

NATIONAL POLICIES FOR ROMA EDUCATION UNDER BULGARIAN CONDITIONS: A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to identify the educational problems of the Roma which have led to their exclusion from the mainstream education. The methodology of this research is based on a desktop study and analysis of secondary data. The first part of the paper is focused on data, correlating unequal educational opportunities and the ethnicity factor. The text presents an insight into the widely argued Roma dropout phenomenon, different sets of reasons for dropping out from school are discussed in the paper, *i.e.* educational, ethnic and cultural, economic, and family reasons.

In addition, the article reviews recent key policy measures for equal educational opportunities, targeting the Roma. Various aspects of adopted policy interventions for stimulating educational inclusion are illustrated, and supplemented by a critical consideration towards the reviewed strategic documents.

The conclusion from the current analysis is that the required policy actions targeting educational equity for marginalized social groups, such as the Roma, have been indeed formulated by the stakeholders; yet, certain shortcomings could be noticed and these are primarily linked to practical implementation of the national policies into activities.

Keywords: Roma dropouts, early school leavers, educational equity, ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper summarized sociological research on Roma educational integration. The objectives of the paper are: 1) to identify specific issues, related to Roma and education in Bulgaria, leaning on data; 2) to analyse key policy measures for equal educational opportunities for the Roma; and 3) to assess

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achievements and failures of the introduced practices for Roma inclusion into educational structures. The methodology of the present paper represents a desktop study based on analysis of secondary data. It encompasses document review (*i.e.* strategies and other governmental papers) and statistical information. Basic concepts for observing the Roma dropout phenomenon issue across its different facets have been put forward in the text. In addition, concepts for developing precise policies for reducing the Roma dropout trend have been proposed.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Bulgarian education has been aspiring towards the introduced European targets and has been trying to maintain a relevant interaction with the fluxes of social life and institutional changes. In the age of technology and “knowledge-based economy”, Bulgarian educational system is challenged and abetted to modernize in compliance with the “Europe 2020” strategy and the ensuing National Development Program “Bulgaria 2020” by achieving strong higher education targets, or 36% of the population aged 30–34 is expected to hold a higher education diploma. Despite of the current efforts, the share of Bulgarian citizens aged 30–34 who have completed higher education is 26.9% against 32.3% the EU average. For comparison, 54.1% of the population has upper secondary education (up to 12th grade) while 18.9% have basic or lower education (up to 8th grade)¹.

An indicator for a successful educational reform is to what extent it has managed to demonstrate positive results in ethnic aspect or to what degree young generations of socially vulnerable people, such as the Roma, have been included in the system. Statistical figures are as follows: almost similar shares of Roma have completed primary school (33.7%) and lower secondary school (37%). The share of Roma in higher education has continuously been below 0.5%, whereas the portion of Roma with upper secondary education has remained at 6.5%.

A serious local, ethnically-determined, trend has occurred related to the deficit of equal educational opportunities, e.g. the Roma dropout phenomenon. Dropping out from school causes illiteracy and seriously harms the chances of any individual to socialize and be compatible when applying for (the simplest) job. The alarming facts of the latest national Census show that 11.8% of the Roma in the country reported themselves as illiterate². Another multinational survey adds to the Census by describing the share of self-perceived illiterates among young Roma aged 16–24, which is 10% of all respondents; yet lower than the figure in Greece where 35% of the same age group declared unable to read and write (FRA 2014a, 27).

¹ National Statistical Institute, Education in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2015. General education

² <http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf>

The reason for illiteracy is the event of regular school absences and the subsequent dropout; as the share of minority children dropping out from school is disturbingly high in Bulgaria. In the year 2013/2014, 17 794 pupils dropped out from the mainstream educational system, as 30 percent of them were up to 4th grade (ISCED 1), and 27.5% – up to 8th grade (ISCED 2) (NSI, 2015)³. Almost half of them quit due to family reasons (44.5%), followed by those who migrated abroad (34.4%), or as a result of reluctance to study further (14%). Data convey that the portion of people who left educational system in primary school is the biggest in Bulgaria and Portugal (respectively 38% and 40% of all early school leavers per country). It is noteworthy that the biggest percentage of dropouts could be observed in the poorest region in Bulgaria, Severozapaden (NorthWest), notorious with its highest unemployment levels⁴.

