.

“I believe there’s going to be hard times. Look at those from Hungary who are now in EU; they come to us to do their shopping.” (Romania)

Some respondents complained that they had too little information to adequately assess the current situation.

“I really do not know in which direction the country is going.” (Romania)

Who’s To Blame?

Respondents from all non-Roma groups placed the blame for the current situation in their countries squarely on the shoulders of the government, which were criticized both for widespread corruption and general incompetence. The overwhelming majority of respondents believe that they have been abandoned by the state and hurled, without protection or preparation, into the chaos and uncertainty of the free market economy.

“Vlast! It’s a Serbian that describes [the situation] – all people in power and all levels of power, whose only aim is to grab as many benefits as possible for themselves.”
(Montenegro)

“Politicians today put their own interest first – not the common interest.” (Romania)

“The present leadership is incompetent.” (Hungary)

“There are government officers who don’t understand the industry they are in charge of at all.” (Czech Republic)

A few younger respondents in Macedonia blamed the current situation on older citizens who are nostalgic about the past and resistant to social change and the increased work hours and responsibilities that it necessarily involves.

Some Slovakian respondents described current social and economic problems as the short-term growing pains required for long-term positive change in the future.

National Identity

Respondents from different countries expressed three different types of attitudes toward their national identities:

- Uniform pride in their countries achievements and the characteristics of its people (Slovakia and Bulgaria);
- A balance of pride in and criticism of their national identities (Croatia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Macedonia, Montenegro);
- Generally negative assessments of their national identities (Slovakia).

Respondents from other countries exhibited an uneasy balance of pride in and criticism of their national identities.

- Hungarians expressed tremendous pride in their rich history and culture, while also expressing concern (particularly among younger respondents) regarding the current lack of diversity and tolerance in Hungarian society.
- Romanians described themselves as friendly and openhearted (“*the most convivial of all Europeans*”), as well as highly intellectual people, who are also extremely impractical at times.
- Montenegrins provided an extensive list of positive national traits (courage, honesty, honor, respectfulness), but also worried that these positive characteristics were being threatened by the current transformation of their society.
- Respondents from the Czech Republic stressed the tremendous adaptability of their nation’s citizens during times of change and dislocation, but also criticized the tendency of Czechs to exploit national crises for their own individual advantage.

For some respondents, the negative characteristics associated with their national identity outweigh or even negate the positive. Macedonians, for instance, complained that their nation’s rich history and extensive cultural achievements were compromised by the current disempowerment and impoverishment of its people, who were increasingly being replaced by ethnic outsiders.

“We are discriminated against in all fields. Macedonians are sent away from companies just to be replaced by Albanians.” (Macedonia)

Slovakians were even more critical of their nation’s timidity and passivity in the face of social conflict and change. Qualities such as adaptability and patience, that had once positively distinguished the Slovakian people, have now become a source of disempowerment and shame, particularly for younger respondents.

“Slovaks have always been oppressed, so we are adaptable. Whatever happens, all the politics or complaining is done in pubs and nowhere else; we are afraid to rise. For example, French or Italians, they are constantly on strike and they win. We only complain about the reforms but we go on. Somewhere in a pub, we swear.” (Slovakia)

How They Treat Others

Respondents from different countries were divided in their assessment of their nation's tolerance – or lack of tolerance – for ethnic and religious minorities and other outsiders.

Generally speaking, Hungarian, Romanian, Czech and Bulgarian respondents described their citizens as highly tolerant of minorities. Hungarian respondents, for example, repeatedly used the words “hospitality” and “tolerance” to describe their relationships with refugees and ethnic and religious minorities, and insisted that minorities in their countries were treated fairly and enjoyed a good quality of life.

“I think Hungarians are infinitely kind and polite.” (Hungary)

Romanians also described their citizens as highly tolerant of minorities, with several respondents expressing concern that their nation had perhaps responded with too much tolerance toward minorities in the past.

“We are a very tolerant nation. That's who we are.” (Romania)

Bulgarians explained that tolerance has historically been one of the primary characteristics of their citizens, with several respondents providing specific examples of the nation's conservation of Turkish mosques and protection of the Bulgarian Jews from the Nazis, as well as the present-day relationships between Bulgarians and ethnic Turks.

