

## The Situation of the Education of Romani Children in Albania

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In the Albanian territory, side by side with the Albanians, live other ethnic groups as well, such as: Greeks, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Vlacs, Romas and Gypsies. The Census of the Albanian Population of 1989, showed that non-Albanian ethnic groups used to represent approximately 2 percent of the population (Annual Report 1990, Tirana, 1991). The later independent researches supported the idea that these groups represented 5 percent of the population in Albania (Bërxolli A., Minorities in Albania, Tirana 2005, p. 19-24). The last national Census in 2011 has shown that the total number of the Roma community in the country is 8301 persons or 0.30 percent of the population.

As the history has witnessed, the Proclamation of the Independence of Albania in 1912 was followed with a relatively good treatment of Roma community (ERRC, Roma in Albania, An Unknown Case, 1997, p.56), although the social gap between Romas and non-Romas continued to exist (Koinova M., Minorities in Southeast Europe, 1999, p.135).

During WWII, approximately half million of Romanis from different countries in Europe were executed or killed in nazi camps (Ringold D., Orenstein M.A., Wilkens E., Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle, A World Bank Study, Washington D.C., 2003). While in Albania, the survival of Romanis was relatively better due to the fact that in the country was not built any concentration camp and did not occur any ethnic cleansing (Ringold D., Orenstein M.A., Wilkens E., Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle, A World Bank Study, Washington D.C., 2003). Meanwhile, a lot of Romani people actively participated in the National War for Liberation side by side with the partisans. During the socialist regime (1945-1990), living conditions of Roma community had visibly improved regarding the housing, education, medical care and social services. As the majority of the population, Romanis enjoyed full right to work, although most of them used to work as unqualified workers (Fonseca I., Among the Gypsies, The New Yorker, 25 September 1995). In rural areas, they used to work in the agriculture sector. In urban areas, Romanis used to work in construction, public services and handcrafts (Taho B., Document on the Situation of Roma in Albania, 2002). The adaption of the Constitution of 1976 banned the private economic activities and any private activity was charged by law. Despite this fact, many Romanis continued with their small capacities in trading (De Soto H. et al., Roma and Egyptians in Albania: From social exclusion to social inclusion, 2005), which included bartering horses, the handcraft goods and other products that they bought in the cities and sold in the villages or vice-versa, thus playing the role of the intermediary in trading between rural and urban areas (Courthiade M., Duka J., A Social and Historical Profile of the Romanis in Albania in 1990s. A draft paper provided by the authors). The inclusion in this informal activities provided them supplementary incomes and marked the difference with the other communities in the country. Consequently, their economic status experienced relative improvements.

During the period of the post-socialist transition, the collapse and closure of the state owned enterprises, as well as the onesided character of Romani professional abilities, including their low level of the education and their discrimination, transformed their status from a relative welfare to an extreme poverty. Currently, they are the poorest and most marginalised ethnic group in Albania (De Soto H. and Gedeshi I., Dimension of Romani Poverty in Albania, in ERRC Roma Rights Newsletter, No. 1/2002.) Also available at: [http://lists.errc.org/rr\\_nr1\\_2002/noteb3.shtml](http://lists.errc.org/rr_nr1_2002/noteb3.shtml).

### 1. Research Method

In this paper, the research method applied is the qualitative approach, because the research is dealing with the understanding of "the inside experience of the subjects" and with "the patterns of the social interaction" among Roma community and the society, seen through the eyes of their representatives and based on "cultural understanding" that they give to this experiences (Silverman J., Hindry M., Diophantine Geometry: An Introduction, Springer-Verlag, GTM201, 2000).

In the focus of this research are the parents of Romani children (both, mother and father), which in several cases are grandfathers as well, despite their young age. The focus-groups of this research included 39 participants, among

them 21 females.

Aiming at having a more comprehensive approach regarding the current level of the education among Romani children, and knowing better the perception of the state institutions concerning their level of education, several interviews with the key persons were conducted.

## **2. Geographic Perspective of the Research**

The research was done in five districts of Albania: Tirana, Fier, Elbasan, Korça, Berat, mainly because of the high concentration of the Roma community in these areas. Roma community is more organised in the above mentioned areas, which offers the opportunity for a geographical extension of the research (Census, Instat, 2011).

Roma community has its own associations in all these areas. The district of Fier is considered "the capital" of Roma community in Albania. The capital of the country, Tirana, having the highest number of the population, is considered to be a wide source of information on the wide range of problems for Roma community. Meanwhile, Berat, Korça, Elbasan are big cities especially important for the high number of Roma community compared to other cities.