In a longer perspective, early school leavers and dropouts bring about high economic costs. People with lower secondary or no education at all are affected by unemployment and they are more likely to rely on social aids; all these aspects have had influence on their health, wellbeing and lifetime earnings⁵. Dropouts are considered those who recently quit schooling, usually up to 8th grade (14.3 years old), whereas early school leavers are people of age 18–24 who have only lower secondary education or less and have no interest in continuing education and training. Their segment in Bulgaria is 12.9% in 2014 (EUROSTAT). The demographic crisis and rural–urban disparities further deepen segmentation. The shrinking population of Bulgaria (due to migration, decreasing number of births, ageing) has brought about serious issues related to unemployment, lower quality of life, insecurity and marginalization, which also assist the trend to drop out from the educational system over the last decades. There is a continuous decrease in the number of pupils in all categories of mainstream education – in the school year 2009/2010 they were 627 200, while in 2014/2015 the number of pupils shrank to 604 481. In a short period of time, the number of schools in the country declined by 455, predominantly in rural areas. Village schools are the most vulnerable in relation to population decrease, as the surviving ones are mainly attended by Roma pupils from disadvantaged families at risk of early school leaving (NSI 2015, Education).

Looking at the early childhood education, records reveal that no more than 42% of Roma children aged four and up (ready for compulsory education) were attending preschool or kindergarten in 2010/2011 (FRA 2014a, 16). Furthermore, the official census of 2011 disclosed that 23.2% of Roma children (aged 7–15) are excluded from the schooling process.

³Early school leavers in Bulgarian educational system by reasons and grade. NSI: <http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3435/>

⁴EUROSTAT data accessible at: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_16&lang=en

⁵www.europa.eu (2011)

The Bulgarian educational system persistently perpetuates inequity and presupposes high dropout rates and low enrolment of minority pupils in secondary and university education, experts claim (Marushiakova 2007, 9–10). Poverty and judgmental attitudes are considerable factors in the exceptionally low enrolment rates of minority children in pre-schooling that further exacerbate the impediments they face later at school. Besides, disadvantaged Roma families demonstrate weak interest in schooling and parental deficiency of educative style towards their children (Tilkidjiev *et al.* 2009, 51, 67).

Residential segregation could be also counted for a factor for acquisition of low qualification level. When living in isolated spaces, with bad infrastructure, normally pupils would attend school in the vicinity of their homes. A survey shows that children in Roma neighbourhoods are very likely to be enrolled in “ghetto” schools in countries like Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. The share of Roma kids in school age, attending “ghetto” schools in segregated areas in Bulgaria, is 58% (FRA 2014a, 46–47). Schools with prevailing number of Roma pupils are located also in the rural areas and, unlike the urban “ghetto” schools, the rural educational institutions have not been established especially for the Roma; however, they occurred as “mainly Roma schools” as a result of the outward migration of majority of Bulgarian families from the country towards the cities.

The exclusionary Roma schools can be illustrated through a series of shortcomings. First, material and technical conditions in Roma schools are considerably worse than those in other educational institutions in Bulgaria. For most of the teachers, working in Roma schools is considered unworthy vocation; therefore educators prefer leaving such jobs at first opportunity. In some cases teachers in “ghetto schools” are insufficiently qualified. Furthermore, many teachers have not undergone the necessary training for working with minority children, which hampers communication and deepens the gap between pupils and professionals. The poor quality of education is due to the downward motivation of both teachers and children to attend classes in a school with prevailing number of Roma students. Most of the Bulgarian parents are unwilling to send their children to these schools too; hence, the reputation of such schools declined. As a result, educational segregation by ethnicity has been evolving into a sustainable trend, adding to the process of social exclusion and eliminating the chances for young Roma generations.

Even if enrolled in desegregated mainstream schools, there are not many advantages for the Roma pupils: minority children are often isolated from their Bulgarian peers and by the non-Roma parents, which is an example for further social divisions, in experts’ opinion. Many Roma pupils get enrolled in special schools for mentally disabled children “because of benefits like free meals and clothing” (Marushiakova *et al.* 2007, 10).

The set of reasons for dropping out from school are complicated, as they are differentiated as educational, ethnic-cultural, economic, family, psychological, institutional, etc. by the “Roma dropouts” survey (Tilkidjiev *et al* 2009, 51–86)⁶. A thorough insight into the dropout tendency among the Roma will be discussed next.

CAUSES OF DROPPING OUT FROM EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL CAUSES

Educational causes for dropping out from school present a complex set of characteristics that hamper the training and upbringing of young people, in particular:

– *Institutional and organizational causes* related to observable shortages in resources within an educational environment, such as manuals, reference books and textbooks, specially equipped classrooms, computers, extracurricular and out-of-class forms of teaching, full-day school activities, and other important components.

– *Teaching-related causes*, concerning curriculum, learning content and the personality of teachers as active agents of teaching, coaching and developing pupils’ learning habits.

To a large extent, *teaching-related causes for dropout* refer to pupils’ difficulties in acquiring the learning content. They are generally linked to negative attitudes towards typical educational elements: textbook content, exams, personality of teachers, learning habits, etc.

