

Roma in Public Education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	5
1. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK	6
2. LEGAL NORMS AND PRACTICES IN THE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION IN LATVIA	7
2.1. LEGAL NORMS REGULATING MAINSTREAM EDUCATION.....	7
2.2. LEGAL NORMS REGULATING MINORITY EDUCATION	10
3. SITUATION OF ROMA IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF LATVIA	10
3.1. ROMA IN THE GENERAL MAINSTREAM EDUCATION.....	10
3.2. SEGREGATION.....	13
3.2.1. <i>Pedagogic correction classes</i>	15
3.3. ROMA AND MINORITY EDUCATION	16
3.4. ASSESSMENT OF SEGREGATED PRACTICES	18
3.5. SPECIAL EDUCATION.....	20
4. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES.....	20
5. MAIN ACTORS INVOLVED	21
6. STUDIES ON THE ATTITUDES OF THE MAJORITY OF POPULATION.....	22
7. STUDIES ON THE ATTITUDES OF ROMA TOWARDS EDUCATION	22
CONCLUSION.....	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY	25

Preface

For the purpose of this report, the term “Roma” in English is used to describe both those who identify themselves as Roma, and those who have been recognised as Roma by the implementers of educational policies. In Latvian, however, the term “*čigāni*” (gypsies) is commonly used in the daily life, and this term is largely accepted by Roma and non-Roma. A number of Roma NGOs have the term “*čigāni*” as a part of their official names, for instance, *Latvijas Čigānu nacionālā kultūras biedrība* (Latvian Gypsy National Cultural Association). The term “*romi*” is suggested to be used in addition by some of Roma leaders in the Latvian language, however, majority of Roma themselves continue to use the term “*čigāni*” in both official and unofficial situations.

The secondary sources and results of the fieldwork (observations in the classrooms, interviews with the students, teachers, parents and educational and municipality officials), obtained within the framework of the research for the master thesis “Successes and Failures in the Education of Romani Children in Latvia”¹ have been used in this report.

¹ Lukumiete, D. (2004) master thesis “Successes and Failures in the Education of Romani Children In Latvia” Central European University, Nationalism Studies Department. The two Latvian schools, the Romani Ethnic Classes at the Ventspils Secondary Evening School and the Ventspils Secondary School No. 5 have been included in the scope of the master thesis research in January and April 2004.

Executive summary

Available statistical data on Roma's inclusion and achievement within the Latvian education system raises serious concerns. Among the 5,985 Romani people who were fifteen years old or older at the time of the last population census², 24.3 three per cent have not completed the fourth grade. For comparison, only 2.1 per cent of the Latvian general population has not completed primary education.³ Furthermore, a total of 12.5 per cent of Latvia's residents have obtained higher education, while only 0.4 per cent of Roma have done it. The illiteracy rate is also non-proportionally high among the Roma.⁴ According to the results of the 2000 Population Census in Latvia, there were 5361(0.2 per cent of the whole population) illiterate persons in Latvia in 2000.⁵ The Central Statistical Bureau does not perform a breakdown of illiterate persons according to their ethnicity; however, it is assumed that illiteracy is a serious problem among Roma. These assumptions are supported by the data at the disposal of several branches of the National Employment Agency (NEA) showing that majority of the registered illiterate unemployed are Roma. According to the NEA, out of forty-six registered illiterate unemployed on February 1, 2003, thirty-nine (85 per cent) were Roma.⁶

Although many educational institutions claim that all children, including Romani, are registered for school, representatives of some municipalities unofficially admit that about one third of Romani children are not enrolled in school.⁷ Although no monitoring on school attendance, educational performance and drop-out rates of Romani children is being done, the data on their overall low educational levels, as well as statements of school administration and teachers⁸ indicate serious problems in all spheres.

The unequal situation of Roma in the field of education contributes to their further exclusion in other spheres, especially in employment. Although there is no precise data about the rate of unemployment among Roma, it is at least several times lower than the average unemployment rate in Latvia – the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance has surmised that only two per cent of Roma in Latvia are working officially,⁹ while according to the different leaders of Romani NGOs ten, five, three or just one per cent of Roma have official jobs.¹⁰ Statistical data on employment within different ethnic groups available in Latvia indicates not the level of employment, but the number of the officially registered unemployed. The overall rate of Latvian residents which are registered as unemployed is 8.7 per cent.¹¹

² Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2001), *The Results of the 2000 National Census in Latvia: Collection of Statistical Data*, p. 202.