For Czech respondents, tolerance is contingent on the willingness of minorities to conform to the values and expectations of the majority population.

“Well, we treat the gypsies the way they treat us, and I think we treat them very well.”
(Czech Republic)

Other respondents described more complex and divided attitudes in their countries.

- Croatians, for example, worried that generally, the positive views toward minorities were threatened by the rise of nationalism in their country.
- Macedonians admitted that their nation's general tendency toward tolerance and hospitality (as evidenced in the recent treatment of refugees from Kosovo) definitely has its limits. Several respondents described how the level of tolerance toward a specific minority group increases or decreases depending on the group's potential contributions to society. *“We are hospitable toward the foreigners, but we also have expectations from them.”*
- Macedonians described themselves as generally tolerant toward minorities, as long as they do not constitute a threat to Macedonian society or the general wellbeing of its citizens. As an example, respondents repeatedly expressed concerns about the impact of Muslims and ethnic Albanians, acknowledging extreme tensions between Macedonians and these groups in areas such as Nik. *“I don't like the Albanians too much because of personal experiences. For me, these people are malicious.”*

- In Serbia, age played an important role in determining respondents attitudes toward minorities, with younger respondents describing themselves as sympathetic and supportive of minority groups, and older respondents expressing less tolerance and, in some cases, openly racist views.

Virtually all Slovakian respondents acknowledged that tolerance is not something that can be presupposed in their country. Younger respondents described a situation in which racism and xenophobia are widespread and predominant. While older respondents insisted that their nation was basically tolerant of minorities and foreigners, most also expressed extreme suspicions of immigrants and other minorities, along with the threat of crime, disease and terrorism that they bring. *“We should watch out.”*

Attitudes Toward the Roma

Virtually all respondents reported negative associations toward the Roma as a whole, along with a consistent litany of negative characteristics to describe them. Respondents were adamant that their attitudes toward the Roma are based on the characteristics and behavior of the Roma themselves – and not a product of racism and ethnic bias. The most commonly repeated negative features associated with the Roma included:

- Lack of adaptability and flexibility in relation to the expectations and standards dominant culture;
- Lack of hygiene *“They let their children run around in rags....”*
- Lack of work ethic;
- Tendency toward criminality – *“All Roma steal.”* (Czech Republic)
- Unemployment and poverty;
- Dishonesty and tendency to cheat;
- Illiteracy;
- Aggressiveness.

Respondents from different countries were divided in their attitudes toward the composition of the Roma community and the factors contributing to its current situation. A few groups (the majority of respondents from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, along with some respondents from other countries) described the Roma as a largely homogenous group that is completely responsible for its own problems, while the vast majority expressed more complex and often more conflicted views of the Roma and the problems that they face.

Respondents from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria were predominantly negative in their attitudes toward the Roma and analysis of the Roma situation, describing the Roma as a uniform, homogeneous group who are largely responsible (because of their lack of initiative and adaptability) for their own problems and position in society. Research suggests that the negative attitudes of respondents from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria were heavily informed by the perceived impact of the Roma on the overall social and economic conditions within their countries (*“They sponge on us”*), as well as the international reputation of the country itself. Particularly among Bulgarian respondents,

“*excessive tolerance*” toward the Roma has had a negative impact both on society as a whole and, ironically, on the Roma themselves – compared to the position of the Roma in a socialist society in which they were more aggressively compelled to adapt and assimilate.

“They were more fully integrated in those years when the enterprises were functioning. They built their own homes back then; they had something to rely on. They had their place in society, which is lost nowadays.” (Bulgaria)

Respondents from Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Romania expressed divergent views (depending on age, direct experience with the Roma and related factors) regarding the Roma and their situation in society. It is interesting to note that the meaning of key predictors, such as age and direct experience with the Roma, sometimes shifted completely from one nation to another. For example, older Hungarian respondents were more likely to express positive attitudes toward (and report positive experiences with) the Roma than were younger respondents, while the opposite tendency was observed among respondents in Serbia and Slovakia. Similarly, direct encounters with the Roma improved attitudes and increased sympathy in Croatia and Hungary, while day-to-day interactions with the Roma tended to increase traditional stereotypes toward the Roma among respondents in Macedonia and Slovakia.

