

Ms. Donka Panayotova is the chairperson of the non-governmental organization (NGO), Organization Drom (www.drom-vidin.org). She established the organization in 1997 as a human rights NGO and three years later started implementing the most publicized education initiative in Central and Eastern Europe, namely, the pilot project for the desegregation of Roma education. Due to her commitment and success with Roma education initiatives, in the winter of 2009 she was the second place winner of the 2009 "Humanitarian of the Year" award pronounced by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. Ms. Panayotova has a Master's Degree in Pedagogy from Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski," 20 years' experience as a teacher, and 12 years' experience in the non-governmental sector. She is the co-author of two books, has published numerous articles, and has given interviews for the national and international press and the electronic media.

(1) Please describe life in the Mahala for the most underprivileged Roma.

There are about 10 million Roma living in Europe. 700,000 of them, as indicated by unofficial estimates, live in Bulgaria. This is close to 10 % of the Bulgarian population. More than 30% of the members of the Roma community in Bulgaria fall in the category of long-term unemployment. The Roma are also territorially segregated in both villages and urban areas. The children grow up illiterate in closed circles and develop a ghetto mentality. This capsulation within the Roma ghetto produces negative perceptions of mainstream society and reproduces a culture of protest causing severe barriers for families who would like to escape from the ghetto, find a job, and secure an education for their children.

The Vidin region, where our NGO operates, is in Northwest Bulgaria. It is among the poorest regions in the country in terms of economic and social development. About 10,000 Roma (80% of all Roma in Vidin) live in the territorially segregated Roma neighborhood, which is commonly referred to as the *Mahala*. Most of the adult Roma are unemployed, and those few that are employed, usually have unskilled jobs (cleaning streets, street trade, etc.). A relatively high number of Roma still count only on monthly social payments, and most Roma families live below the poverty line with less than **1 USD day/ person**. Most often, Roma are found without medical insurance, thereby limiting their access to medical care. The low level of education of the Roma adults is also striking. As recent surveys indicate, every third adult Roma in the Roma *Mahala* in Vidin is illiterate.

2) How has the desegregation process in Vidin changed the life (or chances for a better life) of Romani children?

In the five years prior to the Vidin pilot program a mere 94 Roma children from Vidin studied in mainstream schools. Most of these lucky few lived *outside* Vidin's impoverished Roma neighbourhood, called the *Mahala*. Before the desegregation bus came along, *almost all* Roma children attended the notoriously substandard all-Romani, segregated schools. The dismal track record of these schools 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. They lack nurturing and encouragement. Year after year ill-equipped teachers churn out a new generation of illiterate Roma, which is why it is rare for young Roma to complete secondary education. As for going to the university, for all but the luckiest of Roma children, this is an impossibility. Roma, therefore, remain out of work, separate from the rest of society. They are well experienced with racial discrimination and know all too well 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 society.

The Vidin desegregation process, pilot project for Central and Eastern Europe, started in the summer of 2000. The basic aim of the process is to improve the Roma children's chances for a better life. Unlike the situation in the segregated Roma schools, Roma children that participate in the desegregation process begin studies in an integrated school environment, communicating on a daily basis with their non-Roma peers and receiving equal access to quality education.

(3) What has the process of desegregation meant to you over the last 10 years? How has your perspective on the situation of Roma evolved?

I think that the desegregation process of Roma education provides a chance to eradicate one injustice, namely, unequal treatment of people just because of their ethnic origin. Segregated education is a punishment by the state. As a Roma and a pedagogue, I believe it is completely legitimate that all children should have equal chances in life, and the state should be working to create equal conditions through the public services it offers.

Not even one child should be neglected by these services. Otherwise, from a very young age, the child will not grow in confidence of being a full citizen of the country. The Vidin desegregation project became a best practice model and was replicated in 10 additional cities in the country, including circa 4,000 Roma children studying with their non-Roma peers. It is sad, however, that about 70% of all Roma children, enrolled in school in Bulgaria, continue to study in a segregated school environment.

(4) Looking back over the last 10 years, what has been the most difficult aspect of the process? Why?