## **3. The Importance of the National Strategy for the Romani Integration in Albania**

Romanis in Albania, as elsewhere in other countries of Europe, have had a very low level of education. Their nomadic traditions, their special way of living, their poverty and their discrimination are among the principal factors lying behind this situation. In the early 1930, while describing the nomadic tradition of Romanis, Hasluck highlighted the fact that Romanis once in a while settle in a city for several months, and afterward they go back to their tent way of living (Hasluck M., *The Gypsies of Albania*, Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society, 17 (2): 49-61, 1938). In these conditions, the education of Romani children is pretty hard to be achieved.

The level of education of Romani children was visibly improved during the socialist regime following the measures taken by the government, aiming at their integration in the society. By offering them a fixed settlement in the 1960s, a full and guaranteed employment, as well as an accommodation resulted in the improvement of their life conditions which was followed by a higher educational level.

The empirical datas of the above mentioned researches have shown that during the period from 1973 to 1983, the level of illiteracy for the Romanis from 35 years old to 45 years old had decreased to 30.6 percent; the average period of education for those who continued to study is 6,6 years: 25.1 percent of the Romanis of this age group have completed the elementary school; 33.5 percent have completed 8 years of education, 3.5 percent have finished the high school and 0.3 percent have a university degree.

During the post-socialist transition, the level of education of Romanis, as elsewhere in other countries of the Central and East Europe deteriorated. The high level of unemployment and their poverty, their discrimination and their social exclusion were reflected in the decrease of their educational level. Currently Roma population is facing the illiteracy (40.3 percent); the percentage of the elementary school completed is 25.9 percent and of the dropped out is 14.9 percent. Even less Romanis have completed the 8 year of education (16.1 percent) and the high school (2.1 percent). The average years of education for men are 5.6, and for women 5.3.

Meanwhile, a detailed study shows that comparing the level of the education of Roma community with the majority of the population, the differences and the gaps are considered very big (Ikonomi E., Musai B., Sotirofski K., *Mapping Policies and Practices for the Preparation of Teachers for Inclusive Education in Contexts of Social and Cultural Diversity: Albania Country Report*, Torino: European Training Foundation, 2010).

In 2003, the Albanian Government adapted "The National Strategy for the Improvement of the Life Conditions of the Roma Community (2003-2015)". In this ambitious document, together with the social, cultural and economic aspects of the life, a special chapter is dedicated to the policies of the education of the Roma community. The drafting of this strategy was based on a plurality of sources such as: the knowledge of the socio-economic situation and on the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the necessities of the vulnerable groups; the statistical data processing provided by official and unofficial sources regarding the rate of vulnerability and of the social exclusion; the extension and the density of the risk groups. But some definitions of the above mentioned strategy display some problems, for instance the proposal to study "the way of living of the Romas" within the objective "to improve" it.

In "The National Strategy for the Improvement of the Life Conditions of the Roma Community" is included as well a detailed action plan that foresees the responsible institutions and a budget for the accomplishment of each year objectives, starting from 2003 to 2015 (Ikonomi E., Musai B., Sotirofski K., *Mapping Policies and Practices for the Preparation of Teachers for Inclusive Education in Contexts of Social and Cultural Diversity: Albania Country Report*,

Torino: European Training Foundation, 2010).

By comparing the measures taken and the foreseen objectives regarding the education of the Romani children in the "National Strategy", it seems that these objectives have been partially met, because of institutional factors, as well as for the lack of financial and humanitarian resources.

It is visible the contradiction between the very ambitious objectives of the "National Strategy" regarding the improvement of life conditions of the Roma community and the limited institutional, human and financial capacities that were foreseen for meeting these objectives (Tamo A., Karaj Th., Study report "The situation of the Romani children in Albania", Tirana, 2007).

The only responsible institution for implementing the objectives of the "National Strategy" for the Romanis in all the fields: education, national heritage, family, economy, employment, the reduction of poverty, social protection, health, infrastructure, justice, security and public administration, is the Monitoring Sector in the State Social Service Office within the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth. This sector was created to coordinate the work with all line ministries foreseen in the strategy (10 ministries: Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Foreign Affairs etc.). Another mission of the Monitoring Sector is to raise awareness for the local government to participate in the implementation of the "National Strategy for Roma Community", to coordinate with the representatives of the Roma community and the Roma non-governmental organizations in order to contribute to carry out and monitor the strategy, as well as to collaborate with donors and local and international non-governmental organisations for its successful implementation. In front of this multidimensional work, the Monitoring Sector at the State Social Service seems to run into difficulties in completely fulfilling its mission, because it is of lower level importance compared with the other institutions it has to coordinate the whole work.