The difficulties related to the *excessive learning load* have been often stressed as a shortcoming of the Bulgarian educational system. It has been found that the overly complicated material and accumulation of excessive information in textbooks tends to discourage the pupils; it is hard for them to understand the context of the content and to cope with it.

An interesting finding of the study is which the three least preferred groups of disciplines are (Milenkova 2004, 117). It occurred that these are Technical subjects and Physical culture; Mathematics and Natural Sciences and Humane disciplines. As for the Roma, they are least likely to skip Music classes, Fine Arts and Vocational training – the distribution by ethnicity regarding the absence of pupils, in relation to these three groups of school subjects, is the following:

– Mathematics and Natural Science disciplines (Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology) – the share of absent Roma pupils is 71.4%, Bulgarians– 12.2% and Turks – 12.6%.

⁶ The book “Roma Dropouts” is a result from the research project “Towards Desegregation of the Bulgarian School: Educational Policies and Social Technologies for Overcoming the Dropping Out of Roma”, based on a contract with the Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria (2005–2008).

– Technical subjects (Fine Arts, Musicology, Time tutorials, Vocational training) – the share of absent Bulgarians is 49.4%, Turks – 37.5, Roma – 8.3%.

– Humane disciplines (Bulgarian Language and Literature, Foreign languages, History, Geography) – the share of Roma pupils who are likely to skip these classes is 61.4%; Bulgarians–14.2%, and Turks – 22.2%.

Among the *teaching-related* causes of the dropout phenomenon the most important one is *the personality of teachers*. Teachers are expected to encourage and give directions to young people's determination, and, to stimulate pupils' willpower to learn and commit to school activities. During the survey the teachers, especially those working in rural or isolated areas, shared that children were emotionally attached to their role of mentors and educators. The interviewed teachers and school principals emphasized on the necessity of undertaking intercultural training pre-qualification. Through additional training, it is believed, they would attain proper approaches towards Roma parents, especially in regard to mobilizing resources from the ethnic community to assist them in promoting regular school attendance.

School and educational management authorities are delegated the responsibility to endorse and implement rules and standards for teaching and upbringing, such as guaranteeing quality of textbooks content, appropriate teachers' qualification, etc. In other words, the institutional style of work in schools is a priority which falls within the direct competence of the Ministry of Education, the Regional Educational Inspectorates and the school authorities. On the other hand, Roma dropout phenomenon has become a public issue rather than a sole concern of management structures in education and training. Moreover, it has become broadly discussed because it is related to quality of life, state responsibility, and parental ethical norms; as well, it has been attached to the collision between value systems of various social groups.

Another deficiency of the educational system in Bulgaria is the inappropriate conditions for individual work with pupils and the insufficient number of "recovering programmes" that might enable children to proceed with their own pace of learning. In line with that, young people, who have completed compulsory school age, have been given the opportunity to participate in different forms for acquiring additional qualification, such as the second chance schools. The idea of these schools is to upgrade the knowledge and vocational skills of youth above the compulsory school age, and thus to facilitate their access to the labour market. Yet, there are not enough well-functioning state incentives which might support and assist young people's aspiration towards further education.

A necessary endeavour to decline the number of school children at risk of dropping out are the personal meetings *between teachers and parents*. All interviewed teachers and school principals under the survey "Roma dropouts" (Tilkidjiev *et al.* 2009, 71) declared that they typically visit pupils' families, and even more frequently if pupils are absent from class. On the other hand, teachers

face the mischance to be dismissed from their job if they do not have enough pupils to teach. (For example, closing down schools in Bulgaria because of the decreased number of young people of relevant age has led to a decline in the number of teachers). Hence, the dropout phenomenon is interconnected with the general social context, state educational policy and community value system.

ECONOMIC CAUSES

Income figures indicate that poverty among Roma is four times higher in comparison to that of the majority population in Bulgaria (Frazer and Marlier 2011, 23). Low economic status and insufficient household income are considered basic factors for dropping out. This statement is supported by a World Bank study saying that the share of children enrolled in school, who come from the 20% poorest households in the country, is considerably lower than the average share of children, attending school in the country (Nonchev *et al.* 2006, 27–28). Low family earnings are an indisputable motive for giving up class attendance in compulsory school age (op.cit):

- 24% of the interviewed dropouts declared that “we did not have money for textbooks and notebooks”. Lack of funds for books is mentioned by 26.2% of the Roma youth; 26.3% of the Turkish youth; 16.1% of the Bulgarian youth;

- 19% of the respondents accentuated on the scarcity of “appropriate clothes and shoes”; as the ethnicity shares are as follows: 21.7% Roma; 16.9% Turks; 10.2% Bulgarians.

- “I had to help at home, to work for family sustenance” is among the reasons for dropping out from school, indicated by 12% of the children aged 12–16. “Taking care for the family” is pointed out by 23.4% of the Bulgarians, 15.3% of the Turks, and 59.1% of the Roma pupils.

