



*Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*We are now in a period of economic crisis, a crisis of values, but the investments that we put into the education of Roma children for the development of their potential and talent are worth it because they are children of Europe.*

*We started the process of Roma desegregation of education in a situation of many deep-rooted prejudices. After ten years, we can confidently say that we witness a change in the attitude at all levels of the society. Moreover, a statement, like education is not a value for the Roma Community proved not to be valid. Finally, assertions, like Roma children will on a mass scale drop-out of the mainstream school, that they will be incapable of understanding the school material in the new school, and that the non-Roma children will leave the schools which invite Roma children, have become simply myths.*

*We believe that the most important fact is that we created a strong self-confidence for the Roma children taking part in the desegregation programs across Central and Eastern Europe. Now they can also dream of becoming teachers, doctors and lawyers. In this way, we not only create opportunities in life for these Roma children but we also create a public good for the society for a respect and tolerant attitude towards ethnic minorities, which is one of the core values of the new Europe.*

*We would like to thank Mr. George Soros for putting the desegregation idea very high on his agenda and that is how the Open Society Institute (Budapest, Hungary) became the forerunner in financing desegregation activities in Central and Eastern Europe.*

*Thanks also goes to Ms. Deborah Harding, former Vice president of Open Society Institute (New York, USA) and Mr. Rumyan Russinov, former Director of the Roma Participation Programme, Open Society Institute (Budapest, Hungary) and former Deputy Director of the Roma Education Fund (Budapest, Hungary) for the trust and support since early 2000s.*

*Донка Панайотова, председател УС  
Сдружение "Организация Дром"*

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## ROMA DESEGREGATION OF EDUCATION

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Ten million Roma people continue to be the most vulnerable ethnic group in terms of high unemployment and living below the poverty line in Europe. The Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) became an unprecedented commitment by governments in Central and Eastern Europe in the area of improving lives of Roma by addressing socio-economic status and inclusion of Roma in the mainstream society.

The founding international partner organizations of the Decade are the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, the United Nations Development Program, the Council of Europe, Council of Europe Development Bank, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Roma Information Office, the European Roma and Traveller Forum, and the European Roma Rights Centre. In 2008, UN-HABITAT, UNHCR, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also became partners in the Decade.<sup>1</sup>

As a central pillar of the Decade, a Roma Education Fund (REF) was established in 2005 to expand educational opportunities for Roma communities in Central and Southeastern Europe. The goal of the REF is to contribute to closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma, through policies and programs including desegregation of educational systems.<sup>2</sup>

Desegregation of Roma Education has become one of the cornerstones of the Decade. Bulgaria, which has one of the largest Roma populations (unofficially, over 750,000), is the country that provided the first case for Desegregation of Roma Education in Central and Eastern Europe. The pilot case was started ten years ago by NGO Organization Drom in the town of Vidin with 100 Roma children. Later on, it spread to ten Bulgarian towns, currently involving over 4,000 Roma children, studying in integrated school environment. In 2001, the Vidin desegregation model crossed the boundaries to provide access to quality education to more Roma children and demonstrate its value in six other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, namely Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia.



***Segregation in Education for Roma in Eastern Europe for decades has been a serious obstacle for access in mainstream society.***

In the five years prior to the Vidin pilot program for Central and Eastern Europe a mere 94 Vidin Roma children studied in mainstream schools. Most of these lucky few lived outside Vidin's impoverished Roma neighbourhood. Before the yellow desegregation bus came along, almost all Roma children attended the notoriously substandard all-Romani segregated school. The dismal track record of these schools, found throughout Bulgaria, is well documented. Inside their walls – and they are still standing – Roma pupils are treated as outcasts and often considered to be of below average intelligence. The Roma children in these schools lack nurturing and encouragement. Year after year ill-equipped teachers churn out a new illiterate generation of Roma, which is why it is rare for young Roma to complete secondary education. As for University, for all but the luckiest of Roma children, this is still impossibility. Roma therefore remain out of work, separate from the rest of society. They are well educated in racial discrimination and what it's like to be on the receiving end of violence. Being treated as different continues to prevent Roma from being full participants in public life.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the Decade of Roma Inclusion can be found on [www.romadecade.org](http://www.romadecade.org).

<sup>2</sup> More information can be found on [www.romaeducationfund.org](http://www.romaeducationfund.org).