It was very difficult when we started the process ten years ago. At the beginning nobody knew about the benefits of desegregation. Roma parents were mostly negative and sceptical, because they were afraid of how their children would be treated by teachers and other children in the integrated school environment. In this respect, the most difficult part was to change the mentality of the people – parents, but teachers alike. We needed to convince the Bulgarian society that Organization Drom would take a responsible and inclusive approach. Ten years later, I can say that the Roma children are accepted very well by the society, and I am happiest when I see children from the desegregation program having non-Roma children as friends and playing together.

This was my dream since the time when I was a child and I experienced isolation just because of my Roma ethnic origin. However, it is still difficult because despite the good results that we have, it is only the NGOs that are continuing work for integrated education. For instance, the 264 municipalities in Bulgaria are major beneficiaries of EU Structural Funds, which are worth more than 7.5 billion USD for the framework period 2007-2013. However, they do not have the administrative capacity to prepare, implement, monitor and control European projects. In this line of thought, municipalities in Bulgaria should open doors for more cooperation with NGOs, who have been experiencing project work intensively in the past two decades during the transition period. The need is even more relevant nowadays because the global financial crisis has seriously impacted municipal budgets.

(5) How has the desegregation process changed the Roma community?

The desegregation process indeed changed the Roma community- mostly in their belief that investment in education will bring a better life for their children in the future. The Roma children from Vidin, taking part in the desegregation program, have been very successful and statistics for the period since 2000 are encouraging. For example, very few Roma children, about 2%, drop out of the program annually. Roma participants' grades are steadily improving, and the amount of Roma prepared for university level education is gradually increasing. About 30 Roma children have entered Universities in Bulgaria and many more from the young generation shall continue to do so.

(6) Please describe why the government still offers little or no financial support to the process?

The government does not sufficiently finance the education of the Roma children, because it is not thinking about the future, and is not investing in it. The government is focused on the daily problems of the country, especially with the impact of the global financial crisis, and does not think long-term

(7) Has Bulgaria's entry into the EU (or EU Structural Funds) made a significant improvement or impact on the desegregation process?

Bulgaria's membership within the European Union gave Roma freedom to travel and also many Roma NGOs the opportunity to work on programs for the development and support of their communities. Now, we feel that we are more protected because EU standards impose equal rights for minorities. However, there is a huge need that these rights are enforced properly within the frameworks of the national legislation and responsible institutions.

(8) What kind of action would best support desegregation? What would be the most sustainable path?

The very best action for supporting the desegregation process at present is to provide a chance for more Roma children to take part in the education process in Bulgaria. Provided the state is not able to tackle this issue because of the international financial crisis and provided that the municipalities are not able to absorb EU funding from the EU Structural Funds, we need on-going support from international donor organizations and people from abroad to help us sustain the desegregation process and spread it to more cities in the country. The funding will be useful for providing free busing from the Mahala to integrated schools, purchase of education materials, training for teachers and parents, extracurricular activities for both Roma and non-Roma children and parents to facilitate integration.

9) Donka, please comment on the following:

In August 2009, Madonna spoke out against the discrimination of Roma in CEE countries. She stated the following:

I've never been to Romania before and I am happy to be here. But I found out that there is a lot of discrimination against gypsies in Eastern Europe and that makes me very very sad, because we don't believe in discrimination against anyone. We believe in freedom and equal rights for everyone, right? Gypsies, homosexuals, people who are different; everyone is equal and should be treated with respect, OK? Let's not forget that.

Thousands of fans in the audience booed her for this statement. Many in the public jeered her and stated that she doesn't know what she is talking about and isn't an expert on the matter. In her concert in Sofia, she said, "I'll speak about Gypsies if I want," showing continued support.

Madonna's statement is right and the signals she received from the public are not controversial but something that we are used to, especially in the past 20 years. Yes, indeed, Roma are treated as the lowest strata of society and many believe that they should not be given a equal chance . This is the common thinking which we have been trying to change in the past decade. Through the desegregation process, we have demonstrated a clear case that: a) integration is possible; b) the performance of Roma children improves, and c) non-Roma children perform even better in classes with Roma children. All this gives us a hope for the future. The more Roma children study in an integrated school environment, the better chance for success in their lives and for the society as a whole.