Dropping out for economic reasons could also derive from family migrating in search of a job (i.e. from village to city; from one city to another and to a foreign country), as certain forms of child labour could be involved. Unemployment status of adult household members and, generally, low quality of life, typically lead to forcing children to participate in earning livelihoods and taking responsibility for family survival.

ETHNO-CULTURAL CAUSES

The set of ethno-cultural causes for dropping out are strongly related to the impact of retrograde beliefs, according to which the state education system supports the majority culture and imposes it as dominant in teaching. It is widely believed by the respondents that school, through its institutional mechanisms, consolidates the deficiency of equal opportunities and situates children belonging

to ethnic minorities in disadvantaged position, with little hope to avoid poverty and exclusion. In most cases, the dynamics of frequent absences and dropping out are linked to reasons, determined by the minority culture.

Prevention from cultural loss is viewed as a basic reason for dropout and, subsequently, for the low educational status of the Roma. Roma culture represents a specific community value system where oral tradition is assigned the biggest gravity for upbringing individuals. The widespread community view that institutionalized education is a waste of time and energy defines Roma attitude towards formal schooling (Barany 2001, 54). Roma people cherish traditional way of living, whilst school (as a modern institution) has not been recognized as entirely supportive model for socialization of the youngsters. Roma family model is dominated by community cohesive efforts, for instance performing community-established handicrafts; hence, it is expected from the children to master particular occupational skills and transfer the know-how to the next generation as a form of rearing and incorporating into the local social context. In this regard, school is perceived as an extraneous place which detaches children from family environment for a long period of the day. Thereby school is seen as depriving the family from children's contribution; most of the Roma believe that school is a restricting establishment that hampers and destabilizes family interactions. As a consequence, Roma demonstrate "quiet resistance as a community that sees the school as an alien and hostile institution intending to destroy their traditions and aiming at cultural assimilation" (Tomova 1995, 57).

On the other hand, Bulgarian school has not been well-adjusted to the learning needs of a minority person. A UNDP study revealed 85% of Roma learn Romani language in their community, 49.7% of them learn Romani history in the community; 63.8% of the Roma are taught in moral values in their communities; 59.1% of the Roma said that they learned traditional ethnic crafts only in the community; and, two-thirds of the Roma acquired cooking skills or knowledge on herbs, tailoring, embroidery, etc. in the community rather than in school (UNDP 2003, 107–108). Therefore, formal education is seen as irrelevant to Roma everyday life. In line with that, researchers noticed a clearly repetitive model: the "vicious circle" of poverty and the lack of vision for future fulfilment generates and perpetuates certain deficit of learning habits and motivation, which would be otherwise a necessary prerequisite for school socialization; and this explains most Roma pupils' reluctance to study.

FAMILY CAUSES

Despite the distrustful attitude of many (especially vulnerable) Roma parents towards schooling, the community does not utterly ignore formal education. The contemporary living patterns have irreversibly altered the retrograde beliefs for continuing intergenerational illiteracy within the ethnic group. Nowadays many

Roma parents recognize education as a faster way for adaptation into dominant society, yet trying to preserve their family and broader cultural patterns as much as they could. In respect to the above-mentioned, *working with parents* occurred as a necessary step for prevention from dropping out.

Family has a strong impact on the formation of attitudes towards the learning process as a whole – this is the place where perceptions, judgements and opinions discover legitimacy. The level of parental education is a decisive factor for school dropout. A number of studies disclosed that the more educated the household head is, the bigger the educational aspirations for the children are. For example, upper secondary education for their children was aspired by 71% of the Roma, who have completed no higher than primary school, in contrast to 89% of those Roma who have completed upper secondary education (Brüggemann 2012, 50). Respectively, the chances for a pupil with more educated parents to continue studies are bigger because education is attached more value.

Children who reside in unhealthy social environment, such as places of domestic violence, extended families with scarcity of living space, etc. tend to quit school attendance more frequently. To the question “How does your family solve domestic issues?” 47.6% of the Roma pupils answered “only the parents take decisions” whereas 52.4% stated that “only father decides at home” (Milenkova 2004, 114–124). The problems within such type of families tend to be solved more or less in a punitive manner: more than 1/3 of the respondents stated they are regularly punished by their parents for misbehaving (*op. cit.*). 44.4% of the Roma children, who have been punished at home, also stated that “they go to school less often than last year”. The survey shows that home violence and parental inflexibility is a precondition for deteriorated school participation of young people.