³ The Law on General Education (10.06.1999 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 23.09.1999; 20.06.2000; 14.09.2000; 31.10.2002), determines the following stages of education: 1) pre-school education (age 5-6); 2) primary education (1 - 4 grade); 3) basic secondary education (5 – 9 grade); 4) secondary education (10 – 12 grade) 5) higher education. Source: Ministry of Education and Science Republic of Latvia, <http://www.izm.gov.lv/default.aspx?tabID=3&id=912>

⁴ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 19

⁵ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2001), *The Results of the 2000 National Census in Latvia: Collection of Statistical Data*, p. 202

⁶ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003) *The Situation of Roma in Latvia* p.20

⁷ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 20

⁸ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, pp. 19-25

⁹ European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, second report on Latvia, adopted on 14.12.2001, http://www.coe.int/T/E/human_rights/Ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-by-country_approach/Latvia/Latvia_CBC_2.asp#TopOfPage, (02.10.2004)

¹⁰ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 33

¹¹ The State Employment Agency, <http://www.nva.lv/index.php?id=1>, (17.10.2004)

Since Latvia regained independence in 1991, no specific complex national policy or programme aimed at the improvement of the situation of Roma in Latvia had been developed. Along with all other ethnic groups in Latvia, Roma are subjects of the overall domestic and international norms regulating education, minority education and anti-discrimination.

At present, there are eight initiatives on municipal and school levels aimed at raising the educational level of Roma, however, all of them consist of organising the special segregated classes for Romani children. Although those classes have different status, their content is very similar.

The overall situation of Roma in the area of education could be summarised as follows:

- available data (educational level, number of illiterates, etc) indicates that over the last 13 years since regaining state independence, the Latvian mainstream education system to a very big extent has failed to include Romani children;
- only since late 1990s, and only those few municipalities and schools, where the number of Roma was higher than average, have made attempts to improve the situation of Roma;
- those municipalities and schools mentioned above usually follow two officially different, but in the reality very similar, approaches: segregation of Romani children in special classes which have a status of the “pedagogical correction classes”, and segregation of Romani children in the classes which claim to implement minority education programmes or bilingual education programmes. However, observations raise doubts about compliance of both practices with the minority rights norms;
- only recently, an ethnic integration project approved by the Society Integration Foundation and funded by the EU Phare in the fall of 2003, and aiming at integration of Romani children into the mainstream schools from the very early age, has been started.

No official evaluation of either attempts to include Roma into the general mainstream education, or creation of the segregated classes has been performed. Neither has a broader public discussion about the effects of segregation taken place in Latvia.

The present situation of Roma in the field of education in Latvia raises concerns about the observance of minority rights and anti-discriminatory norms in education. The latter is probably more pertinent given the current situation in Latvia, when many Roma are subjected to special segregation practices, which, although being implemented on the basis of their ethnicity, do not even claim to be aimed at the preservation of Roma language, culture and identity.

One of the main education’s goals is to create equal opportunities for all society’s members and to help them to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for functioning in this society and interacting with its other members. As this goal is apparently not being fulfilled in the case of Roma, there is a strong need to evaluate existing legal norms and practices regulating the education of Roma.

Introduction

After regaining independence in 1991, Latvia faced a very challenging and complex task - policies and practices in all spheres, including education, had to be developed or re-established. Over the last thirteen years, the Latvian education system has undergone a number of transformations, including the education reform of 2004¹². But there are still issues which have not been addressed, or have been addressed insufficiently.

One of the shortcomings of the present education system is lack of specific national policy or programme aimed at the improvement of the situation of Roma in Latvia. In summer 2004, the Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs launched a series of discussions about the development of special national programme for Roma; however, according to the official of the Secretariat, discussions came to a halt as there was no political support for the development of such programme.¹³ Lack of political support and public attention may be explained by a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a relatively small number of Roma in Latvia (according to the census, there are 8,204 Roma residents in Latvia, which represents 0.3 per cent of the population¹⁴; according to the unofficial sources, the real number of Roma is more likely 13,000 - 15,000¹⁵). Secondly, while lack of citizenship and poor Latvian language proficiency are considered to be the main obstacles of integration into the Latvian society, almost all Roma in Latvia are Latvian citizens and have a rather high level of Latvian language proficiency¹⁶, in contrast to the Russian-speaking minorities. Thirdly, the leaders of the Latvian Roma community until recently have not questioned the formation of the segregated classes for Romani children. All three factors have contributed to the interpretation and presentation of the situation of Roma in Latvia as comparatively good, and have encouraged such statements as "Roma are well integrated into the Latvian society" not only by Latvian politicians and media,¹⁷ but also by scholars.¹⁸ There is a serious lack of any information – statistics, academic studies, or reports – about Roma in Latvia. Statistics concerning Roma are seldom available: even if data is collected according to ethnicity, Roma are usually included in the category 'others' together with other small ethnic groups. The only academic study, 'The Situation of Roma in Latvia', was conducted in 2003 by local researchers. Although it covers a range of issues, there is a lack of in-depth analysis in a number of fields. Neither have Roma in Latvia attracted the interest of foreign researchers. Latvian Roma have been mentioned in the international research studies only in connection to the Romani languages spoken by Roma in Latvia. Scholars have described Roma in Latvia as non-Vlax Roma, belonging to Northern sub-branch (together with Roma from the whole Baltic area, northern Poland and Russia)¹⁹ or as Lotfika under the Russka Roma, along with such sub-groups as Polska and Lietovska Roma.²⁰ However, this is rather general description of Roma

