

WRITTEN COMMENTS

BY THE EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTRE AND PRAXIS, CONCERNING SERBIA

For Consideration by the Committee on the Rights of the Child at the
Concluding Observations of the 74th Session (16 January to 3 February 2017)

CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

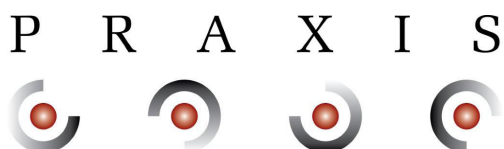


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INTRODUCTION

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)¹ and Praxis² respectfully submit their written comments concerning Serbia for consideration by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) at its Concluding Observations of the 74th Session, which will be held from 16 January to 3 February 2017. The ERRC and Praxis have undertaken regular monitoring of the human rights situation of Roma in Serbia and this report reflects the current priorities in our work in Serbia.

According to current official estimates, Roma in Serbia make up approximately 2.05%³ of the total population or 147,604 Roma. This makes Roma the second largest minority after Hungarians.⁴ However, a verified and accurate count remains elusive. Unofficial sources suggest that the number of Roma in Serbia is significantly higher, ranging between 250,000 to 500,000.⁵ In addition to the autochthonous groups, approximately 4,000 – 50,000 Roma fled during and after the conflict in Kosovo to Serbia; only half of whom registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁶ However, it is not known if all of them remained in Serbia or left for destinations in Western Europe. Furthermore, thousands of Roma have been returned to Serbia from Western European countries in the last years as failed asylum seekers; including Roma who were originally from Kosovo.

Roma are the youngest ethnic group in Serbia. The average age is 27.5 years, compared to 40.2 years among the general Serbian population.⁷ According to UNICEF, the primary school completion rate for non-Roma children is 94.5% and the transition rate to secondary school is 96.5%, while for Roma children the primary school completion rate considerably lower - 63%, while the numbers for secondary school for Roma youngsters is even lower - 55.5%⁸. Illiteracy rates range between age groups from 13.7% amongst adolescents to 57.2% among the elderly.⁹ Romani women are extremely disadvantaged when it comes to education achievements; illiteracy is estimated to reach up to 80%.¹⁰

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK ON SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN SERBIA

The need for the collection of disaggregated data concerning Roma pupils and the lack of a systematic and uniform approach to recoding data on national belonging¹¹ is a serious issue pointed out in the *National Millennium Development Goals in the Republic of Serbia*¹² and *The Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia*.¹³ The problem has been partly solved by adopting the Law on Primary Education.¹⁴ However, despite the legal provisions demanding schools to keep track of “*pupils or children, their academic achievement, exams, educational*

1 See: <http://www.errc.org/about-us-overview>.

2 See: <http://www.praxis.org.rs/index.php/en/>.

3 See: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, available at: <http://webzrs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/public/PublicationView.aspx?pKey=41&pLevel=1&pubType=2&pubKey=154>.

4 Roma Feel Less Fear and More Hope After Census, Open Society Foundations, 12 December 2012, available at: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/roma-feel-less-fear-and-more-hope-after-census>.

5 Government of the Republic of Serbia, “Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia”, Belgrade, 2010, p. 9, available at: http://www.seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/ekspertske%20misije/protection_of_minorities/strategy_for_roma.pdf.

6 *Ibid.*, p.28.

7 See: <http://www.care.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Situational-Analysis-of-Education-and-Social-Inclusion-of-Roma-Girls-in-Serbia.pdf>.

8 See: http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/MICS_5_-_Key_Findings.pdf.

9 See: <http://webzrs.stat.gov.rs/axd/popis/htm>.

10 See: <http://www.care.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Situational-Analysis-of-Education-and-Social-Inclusion-of-Roma-Girls-in-Serbia.pdf>.

11 The Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia, p. 11.

12 The Government of the Republic of Serbia, the National Millennium Development Goals, Belgrade, 2006, available at: <http://www.minrz.gov.rs/files/doc/porodica/strategije/Nacionalni%20milenijumski%20ciljevi.pdf>, p. 23-29.

13 The Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia (*Official Gazette of RS*, no. 27/09), available at: <http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Strategija-SR-web-FINAL.pdf>.