To conclude this paragraph, the presented causes for school dropout (whether they are institutional, economic, ethno-cultural, or family-related) interact in three major contexts –family, school, and institutions. Apparently, these causes pre-define one another in overlapping fields of relevance. The predominant numbers of those who never attended school, or who have been regularly absent from school or who cease attending classes are belonging to the ethnic minorities (Roma or Turks). Yet, the dropout phenomenon reflects not only the failure of school authorities to cope with cultural and linguistic differences and failure to nurture communication and professional skills within certain groups. Rather, school dropout penetrates economic and institutional trajectories and touches upon majority *vs.* minority cultural values and how the social order copes with this dichotomy.

Lack of education and skills exclude the low qualified individuals from labour market and social participation. The next section will outline and describe the recent national policy documents and initiatives that address (directly or less directly) the major educational equity-related challenges in Bulgaria, as well as the funding dimensions for the stakeholders.

REVIEW OF POLICY MEASURES TOWARDS ROMA EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION

In the first years of Bulgarian transition to democracy and market economy (1989–onwards) there has been insufficient interest towards development of social or economic policies towards the marginalized group of the Roma people. As a consequence, the number of Roma dropouts in mandatory school age and Roma early school leavers, who do not proceed into tertiary degree, has drastically increased. As a result of this phenomenon, a number of non-governmental organizations, focusing on Roma education and other minority-related issues, have emerged in mid-1990s to launch externally funded programs. The first step was “Desegregating Roma schools” project which granted funds for transportation of Roma pupils from the “ghetto” schools to mainstream ones. The project was piloted by NGOs in the town of Vidin in 2000–2001 and subsequently replicated in the cities of Montana, Pleven, Sliven, Haskovo, Stara Zagora, Sofia, Samokov and Kyustendil. The then newly-introduced positions of Romani-speaking assistant teachers and the active participation of Roma parents contributed to a large degree to the efficiency of the intervention. However, some serious shortcomings have emerged (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2005, 28–39). For instance, Roma pupils generated a feeling of insecurity in a Bulgarian-speaking environment, since they were lesser than the Bulgarian peers. Roma pupils declared they felt discouraged by the attitude of their Bulgarian classmates and some teachers. Additionally, the parents of the non-Roma children started to believe that Roma pupils threaten the quality of classes and, as a consequence, a number of parents transferred their children to other schools. This so called “the white flight” phenomenon has led to cease the enrolment of Roma pupils in particular schools, a tough measure, introduced by several school principals.

Overall, the non-governmental sector became a vital partner and contributor to Roma educational inclusion through motivating Roma pupils and communicating individually with Roma parents, teachers and pedagogical experts. This routine has converted the responsible NGOs into accumulator of huge bridging social capital, attributing to the success of educational equity projects and communication with vulnerable communities. Bridging social capital refers to relations among people who find it difficult to trust each other, such as vertical relations, and among people belonging to different ethnic groups or social classes (Radu and Radišić 2012, 30). Despite all efforts, most of the NGOs’ educational interventions have been somewhat local or performed on a minor scale.

In the recent years a series of policies and measures have been introduced aiming at reducing dropout rate in primary schools, stimulating continuous education and raising the chances for marginalized communities to participate in social and economic life. There are three sets of measures: 1) preventive (e.g. compulsory preschool, introducing full-time school day, out-of-class and out-of-school activities, improving the command in the official language for linguistic

minorities, etc.); 2) intervening (e.g. delivery of career orientation services, prequalification of teachers and school staff to work in multicultural environment) and 3) compensatory (e.g. projects for reintegration of dropouts, improving adult literacy, etc.).

A significant step forward in the development of the Bulgarian school is the eagerness to take up and implement renewed patterns and good practices from the global educational experience. Bulgarian schools could essentially benefit from communicating with various teaching and learning cultures and could enrich the scope of activities and their capacity for tutoring and socializing young generations. In this context, the European Social Fund (ESF) has been offering funds to various social actors (i.e. schools, kindergartens, NGOs, municipalities) for launching and practising inclusive educational approaches. What they aspire is making the school attractive to young people through initiating extracurricular activities (hobby clubs, etc.); establishment of intercultural learning environment; pre-qualification of teachers for working with bilingual technologies, etc.

Roma educational inclusion policies seek to revise and modernize the educational system (in regard to equal chances for minority pupils) through enhancing the responsibilities of all actors alongside the process: teachers, parents, children, non-governmental organizations, Regional Inspectorates of Education, Ministry of Education and Science (MES), policy-makers, etc. In line with that, consistent educational policies are regularly re-initiated given that so far these instruments have been, to a lesser extent, coordinated and resourceful. Next, the paper will present some of the recent documents targeting educational equality.

The “Strategy for the Educational Integration of Children from Ethnic Minorities (2005–2015)”, adopted by the Ministry of Education, guarantees to children, belonging to ethnic minorities, the right for equal access to quality education, through promoting cultural diversity, mutual understanding, respect and tolerance at school. In 2010 the responsible Ministry came up with positive outcomes: 3 500 students from “ghetto” schools have been integrated in mainstream schools outside the Roma neighbourhoods. In addition, 107 assistant-teachers of Roma origin have been recruited to support educational integration of Roma children; as well 360 primary teachers have been trained in teaching in a multiethnic environment.