Very often, partnership institutions in implementing the "National Strategy" are not seriously engaged in positively responding to the requirements of the Monitoring Sector in the State Social Service. It also seems that the multifunctional character of the Sector (monitoring, coordinating, implementing) is causing serious difficulties to the Monitoring Sector. The most difficult point seems to be the cooperation of the above mentioned sector with the regional and local institutions. The longer the distance from the executive institutions, the less is the information on the implementation measures of the "National Strategy", and thus the lower is the engagement for its accomplishment.

In 2007, the progress-report of the Ministry of Social Welfare, supported by UNDP has reported a very slow progress in the implementation of the "National Strategy" and called for its revision (Duka R., Progress Report for the National Strategy for the Improvement of the Life Conditions of the Roma Community, Tirana, 2007). Two years later, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) demanded from the Albanian Government to increase the allocation of sources for monitoring the executive and the local government for the implementation of the "National Strategy". It also asked from the Government to include more in the process the Ministry of Interior, the local authorities and the Roma community (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI Report on Albania, Fourth Monitoring Cycle, Strasburg: Council of Europe, 2010, p. 29).

Romanis are represented in the State Committee for the Minorities within the Council of Ministers, an advisory body under the Prime Minister's office. Nevertheless up to now, this body has not had any influence on the policies yet.

#### **4. Discussion**

In other researches, it has been highlighted that 54 percent of Romani households with children stated that they could not afford the education of their children, compared to 12 percent of non-Romani households under the same circumstances. On average, a Romani family spends 20 EUR per year on their children's education, while non-Romani households yearly spend 308 EUR for the same purpose (UNDP, At Risk: The Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania, 2006, p.24). For 34 percent of the Roma surveyed, facing the expenses for the purchase of books, school equipment, paying fees and other education-related costs which would often exceed their income was the main reason why their education stopped (UNDP, At Risk: The Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania, 2006, p.25). Additionally, data from qualitative sources suggest that many Romani families cannot afford to buy comfortable clothes or decent clothes for their children, unlike most non-Romani families (UNDP, At Risk: The Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania, 2006, p.25). Bearing in mind the data on incidences of hunger, Romani children often suffer from malnutrition and consequently experience difficulties in concentrating during the learning hours (UNDP, At Risk: The Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania, 2006, p.25).

This is a clear outcome of our research as well. The households and the teachers have stated equally that the hunger is one of the main reasons why the Romani children can not effort to stay in the classrooms during the learning hours.

The research has shown that some Romani children do not enrol in school because of the migration and

emigration, free movement in and out of the country, which happened especially during the transition of the early 1990. These chaotic movements, economically motivated as defined by the parents in the research, have influenced negatively the education life not only of the children, but of the Roma community as well, which turned out to be more educated before 1990 than today.

After 1990, the Albanian population migrated massively to Greece, Italy and beyond. In this context, some Romani individuals and families emigrated as well, but Greece and Italy represent the most frequent destinations for the Romanis. Following the researches, when Romani men emigrated, their children left in the country of origin with their mother or their grandparents went out of control, abandoned the schools or went to work in order to guarantee some incomes for themselves and their families as well. It is almost the same picture for those children that emigrated together with their families. The children abandoned the school and went abroad with their parents. In the host country, most of them do not go to school (Karaj Th., Tamo A., *The Situation in Education*, 2007, p. 54). This is a clear outcome of our research too. Romani children even if they are enrolled in kindergardens or schools, they continuously move from one place to another. This phenomenon brings difficulties with the inscription procedures in other education institutions and the lack of control from the state institutions regarding the monitoring of the situation.

Meanwhile, our research shows clearly the difficulties that Romanis face when they return from emigration and the barriers they have to re-enroll their children in schools, because of the required bureaucracies which take a lot of time and they have to bear the costs.

The research highlights that following the Romani tradition of child marriage, the young girls are more affected by this phenomenon, which conditions their level of education. The parents, the teachers and the experts have stated equally that the Romani girls that have accomplished an education level are less in number comparing to the Romani boys. Their level of education is considerably lower too comparing to the boys.

Child marriage frequently precludes Romani girls from attending schools, infringing their right to education, and giving them a new status, the one of the housewives. Despite the negative health and psychological effects, the child marriages deter the Romani girls in completing their education and becoming qualified by diminishing their chances of employment. (ERRC, Submission to the Joint CEDAW-CRC, General Recommendation /Comment on Harmful Practices: Child Marriages among Roma, 9 September 2011). This outcome is affirmed in other researches as well. Romani children, particularly girls, abandon school at a relatively young age because of early marriages, or prejudgments that their parents and the community have. The latter is due to a patriarchal upbringing according to which girls should not associate with boys when they reach their early teenage years. Schools are perceived as places where this unwanted association would take place... However, starting from the fifth grade, many girls are kept at home because their parents want them to get married, so from the fifth to the eighth grade there are no Romani girls at school (UNDP, *At Risk: The Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania*, 2006, p.27).