¹² Latvian NFP report 'Minority education in Latvia', submitted to the EUMC in January 2004, p. 8-9

¹³ Interview with the Head of the Minority Department of the Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs on 21.10.2004

¹⁴ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2001), *The Results of the 2000 National Census in Latvia: Collection of Statistical Data*, p. 13

¹⁵ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.7

¹⁶ 97.6 per cent of those who indicated themselves as Roma in the census of 2000 are Latvian citizens and almost 70 per cent of Roma state that they had a good command of the Latvian language. Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.3

¹⁷ The Latvian Institute, <http://www.latinst.lv/pdf/Multiethnic%20Latvia.pdf>, (30.10.2003)

¹⁸ Barany, Z. (2002), *The East European Gypsies : Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, p.188; Guy W. eds, *Between Past and Future*, p. 251

¹⁹ Matras, Yaron *Romani: A Linguistic Introduction* in Michael Stewart (2001) "Summer Course Material: the Plight of the Gypsies," Central European University, p. 219

²⁰ Guy, Will (2001) eds. *Between Past and Future: the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, Hatfield, Hertfordshire, UK : University of Hertfordshire Press, p.39

in Latvia, as according to the author's observations and views of the interviewed Roma, the Roma in Latvia are further divided into two communities: the Latvian Roma and the Russian Roma. The Russian Roma live in the eastern region of Latgale, mostly in the city of Daugavpils. Significant differences in the language, traditions and religion are claimed to exist between these two communities.²¹

In Latvia Roma are dispersed over the whole territory of the country, mostly living in urban areas. In towns and cities there are usually a number of areas and streets where they reside most densely, but other ethnic groups live there as well.²² There are no nomadic Roma in the country.²³ According to the statistical data, Roma is the only ethnic group in Latvia with a positive demography: in 2000 the natural growth among Roma was 14.8 per cent, while among Latvians it was 3.5 per cent and among Russians 6.4 per cent. Another interesting fact is that the number of marriages between Roma and non-Roma is increasing. Between 2000 and 2002, there were 105 registered marriages, in which at least one of the spouses was a Romani person. (54 per cent of those marriages were mixed marriages).²⁴ A number of objective indicators, such as decrease of the number of children in families, increase of age of Romani women who give birth,²⁵ show that the Roma in Latvia is a diverse group, and some members of this group do not correspond to the "traditional" perception of Roma by the society at large: large families, early marriages, young girls giving birth, etc.

Although Roma have been living in Latvia for centuries, the mainstream society always perceived them as a very closed community.²⁶ Although majority of non-Roma perceive this separation as Roma's own choice, it can also be interpreted the other way around, where Roma are being excluded from the mainstream society through marginalisation.

When the first comprehensive study of the situation of Roma in Latvia was conducted in 2003, it concluded that Roma in Latvia experience rather similar problems to those that Roma face in other East and Central European countries: high unemployment, very low educational level, widespread cases of direct and indirect discrimination.²⁷ The study confirmed that education is among the most topical issues. The level of education of Roma is dramatically low, while the rate of illiteracy is several times higher than among other ethnic groups in Latvia.²⁸ The fact that problems concerning education face Roma of all ages (from children to old people) raise serious concern, as lack of education leads to further exclusion and prevents integration and employment possibilities.

1. International legal framework

After becoming an independent state, Latvia expressed a strong determination to become a full-fledged member of the international democratic community, and main principles of democracy

²¹ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003) *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.14

²² Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003) *The Situation of Roma in Latvia* p.15

²³ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003) *The Situation of Roma in Latvia* p.17

²⁴ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003) *The Situation of Roma in Latvia* pp. 20-21

²⁵ Latvian NFP report 'Minority education in Latvia', submitted to the EUMC in January 2004

²⁶ 71.2% of respondents believe that Roma in Latvia form a closed community. Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003) *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.12

²⁷ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 19 and p. 33

²⁸ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, pp. 19-20

have been stipulated by the Constitution of Latvia. Latvia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU provided further incentives to liberalising the domestic legislation, as well as to signing international documents which guarantee human rights to all residents in all spheres, including education. As for now, Latvia has already acceded a number of international documents which guarantee the right to education to all its residents, and is bound by a number of international instruments which concern also minority rights, in particular minority rights to education, including the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (and the Optional Protocol number one), the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, the European Convention on Human Rights (and Protocol I, with a provision on education rights).