In compliance with the above-mentioned strategy, the Council of Ministries of Bulgaria has launched the “Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities”, which has been mobilizing resources from different donors and ensuring funding from the Republican budget for the purposes of 1) improving educational conditions for children from minority origin in state schools and kindergartens; 2) offering supplementary tutorials to children at risk of dropping out; 3) advancing teachers’ qualifications to work in an ethnically diverse setting and 4) preparation of parents to assist their children in educational endeavours.

In 2014 the Centre funded 21 projects targeting at provision of appropriate environment for gradual inclusion of children from ethnically segregated kindergartens into multiethnic groups in ones outside the Roma neighbourhoods. The following indicators of success were reported: 387 Roma children and pupils were integrated in multiethnic groups; 356 teachers were trained to work in intercultural environment; 370 bilingual children in kindergarten and pupils from primary schools were integrated into educational facilities and 580 ethnic minority pupils were reintegrated into the educational system. As an adjunct to these outcomes, in the 2014/2015, 99 groups of pupils opted to study “Folklore of the ethnicities – Roma folklore”, a class which contributes to preservation of cultural identity (NCCEII 2014, 6).

Another recent document is the Plan of the Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers (2013–2020). It envisages additional classes in the official language of the country for pupils at-risk of early school leaving, supplemented with information activities to promote the benefits of education. In schools and kindergartens, upon consideration of the principal, assistant–tutor and assistant–teacher might be appointed to support the educational integration of children and students from ethnic minorities. The Plan describes the necessity for developing of an early warning system which is to provide consistent and reliable information about the movement of students, including those of Roma origin, within the country and to trace their educational development.

The good effects of the National Program for Educational Inclusion of More Students in Compulsory School Age (2005–2008) stemmed from the fact that it secured the supply of free textbooks for children from 2nd–4th grade (ISCED level 1–2), primarily dedicated to pupils from socially vulnerable groups, especially Roma. (Note that in 1st grade the textbooks are free for everyone). Free transportation to state and municipal schools was guaranteed and this measure triggers pupils living in isolated areas with no schools, where the number of children in compulsory school age is insufficient. Also, free breakfast for children of 1st – 4th grade was secured.

A broad range of tools to retain at-risk pupils in school was proposed by the National Program on School Education and Preschool Upbringing (2006–2015). Among these tools are modifying of learning content to serve bilingual pupils and those with special educational needs, alternative forms of teaching, “Second chance” pilot schools, etc.

By its side, the National Strategy to Promote and Improve Literacy Skills (2014–2020) entails overcoming the causes of low literacy among the vulnerable groups of the poor and that of the bilingual people (i.e. the Roma) where poverty and bad command of the official language serve as major barriers for acquiring diploma. As an adjunct to it, the Strategy for Roma Integration (2020) implies that Roma pupils over 16 years old should be motivated to continue their studies in vocational training. Since 2014, 80 214 Roma over 16 years old graduated from vocational training.

A series of other policy measures target ethnic minorities and prevention of dropout, such as the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Roma Inclusion Decade; National Programme for the Development of Primary, Secondary and Preparatory Education (2006–2015), the Action Plan of the National Strategy for Integration of Roma in Bulgaria (2012–2020), and National Strategy for Reduction of Early School Leaving (2013–2020).

A key policy document, the Operational Program “Human Resources Development” (OP HRD) (2014–2020), assumes that the issues of social and economic integration of marginalized groups have a multifaceted character. Hence, they require integrated approaches, combining interventions in the following spheres: improving employment and educational opportunities and improving access to social and health services. The desired goal is equal treatment and implementation of social and cultural rights (OP HRD 2014–2020, 59–60). The stream of the OP “Improving access to education”, being in harmony with the National Strategy on Roma Integration (2012–2020), involves prevention of early school leaving; re-integration of youth in the system of education; enhancing early childhood development; adult literacy.

Another relevant policy document is the Operational Program “Science and Education for Intelligent Growth” (2014–2020), which envisages two thematic objectives, related to Roma integration: 1) early education for children 3–6 years old whose mother tongue is different from the official with the aim to prevent dropout, and 2) overcoming ethnically differentiated admission to schools and improving school environment.

