

## **Marching West**

The government has created a comprehensive wish list for the social integration of Roma population. Its structure is arcane and the implementation sluggish. With real results far away in the future at best, the emigration potential of the Roma people looks set to create serious problems when the visa restrictions for Romanian nationals will be lifted.

### **Out of this world**

Social integration of Roma is a problem confounding many CEE governments. It is however especially acute in Romania. According to estimates used by the World Bank, Romania has the second highest percentage of Roma in the whole region – see table 1. The treatment of the Roma minority is one of the two failures (together with the issues of institutionalized children) that compromise Romanian fulfilment of the political criteria for EU accession.

Table 1. Roma population (thousands), 1991 – 1994

Country	Roma population	Total population	% of Roma
Albania	95	3,421	2.8
Bosnia	45	4,383	1.0
Bulgaria	750	8,459	8.9
Croatia	35	4,788	0.7
Czech Republic	275	10,323	2.7
Hungary	575	10,280	5.6
FYR Macedonia	240	2,191	10.9
Poland	45	38,446	0.1
Romania	2,150	22,761	9.4
Slovak Republic	480	5,345	9.4
Slovenia	10	1,993	0.4
Turkey	400	59,461	0.7
FR Yugoslavia	425	10,675	4.0

Similarly to the situation in neighbouring countries, Romanian Roma lag far behind the average population in education attainment. The illiteracy rate is high, while there are practically no Roma graduates (table 2). Their access to primary health services is also hampered and they are more likely to use emergency services (table 3). The life expectancy is substantially shorter than for the rest of population, and, an indicator of poor access to health care, the infant mortality rate is higher.

Table 2. Highest level of education attained (percent of population group)

	1994		1997	
	Roma	Total	Roma	Total
No education	36	11	42	12
Basic (grades 1-8)	57	48	49	43

Secondary	7	36	9	37
Tertiary	0	5	0.1	8

Table 3. Location of treatment or illness 1998 (percent of individuals who were sick during the previous month)

	Nowhere	Private practice	Public primary health unit	Hospital	Other
Romanian	36.3	11.3	45.0	6.7	0.7
Hungarian	38.1	10.3	44.5	6.1	1.0
Roma	52.5	2.2	38.1	7.2	0.0
German	43.8	6.7	48.3	1.1	0.0
Other	51.4	11.0	37.6	0.0	0.0
Total	36.9	11.1	44.9	6.5	0.7

Poor education and health status result in lower participation in the labour force, and a higher unemployment rate. Poverty is widespread – a Roma is three times more likely to live below the poverty line than the average Romanian – see table 4. This situation is compounded by the high birth rate of Roma: they have the highest number of children of all Romanian families, what strongly correlates with living in poverty – see table 5. For a taste of the quality of living conditions, have also a look at tables 6 and 7.

Table 4. Poverty by ethnicity, (1995, 1997)

	% of population (97)*	Poverty rate			
		1995 (%)	Share	1997 (%)	Share
Romanian	89.8	24.5	87.4	29.7	86.6
Hungarian	6.8	22.8	6.1	28.4	6.0
Roma	2.3	76.4	5.4	78.8	6.3
Other	0.3	23.5	1.1	32.6	1.1
Romania	0.9	25.3	100	30.8	100

\* Census data are based on self-identification. Data in table 1 were estimates of the actual number.

Table 5 Household and family size, 1998

	Household size	Family size
Romanian	2.8	2.7
Hungarian	2.6	2.5
Roma	4.4	4.2
German	2.2	2.1
Other	2.7	2.6

Table 6. Type of water supply (percent of households)

	Public system	Own system	Outside unit, inside building	Outside the building	From the river	Other
Romanian	45.3	2.4	3.2	48.8	0.0	0.3
Hungarian	54.8	7.2	4.1	33.7	0.2	0.1
Roma	23.5	1.0	10.1	63.4	0.6	1.4
German	60.7	2.5	12.3	24.6	0.0	0.0
Other	49.6	13.0	5.9	31.1	0.0	0.4
Total	45.7	2.8	3.5	47.7	0.1	0.3

Table 7. Location of toilet facilities (percent of households)

	Inside	Outside	None
Romanian	42.9	27.4	29.7
Hungarian	47.3	36.0	16.8
Roma	18.6	46.6	34.8
German	52.5	34.4	13.1
Other	38.2	51.5	10.4
Total	42.9	28.6	28.6

## **Government strategy**

For dealing with these problems, the government has created a two direction strategy: reducing poverty and eliminating discrimination, supported by a new institutional infrastructure. The strategy is comprehensive: it comprises ten areas of action, including from health care, education, social security, child welfare, and housing to justice and public order. The strategy has been operationalised in a detailed work plan, with a timetable and clear responsibilities.

One direction of action is to help Roma enjoy the same benefits as the rest of the Romanian population - e.g. improve the access to social insurance, by providing identity cards. Another type of actions covers special support for Roma – e.g. fiscal facilities for companies hiring Roma, or preferential hiring for Roma in the public sector.

## **New government agencies**

The institutional infrastructure being created for the implementation of the strategy involves both central and local government. At the central level, ministerial committees dealing with Roma issues were established in 14 departments, each chaired by a junior minister. There was also created a joint committee, bringing together the heads of the ministerial committees and representatives of Roma NGOs. The joint committee is chaired by the junior minister for minorities, while its secretary is the undersecretary of state for Roma issues.

