



## Roma in Serbia: Introducing Romany Language and Culture into Primary Schools

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### Introduction

Roma communities throughout Europe suffer systematic racial discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Their language and culture has been marginalized, with schooling that is insensitive to the best interests of the child, hostile to the Roma language and culture, and with Roma children facing prejudice from classmates and teachers. Many Roma children do not attend school; most of those who do attend, however, drop out before the end of primary (elementary) school. In Serbia today this problem is compounded by the recent wars; growing poverty; the placement of many Roma children in special schools;<sup>2</sup> and the almost total disregard of Roma language, culture and communities. Nevertheless, many of the issues in this study are common to the education of Roma throughout Europe and the lessons from our research may have much wider implications.

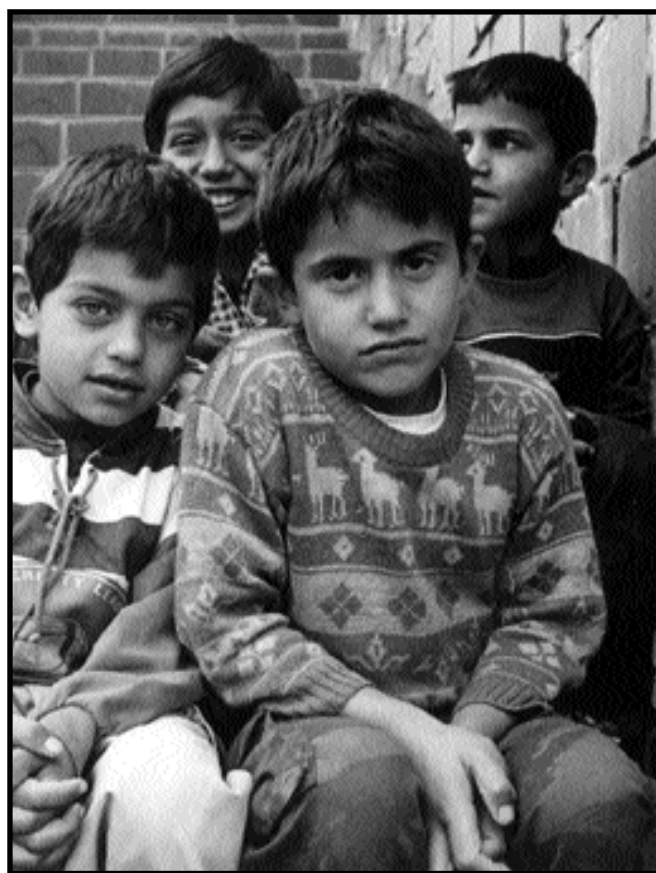
### Being Roma in Serbia

A boy from Belgrade was taunted at school. Others said that he lived in rubbish and he slept in a rubbish cart. He invited everyone in his class to a party to show that he lived in a house.

A girl who was in the second year of primary school said that she was only 'half Roma' to make herself more popular with her teacher and the other children at school.<sup>3</sup>

Many Roma migrated and settled in Serbia over 800 years ago.<sup>4</sup> Today there are many different Roma communities in Serbia with a common cultural heritage. Most Roma have Romanes as their common language. A small number speak another language as their first language (mother tongue), including: Albanian, Hungarian, Romanian and Serbian, and in contrast to most Roma, they usually have opportunities for first language education. This study only covers children who have Romanes as their first language, and live in central Serbia and Vojvodina (northern Serbia).<sup>5</sup>

The 1991 census showed that there were approximately 9.8 million people living in Serbia. It is difficult to be more precise, however, the Roma Documentation and Information Centre suggests that there are over



Roma children at a primary school near Belgrade, Serbia Photo: Poppy Szaybo

200,000 Roma of school age, which would constitute some 10 per cent of potential school children. There are higher concentrations of Roma children around Belgrade; in Jablanicki, Nisavski and Pirotski districts (in southern Serbia); and in the Vojvodina districts of South and North Banat.