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## THE DRIVER OF THE PILOT DESEGREGATION PROGRAM

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*Organization Drom is the driver of the pilot desegregation program. This is a Bulgarian non-profit legal entity, registered in accordance with the requirements of the Bulgarian legislation, where representatives of variety of ethnoses (non-Roma and Roma) work together to help ethnic groups in the country and in Europe.*

### **MISSION:**

*Help the integration of Roma within Bulgarian society, thus helping the process of democratization and European integration.*

### **GOALS:**

- *promote integration through education and access to quality education for Roma;*
- *work as a social mediator between Roma and local/state authorities;*
- *coordinate with other NGOs working for the integration of Roma within Bulgarian society;*
- *promote the Roma ethno-culture in order to create tolerant attitude towards Roma;*
- *monitor and report the human rights situation of Roma;*
- *provide legal aid for Roma in cases of infringement of their human rights;*
- *distribute information for cases in which the human rights of Roma are violated.*

*The organization was founded in 1997 as a Human Rights Advocacy NGO, providing legal aid to Roma, whose rights were infringed. Since 2000, the activities of the organization re-focused on two main dimensions that are briefly outlined below:*

### **EDUCATION**

*The desegregation process, led by NGO "Organization Drom" in Vidin, started in 2000 with 100 Roma children as the pilot project in Central and Eastern Europe. The project was funded by the Roma Participation Programme of Open Society Institute (Budapest, Hungary). Its basic idea – provide equal access to quality education for Romani children from the all-Romani segregated school in the "Nov Pat" Roma quarter to the mainstream schooling system. Organization Drom, continues to run the activities for a tenth consecutive school year, using variety of incentives in order to change the attitude of the social groups involved within the framework of the process. The Vidin initiative progressively increased the number of integrated Roma children to over 400 Roma children and became the most widely publicized education initiative, launched in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Mr. George Soros on a ministerial conference, „the Vidin project gave the impetus for the start of the most important inter-governmental coalition targeting the integration of Roma into mainstream societies in the Central and Eastern European region - Roma Decade Inclusion Initiative (2005-2015)“<sup>4</sup>*

*The case of the desegregation initiative in Vidin was published by European Commission report, which mentions „...it is the first Roma-led desegregation initiative in Central and Eastern Europe...and it should be seen as a step in the right direction, rather than an end in itself“ because longer-term objectives should be obtained through sustainable policy initiative (European Commission, 2004, p.20)<sup>5</sup>.*

*The desegregation model developed by NGO Organization Drom was implemented in several other Bulgarian towns (Berkovitzha, Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Montana, Pazardjik, Pleven, Plovdiv, Sliven, Sofia and St.Zagora). The initiative also spread out in other countries from the Eastern European region, which followed the Vidin example: as for instance, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia, Romania and Macedonia.*

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<sup>3</sup> The international Media presence of Organization Drom first began with Nancy Durham's report about the first desegregation school day shown by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in September 2000 and a full-page article - Bulgaria Opens School Doors for Gypsy Children - written by John Tagliabue for the New York Times on June 12, 2001, which also appeared in the International Herald Tribune two days later. Regular news updates, interviews, and documentary features, debates in the newspapers, on television, and on the radio were presented regularly.

<sup>4</sup> On 2 February 2005, Mr. George Soros gave a speech in the presence of eight prime-ministers from Central and Eastern Europe, who signed a memorandum for launching the Roma Decade Initiative.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2004). The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union, Employment and Social Affairs.

## **MEDIA**

*NGO Organization Drom develops video films and runs documentary programs on the Regional TV channel. The organization has constant contacts with the press and electronic media. The relationship established with journalists from the national TV "Channel One" and bTV, local TV "VIDIN" and TV "Fanty G", national newspapers, like "24 CHASA" and "TRUD", regional "KONKURENT" and local "NIE" and "VIDIN" proved to be valuable when discussing the success of the activities and promotion of the results. Furthermore, the organization initiated round tables and seminars to discuss together with NGO activists, representatives from local authorities and Media the effect of the desegregation activities. In cooperation with the New York-based WITNESS ([www.witness.org](http://www.witness.org)), the organization developed a video advocacy film, called "Equal Access: Integrated Education for Romani children in Bulgaria". The film won the first prize in the Skopje International Festival "Golden Wheel" in 2007.*

## **PROJECTS IMPLEMENTED**

*NGO Organization Drom has been active since September 1997. There have been many projects, financed by variety of institutions, as listed below:*