Similarly, Roma offices were established at county level, in the structure of the prefect offices – the highest central government representative in a county. These offices have to be led by an ethnic Roma. In addition, there are Roma experts at the municipality level, mayoral public servants, but with double subordination: both to the mayor and to the prefect.

Public non-profit foundations are to be established in each county to manage the budget for Roma programmes. The total budget of the strategy is estimated at the amount of 104.589.000 Euro for 2002, about 70% (71,588,759 Euro) coming from the European Union, and 30 % (33,009,241 Euro) from the Romanian government.

Is not to be forgotten that, in addition to this large administrative structure, individual departments have established their own structures dealing with Roma affairs. The Ministry of Education and Research has created the position of county inspector for Roma issues.

### **Administrative Feasibility**

There are serious question marks concerning the feasibility of this approach. The strategy requires the creation of new administrative bodies. It remains to be seen how well these new departments will be integrated in the rest of the bureaucratic organism. In addition, while the line of command is pretty clear in the central government, the co-operation of local administration in the implementation of the strategy is more doubtful. The local experts are supposed to report both to the prefect and the mayor. But they are mayoral employees, what will give the mayor leverage. Mayors are more sensitive to public opinion – that is pretty hostile to Roma population. A taste of the future to come is the reaction to the row stirred by the proposal of the mayor of Piatra Neamt to create a ghetto-like neighbourhood for Roma. Mayors will also look to the public's priorities. They might object to resources being channelled towards Roma projects, instead of more popular items. A parallel can be drawn with the case of institutionalized children: there have been reported cases when money destined to children homes were channelled to road construction.

Moreover, manning the new offices with appropriate staff is already proving tenuous. Some of the new positions are reserved for Roma ethnics. Given the low number of Roma graduates, this requires accepting lower qualified staff. There have even been reported cases when finding Roma people for the job has been impossible. The government has launched a large training programme for the staff of the Roma offices, provided by an experienced NGO. It is an open question how much a training programme can be a substitute for adequately experienced and educated staff. The provider of the training has doubts: the chairperson of the organization is quoted as stating that if the strategy will reach 20% of its objectives this would be a good result.

The strategy for improving the condition of Roma has tight deadlines, requires good inter-departmental co-ordination, and asks the public administration to perform highly discriminative acts. Given the low administrative capacity of Romanian bureaucracy, the accurate implementation of this plan is unlikely. One exemplification is the simple fact that, because the strategy has been finalized two weeks after the draft budget, no funding has been provided for 2002. This situation requires the amendment of draft in the committee state.

Finally, the document is not really a strategy: there are very few measurable targets. Lacking these, there is no way to say whether the objectives have been met. The whole exercise risks transforming in another smart way of spoiling the Brussels money. Part of the cause for this failure is the poverty of data on Roma. Adequate research should have preceded the policy formulation.

This problem is compounded by the difficulty of determining who is a Roma, and of assessing their number. While most estimates put the number of Romanian Roma to 1.5 – 2 million, the 1992 census data has recorded only 0.4 million who have identified themselves as such. This uncertainty and especially the legal impossibility of determining who is a Roma will seriously hinder the implementation of the policy.

## **Poverty Alleviation**

The instruments most likely to achieve a sizeable impact upon the Roma community are the non-discriminatory social benefits. Because of their extreme poverty, Roma tend to benefit most from the minimum income guarantee, due to be implemented next year (Law 416 / 2001). The most important question mark here is the financial affordability of the whole scheme in selected municipalities.

In addition, the larger than average and younger families of the Roma will also make them important beneficiaries of the supplemented child allowance, and of the newly introduced school supplies support for poorer children (Government Ordinance 337 / 2001).

## **Affirmative action**

The measures targeted especially at Roma are the core of the strategy, and they are likely to be the most troublesome. Most of them are sensible decisions: efforts to increase the registration of Roma with health funds by providing them with identity cards. The government strategy also aims to reserve certain positions for Roma and to provide special facilities for them. This approach faces the risk of political and legal challenges. Given the existing hostility of large sections of the society to Roma minority, and coming after years of resistance to positive discrimination in favour of the Hungarian minority, it is likely that many Romanians will react negatively to this policy. In addition, measures like fiscal facilities for companies hiring at least 10% of employees from the Roma community will have to provide a legally valid answer why a certain person, who claims to be a Roma, is actually no such thing.

There is also a disparity between the scale of the problem and the solutions envisaged. In the few cases where there are quantifiable targets set, the numbers are rather meagre: e.g. the Ministry of Labour expects to help 3725 Roma finding a job in 2001; and 3150 Roma has received identity cards.

## **High risks of failure**

The plight of the Romanian Roma is terrible. With little hope of marked improvements in the short term, they will be the first to take advantage of the lifting of travel restrictions towards EU countries, expected soon. This poses a serious political risk for the government.

The intentions of the government are commendable. It is however questionable whether the Romanian administration has the capacity to put them in practice. The crucial connection between the central government and local administration is not very well defined, and the quality of staff raises concerns. Even if against odds these issues are addressed, the effects of the strategy will take time to filter through.

The government should prioritise those measures which are simpler to perform and deliver quick results. The policies with the highest impact are those that improve the access of Roma population to social services, like social benefits, health care and education. Here registration with proper authorities (police, school authority, health fund) will play a crucial role. Unfortunately, the government is channelling its energy in creating a new bureaucratic structure and in a host of policy initiatives that are likely to arouse political opposition and to be unenforceable.