Roma communities have a high proportion of young, poorly educated children, they tend to have large families and die at an early age.<sup>6</sup> Poverty is endemic among the Roma and its causes are multifaceted.<sup>7</sup> Although there are exceptions, the Roma are usually among the poorest of the poor in Serbia, with over one third being illiterate.<sup>8</sup> The Roma non-governmental organization (NGO) Bibija estimates that only 10–15 per cent of Roma are employed.<sup>9</sup> The new Federal Law on Rights and Freedoms of National

Minorities (2002), recognizes the Roma as a national minority. The government reports that:

*The Yugoslav legal system guarantees not only the right of persons belonging to national minorities to study their mother tongue, but also the right, under certain conditions set by the law, to receive education, within the public education system, in two languages or in their mother tongue. When the program of instruction and curriculum are realized in the Serbian language, it is ensured that pupils belonging to national minorities in the Republic of Serbia are taught according to the program of instruction and curriculum for their mother tongue with elements of the national culture.<sup>10</sup>*

However these laws are not effectively implemented for most Roma pupils, although significant efforts are made for other language groups.

## Language and cultural education

Current research on linguistics shows that when a child's first language is valued and recognized, their ability to learn a second language is enhanced.<sup>11</sup> Often Roma children are caught in a vicious circle; schools fail to support the language they use at home and their skills in this language are poor. At the same time, they do not progress with a second language at school and are labelled 'semi-lingual'. The educational consequences are severe. If a child has a poor knowledge of a language, this can seriously impair their intellectual development.

Linguistic scholars<sup>12</sup> believe that a good education should lead to:

- high levels of multilingualism;
- a fair chance of achieving academically;
- a strong, positive, multilingual and multicultural identity;
- positive attitudes towards oneself and others; and
- a fair chance of self-development.

Monolingual education in the dominant language is the worst option (this is what almost all Roma experience). A better option is education in the dominant language, with some education in the first language and on Roma culture. The preferred option by some linguists is for many subjects to be taught in the first language with parallel learning of the dominant language, and the teaching of some subjects in the dominant language.

However, the Roma's situation is unique and parents should have a right to choose. If children are educated separately, there is a risk that Roma education would be of a lower quality, due to insufficient resources. There is also the risk that different ethnic groups would not mix and that the Roma would not be sufficiently fluent in the dominant language to succeed in further education and in the employment market.

## Kindergartens

Serbian children often attend fee-paying kindergartens before beginning school, however it is rare for Roma children to have such an opportunity. There are less than 20 private kindergartens in Serbia for Roma children. These are funded by humanitarian organizations and are often



Roma children at a primary school near Belgrade, Serbia Photo: Poppy Szaybo

managed by Roma NGOs. Commendably in Vojvodina, five primary schools have pioneered preparatory education for 114 pre-school Roma children. However, there are many thousands of Roma children who need pre-school education.

In Nis, where in 1998–9 Roma children benefited from bilingual education at a culturally sensitive kindergarten, a study by the Open Society Institute shows that Roma children achieve dramatically better results in Serbian, in their school entry test, their attendance and in their grades in their first year of primary education.<sup>13</sup>

## Primary schools

In Serbia, at the age of seven, children usually begin their formal education in grade 1. They are tested to determine their ability. Many Roma children, when tested, are deemed to be unsuitable for mainstream schools and are placed in special schools. Children are tested in Serbian, and although Roma children have some Serbian language they are often unable to respond to questions and concepts that are designed around Serbian culture. Parents are put under considerable pressure not to object to their children being placed in these special schools, as children at these schools receive free school meals, the necessary school books, equipment and other benefits, which are not usually provided by the state in mainstream schools.<sup>14</sup> Children from special schools cannot go on to mainstream secondary schools and are only considered for the most menial of jobs. This educational policy appears to be incompatible with Article 4 (non-discrimination) and Article 15 (effective participation) of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM).<sup>15</sup>

## Serbian language education

Most Roma children usually start school with an insufficient command of the Serbian language to be able to fully understand what is happening in lessons. A significant number are subsequently referred to special schools.