An amendment in the Education Act (art. 26, par. 3, 4, 5 and 6) pioneered tangible adjustments targeting school children in depopulated and isolated regions. With the change of the Act, in 2010/2011 academic year, “focal schools” have been introduced. It means that pupils who come from villages with no schools are eligible to attend a focal school and benefit from full-time activities. The gradual launch of mandatory two-year full-day preparation for children before entering the first grade has begun in 2010/2011 with the purpose to raise enrolment rate. During 2013/2014, with the assistance of EU funds, the number of the semi-boarding school groups is 7 642 with 177 734 participants (1st to 4th grade) and 1 659 groups with 38 924 participants from 5th to 8th grade (NCCEII 2013, 6). “Semi-boarding groups” means full-day organization of the educational process (pupils are occupied from 7.30 am to 5 pm, including leisure time and lunch). The full-day schooling encompasses tutorials, self-preparation (e.g. writing one’s homework), creative and entertaining activities, etc. The full-day schooling is essential for early age pupils because it enables them to adopt the educational content better, to overcome gaps in knowledge through consultation with educators and individual work; it also prevents from dropping out. As of 2015, altogether 783 focal-point schools offer semi-boarding groups.

One more modification of the Education Act brought in action classes in Bulgarian language for kindergarten children with different mother tongue (art. 20, par. 5). Apart from that, art. 8 of the Act postulates that minority pupils have the choice to study their mother tongue as an optional subject. Thus, in the year 2014/2015, 7943 pupils in mainstream education studied Turkish language and 587 – Roma language at school (NSI Education 2015, 48).

Last but not the least to mention, an amendment of the Vocational Education and Training Act (2015) offers an upgrading of the system for vocational training with the purpose to become more attractive specifically to children from deprived families, children with special educational needs, homeless and/or institutionalized youth or young delinquents.

It is necessary to note that the education policies and practices on the state and non-governmental level reveal serious attempts to increase the equal educational access for Roma pupils. At the same time, the ethnic problems in education must not be regarded only as inability of school to perform its functions for integration; it is a far more serious problem, involving other agents, interactions and circumstances. The unsatisfactory performance of certain policies was due to two basic sets of shortcomings: management-related and ethnically-determined inefficiencies.

A major managerial issue derives from the fact that inter-institutional policies for increasing equal access to education are rather complex entities which have been determined by school environment, regional/local specificity and broader social milieu. The guiding policies engage quite a few public organizations on national, regional, municipal and school level; *yetno effective coordinating mechanism* exists to guarantee equal educational opportunities in Bulgarian policymaking. Governmental commitments are long-term and demanding consistent institutional memory and sense of cohesion and continuity between two sequent governments; which very often is not the case. Such occurrence leads to ineffective communication among various policy actors and reflects the implementation of the policies.

Another key weakness stems from the management inadequacy of the OP HRD, which is a huge pool for financing interventions in the sphere of educational equality (with the particular focus on Roma). The reality is that, due to *regional disparities*, not all the regions in need could benefit to the fullest from this structural funding instrument. It is not surprising that the biggest Bulgarian cities with active civil-society sector have attracted more grants under the ESF-funded schemes. The larger number of contracts, however, has been diverted to Sofia because the capital has the strongest civil society sector, including human and financial resources, administrative and professional capacity. There is a disproportion between best grant-served regions in regard to educational interventions and those regions which are “low-populated/ with underprivileged population” – Vidin and Montana. The percentage of dropouts from the educational

system in Vidin region is not high compared to the average in the country; though, there is an intimidating percentage of pupils at risk of early school leaving (the Roma population exceeds 7%). The region suffers unemployment, ascending brain-drain to the capital and abroad, which results in a fading civil society and a weakened role of public institutions, such as municipalities and schools⁷.

Regarding small-scale interventions in the educational sphere, urged by the OP HRD, the deficiency of sustainability is clearly noticeable. The activities, supported by the European Social Fund and implemented on local level (mainly by NGOs and schools), have not contributed towards a significant change in education due to their *minor scope of action*. They have not decreased the learning deficits within vulnerable communities at larger scale, and have not improved the quantitative indicators in the Bulgarian educational system.

An overall deficiency of the aforementioned policy documents is the lack of well-structured and *proven concept of funds allocation* in the action plans, supporting the macro-framework. A serious disadvantage is the *imprecise time horizons and deadlines*, and the lack of evident state budget financial provisions and specific quantitative and qualitative indicators, subject to continuous monitoring. Besides, *the low popularization* also serves as a shortcoming – some of the policy documents were not widely promoted among the target groups and eventual stakeholders. More to the point – some of the policy documents remained just a wishful text on a piece of paper or they were *formally adopted*.

Apart from the weaknesses in administering the policies, two examples of *ethnically-determined inefficiencies* of legal sanctions, coined to combat educational inequality, will be presented. The first example is linked to the Education Act, as it envisages a *sanction for the parents* who do not send their children to preschool. Through the sanction, a large number of Roma families were penalized, but they have not been able to pay the fine. The reason is that poverty in Bulgaria is disproportionately distributed and concentrated mainly among the ethnic groups of Roma and Turks. According to a World Bank study, Roma account for 20% of the poorest Bulgarian citizens (De Laat *et al.*, 2010, p. 7). A more up-to-date survey on employment in the EU (FRA, 2014b, p. 35) reveals that in Bulgaria 87% of the Roma households have disposable incomes below the national at-risk-of-poverty gap.