However, there are two documents, implementation and ratification of which have caused hot debates in Latvia. In 1995, Latvia signed the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, but has still not ratified it. Another important and not completed task is the full transposition of the Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin into the national legislation. The Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs was made responsible for implementation of the Council Directive 2000/43/EC. A working group was formed to identify and elaborate the necessary legislative amendments to transpose the Council Directive 2000/43/EC into Latvian legislation. The targeted deadline was 1 May, 2003 – Latvia's EU accession date. In November 2004, though, proposed amendments were still to be presented to the Parliament for passage into legislation.

2. Legal norms and practices in the mainstream education in Latvia

2.1. Legal norms regulating mainstream education

On the national level, Roma do not fall under any particular provisions, and along with the other ethnic groups in Latvia are subjected to overall domestic and international norms regarding education, minority education and anti-discrimination.

Education in Latvia is regulated by a number of laws, including the Constitution. Two Articles of the Constitution of Latvia addresses education. The Article 112 provides "Everyone has the right to education. The State shall ensure that everyone may acquire primary and secondary education without charge. Primary education shall be compulsory." The Article 114 stipulates "Persons belonging to ethnic minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity."

Education is also addressed by the Article 11 of the Children's Rights Protection Law, which stipulates: "The state shall provide to all children equal rights and the possibility to acquire an education according to their abilities. A child has the right to free elementary, secondary and vocational education. Children belonging to the minority ethnic groups of Latvia have the right to acquire education in their native language in accordance with the Education Law."

The Law on Education and the Law on General Education are the two key legal instruments concerning education, including minority education. There are other laws – the Law on Professional Education, the Higher Education Law and the Law on Scientific Activities – they, however, currently are of much lesser relevance to the topic of the study, as the actual number of Roma possessing the level of education required for vocational or higher education is very small.

The provisions set in the Law on General Education overlap with many of the provisions of the Law on Education; however, the Law on Education regulates the education system as a whole and the types and levels of education and educational institutions, while the Law on General Education specifies provisions regarding general education. The Law on Education and the Law on General Education are effective as of 1999.

The Law on Education also contains the norm which stipulates that education is provided to all residents without discrimination against their social and economic situation, race, ethnicity, religious and political affiliations, and conditions of health, occupation and place of residency.²⁹

Both laws also stipulate that education is compulsory: Article 4 of the Law on Education provides that elementary education (grades 1-9) is compulsory, including pre-school education as of the age five or six. Or if a pupil has not managed to acquire elementary education when she or he is fifteen years old, she or he is obliged to stay in the educational system until finishing elementary school, or, alternatively, reaching the age of eighteen.

Completing at least secondary education is of increasing importance. Secondary education becomes a minimal requirement in the job market, as well as in all other spheres. For instance, the National Employment Agency can offer very few job vacancies for persons without secondary education,³⁰ and very few professional training or re-training courses for those who have only basic education.³¹

The requirement that those children who at the age of fifteen have not managed to complete elementary school should stay in the education system till completing the ninth grade or till reaching the age of eighteen is controversial, and its effectiveness is not very clear. In fact, it may help to disguise the real number of students not attending school. There are unofficial reports from the representatives of several schools and municipalities that students over the age of fifteen who have not completed elementary school do not attend school at all.³² However, those students' names are often kept on the school's register because both school and parents benefit from it: schools can report a higher number of students, and parents are entitled to the state allowance for a minor studying at school.

Pre-school education became compulsory only as of the academic year 2004/2005. The introduction of this provision should be viewed as positive, because according to the educators, one of the key reasons preventing inclusion of Roma children into the mainstream school system is their lower preparedness for school in comparison with the other ethnic groups. The provision should be accompanied by the special measures at national level, which would ensure that Roma parents are aware of this norm, and that their children are both enrolled and attend the pre-schools. However, there is no information that such measures have been taken, apart from opening of the pre-school Romani Ethnic Classes in the Ventspils Secondary Evening School. These particular classes, though, can be questioned on grounds of segregation.

The state ensures compulsory enrolment of children through the procedure set in the Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers No 446 'On the Procedure of the Registration of Pre-school

²⁹ Education Law, Article 3, (29.10.1998 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 11.11.1999; 11.05.2000), <http://www.ttc.lv/New/lv/tulkojumi/E0121.doc>

³⁰ On-line vacancies offered by the State Employment Agency, <http://www.nva.lv/index.php?id=26>, (12.10.2004)

³¹ The State Employment Agency, <http://www.nva.lv/index.php?id=108>, (15.05.2004)

³² Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, pp.19-26

Children'.³³ The Regulations stipulate that there are four independent institutions, the Register of Population, and the Ministry of Education and Science, municipality and school responsible for the registration. This leads to the situation when there are four separate registers each showing different numbers.³⁴ Another drawback of this procedure is that the Register of Population can provide data only about those people who have officially registered their place of residence, thus not including those children whose place of residence has not been registered. Another issue of concern is that enrolment of Romani children into segregated Romani classes is usually not a conscious choice of their parents, but decision of teachers, school administration and municipalities (see more detailed analysis on the issue in the section 'Pedagogic correction classes').