The language of instruction in both mainstream and special schools is almost exclusively Serbian and focuses on Serbian culture. There are some notable exceptions, with four schools in central Serbia offering Romanes lessons,

and an initiative in Vojvodina with 46 classes in 2002–3 offering two optional lessons a week in Romanes and elements of Roma culture. This is a start, but it benefits fewer than 0.1 per cent of Roma children. Our research shows that many other Roma children would like to learn Romanes. This absence of first language education appears to be incompatible with Article 14 of the FCNM.

## Teachers

It is very rare to find a Roma teacher, a Romanes-speaking teacher or even a Romanes-speaking assistant in schools. Yet it is impossible to obtain a professional ‘teacher in Romanes’ qualification in Serbia, since there are no colleges or universities that teach Romanes. However, during our research, we found 30 Roma with secondary and tertiary education who are interested in becoming teachers of Romanes. If such posts were advertised widely it is highly likely that many more potential teachers and classroom support staff would emerge.

Learning Serbian is important, but an education in Romanes is also important, both in its own right, for enhancing the ability of children to adapt and be valued at school, and for children to be confident in their learning of Serbian. Our research shows that Roma children want to be treated fairly by teachers, to be respected as equals, and want an end to discrimination and prejudice in the classroom.<sup>16</sup>

## Textbooks, literature and intercultural education

The current curriculum fails to offer the choice of education in or of Romanes. There are only three textbooks (two are recent additions) available in Roma for primary or secondary education.<sup>17</sup> Although some challenges do exist regarding codifying Romanes in the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, this is not a major obstacle. Further, little NGO literature has been translated into Romanes that could be used in teaching support. Roma and non-Roma children should learn about each other’s beliefs, culture, customs, history and traditions. Our research shows that many Roma children believe this would encourage their schoolfriends to better accept and respect them. This would also ensure that Article 12.1 of the FCNM was effectively implemented.

Our study found that there are no textbooks, even in Serbian, supporting education on Roma culture. Further, some literature used in schools is seen by the Roma to be insulting.<sup>18</sup>

*Chavrikano lil* was a successful children’s newspaper that was first published 17 years ago in Gornji Milanovac; it was the only newspaper of its kind in the world, regularly published in Romanes and Serbian by the independent Roma organization Rrominterpress. It stopped publishing in 2000 due to a lack of funding and needs to be revived, as a language teaching support. Other publications from abroad in Romanes would be valuable resources for Roma children.

There is an urgent need for school books, including: books with assorted texts, textbooks of Romanes, poetry

and prose for grades 4–8, picture books, and selected reading texts from Roma folk and art sources. A team of Roma scholars and others should be invited to develop these, with sufficient funding to ensure that Romanes literature is visible and valued, thus complying with Article 12.2 of the FCNM.

## School attendance

Our research found that Roma above all else want to use education to raise their economic and social status, so that they would be equal to others. Many Roma children feel that by entering the educational system they would achieve more than their parents, and improve their status in the future.

However, at the outset, some 30 per cent of children never attend primary school, while the government states that 78.7 per cent of Roma drop out of primary school and no more than 0.4 per cent of Roma have a university education.<sup>19</sup> The figures for girls are worse, our research estimates that their attendance rate is some 10 per cent lower than for boys and that only about 10 per cent of girls finish primary school.

Our research also shows that the main reasons for Roma children’s poor attendance are:

- Roma’s difficult economic situation over many centuries;
- the state and its educational institutions’ lack of interest in Roma problems and in responding to the Roma’s educational needs;
- insufficient promotion and understanding of the value of education – even of education in Romanes and in the Romany culture;
- older Roma having an insufficient interest in the education of their children.

Additionally, endemic discrimination, the loss of Roma values and identity, and the need for help in earning an income or in the house, put acute pressure on parents and children alike. However, there are some interesting pilot educational projects involving the education of whole Roma families that are having a marked success for parents who dropped out of school and for children who were alienated by state schooling.