The outcomes of the research have shown that the language barriers that face Romani children are more evident in the 9-year education level, especially for them who did not attend the preschool. But even the Romani children that attend the preschool have problems of communicating in Albanian language with their teachers, which have difficulties in understanding them speaking in Romani language. In other researches has been stressed that in some big Roma communities, children use more the Romani language amongst them. Consequently, many of them face difficulties on first grade where classes are in Albanian, pushing them to drop out of school. Almost 8 percent of the parents stress out this obstacle (Gedeshi I., Jorgoni E., *Mapping Roma Children in Albania*, 2011, p.27). Most of Romani households highlight this barrier. But in none of the researches, it is not stressed the importance of the presence of the moderator or of the teacher assistant in the preschools and in the primary schools. These moderators or teachers have a specific role not only for understanding the language, but even for the support that it is provided to the Romani children.

To this end, it is of special importance to bring to the attention of the readers that the schools frequented by Romani children are located in the suburbs of the main cities. Mostly these peripheral schools are in the areas where the concentration of Roma community is high as well, eg. "Naim Frasheri" school in Korça which is located in an area where 95 percent of the population belong to Roma community.

This phenomenon, that is evidenced even in the preschool system, seems to isolate Romani children from the other part of the society. This fact has been highlighted even in regional and international studies, which push forward the idea that the concentration of the children in one school echoes "the special schools" in the countries of East Europe and shows elements of residential isolation, a phenomenon that has been criticised from the Albanian organisations too. (Cahn, C., Chirico, D., Mc Donald C., Mohacsi V., Proc T., Szkeley A., *Roma in the educational system of Central and Eastern Europe*, in the Roma Resource Book (1999) Open Society Institute-Institute for Educational Policy, Budapest).

## 5. Conclusions

- The poverty of the Roma community is a key factor why Romani children do not go to school or they abandon their education. The life conditions of Romani households force the parents to keep their children home, because they can not afford the minimal life conditions of the children, such as: food and clothing.
- The absence of school equipments such as: copybooks, pencils, pens, bags and in some cases even of the schoolbooks is a problem that Romani children face very often. In different districts, the process of grace delivery of the schoolbooks and school supplies has been slow and difficult.
- The Roma community plays an important role in the life of Romani children, because this community is full of prejudgements for the Romani young girls that go to school after having reached a certain age. Roma community is not supportive for the Romani children that are enrolled in schools and for their parents. This phenomenon appears after the girls reach the age of the fifth grade of secondary school.
- The child marriage is a big problem amongst the Roma community, which infringes the children to abandon the school at an early age. This phenomenon is very vivid among girls, which at the age of 12 or 13 years old get married against their will from their families, constraining them to drop out the schools. In the opposite, the girls risk to remain unmarried. Facing this phenomenon, Romani parents force their daughters to abandon the school and to have their own family. A similar phenomenon is spread even among Romani boys. But for Romani girls this phenomenon has another meaning, considering that according to their parents they are exposed to the human trafficking.
- The location of the preschool institutions is a considerable problem for Romani children. Romani communities are settled in the suburbs of the big cities, in areas where preschool education is not provided at all. In this context, Romani parents should send their children in educational institutions which are far away from their place of living. Facing this inadequacy, Romani parents prefer not to send their children to the preschool institution.
- The inability of the preschool teachers to communicate with Romani children that do not speak Albanian in Romani language, is another problem in the educational institutions where the presence of Romanis is considerably high. The lack of communication between Romani children and their teachers it is not the only problem, as far as the same problem exist between Romani children and their peers from the majority. The language barrier between Romani children and children from the majority of the population, makes Romani children feel themselves excluded from the learning process.
- The enrollement of the Romani children in the elementary schools is facing the lack of the low number of Romani children that have continuity in their education process from preschool to elementary school.
- Romani community faces continuously the problem of not registering the newborn Romani babies in the General Register Office at the moment of their birth. Many Romani children are not still registered in the General Register Office. This gap of datas is reflected in the work of educational institutions, whose employees once in a while are forced to visit at home all Romani households in order to identify their children and to move forward the process of their registration in the General Register Office.
- The lack of capacities of the educational institutions in secondary districts has been reflected as well in the insufficiency of awareness campaigns regarding the importance of education for Romani children. In this context, the awareness campaign has involved the local teachers, who have been visiting Romani households one by one in the areas where the concentration of Romas is high, aiming at convincing them for the importance of the education for the future of their children.

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