Following is a more detailed description of the attitudes of respondents from nations with diverging or conflicted attitudes toward the Roma:

- Croatia respondents were divided in their attitudes toward the Roma and the problems they face, with some respondents expressing empathy and understanding of the Roma community and others voicing more negative attitudes. Respondents with more frequent day-to-day experience of the Roma and greater knowledge of Roma history and traditions were more likely to attribute the lifestyle of the Roma and the problems faced by the Roma community to external factors (e.g., discrimination, poor education, restricted employment opportunities, etc.), while respondents with less direct experience of the Roma tended to blame the Roma for their own plight. Respondents from Beli Manastir expressed more negative views of the Roma than did respondents from other regions, which they attributed to their experience of the recent war.
- Respondents from Hungary also expressed sharply divergent attitudes toward the Roma. Younger respondents (even those who were well-educated and widely traveled) were more likely to express uniformly negative attitudes toward the Roma, whom they regarded as a single, homogeneous group. *“Their attitude toward work is in their genetic code; it’s in their blood.”* Older respondents were more likely to distinguish between two types of Roma: the traditional nomadic group, who generally conform to the negative stereotypes (poverty, criminality, etc.) expressed by other non-Roma respondents, and Roma musicians, artists and other professionals who, through hard work and talent, had made the effort to enter into and make a positive contribution to Hungarian society. *“As a musician,*

I used to play together with Roma people, and that's a completely different world. They were nice; there's no problem with them."

- The attitudes of Macedonian respondents were largely determined by where they live. Respondents from Stip and Prilep distinguished between distinct between "good" and "bad" Roma. *"The nomads, they are wild."* Representatives of Skoje, however, viewed the Roma as a more homogeneous population and in largely negative terms. *"You can't turn your back on them. Give them your hand, and they'll take your glove."* Generally speaking, Macedonian respondents have had very little direct experience of the Roma in their day-to-day lives, and those few encounters that they have had tend to confirm their traditional negative stereotypes. In spite of the negative stereotypes, the Macedonian Roma are generally more highly regarded than are ethnic Albanians living in the country. *"The Roma are more objective and fair than the Albanians, who present their flaws as a direct product of social discrimination."*
- Respondents from Montenegro described the Roma as a predominantly uniform and homogenous group, with largely negative characteristics and lifestyles. Montenegrins were less likely than many other groups, however, to blame the Roma for their own problems, which were generally attributed to chronic unemployment and poor education. *"But they are not understood, and, at the very beginning, they have much more problems to enroll in schools. When they see a Roma child they say immediately that they are unintelligent, without testing them."* Interestingly, many Montenegrin respondents tended to exempt the Roma whom they know personally from their negative assessments of the characteristics and behavior of the group as a whole, describing them instead as "modest," "joyful," "hardworking" and "pleasant."
- Serbian respondents expressed negative stereotypes of the Roma overall, although many described positive personal experiences with the Roma they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Older Serbian respondents were more likely to view the Roma as responsible for their own problems (because of their irresponsible lifestyle and anti-social behaviors), while younger and well-educated respondents tended to describe a "vicious circle" that traps the Roma in a life of poverty, illiteracy and isolation.
- The majority of Slovakian respondents also distinguished between "acceptable" and "non-acceptable" Roma. Younger respondents were more likely to attribute the current situation of the Roma to external social conditions, while older respondents were more likely to insist that the Roma are responsible for their own situation. Direct encounters with the Roma tended to inspire negative associations of the group.
- Romanian respondents were the most adamant in describing the Roma as a diverse and heterogeneous group, with many strongly resisting discussions of the Roma as a single, homogenous group. *"I believe that there are Roma and Roma, and not all of them are alike."* Even the most sympathetic Romanian respondents believed that the Roma in their country have been too passive in addressing their own problems. *"It's up to them to make their lives easier. They always wait for help and don't make any decisions about how to make their lives better."* The vast majority of Romanian respondents expressed great concern for Roma

children, regardless of their attitudes toward their parents. *“They may be Roma, but they are still children.”*

Attitudes Toward Roma Assimilation

Respondents from all groups expressed support for the increased assimilation of Roma into society as a whole, which most viewed as the only sustainable and effective solution to the problems of the Roma. Virtually all respondents agreed that it is in the interest of society to solve the *“Roma problem”* once and for all, although many expressed doubts that any meaningful progress could be made until the Roma assume a more active role in assimilating themselves into mainstream society.