14 Law on Primary Education (*Official Gazette of RS*, no. 55/13).

*process and employees*¹⁵ the law also makes that declaration of national belonging is voluntary¹⁶ and refers to the data on national belonging as supplementary to the records of the single information system of education.¹⁷ Therefore, primary schools often do not collect data on ethnicity. It also remains unclear whether the data on national belonging is based on self-declaration or on the perception of the persons in charge. Also, due to such a legal provision, data collection is not regulated or stored within the system of education in a uniform and systematic manner, which opens the space to potential abuse and arbitrariness. The main issue remains that data collection on national belonging is not an integral part of the single information system of education according to the *Law on the Fundamentals of Education System*. This affects the monitoring of the right to education by persons belonging to national minorities and reduces the efficiency of the education system to provide adequate means for social integration and prevention from social exclusion and marginalisation of ethnic minorities.

International organisations support the collection of sensitive personal data in specific circumstances that are justified. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed its concern about the lack of systematic collection and processing of disaggregated data to allow for an adequate assessment of the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights in Serbia. The Committee recommended setting up a system to collect statistical data on the major factors affecting the implementation of the economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the Covenant, duly disaggregated by year, sex, age, urban/rural population, ethnic origin, disadvantaged and marginalised groups and other relevant criteria, and including such statistical data in the next periodic report.¹⁸

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Romani children are disproportionately represented in “special schools” excluding them from equal access to quality education. Despite the positive legislative measures (i.e. the adoption of the Law on Foundations of the Educational system in 2009) leading to the, *inter alia* decrease of the proportion and overall number of Romani pupils in special education (EPD schools), the increase in the number of Romani pupils transferred from mainstream schools to EPD schools remains. General steps are taken to reduce the use of EPD schools,¹⁹ however no particular measures are taken vis-à-vis the Roma pupils.

Among the 80 special schools in Serbia, attended by around 9,000 pupils (7,500 at primary school and 1,500 at secondary level). There is a lack of reliable data concerning the proportion of Romani children in special education. Data from the 2010/2011 school year, suggested that the number of Roma pupils in the “special schools” amounted to 1,199 (or 28% of the total number - 4,248 pupils).²⁰ However, the actual situation is potentially higher for two reasons: 1) due to prejudice Roma do not openly declare their ethnicity and 2) the lack of identity documents additionally troubles the data collection.²¹

The 2013 ERRC’s data-collection exercise, complemented by a survey conducted in ten localities across country in 128 Romani households with students in EPD schools showed that despite the fact that their total number has decreased, the Romani students are still overrepresented in these schools. The ERRC survey shows²² that in 2011/2012 a total of 41 Roma first graders (or 20% of the total number) enrolled in EPD schools. In 2012/13,

15 Law on Primary Education, Art. 80.

16 Law on Primary Education, Art. 81, paragraph 3.

17 According to the Trends in Development and Upgrading of the Quality of Preschool, Primary, General Secondary and Art Education and Upbringing 2010 – 2020, a single information system of education has been recognised as an “urgent need of Serbia.” The information system of education should fulfil all basic requirements: to collect all relevant information on education, conduct analyses of the information collected, appropriately communicate the results of these analyses for different users and thus provide a basis for effective management of the education system. National Education Council, Education in Serbia: How to Reach Better Results, Trends in Development and Upgrading of the Quality of Preschool, Primary, General Secondary and Art Education and Upbringing 2010-2020, p. 35.

18 Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Serbia, UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, July 2014.

19 Education of pupils with disabilities (formerly known as “special schools”).

20 The Education Advancement Institute, Educational Institutions for Children and Pupils with Developmental Challenges (Beograd: Zavod za unapređivanje obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2012).

21 Praxis 2011 *Analysis of the Main Problems and Obstacles in Access of Roma in Serbia to the Right to Education*, p.24.

22 ERRC, A Long Way to Go: Overrepresentation of Romani Children in “Special Schools” in Serbia. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/serbia-education-report-a-long-way-to-go-serbian-13-march-2014.pdf>.

the number of Romani students enrolling in such schools dropped to 24 new students (11%). Despite the positive indications for decrease, the chance of Romani children enrolling in “special schools” is higher than their chance of attending mainstream education. In 2014, an ERRC report²³ confirmed that despite the positive legal and policy reforms such as the 2009 Law on the Foundations of the Education System, Romani pupils are still overrepresented in EDPs despite the overall decreased number. The data collected from 31 schools in Serbia has revealed an extremely high proportion of Romani students (reaching up to 73% in 2012/13) in “special schools”.

