OSE Lunchtime Sessions – 27 June 2011

Closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma: Why the European Union matters?

Session summary

The OSE Lunchtime Session entitled “Closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma: Why the European Union matters?” was held jointly by VLEVA (Flanders-Europe Agency) and the Neujobs network on 27 June 2011. This session’s keynote speaker was Costel Bercus, a prominent Roma activist and Chairman of the Roma Education Fund (Budapest, Hungary). After presenting the situation of the Roma (particularly from the perspective of educational development) as well as the work of the Roma Education Fund, Costel Bercus answered questions from the audience and discussed the issues raised by the designated discussants (see the “Highlights” section below for further details). The session was chaired by Bart Vanhercke, Co-director of the European Social Observatory (OSE).

In opening the session, Bart Vanhercke spotlighted the jointly produced UNICEF-OSE report on Preventing Social Exclusion through the Europe 2020 Strategy: Early Childhood Development and the Inclusion of Roma Families. After welcoming and introducing the keynote speaker, Bart Vanhercke raised several basic questions which he believed had to be addressed during the discussion: Who are the Roma, where do they live? What kind of migration issues does the Roma issue raise? Can the education gap be closed?

Key note presentation by Costel Bercus, Chairman of the Roma Education Fund

Costel Bercus’ highly informative presentation included a brief introduction of the Roma Education Fund, an overview of the situation of the Roma population across Europe (mostly in Central & Southeastern Europe), basic education indicators, the extent of the educational segregation of the Roma, negative trends in education reform, and proposals for action. The PowerPoint presentation is available at:


The key insights and perspectives of Costel Bercus’ presentation:

- “Who are the Roma”: While referred to using different names, politically speaking this population wants to be referred to as “the Roma”. Costel Bercus also pointed out that a
number of sub-groups do not want to be associated with the Roma (e.g., the Sinti community in Germany) and that at European level different debates are taking place with regard to the terminology (e.g., the OSCE’s official terminology is “Roma and Sinti”, while the Council of Europe uses “Roma and Travelers”). Identity construction takes place through otherness processes, even though objectively there are many similarities between different groups. Since 2006, the European Commission uses the term “Roma”.

- **The Roma Education Fund:** The fund was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. During the 2005 opening program in Sophia, a declaration was signed by nine countries where education was identified as the most important issue to be addressed. On the one hand, the fund benefits from the support of the World Bank and of the Open Society Institute, but Bercus emphasized the importance of public-private partnerships. Close to 20 million euros have been spent to address the education gap between the Roma and non-Roma. While it is too early to say whether the fund has addressed the identified problems, there is visible evidence of change at the policy level. The fund’s main target is children, but secondary targets are parents and educators teaching Roma children. Since 2005 a significant financial effort has been made.

- **The situation of Roma in education:**
  - High share of Roma children never enrolled in the education system (e.g., 15% in Bulgaria and Romania, up to 25% in Serbia)
  - Extremely low participation in preschool education
  - Very low transition to higher education
  - Discrimination: parents are often required to show a proof of employment in order to enroll their children in school; due to the high proportion of Roma working without a legal contract, this is a major source of exclusion.
  - Much lower secondary education completion rate compared to the majority
  - The segregation of Roma children within the school systems is common. There are different forms of segregation. For example, in Bulgaria between 44 – 70% of Roma students learn in segregated schools. They are not only physically separated, but the quality of education and facilities, qualification of teachers, and budgets are typically low. In Slovakia, over 60% of children placed into programs for children with mental problems are Roma.