<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>PROJECT</b>	<b>PERIOD</b>
European Roma Rights Center, Budapest, Hungary	Legal protection of Roma from discrimination	1997-1998
Foundation for Development of Civil Society, Sofia, Bulgaria	Legal protection of Roma from discrimination	1998-1999 2000-2001
Foundation S.E.G.A.-Sofia, Bulgaria	Preparation of 6-year-old Roma children for I-st grade	1999-2000
Minority Rights Group International, London, UK	Human Rights Campaign	2000-2001
Minority Rights Group International, London, UK	Monitoring of the Court system on local level	2001-2002
European Roma Rights Center, Budapest, Hungary	Human Rights Campaign	2000-2001
Open Society Institute, Media Network Program, Budapest, Hungary	Media project	2001-2002
Roma Participation Program, Open Society Institute, Budapest, Hungary	Free access of Roma children to mainstream schools in Vidin (submission on an annual basis)	2000-2006
MATRA, The Royal Embassy of Netherlands	Human Rights Campaign	2004-2005
Minority Rights Group International, London, UK	Community Impact Study Report	2004-2005
Institute "Open Society" – Sofia, Bulgaria	Lobby for integration clauses in Municipality plans	2006
Roma Education Fund, Budapest, Hungary	Desegregation and Advocacy (submission on an annual basis)	2006-present
Operational Program "Human Resources Development", Ministry of Education and Science, Sofia, Bulgaria	Integration through education	2008-2009
America for Bulgaria Foundation, Sofia, Bulgaria	Together in Diversity	2009-2010
Roma Initiatives Programme, Open Society Institute, Budapest, Hungary	Desegregation activities and international conference	2009-2010

*The team of the organization and the beneficiaries from all these projects are thankful to all institutions listed above for their constant support and encouragement.*

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## THE VIDIN DESEGREGATION MODEL

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*Children from the desegregation program in year 2000.*

*The town of Vidin is a port town on the southern bank of the Danube River, in north-western Bulgaria with a total population of about 60,000 inhabitants. Currently, the Roma Community in Vidin constitutes circa 13,000 people.*

*In the summer of 2000, when the Vidin project was launched by the Roma NGO Organization Drom, its organizers vowed to work to make the dream of the “Vidin One Hundred” (the Roma children that first signed in the desegregation program) a reality for Roma children across Bulgaria and Eastern Europe.*

*One year later, in June 2001, the Vidin pilot project was heralded by the New York Times (“Bulgaria Opens School Doors for Gypsy Children”) which saw it as an “experiment” that may spread across Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the “experiment” did spread and has proven to be successful. Today more than 4,000 Roma children in Bulgaria (over 400 in Vidin, alone) and many more in six other Eastern European countries have access to quality education by studying in integrated mainstream schools. They are on the “yellow bus” to a new life.*

### **FINANCING**

*The Vidin desegregation program has been continuously financed between 2000 and 2006 by George Soros’ Open Society Institute (OSI), based in Budapest. Since 2006 assistance also has come from the Budapest-based Roma Education Fund which is supported by the World Bank, OSI, Council of Europe Development Bank, and the Governments of Canada, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Funding has been channelled also through the Operational Program “Human Resources Development” of the European Social Fund, as well as from the America for Bulgaria Foundation.*

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<sup>6</sup>The New York Times article by John Tagliabue can be found at:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/12/world/bulgaria-opens-school-doors-for-gypsy-children.html>.

## BENEFICIARIES

The direct beneficiaries of the desegregation project are the Roma children in the age group between 6 and 18 year-olds and their parents from the town of Vidin, whereas the indirect beneficiaries are non-Roma parent and children, as well as the primary and secondary education system in Vidin. The emphasis on advocacy has a substantial impact upon the Roma Community as far as it promotes desegregation at the national level. Thus, the whole Bulgarian society benefits because of the important contribution of this project – increasing access to quality education for Roma children.

## STAKEHOLDERS

NGO Organization Drom serves as the driving engine for the implementation of the desegregation project in Vidin. At the local level, the organization cooperates with school authorities, local authorities, district government authorities, and media to sustain the successful implementation of the project activities. The desegregation work involves specific engagement with Roma and non-Roma parents and children, school teachers and school principals. In fact, the organization has helped the institutionalization of two structures at the school level that very effectively facilitate the dialogue between teachers and parents. These are the Club “SOS Parents” and the Club “Togetherness”. The organization also leads a positive dialogue with the Regional Education Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science.

## THE VIDIN MODEL

The Vidin desegregation program has become a model for desegregation by working closely with the main stakeholders. Local supervisors are engaged to monitor daily attendance and school achievements. Catch-up groups for Roma children and professional development courses for teachers are regularly organized. Extracurricular activities (such as sports, essay writing, music, and theatre among other) are also a successful tool in helping to integrate Roma and non-Roma children and their parents in the wider community.