In general, there is insufficient support for Romani pupils to stay in mainstream education and practices of transferring students from mainstream to EPD schools remains. ERRC-commissioned research from 2016²⁴ showed that: the outdated catchment area system lacks revision and does not take into consideration demographic changes and it is not implemented, it allows for unchecked “white-flight” leading to segregation of Romani children in schools close to Romani settlements; and “in integrated classes Romani children are far more likely to be designated to follow individual education plans, which allows schools to reduce the size of the class”.²⁵ The issue of over-representation in “special schools” remains without any progress.²⁶

CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

Despite the comprehensive legal framework in the Republic of Serbia not allowing any discrimination against children on the basis of ethnicity, prejudices against Roma persist. Among professionals in the social welfare system there are two prevailing views: 1) that poverty itself is not a sufficient reason for the relocation of Roma children from their biological parents, however in combination with other elements particularly the lack of parental competence often leads to relocation and 2) professionals emphasise poverty less when it comes to Roma parents when deciding on relocating a child, since there is limited interest in fostering Romani children. However, interest among foster parents in taking children of Roma origin has increased and consequently reduced the number of Roma children in institutions. The process of deinstitutionalization of institutions for children without parental care has positively impacted this phenomenon. However the process remains very slow. There is a large proportion of Romani children remaining in institutions disaggregated data shows that in some cases between 30% and 50% of the children are Roma when information on ethnicity is available.

The 2008 report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child has warned the Serbian state “for the lack of a systematic support system and multisectoral service provision to parents, and at the overall weakness of measures to support families and prevent deterioration of family relations and its effect on children due to the lack of well-trained social workers.” However, progress has been slow or in some areas completely lacking. The Praxis and ERRC research²⁷ suggested that Roma children in care have very limited contact with their parents and “systematic support for strengthening biological families for the return of children is completely undeveloped. The advisory-therapeutic and socio-educational services are at a very low level, which results in very small number of Roma children being returned to their biological families.”

IDENTITY DOCUMENTS AND BIRTH REGISTRATION

Lack of birth registration documents is a particular problem many Roma in Serbia face, stemming from social exclusion, discrimination and forced movement in the 1990s. In such cases the registration of newborns in the system is refused by the responsible institutions which perpetuates exclusion and leads to statelessness. According to a 2014 UNICEF survey 5% of Romani children are unregistered.²⁸ There is no accurate data to

23 ERRC, A Long Way to Go: Overrepresentation of Romani Children in “Special Schools” in Serbia. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/serbia-education-report-a-long-way-to-go-serbian-13-march-2014.pdf>.

24 See: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/ec-submission-on-roma-inclusion-in-the-western-balkans-july-2016.pdf>.

25 *Ibid.*, p.13.

26 *Ibid.*, p.13.

27 To be published in 2017.

28 See: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/57bd436b4.pdf>.

measure this phenomenon among the affected Roma. It is accepted that due to the frequent migration of the Roma population, reluctance to declare themselves as Roma because of prejudice, lack of documentation, it is not possible to collect fully comprehensive data on the lack of identity documents among Serbian Roma.²⁹

The ERRC and the Praxis, with support from the European Network on Statelessness, lodged a constitutional “initiative” with the Constitutional Court in Serbia in February 2016 attacking a provision of the Law on Registries which allows registrars to delay birth registration.³⁰ The initiative is included at Annex 1.³¹ The ERRC and Praxis relied primarily on Article 7(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the requirement that birth registration must be “immediate”. In September, the Constitutional Court rejected the initiative. A translation of the decision can be found at the Annex. The ERRC and Praxis strongly urge the Committee to give careful consideration to this judgment, which does not appear to be in accordance with Article 7(1) of the Convention.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING THE SITUATION OF ROMANI CHILDREN IN SERBIA

- Establish a systematic approach to keeping records of national and ethnic origin in all institutions in the system of social protection in the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with national and international standards.
- Ensure additional education of professionals in the social welfare system in order to eliminate the prejudices and strengthen counselling work with parents of Roma children in care to strengthen their capacities for bringing the child back in the biological family.
- Develop precise guidelines on the treatment of social welfare centres in cases of urgent relocation of children and displacement of children at particular risk, such as readmitted persons, refugees and IDPs, “legally invisible” persons, women who are victims of domestic violence, etc.
- Master the plan for the transformation of social care institutions for children and youth in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2009-2013 and continue its implementation as managing principle of deinstitutionalization process in the country
- Introduce new and/or improve existing social services (such as the service of family assistant) aimed at strengthening the biological families, who, in this context, should be the primary objective of all stakeholders in the system of social protection. Services of empowerment of biological families should include both financial and advisory support, so that services provided to families at risk and the same range of those provided to foster families.
- Amend the Law on Registries to ensure that all births are registered immediately.

29 Praxis 2011 *Analysis of the Main Problems and Obstacles in Access of Roma in Serbia to the Right to Education* p.24.

30 See: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/ec-submission-on-roma-inclusion-in-the-western-balkans-july-2016.pdf>.

31 See: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/serbia-birth-initiative-7-march-2016-english.pdf>.