- **Proposals for action and reform:**
  - The parents and local communities should be equally involved and share ownership
  - Promote parents’ motivation and involvement in children’s education
  - Reduce the impact of poverty on education (meal provision, transportation, scholarships)
  - Improve the quality of education (teachers’ training, Roma educators, introduce Romani language)
  - Increase the sustainability of interventions
Discussion: the different experiences integrating Roma

Anaïs Faure Atger, Researcher in Justice and Home Affairs, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

Anaïs Faure Atger endeavored to answer the question featured in the session title, “Why the European Union matters?”. She argued that despite EU limited competence in the matter, it can play a role, not least in stressing the importance of education, promoting good practices, helping Member States in information exchange, and funding research promoting the inclusion of vulnerable groups. She emphasized that most Roma are citizens of an EU Member State and, therefore, are entitled to the respect of their rights as EU citizens. In her opinion, Commission’s firm reaction when France expelled Romanian Roma migrants in the Summer of 2010 shows that the EU could play an active role with regard to this issue. She briefly presented CEPS’ involvement in a 5-year project called INCLUDED, which focused on inclusion strategies in education. The project was financed by DG Research and involved 15 participating universities and research centers. Faure Atger noted that some of the conclusions drawn from the project match the “proposals for action” of the Roma Education Fund as presented by Costel Bercus. These conclusions include: the importance of involving the local community, the imperativeness of consulting the local community and families, the effectiveness of giving a voice to end-users in the decision-making process, and the need to focus on how education and other policy areas (i.e., health, employment, housing) are intertwined.

Faure Atger raised a number of questions directed to Costel Bercus:

Have you seen any improvements? Are you observing a trend towards desegregation, and to what extent are the Roma involved in the projects of the Roma Education Fund?

With regard to segregation, Costel Bercus maintained that optimism has to be kept. He emphasized that the segregation does not only result from government policies, but also from the opposition of members of the community (e.g. non-Roma parents) to Roma inclusion. While he argued that segregation is bad also for non-Roma children, he mentioned that dialogue had not reached this level yet. On the subject of Roma involvement, Bercus explained that 75% of the staff are of Roma origin and that Roma persons participate in the foundation’s activity at all levels. Stakeholder meetings are held, but civil society has reportedly criticized consultations for their lack of focus on identity. Bercus also contended that platforms for exchanging ideas and practices are necessary, though he emphasized that we shouldn’t focus solely on so-called
“best practices” because policy measures have to be adapted to local and contextual circumstances.

The Flemish experiences

Jean-Paul De Beleyr, from the Flemish department for Education and Training, involved in coordination activities between Flemish cities, outlined the situation of Roma in connection with education and related policies in the Flanders region. He talked about a 2002 decree which focused on education for all, avoiding segregation and discrimination, and promoting cohesion and inclusion. This has involved working with school teachers for the last 15 years, specifically concentrating on the Roma (a relatively new migrant group in Belgium). He underscored that there are many inclusion or “bridge” projects, but admitted that integration remains a problem area. De Beleyr listed key remaining challenges, including those related to gender and religion and the difficulties faced by Roma families with regard to housing, social security and social cohesion. He explained in greater detail the specific situation and issues at different levels of education. The main problems at the preschool level include the language barrier and late enrollment (Roma children rarely enroll at 2.5 years and usually enroll at 5 years). With regard to secondary education, major problems include again the language barrier and irregular presence at school (only 20% o Roma boys aged 12 to 18 are regularly present at school, for girls the percentage is as low as 10%), and early marriages. Roma children are often perceived as having special needs. De Beleyr also brought up the role of Roma parents, often unfamiliar with the school culture themselves; this in turn reinforces stereotypes that Roma parents aren’t involved in their children’s schooling. The discussant emphasized the Roma’s risk of under-qualification (mainly for women, due to the tradition of early marriage) and implications this phenomenon has for continued poverty. The written presentation is available at:

Rowan Eykens, Education Mediator, city of Diest, (Local Consultation Platform – “Bridge” Project), presented about “Bridge”, a project of the city of Diest in Flanders in which she is an education mediator. Diest is home to a high number of Kosovar, Serbian, and Slovakian Roma. The purpose of the “Bridge” project is to provide disadvantaged children with access to education. Roma are targeted because of their irregular participation in education and extremely low levels of pre-school enrollment. The project promotes and facilitates parent involvement in education. Eykens explained that parents were not supportive of their children’s school participation because of the lack of basic services (food, clothing, shoes, etc.). The project includes the provision of necessities (clothing, lunches, transportation, etc), getting to know Roma families, additional language classes (also for the parents, in order to read and write Dutch and to get to know other people), home visits from teachers, and special clubs for both students and parents. The slides of the presentation are available at http://www.ose.be/files/midi_OSE/Eykens_2011_Roma.pdf.