According to the Articles 17 of the Education Law, municipalities are responsible not only for enrolment, but also for other important issues – maintenance of the schools, opportunity to acquire primary education in the school nearest to the place of residence, and a free choice of schools.³⁵ According to the "Reviews of National Policies for Education. Latvia" published by the OECD, decentralisation of responsibilities between state and municipalities should be seen in a positive light. But division may ensure that specific needs are met more effectively only if an elaborated system of common standards and careful monitoring is functioning. However, no such system is in place at the moment.³⁶ For instance, practices concerning Romani children are evaluated as general practices, not as practices targeting a specific ethnic group – Roma. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the division of functions among state, municipalities and schools, and in particular to their implementation in practice.

The content of education is among important factors, which determine the inclusiveness of the educational programme and the way it meets the needs of diverse society. The Article 14 of the Education Law regulates that the following documents determine acquisition, content and structure of general education: national general education standards; standards of general education subjects; general education curriculum; and curricula of general education subjects.³⁷

In Latvia, the responsibility for the development of the national general education and general education subject standards is exclusive responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science, while implementers, in this case, teachers and school, may take part in the development of the specific subject curriculum and may elaborate the subject curriculum on the basis of the sample programmes provided by the Ministry of Education and Science in accordance with the Article 17 of the General Education Law. Sample programmes, however, do not leave big room for variations.³⁸

Teachers are given freedom in choosing methods to teach their respective subjects. Thus there is a possibility to choose such teaching methods, which would be the most suitable for a specific

³³ Ministry of Education and Science Republic of Latvia, <http://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/default.htm>, (14.02.2004)

³⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Reviews of National Policies for Education. Latvia", <http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/1401071E.PDF>, p. 126. (12.03.2004)

³⁵ Education Law (29.10.1998 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 11.11.1999; 11.05.2000), <http://www.ttc.lv/New/lv/tulkojumi/E0121.doc>

³⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Reviews of National Policies for Education. Latvia", <http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/1401071E.PDF>, p. 69. (12.03.2004)

³⁷ Education Law (29.10.1998 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 11.11.1999; 11.05.2000), <http://www.ttc.lv/New/lv/tulkojumi/E0121.doc>

³⁸ A comment of the official of the Minority Education Department of the Ministry of Education and Science in the e-mail dated on 04.05.2004

situation. However, teachers presently lack motivation, guidance and training necessary for developing curricula and teaching methods applicable in specific situations, like, for example, diverse ethnic background of the students, and presence of the Romani children. The universities and colleges providing education to the teachers do not have specific courses on multiculturalism or methodologies for working with children from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The official of the Ministry of Education and Science explained that multiculturalism is integrated into other mandatory subjects necessary for acquisition of the qualification of teacher.³⁹ Multiculturalism as a subject is offered in the framework of the teacher's mandatory professional education.⁴⁰ However, number of courses covering multiculturalism issues is very limited, and they mainly concern bilingual teaching methods.

2.2. Legal norms regulating minority education

Although the term 'minority education' is broadly used in the Latvian discourse, there are no official definitions of the minority, minority education, and minority school or minority classes. Nevertheless, the term 'minority education' is extensively used also by the state institutions: according to the webpage of the Ministry of Education, there is also minority education in the Romani language available.⁴¹

Very basic provisions concerning minority education are stipulated by the Article 9, Article 38, and Article 41 of the Education Law: education may be acquired in other languages than the state language in the state and local government educational institutions, which implement minority education programmes. Educational programmes for the ethnic minorities shall be developed by the educational institutions in accordance with the State educational standards on the basis of the general educational programmes' models approved by the Ministry of Education and Science.⁴²

Content of the two out of three articles addressing minority education, Article 9 and Article 41, indicates that in the field of the minority education, primary concern is to ensure the increased proficiency in the state language. The paramount focus on the necessity to acquire the Latvian language may be explained by the legacy of the Soviet occupation, which left behind a segregated school system and a big part of population with the very poor proficiency in the Latvian language, if any at all. There were Russian-language and Latvian-language schools in Soviet Latvia, and no minority schools. Other ethnic minorities, such as Belarussians, Poles and Ukrainians, mainly attended Russian-language schools; while Roma attended both Latvian- and Russian-language schools.

3. Situation of Roma in the educational system of Latvia

3.1. Roma in the general mainstream education

Although there are a number of improvements in the policies and practices regarding the mainstream education in Latvia, including minority education, available statistical data indicates

³⁹ Phone interview with an official of the Department of Educators of the Ministry of Education and Science on 10.10.2004.