“The present situation suits them just as it is. Society maintains them.” [Hungary]

The majority of respondents from most countries indicated that they are ready to accept the Roma into all areas of their day-to-day lives – from the schools their children attend to the workplace to their neighborhoods. Many respondents from Hungary and Slovakia qualified their support for Roma integration to include only *“acceptable Roma”* (primarily those people they already know and are familiar with in their everyday lives), contrast to *“non-acceptable Roma”* (the traditional nomadic Roma about whom they consistently expressed fear and distrust).

“There is no trouble with [the acceptable Roma].” (Hungary)

For many of these respondents, the potential benefits of integrating traditional Roma are outweighed by the perceived threat that their presence would pose to their lives and communities. Although they expressed similar fears and uneasiness about the active inclusion of all Roma in public life, respondents from Montenegro indicated that they would not resist the integration of all Roma groups, in spite of their misgivings.

“To be honest, I wouldn’t like it, but I wouldn’t oppose it either.” (Montenegro)

Nevertheless, they maintained that Roma integration should be implemented gradually, with substantive education for both sides regarding the demands and benefits of co-existence.

Other respondents, such as younger respondents in Macedonia, insisted that the current behavior of *“acceptable Roma”* was the best argument for other segments of the Roma population. The Roma who live and gather in the central areas of the cities, they argued, look and behave exactly like other citizens, while the Roma who are isolated in small settlements and rural areas continue to behave in ways that provoke fear and mistrust. For this reason, inclusion of Roma in the mainstream is the most likely way to change their behavior and eliminate the social stigma and socio-economic dislocation from which they currently suffer.

A notable exception were respondents from the Czech Republic, many of whom actively rejected the idea of Roma integration, even if continued segregation meant the relegation of the majority of Roma children into special schools for children with learning disabilities and Roma workers into menial, low-paying jobs.

The overwhelming majority of respondents from all countries and groups agreed, however, that it is primarily the responsibility of the Roma people – and not the government or the population as a whole – to facilitate the integration process. The majority of respondents from all countries believe that it is the resistance to assimilation of the Roma themselves – and not the failure of the government to provide support or discrimination by the local populations – that is responsible for the isolation of the Roma on the margins of Central European society. Most respondents believe that the government has already done all that it can to bring the Roma into mainstream society and that it is now up to the Roma to make the adjustments necessary for inclusion and active participation in public life.

In addition to integration, respondents from Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Slovakia and Romania believed that the government should do more than it is currently doing to support the Roma in the crucial areas of employment and education.

Respondents from the Czech Republic and Serbia insisted that the governments in their countries have already done everything they can to help the Roma. So few results have been achieved, they argued, because of the continued refusal of the Roma to help themselves and take responsibility for their own situations. The combination of government initiatives and poor results has actually increased these respondents frustration with and suspicions of the Roma.

Even those respondents who were most open to the integration and increased support of the Roma stressed the importance of providing such assistance in combination with – and not instead of – needed support for the population as a whole. Respondents from all countries and all groups were concerned about the prospect that additional aid to the Roma would take precedence over the other needs of their societies.

“Why should I have such a responsibility [to help the Roma] if I can’t improve my own life first?” [Romania]

A substantial majority of respondents from all countries and groups refused to accept the idea that discrimination against the Roma is serious problem in their societies or that increased openness toward the Roma is a vital step in addressing the current *“Roma problem.”*

Decade of the Roma

Respondents from all countries and groups exhibited little or no awareness of the Decade of the Roma Inclusion, though a few (notably the younger respondents from Macedonia

and Montenegro) were aware of the existence of several international non-governmental initiatives designed to assist the Roma.

