

The Start of an Ambitious Initiative: Implementing a New Approach to Policy-Making in Bulgaria

Dr Svetlana Tacheva¹

THE ERRC implemented a project between November 2006 and February 2008 to address the problems of systemic disadvantage in Bulgaria. These disadvantages include the evils of racial segregation in the education of Romani children and the absence of action by the central and local governments to implement a comprehensive educational integration policy.

The project, “Educational Integration of Roma: Political and Legal Preparation”, was supported by the Roma Education Fund and implemented with the administrative support of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.

The project focused on the problems of Romani children in Bulgaria who suffer from racial segregation in education and, therefore, do not have equal access to quality education or, in some cases, do not have access to education at all. As they grow up, Romani children in Bulgaria therefore do not have equal opportunities to work and face barriers to active citizenship. Thus, without an education, they become dependent on the state and its social security system, and are an at-risk group – vulnerable to different types of social exclusion.²

Project Aims

The project aimed to consider the educational problems of Romani children which are not a specific problem of a separate social and ethnic group, but which are a problem in the Bulgarian

education system as a whole. This approach to the educational problems of a concrete ethnic and social group in Bulgaria gave us several opportunities:

- To solve the problems related to Romani children through systematic reform of educational system in Bulgaria;
- To address the cross-cutting problems of Romani education through systematic change in the whole system of education;
- To discuss educational problems with recognised experts, representatives of main political parties and governmental institutions;
- To receive support from different parties – experts, representatives of main political parties, institutions, stake holders, trade unions, and employers organisations, etc.;
- To overcome potential resistance against a “minority problem”, and focus equal access to quality education for all children as the main principle of the reform; and
- To secure the adoption of a comprehensive education act, generating positive duties under domestic law and respective obligations for public officials to eliminate segregated education.

Project Activities

To achieve the realisation of the above mentioned opportunities, the project team conducted the following activities:

¹ *Dr Svetlana Tacheva is a sociologist with proficiency in both the Bulgarian education system and public reform. Ms Tacheva was programme director of the ERRC project “Educational Integration of Roma: Political and Legal Preparation” from January 2007 through February 2008. Recently, Ms Tacheva has worked as consultant for UNICEF – Bulgaria.*

² *For arguments concerning the economic benefits of integrated education for Roma, see: Institute for Market Economics. December 2007. Expected Long-Term Budgetary Benefits to Roma Education in Bulgaria. Financed by the Roma Education Fund and available online at: <http://ime.bg/en/articles/expected-long-term-budgetary-benefits-to-roma-education-in-bulgaria/>.*

- Building dialogue: The project team³ acted as facilitator and moderator amongst different political parties and relevant actors to develop political will and understanding of the necessity to reform Bulgarian education in a systematic way, keeping in mind the main principle – equal access to quality education for all.
- Conducting research: In order to secure educational reform with a solid base of arguments, the project team undertook several research projects:
 - An Analysis of Mandatory Education Through a Comparative Approach: Legal Pre-conditions and Policy Proposals;
 - Policy Proposals on Mandatory Pre-schooling Education;
 - Policy Proposals on the Provision of Equal Access to Quality Teaching;
 - Policy Proposals on the Provision of Equal Educational Opportunities by Way of Providing Free Textbooks, Transport, Food, After-School Classes, etc.; and
 - Policy Proposals for the Preparation and Implementation of Models of Educational Integration and Desegregation of Minority Children.

In the process of project implementation, we were forced to define explicitly the main principles of the educational reform and on this basis to formulate and discuss with experts (both governmental and non-governmental) and politicians a concrete policy for the comprehensive transformation of Bulgarian education, always bearing in mind equal access to quality education for all children.

Project Results

As a result of many advocacy meetings, the ERRC team realised that consensus for reforming the educational system should be built through a

process of negotiation. The project team took the role of facilitator in the negotiation process and decided to separate it into three stages. In the first stage, participants were invited to discuss and arrive at a consensus concerning the principles of educational reform, as well as the procedure of the negotiation process.

Building upon the first stage, in the second stage participants were invited to discuss and agree on a concrete policy for educational reform. During the second stage, civic negotiations were attended by representatives from the three ruling parties only. Each of them attended their session of the meeting, but did not meet each other in other sessions. Furthermore, the representatives from the three opposition parties in the Parliament and GERB did not attend the negotiations at all. Hence, the politicians who participated had no chance to negotiate. As a result, the project team was forced to change the format of the event because of the lack of political representation and will. Therefore, one of the main participants – a politician – declined to attend further, and we lost the ability to change the format of the Agreement based on expert opinion.

In the last stage, we elaborated the document called “Agreement for Reform of Bulgarian Education” and decided to disseminate it amongst different government institutions, political parties, universities, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders for support.

Reforming the educational system on the basis of a solid civic agreement negotiated amongst politicians, governmental institutions and independent experts still is a very ambitious initiative in Bulgaria. Despite some discouraging moments, such as the lack of political and institutional interest, the project has begun discussions in implementing a new approach to policy-making based on transparent and public discussion, the involvement of non-governmental expertise, governmental institutions and individual politicians.

³ *Dimitrina Petrova, Vladimir Molev and Svetlana Tacheva, with the support of Andras Biro who travelled to Sofia for advocacy meetings with representatives of the main political parties.*