⁴⁰ A teacher is obliged to take one course within three years. Ministry of Education and Science Republic of Latvia, <http://www.izm.gov.lv>, (15.09.2004)

⁴¹ Ministry of Education and Science Republic of Latvia, <http://www.izm.gov.lv/default.aspx?tabID=7&id=409> (13.10.2004)

⁴² Education Law (29.10.1998 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 11.11.1999; 11.05.2000), <http://www.ttc.lv/New/lv/tulkojumi/E0121.doc>

that the existing education system fails to integrate a large number of Roma, and implies that there are officially and non-officially formulated non-inclusive strategies, which are aimed specifically at Roma, and which may result in discrimination of Roma.

Level of education of all Romani people aged 15 and above	Number	Per cent
	5,985	100
Primary school (grade 1-4)	1,092	18.2
Elementary school (grade 5-9)	1,432	23.9
General secondary	401	6.7
Specialized secondary	72	1.2
University	26	0.4
Less than grade 4	1,453	24.3
No information	1,509	25.2

Table 1. Educational Levels of Roma in Latvia.

Source: The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2001), *The Results of the 2000 National Census in Latvia: Collection of Statistical Data*, p.202

School year	In mainstream schools (including segregated classes)	In segregated Romani classes
2004/2005	-	282
2003/2004	1,508	270
2002/2003	1,591	233
2001/2002	1,317	No data available
2000/2001	1,187	No data available

Table 2 The Number of Romani Children in General Education Schools and establishments dealing specifically with Roma in Latvia

Sources: The Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, "The distribution of children attending general education schools in the Republic of Latvia by nationality", <http://www.izm.lv>. (12.10.2004), and data provided by the Ventspils Romani Ethnic Classes.

The available data raises two major concerns. First, the number of Romani students registered at mainstream schools in the academic year 2003/2004 (1,508) has dropped for the first time within the last five years. Since the academic year 2000, the number of Romani students has increased by about 100 children each year, then in 2003/2004 the number of Romani students has dropped by eighty-three students (6 per cent) in comparison to the academic year of 2002/2003 (1,591). Taking into account that Latvian Roma have always had a positive demography⁴³, and that according to the official sources very few Roma have left Latvia,⁴⁴ this fact may have the following explanations: either the existing practices become more and more incapable of integrating Roma into the mainstream educational system, or Roma emigrate to the other countries illegally. It should be also noted that while the number of Romani children in school in general is decreasing, the number of Roma registered at the special segregated classes is increasing.

⁴³ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, *Demographic Year Book of Latvia 2003*, p. 60

⁴⁴ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, *Demographic Year Book of Latvia 2003*, p. 157

As no overall analysis of the inclusiveness of the Latvian education system towards Roma has ever been conducted, it allows some of the educators and policy makers claim that following reasons are solely responsible for Roma's existing situation within the education system:

- Latvian language skills of Romani children in many cases are insufficient to study in accordance with general curriculum;
- Romani children lack motivation to study;
- Specific Romani traditions and ways of life prevent them from schooling.⁴⁵

Let us try to analyse each of those possible reasons separately.

Sufficient **language skills** are important, as a non-ethnic Latvian child, enrolled at a mainstream school, is expected to know the Latvian language at the same level as native speakers. There are no teachers at mainstream schools or teacher assistants who speak the Latvian Romani language.⁴⁶ The lack of the Latvian language proficiency may prevent the inclusion of a part of Romani children into the mainstream schools. However, there are no schools where Romani children could study in the Latvian Romani language.

Another obstacle is that it is expected that all children come to school with the **motivation to learn**, and it is not the task of teachers to foster this motivation. School education foresees active family support, as from the very first grade children are required to do homework, and they often need help and supervision while doing it; which in case of Roma is often problematic as many of the parents themselves have a very low educational level.

The third reason provided, about **traditions and ways of life** that prevent Roma from schooling, does not sustain no criticism, as there is no overall study on the attitudes of Roma towards education, as well as there is no study on the contemporary ways of life of Roma in Latvia.

At the same time, analysis of the mainstream education, which was conducted in the framework of the master thesis "The Successes and Failures of Romani Children in the Education System of Latvia" in a mainstream school in Ventspils, suggested the following obstacles, which prevent the inclusion of Romani children in this mainstream school:

- Lack of diverse teaching methods
- Too strict study environment
- Lack of involvement of Romani parents in the decision-making processes.