The majority of respondents supported the concept of the Decade of the Roma, once they had been introduced to it, explaining that it is in the interest of their respective countries to improve the situation of the Roma and promote further integration of the Roma into society as a whole. However, it must be noted that support for the program diminished when possible costs were presented. Respondents expressed little favor for Roma programs if the cost exceeded a few million Euro per year. The needs of the general populations were considered too great to justify this expense for one minority group.

Serbian respondents were the most likely group to express indifference or outright resistance (and this by only a few) to the concept of the Decade of the Roma, insisting that the government in their country had already provided sufficient aid to address the Roma problem, the Roma have no interest in being helped, and corruption would invariably undermine even the most well-intentioned efforts to solve the problem.

Most respondents qualified their support of the Decade of the Roma to suggest that such aid not be restricted to the Roma, but should be extended to all groups in society with similar social and economic needs. Bulgarian respondents were particularly concerned about the potential negative impact of what might be perceived as preferential treatment of the Roma on existing ethnic tensions in their country.

“Their greatest nonsense is that they concentrate their efforts on the Roma. They should target all socially disadvantaged folks.” [Bulgaria]

“Should only Roma in dire financial status be aided? Of course not. Everybody needs help. These efforts are a fundamental source of ethnic tension in Bulgaria. Remember what happened with the Bulgarian Muslims? These efforts are disconnected from reality.”

Moving attitudes forward

A number of messages were tested in the focus groups to develop an understanding of what kind of language and rationalization for programs for the Roma would resonate with citizens.

The focus groups indicated different levels of support for the concepts, but quite a bit of consistency emerged:

- Citizens do not want to be told that, as related to the current situation of the Roma, they have done anything wrong, that they are responsible, or that they should feel guilt. This kind of shaming only makes them angry and more resistant to helping the Roma communities. They believe that the Roma are responsible

- for their current challenges and that if the Roma would behave differently their problems would diminish significantly.
- A message that ties helping the Roma to being a ‘real part of Europe’ or a more modern country does not resonate with non-Roma. The qualitative research findings indicate a level of defensiveness when the issue of Europe and the EU are raised. The skepticism regarding Europe’s real intentions regarding EU integration is high and therefore any effort that might be seen as driven by outside countries was received negatively. In addition, the qualitative indicates a certain level of skepticism regarding the phrase ‘modern country’ because respondents said that there are many modern countries with high levels of discrimination and poverty.
 - Messages tied to educating the Roma (in particular, the children) seem most potent. Education is considered the most pro-active way to help this community emerge out of poverty. Education is most easily linked to children and few non-Roma blame the Roma children for the difficulties faced by the communities. However, the difficulty is that citizens are extremely sensitive about education opportunities for their own children and for themselves. Hence, programs that appear to benefit only Roma children could be resented.
 - Messages and programs tied to ending discrimination were quite salient as well. Even for those who harbor deeply negative feelings toward the Roma are not comfortable with blatant employment discrimination. If all else is equal, most citizens believe that a person should be hired regardless of their ethnic background.
 - The concept of people having an equal opportunity to prosper resonated with many.

Roma Findings

Following is a brief description of the findings from the research conducted with Roma respondents.

Assessment of the Current Situation

Along with non-Roma respondents, Roma respondents were uniformly pessimistic regarding the current situation in their countries, which were viewed as having a particularly severe impact on the Roma community. Following are the most commonly cited factors contributing to current social and economic decline:

- *Chronic unemployment and widespread poverty;*
- Unequal access to education;
- Substandard health care services – *“Some years ago I was in the Hospital and I was taken into a room, where there were only gypsy women. And I heard with my own ears, when the nurse said that this woman should be taken to that room, because she should be put there.” (Hungary)*
- Discrimination; and,
- Unreliability and incompetence of Roma leadership.

The majority of Roma respondents from all groups expressed the general belief that the situation in their countries has deteriorated in recent years, both for the Roma and society at large

“There are many people who, when the war began, had 15-20 years of work behind them. When the war broke out, they lost their jobs. Many people became social welfare cases. I am among them.” (Croatia)

Who’s To Blame?