The Vidin desegregation program undertakes the following tasks:

- Organize local campaigns for enrolment in the desegregation program of Roma children before the beginning of the school year;

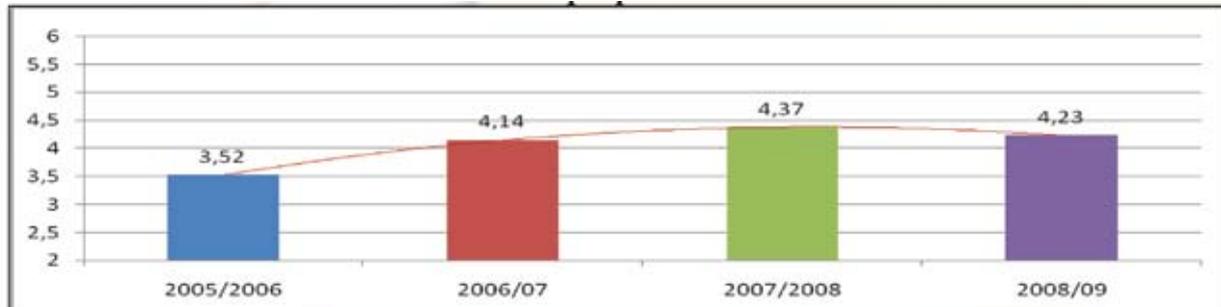
- Equitably distribute Roma children in classes to all integrated Vidin schools (less than 10 % of Roma in each class);
- Provide busing, free of charge, to the children from the Roma Neighbourhood to integrated schools in town;
- Provide children from the most impoverished background free school materials such as supplemental textbooks, notebooks and writing implements;
- Tutor students who perform below grade level;
- Recognize and give tangible incentives to students, who regularly attend school and achieve high marks;
- Implement regular multi-cultural training courses and seminars for teachers and parents of pupils in ethnically mixed classes;
- Organize extra-curricular activities for children (folklore club, sports club, crafts clubs, debate clubs, inter-school competitions);
- Organize inter-school sports activities;
- Work with the school authorities in Vidin on mutual project activities that benefit the maintenance of high quality primary and secondary education system and supports through extracurricular activities the high motivation of children to study and achieve high grades;
- Conduct advocacy campaign (closely work with the media, distribute video materials organize round table discussions with representatives of variety of local, regional and national institutions and key policy-makers).

## THE RESULTS

- Vidin project statistics for the period since 2000 are encouraging;
- Over 400 Roma children taking part in the desegregation program;
- Very few Roma children, about 2%, drop out of the program;
- Roma participants' grades are steadily improving. 78% are considered “good or very good”, on average;
- An outstanding 12% are considered excellent graders;
- Almost none has received a poor grading.

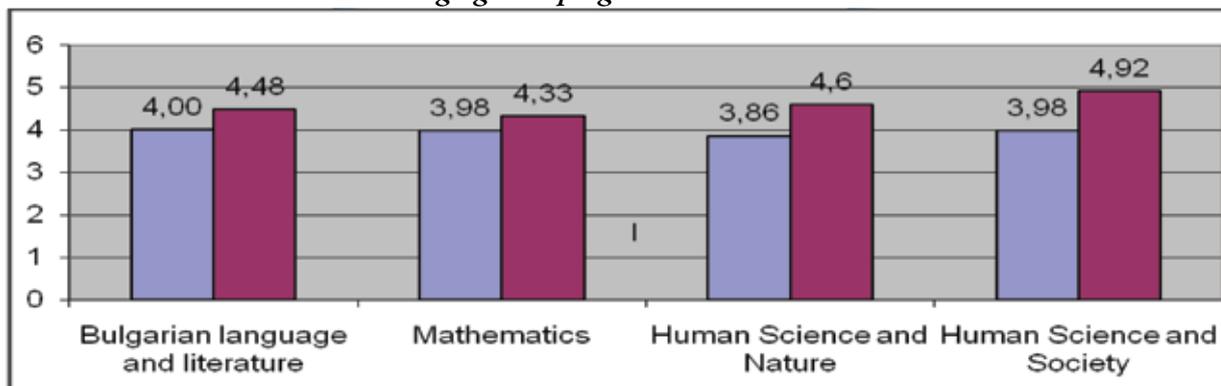
The educational achievement of the Roma children in the Vidin desegregation program has substantially increased as per school evaluations in the past four years (see Fig. 1), whereas external evaluations of 4<sup>th</sup> graders have shown that Roma children perform even better compared to what they achieve at school (see Fig.2).