Open floor to questions
Ramón Peña-Casas, Senior Researcher, European Social Observatory (OSE), asked about the importance of identity issues, about the dissociation processes and internal differences within Roma.

Costel Bercus answered that it is not a simple issue because there are so many Roma identities. It is a highly sensitive issue, and there are plenty of different situations difficult to categorize (e.g., a citizen whose father is Hungarian, the mother is Roma – but from a group that doesn’t call itself Roma).

With regard to education, Costel Bercus mentioned that it would be useful to involve Roma teacher assistants. That would be a way to facilitate communication and understanding between teachers and Roma parents and students.

The gender dimension

Jyostna Patel, member of the technical team of the European Social Fund, asked about the gender patterns of the funding.

Costel Bercus explained that there are more girls benefiting from the funding than boys, and the success rate is higher for girls. 97% of parents say they want to send their children to school at an early age, but there are no school facilities. The drop out rates for girls are high at a certain age, but only in traditional families (it is less the case when girls are more integrated or “assimilated”).

He mentioned that some integration projects didn’t work, and that there should also be change from inside. He also mentioned the problem of 9-10-year old girls giving birth. In his opinion, this is where the state should step in and protect children’s rights (be it by means of legal action against the family).

He stated that “we” (Roma) have to change if “we” want to be part of modern society. This is going to take time, but a critical mass among leaders is needed. Costel Bercus also underscored that women are critical agents of change in the community (e.g., most mediators are women and programs promoting early childhood education are done with women).

The importance of education

Rita Baeten, Senior Policy Analyst, European Social Observatory (OSE), wondered if it would be convenient to invest more in schools with a high proportion of Roma students and attract the best teachers to them.

Koen Geurts, Roma expert, Regional Foyer-Integration Centre of Brussels, explained that while trying to focus on education, his organization faces one particular problem: the gap between decision makers, local authorities, civil society and Roma key figures with expertise in the field. Workers involved in integration programmes do not have substantial field experience, what often leads to biased and not always realistic analyses. E.g., when there are calls for Roma mediators, the required profiles often do not match actual needs (official authorities often use profiles that exclude Roma candidates, for example through requiring a diploma).
The European Union and indicators

- It was raised by Jennifer Vibert, UNICEF Brussels, that one of the things the EU could help with is the development of indicators.
  Costel Bercus explained that 26.5 million euros have been spent on inclusion programmes. This will be mentioned in the media, but the impression will remain that nothing has changed. People in countries with Roma populations will keep complaining about their tax money being spent on such programmes. The European Commission and Member States governments must better explain what these figures mean (for example explain that these 26.5 millions have not been spent on Roma people alone). Roma inclusion cannot be done without the support of the general public. At the moment, politicians would lose the general public’s support if they decide to do something for the Roma population. There is therefore a need to promote the idea that helping the Roma benefits society as a whole (e.g., in Hungary, the government is speaking of targeting “poor regions” in order to “de-Romanize” the problem – this may be a good political approach).

Concerning indicators, Costel Bercus explained that it is necessary to work closely with the World Bank, the European Regional Development Fund, municipalities’ networks, and NGOs. Pre-accession funds were monitored only from a financial point of view, but questions arise with regard to actual outcomes and the amounts which de facto go to the children (aside from NGOs’ operational costs). Costel Bercus concluded by explaining that both schools and parents have to lead the process, have to instigate the conviction that education is not alien to the Roma community.