The usage of traditional teaching methods contributes to the exclusion of children who differ from "normal."⁴⁷ **Traditional teaching methods and lack of individual approaches** do not

⁴⁵ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.22

⁴⁶ There is a lack of any academic studies on Roma in Latvia, including their language. There are also different theories to which sub-group they belong: they are classified as non-Vlax Roma, belonging to Northern sub-branch (together with Roma from all the Baltic area, northern Poland and Russia) (Yaron Matras "Romani: A Linguistic Introduction" in Stewart, M. (2001) "Summer Course Material : the Plight of the Gypsies," p. 219) or as Lotfika under the Russka Roma, along such sub-groups as Polska and Lietovska Roma (Guy, W. eds. (2001) "Between Past and Future: : the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe," Hatfield, Hertfordshire, UK : University of Hertfordshire Press, p.39. Therefore, for the purpose of the report the term Latvian Romani language will be used.

⁴⁷ Goffman, E. (1990), *Stigma: Notes on The Management of Spoiled Identity*, London: Penguin Books, p.3 The term used by Goffman in the opposition to stigmatised individual. According to him people construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain somebody's inferiority. By definition people believe that a

account for the fact that not all children are able to follow the same programme. In a mainstream school, where the fieldwork was conducted, teachers mostly applied methods, based on competition among pupils and high achievement – who is faster, who has read more books, etc., thus automatically dividing pupils into high and low achievers.

The study environment observed in the mainstream school was based on strict discipline. Children were expected to behave in a passive and receptive manner. The teacher was considered to be the only authority in the class, and there were almost no possibilities for children to influence the course of the lesson, to choose activities or tasks, and to express opinions. The key emphasis was on discipline and “culture.”⁴⁸

The importance of parents’ support in schooling of their children is highly stressed by the educators, NGOs, and other actors. One of the possible ways of fostering this involvement is to **involve parents in the decision-making process**. In mainstream schools, there are self-administration boards where parents can elect their representatives. Although there is no data available on the number of Roma parents in all school boards in Latvia, in the mainstream Ventspils Secondary School No 5, where Roma are more numerous than elsewhere, not a single Romani parent is represented on the board.

These observations allow concluding that Romani children are not provided with the equal opportunities in the mainstream school both because of their ethnicity, and, in many cases, because of their lower social and economic status. As stated by the director of one of the mainstream school while attempting to argue that no ethnically based differentiation was made: “There is no ethnic discrimination, but if they come from these families where they are not bathed and are smelly, then, of course, there is a different attitude from other children, but the same attitude is towards such kids of any nationality.”⁴⁹ It has been established that the lack of sensitivity and recognition of the “different” leads to distortion of identities and academic failures of these pupils.⁵⁰ Although such observations were made at only one mainstream school, rates of low enrolment and educational levels of Roma in the whole country suggest that other mainstream schools may share at least some of these flaws.

3.2. Segregation

Segregated classes are the educators’ response to the failure. The offered solution, however, does not question the existing system and does not suggest more flexible practices, like individual approach, teaching in the mother tongue, elimination of discrimination, etc., but rather puts all blame on the children, assuming that if they fail to succeed in a mainstream classroom, it proves them to be unable to study on the equal footing with other children.

person with stigma is not quite normal. On this assumption varieties of discrimination are exercised, through which life chances of stigmatised individual effectively, if often unthinkingly, are reduced.

⁴⁸ The term used by teachers and is meant as good behavior – non-talking, non-moving.

⁴⁹ Interview with the Principle of the Ventspils Secondary School No 5 on 24.04.2004.

⁵⁰ Bouma, D.H., Hoffman, J. (1968), *The Dynamics of School Integration*, Grand Rapids, MI.: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing, p. 52

SEGREGATED CLASSES						
Town/School	Year of establishment	Programme implemented	Number of students			
			2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	
Sabile Secondary School	1998	Minority primary education programme	14	27	16	
Talsi Elementary School	2001	Pedagogical correction class	15	7	9	
Tukums Secondary School No 3	2001	Pedagogical correction class	18	27	21	
Kuldiga Elementary School	2002/2003	Pedagogical correction class	33	32	35	
Ventspils Secondary School No 5	2003	Pedagogical correction class	-	18	20	
Ventspils Evening Secondary School – Romani Ethnic Classes	1987	General education programme	144	130	137 +13 preschool	
Jelgava Evening Secondary School	2000	Pedagogical correction class	21	21	23	
Riga National College	2002	Secondary professional education	16	8	8	
Total			233	270	282	
INCLUSIVE PRACTICES						
Project “Qualitative Education for Romani Children” in mainstream schools in Jekabpils, Jelgava, Valmiera	2003		63 Romani children integrated into classes, which implement general education programmes.			

Table 3. All Roma-targeting education practices implemented in Latvia

All existing practices, as well as lack of specific inclusive practices in the mainstream education, are based on legal norms effective in Latvia. All these programmes have been accredited and licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

Almost all schools and municipalities, where the number of Roma is higher than average, have searched for more effective ways of including Roma in the education system, apart from schools and municipalities in Riga and Jurmala. Although the number of Roma in the capital city of Riga is about 3,000,⁵¹ there are no educational strategies targeting primary education of Roma. In 2002, a Romani class was established in the Riga National Technical School, which provides a secondary school programme with a special focus on commerce. The practice was discontinued soon afterwards, and there will not be any special Romani classes as the last class will graduate this year. In Jurmala, there were attempts to organise segregated classes for Roma as well, however, at the present there are no such classes.