## Notes

- 1 See Liégeois, J.-P. and Gheorghe, N., *Roma/Gypsies: A European Minority*, London, MRG, 1995.
- 2 The public perception is that these special schools are for children with physical or mental disabilities.
- 3 Adapted from interviews carried out by the author.
- 4 See Liégeois and Gheorghe, *op. cit.*
- 5 The displaced Asakali, Egyptians and Roma from Kosovo/a and the Roma in Montenegro are not covered in this paper.
- 6 See Yugoslav State report on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.
- 7 Ringold, D., *Roma in the Transition in Central and Eastern Europe – Trends and Challenges*, World Bank, 2000.
- 8 See Yugoslav State report, *op. cit.*, and Ringold, *ibid.*
- 9 This employment is poorly paid, with incomes of 80 to 100 euros a month, only 70 per cent of the average wage.
- 10 Taken from the Yugoslav State report, *op. cit.*
- 11 See Laubeova, L., ‘Bilingualism’ at [www.tolerance.cz/english/bilingual.htm](http://www.tolerance.cz/english/bilingual.htm)

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## Recommendations

### To the Serbian Ministry of Education:

1. A new strategy for Roma education centred on the principles of the best interest of the child should be designed and implemented immediately. It should be designed with and by Roma to meet their needs, and international minority rights standards.
2. The Serbian laws on the Protection of the Rights and Freedom of National Minorities and the law on Primary Schools should be applied in their entirety for Roma children.
3. The practice of testing Roma children in Serbia for entry into primary school should be halted.
4. Local and international support should be obtained for Roma teaching in the classroom, with Romanes-speaking teachers and assistants, Romanes textbooks,

literature and the necessary resources.

5. A major review of the whole educational system should be undertaken to remove institutional discrimination against the Roma, to promote an atmosphere of multiculturalism in schools, and to learn about each other's culture and language in lessons.
6. Any textbook, poem or piece of literature that is derogatory towards the Roma should be removed from the curriculum and not be used as a reader.

### To the international donor community and the Serbian government:

7. Institutional and financial support should be given to NGO initiatives to promote a broadening of Roma education that is sensitive to the Roma culture, lifestyle and language.

### Notes cont.

- 12 See Skutnabb-Kangass, T., 'Education of ethnic minorities; introduction and evaluation of various models in relation to Roma', at [www.tolerance.cz](http://www.tolerance.cz)
- 13 See *Denied a Future*, London, Save the Children Fund, 2001.
- 14 Some limited support is provided for poor children by humanitarian organizations and teachers/parents in some schools.
- 15 See Opinions of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, and Lee, R., *et al*, *School Success for Roma Children, Step by Step Special Schools Initiative, Interim Report*, New York, Open Society Institute, 2001.
- 16 See Djurovic, B., 'Social and ethnic distance towards Roma in Serbia', *Romano Lil*, 55-6, November 2000.
- 17 A Grade 1 alphabet book by Trifun Dimic, a Grade 1 additional reader by Zlatomir Jovanovic and a Grade 3 additional reader by Trifun Dimic.
- 18 *A Gypsy Man Selling his Horse*, by the well-known author Jovan Jovanovic, is used to support reading at grades 1-3.
- 19 See Yugoslav State report, *op. cit.*

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**Acknowledgements** MRG and its programme partners gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Christian Aid, Cordaid, DFID, the Norwegian Government and the Staples Trust. The author is Dragoljub Acković, a prominent Roma campaigner and broadcaster. Project Coordinator: Angela Haynes; Editor: Katrina Payne. *Roma in Serbia: Introducing Romany Language and Culture into Primary Schools* © Minority Rights Group International, UK and Rrominterpress, Serbia, January 2003. This study is published as a contribution to public understanding, and is part of the Minority Rights and Development programme. The text does not necessarily represent in every detail the collective view of MRG or its partners. Copies of this micro study are available on line at [www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org). Copies can also be obtained from MRG's London office.

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