

Budapest, July 19, 2018

Roma Education Fund's Statement on Educational Segregation and the Exclusion of Roma Children in Bulgaria

The Roma Education Fund (REF) expresses its concerns regarding the ongoing discrimination, segregation and exclusion of Roma children from mainstream educational institutions in Bulgaria.

REF warns to end school segregation and the exclusion of Roma students from mainstream schools. REF also discloses its willingness to cooperate with international bodies and with the Bulgarian government to provide policy proposals for direct action tailored for the Bulgarian situation to ensure Roma pupils' access to integrated quality education, which serves as a basis for both social and economic integration, thereby benefiting all Bulgarian citizens.

As of June 29, the 9th Peyo Yavorov Primary School in Blagoevgrad shared a post on its social media page stating, "*We do not admit children of Roma ethnicity*".¹ Such a statement is not only contradictory with the EU's Racial Equality Directive² and other international commitments that Bulgaria has signed up, including its national antidiscrimination legislations³, but also further strengthens and normalizes the exclusion of Roma students, reinforcing the rejective attitude of educational stakeholders and parents. It is also concerning that non-Roma parents raised their voice supporting such ideas along the social media post shared by the school.

Non-Roma parents' fear and resistance against sharing the same school with Roma, are based on the lack of educational components on Roma in the state curricula, which then allows public opinions to be formulated and distorted by media representations, social networks or spaces which provide biased information. Such prejudicial views also represent characteristics of Roma as obstacles of a meaningful coexistence of Roma and non-Roma in school institutions. However, school desegregation projects supported by REF have proven in practice that the integration of Roma children in mainstream schools is achievable and that Roma culture is not an obstacle for the integration, but a resource that can be utilized.

¹ Unfortunately, such practices are not unique in Bulgaria. In the city of Samokov and in several other localities the same statements and attitudes are practiced. The only difference is the level of publicity of claiming these views openly.

² The human rights and respect for and protection of minorities is among the Copenhagen criteria, being a precondition of EU accession.

³ Protection Against Discrimination Act, SG No. 86/30.09.2003, effective 1.01.2004.

Apart from deepening the educational gap between Roma and non-Roma by such approach, it is also worrisome that the efforts of the European Union, United Nations, the Council of Europe and several other organizations are being ignored and undermined. Both European integration and the integration into national societies requires an inclusive mindset on the level of policy design and its implementation. The Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria is showing respective efforts to deal with the educational segregation, REF also has a fruitful cooperation with it in other specific fields. Minister of Education and Science, Mr. Krasimir Valchev and Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Ms. Denitsa Sacheva both have already condemned the Blagoevgrad case of discrimination. The Educational Act on pre-school and school education⁴ also provides ground for eliminating discrimination in schools; however, it only prohibits class-based segregation. The Education Act itself lacks specific regulations and strategies on stopping school segregation in any form.

In order to preclude further exclusion of Roma from mainstream schools and halt segregation, international bodies, especially EU, should initiate a dialogue with the Bulgarian government to ensure them about the international support in fighting against discrimination and segregation of Roma.

Being one of the most relevant stakeholder in supporting Roma education in Central and Eastern Europe, REF remains committed to work on this matter. REF can share its knowledge accumulated across Central and Eastern European with the Ministry in order to initiate a professional discourse about the educational segregation Roma are facing in Bulgaria as well as to support the government in developing proper policies and practices against school segregation.

Should you have any further inquiries, please contact:

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⁴ Pre-school and School Education Act, Promulgated, State Gazette No. 79/13.10.2015, effective 1.08.2016. Available at:

http://lil.mon.bg/uploaded_files/ZAKON_za_preducilisnoto_i_ucilisnoto_obrazovanie_EN.pdf