The second instance, pertaining to the ethnic and cultural specificity of the Roma group, refers to the 2013 amendment in the Law on Family Allowances. According to the legal modification, *the monthly allowance for children of school age* has been bound to regular class attendance, or to regular attendance of preparatory groups at kindergartens or to compulsory preschool. This rule is seen as unproductive because it does not create a better understanding on how valuable

⁷ “Educational Selectivity Effects of the ESF-funded projects”, carried out in 2012–2013 and launched by OSI – Europe, has scrutinized the projects, targeting educational vulnerability in 5 EU countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia).

education is and which way life chances of Roma children could be improved through continuing education. Studies are not appreciated as a necessity by low qualified Roma parents; rather, this measure serves as “an exchange of benefits”: the state guarantees the Roma parents child allowances, and in return, the parents send their children to school.

CONCLUSION

The FRA study of 11 EU member states illustrates that there is a notably large gap between educational levels of Roma and non-Roma. Even attending primary school has not been a clear guarantee that one can read or write since up to one fifth of those Roma who were enrolled in primary education did not acquire basic literacy skills at the end, especially in Eastern Europe. The alarming news is that Roma illiterates aged 16–24 represents 10% in Bulgaria and Portugal, 22% in Romania and 35% in Greece of all Roma of that age group.

Then, Roma from the age group 16–24, who gave up school before the age of 16, represents a high share in all member states: 65% in Bulgaria, 73% in Portugal and at 86% in Greece. The lowest share of dropouts could be seen in Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

Further, the percentage of Roma aged 16–24 who have never been involved in formal schooling is considerable: from 15% in Romania to 28% in Greece. An essential discovery of the multinational study is that large majority of Roma aged 18–24 quit classes acquiring neither general upper secondary, nor vocational certificate; hence, they cannot fully participate in the labour market. The portion of early school leavers among young Roma within the age range 18–24 is rather high too: from 72% in the Czech Republic to 82%–85% in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Italy and Bulgaria and more than 93% in Romania, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece. Looking at the Roma who actually obtained upper secondary qualification, one can notice that the share is highest in Poland (23%) and it is lowest in Portugal, Greece, Spain and France (respectively 1–4%). Overall, the Central and Eastern European countries (with the exception of Romania) show higher results in upper secondary attainment among the young Roma, though still below the EU targets (FRA 2014a, 25, 28, 30, 34, and 37).

Early school leaving and dropout phenomenon are interconnected with social and economic disadvantage and low educational background. The reform paper “Bulgaria 2020” set the objective of reducing the share of early school leavers under 11% by benefiting from the governmental budget and the structural funds. In the era of technological and inclusive growth, unequal prospects for employability of young people further contribute to deprivation, social exclusion and poverty. Nowadays, the dynamics of social events and the rapid alteration of agendas have led to demand for more flexible and adept options for policy solutions in regard to

educational inequality (with a focus on segregated ethnic communities), including the need for diversity of the commitments to be processed.

The issues embedded in this paper require researchers' recommendations for up-to-date interventions towards educational equity. In regard to raising the level of involvement of national educational authorities, certain innovative actions fall into the scope of solutions. First, European structural funding, especially targeting underprivileged NUTS III regions and separate municipalities, should be earmarked. Next, state educational standards are in demand for remodeling in a way to accentuate on practical competences rather than on learning facts. Hence, new teaching aids must be developed to rather build up on civil competences and communication skills; and the acquired knowledge should imply a broader picture of the global world. In respect to the professionals, supplementary financial motivation should be offered to highly-qualified teachers to work in rural and isolated areas and/or with at-risk pupils.

In regard to encouraging the level of involvement of municipal authorities (e.g. school management, Regional educational inspectorates), efficient incentives could be guaranteed, contributing to the retention of socially vulnerable children in fostering kindergartens or schools through extracurricular activities or alternative schooling. A wise practice would be the maintenance of a database and individual portfolio for each child at risk of dropping out and official information on the achievements of vulnerable pupils. Popularization and advocacy of continuing education into higher degrees and career guidance are initiatives which could be regularly implemented throughout the academic year. Work-based learning, utilization of high technology and technical preparation (i.e. through launching school-based enterprises, internships, job shadowing, etc.) must be secured, especially for children at risk of early school leaving. Last but not the least, family involvement in joint activities and general enhancing of parental participation in school boards is among the new approaches which prove effective in increasing graduation rates and continuing education.

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