Along with non-Roma respondents, Roma respondents placed a large part of the blame for the current situation in their countries squarely on the shoulders of the government, which was repeatedly criticized for corruption, incompetence and general indifference to the situation of the Roma.

In addition, many Roma believe that their situation deteriorated significantly when political systems changed. Capitalism and free market left many unemployed whereas in the past the state ensured employment for all.

In addition to the government, Roma respondents also described the impact of several other key factors on the current situation in their countries, including:

- The national and local media in their countries, who strengthen prejudice against Roma through negative coverage;

- The ongoing prejudice and discrimination of non-Romas against the Roma and other minority groups;
- The Roma themselves (both individual citizens and the Roma leadership), whom many respondents claimed need to play an increased role in addressing the problems that affect the Roma community and society at large. Male respondents were more likely to criticize the role of the Roma in contributing to their own situations than were their female counterparts. Female respondents from Macedonia, for example, were particularly insistent that the Roma in their country have already done everything they can to improve their situations. Both male and female respondents from Montenegro were also resistant to Roma self-criticism, explaining that there was virtually nothing the Roma could do to improve its situation since the problems facing the Roma community are largely financial and the Roma have no financial resources.

Roma Identity

The majority of Roma respondents expressed pride in their Roma cultural and heritage. For most respondents, however, the positive aspects of being a Roma were tempered – and sometimes overwhelmed – the stigmatization and social and economic disadvantage associated with being a Roma in contemporary society. Respondents repeatedly explained that being a Roma means being poor, unemployed, undereducated and generally mistrusted by the rest of society.

“I have never wanted to hide and I have never hidden that I am a Roma. Accept me as a Roma, but judge me like a human being. Isn’t it simple?” (Hungary)

“Wherever you appear, and say that your are Roma, you will not get a job. If you are looking for anything, you will get it much harder than other communities and people in Croatia.” (Croatia)

Roma respondents in Croatia and Macedonia complained that they are constantly referred to by non-Roma citizens as “gypsies,” a term they find to be embarrassing and degrading.

“It’s good when they call you Roma, but in the streets, it became ‘Cigan’ (or Gypsies). That is humiliating.” (Croatia)

Roma respondents in Macedonia noted that they are also reviled and rejected by other minority groups, such as the ethnic Albanians in their country.

“We are often insulted, especially by the Albanians.” (Macedonia)

Virtually all Roma respondents reported that social discrimination is a routine part of their everyday lives. Respondents from different countries disagreed, however, regarding the extent to which discrimination against the Roma has increased or decreased in recent years. Respondents from Montenegro, for example, complained that attitudes toward the

Roma have gotten much worse in their country during the past couple of years. Conversely, respondents from Croatia and Macedonia reported that discrimination against the Roma has decreased in their countries during the past few years.

“I live among Macedonians, and I am well accepted. My children are also well accepted.” (Macedonia)

“Many things change. People are behaving normally, in our village at least, towards us and our kids.” (Croatia)

Attitudes Toward Roma Integration

In spite of the prevailing opinion among non-Roma respondents that Roma are generally resistant to social integration, the majority of Roma respondents insisted that they are open to increased integration into mainstream society. Most Roma respondents believe that increased interaction could both improve their overall social and economic condition and also reduce – or even eliminate – discrimination and prejudice over time.

Many Roma respondents cautioned, however, that the social integration of the Roma is also a difficult and threatening prospect because of the level of prejudice and hostility that currently exists against the Roma among many non-Roma citizens. Generally speaking, female Roma respondents were more enthusiastic about the prospect of integration and more willing to adapt to the standards and expectations of mainstream society than were male Roma respondents. Many male respondents expressed the fear that social integration would necessarily involve the complete assimilation of the Roma into mainstream society and effectively *“obliterate our cultural heritage.”*

“It aims to train people into living Bulgarian-style and to rejecting Roma values, language and tradition.” (Bulgaria)

Along with pride in their Roma heritage, many Roma respondents exhibited a sense of identification with the country in which they live,

“I would like to live with Montenegrin, Muslim, Albanian because I was born here and we should live all together.” (Montenegro)

Role of Government

Roma respondents repeatedly complained about the failure of the governments in their countries to address the problems facing the Roma today. Improvements to their condition will only occur, they maintained, with the aggressive support of the government to create and enforce anti-discrimination legislation and provide more equal access to employment, housing, education and health care.