**Fig.1: Average GPA for the Roma children in the Vidin desegregation program**



Source: Reports to international donors, own estimates

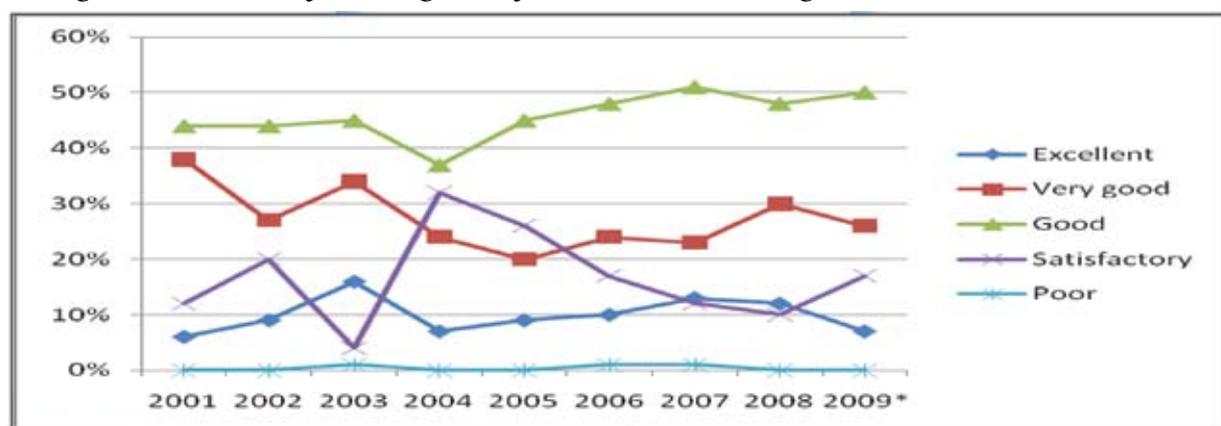
**Fig.2: Comparison of internal and external evaluations of 4<sup>th</sup> grade Roma children in the Vidin desegregation program in 2009**



Source: Data from the Vidin Regional Education Inspectorate, own estimates.

The number of Roma children in the Vidin desegregation program has not only increased, but the children raised also their grades, as the group of “good” and “very good” graders throughout the years became a majority (about ¾ of total), whereas close to 10 per cent (on average) of all Roma children were excellent graders and none were poor graders (see Fig.3).

**Fig. 3: Distribution of annual grades of Roma children in integrated Vidin schools**



Source: Annual data, own estimates.

Note: \*first school term grades are presented for 2008/09 education year.



*The Vidin desegregation model has shifted its core objectives away from focusing on the quantity of Romani children enrolled in the desegregation program toward the quality of education participating Romani children actually receive in the integrated school. With catch up-classes and extra-curricular activities, the program assists Romani children with entry into elite schools in Vidin and supports the improvement of their educational development and professional skills in order to prepare them for entry into higher education and to compete for a job in the labour market. In fact, over 30 Roma children, who have taken part in the Vidin desegregation program, are currently students at Universities and colleges throughout the country.*

*NGO Organization Drom intends to continue to use the successful desegregation tools, which have helped to increase the number of Roma children getting equal access to quality education in the past ten years. The organization shall continue to target key policy-makers, MPs and Ministry of Education, Youth and Science in Bulgaria and international institutions (e.g. European Commission, World Bank, UNESCO, etc.) in order to build up support for providing mechanisms to facilitate the process of desegregation of Roma Education in Central and Eastern Europe.*

### *POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS*

*(a) Ensure the goals and provisions of the Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma into Bulgarian Society and the Bulgarian National Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) are implemented, especially in guaranteeing equal access to quality education and in preserving the cultural identity of the children through multicultural education;*

*(b) Abolishment of all-Romani schools is a must in Bulgaria and throughout Central and Eastern Europe;*

*(c) Certain percentage of the state/municipal budget and the EU budget has to be dedicated for desegregation initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe as this is considered long-term investment for the largest minority in Europe;*

*(d) Roma NGOs have to continue to play a major role, but local authorities and the school system (school boards, regional education inspectorates) should collaborate and provide substantial support;*

*(e) The successful Vidin model needs to be replicated at national levels in Central and Eastern Europe through: providing daily bussing; free textbooks for Roma children from impoverished backgrounds; offering catch-up classes; providing multicultural training courses for teachers; offering supervisors, who act as liaisons between Roma parents and teachers; and organizing variety of extracurricular activities to integrate children and parents.*