Roma respondents expressed a number of reservations about the appropriate role of the government in addressing their problems, however, including:

- General aversion to and mistrust of the government among many Roma respondents – Given the poor history of the government in addressing Roma problems and the widespread governmental corruption throughout the region, many respondents acknowledged that they would inevitably be suspicious of and somewhat resistant to pro-Roma government initiatives.
- Fear of increased discrimination – Many Roma respondents worried that pro-Roma initiatives would be perceived by some non-Roma citizens (particularly those experiencing social and economic difficulties themselves) as unfair and preferential treatment – a perception that might actually increase discrimination and hostility against the Roma in the long run.
- Concerns about chronic dependency – Many male Roma respondents worried that pro-Roma initiatives might increase Roma dependency on public assistance and inhibit their ability to address their own problems. Respondents in Hungary, for example, cautioned about the possibility of the Roma “descending into child status” if public assistance was increased. *“I think that it is all from the time of communism. As they started being given pensions and social benefits, they went to the Labour Office to sign themselves on and half of them are now on disabled pensions.”* (Czech Republic)
- Concerns about other citizens – Along with non-Roma respondents, many Roma respondents believed that any additional assistance provided to the Roma should also be provided to other citizens suffering from comparable social and economic disadvantage.

“We should be helped, yes, but no more than other people with similar needs.”
(Macedonia)

Decade of the Roma

Along with their non-Roma counterparts, the vast majority of Roma respondents were completely unaware of the Decade of the Roma. When introduced to the concept, most respondents exhibited a very positive response, placing particular emphasis on the potential of such an initiative to improve the quality of education provided to their children and to reduce discrimination against the Roma in their countries and throughout the region.

“We need that, it would be good both for us and the future of our kids. All is welcome, the health system and education both for us and our kids.” (Croatia)

Consistent with their misgivings about an overly aggressive government response to the needs of the Roma, many non-Roma respondents expressed concern that the Decade of the Roma might actually increase discrimination and hostility against the Roma over time – if key services (e.g., free vaccines for children) are not simultaneously provided to other groups with similar needs.

A number of respondents expressed skepticism regarding the process through which the Decade of the Roma would actually be implemented, explaining that they have heard similar ideas and promises in the past but with little or no impact on their actual everyday lives.

“I don't get anything now, and that's why I think I won't benefit from it.” (Croatia)

“It would be a really good idea, but it will never be like that exactly.”
(Montenegro)

One of the great paradoxes facing the Roma is what they consider a huge vacuum of leadership in their own community. The Roma expressed complete cynicism about national Roma leaders in their own countries. They consider them, for the most part, corrupt and of little value. Research indicates that the Roma would like to see members of their own community representing their needs more effectively at the national level, but are concerned that there are very few potential Roma leaders. The benefit of greater Roma leadership would also have a positive impact on the community at large in terms of self-esteem, role models, etc.

a. In order to become a real part of Europe...it is a true sign of a modern country.											
b. Helping the Roma advance and integrate is quite simply the right thing to do. This is an issue of human rights...We are an unjust society if...											
c. Helping the Roma is a matter of simple economics. All taxpayers will continue to pay more if we don't do something now. It will cost us and our children more in the long run.											
d. If there's one thing we must do it is to help the Roma children so that they will have the opportunities to prosper in a way that our own children have.											
e. Helping the Roma is about giving every person in our country the opportunity to achieve his/her potential. This is the true meaning of freedom...											
f. The way the Roma have been treated in this country is simply wrong. It makes me ashamed and I want to change it											
g. Having a large minority population like the Roma living in such abject poverty and experiencing constant discrimination reflects badly on our country. I think we can do better.											
h. Our country is on the road to prosperity. We must make sure that this prosperity is shared by all.											