⁵¹ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 21

Those schools and municipalities, which have developed their specific strategies, use mainly one approach – segregated classes specifically for Roma. Although status of these classes differs, informally all these classes are called Romani classes⁵² and content of their programmes is very similar. Students enrolled there are almost exclusively Romani children, although in some cases educators claim that the classes were not formed only for Romani students.⁵³ In total, there are eight such classes in Latvia.

The Romani Ethnic Classes of the Ventspils Secondary Evening School and the Sabile Secondary School claim that they offer minority educational programmes for Roma; the Talsi Primary School claims to have ordinary classes, which implement mainstream educational programmes, but in practice only Romani children are involved in those. The most widespread practice (four out of eight) is the formation of segregated classes, which implement pedagogic correction programme.

In 2002/2003, 15 per cent out of all Romani children enrolled in mainstream education were registered attending segregated Romani classes, in 2003/2004 – 18 per cent. If the total number of Romani children attending segregated Romani classes in Latvia does not seem extremely high, then the percentage of Romani children attending these classes in towns where these classes are available is disproportionate. For instance, in 2003/2004 it is reported that in Ventspils total of 187 Romani children are registered in all schools of the city. Out of those, 80 per cent were registered at segregated classes. Interestingly, in two out of eight of these classes this year there was no first grade. Two different reasons are claimed – lack of students of this age because of migration in case of Talsi, and Romani parents becoming more aware of the possible effects of segregation and thus enrolling their children in the mainstream schools in case of Tukums. There are also other reports available that confirm that Roma are leaving Latvia⁵⁴ and that Roma start to refuse to attending segregated Romani classes also in other cities.⁵⁵

3.2.1. Pedagogic correction classes

The most common form of segregation is to form a pedagogic correction class particularly for the Romani children.

The Law on Education stipulates that there are five types of specific education programmes: 1) minority education programme; 2) special education programme; 3) social correction education programme; 4) adult education programme; 5) programmes orientated to vocational education. According to Article 3 of the Law on General Education pedagogic correction classes is a specific type of general education. The Article stipulates three specific types of general education: 1) special education; 2) social correction 3) pedagogical correction.

Article 1 of the Law on General Education specifies that “pedagogical correction is an educational program which has been adapted in methodological and organizational terms to the needs of an individual who is of the age group which requires mandatory education and who requires additional learning under the auspices of the basic education program.” It is also stated that educational adjustment is organized by the educational institutions through “remedial

⁵² “Čigānu klases” – in Latvian

⁵³ Ventspils Secondary School No 5 established a pedagogic correction class in 2003/2004. The students enrolled in the class are exclusively Roma.

⁵⁴ Benfelde, S. (2004) “Čigāni pamet Latviju” [Roma are Leaving Latvia], in *Nedēļa*, (02.-08.08.2004), p.14

⁵⁵ In the interview with the leader of the Ventspils Romani NGO on 25.07.2004, she stated that segregated classes are not acceptable and that she advocates for sending Romani children to mainstream schools.

education programs which ensure an education or which improve the quality of obtaining the education, engaging in pedagogical activities with children from unfavourable families and with juvenile lawbreakers.⁵⁶

According to the educators, all pedagogic correction classes implement educational programmes which can be equalised with programmes implemented by the mainstream schools and they are as qualitative as programmes implemented by the mainstream schools. Children, who have previously attended pedagogical correction classes, may continue their education in the mainstream schools.⁵⁷

In total there are fifty-five mainstream schools in Latvia, which implement pedagogic correction programmes. Out of these fifty-five, four are dealing exclusively with Roma.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, no data on the breakdown of students enrolled in these fifty-one pedagogic correction classes according to their ethnicity is available; but there is a very high probability that Romani children are enrolled in these classes as well. This would entail that the share of Roma who study in accordance with the general education programmes is even lower.

3.3. Roma and minority education

Two out of eight segregated classes – the Romani Ethnic Classes at the Ventspils Evening Secondary School and at the Sabile Secondary School – claim that they implement minority educational programmes for Romani children. However, according to the information of the Ministry of Education and Science on the licences to implement certain educational programmes, only the Sabile Secondary School implements minority educational programme for Romani children, while the Romani Ethnic Classes at the Ventspils Evening Secondary School have acquired licenses to implement a general education programme. The administration of the Romani Ethnic Classes claimed that at this school Romani children are taught in accordance with the mainstream curriculum, but by the bilingual methods (in Latvian and Latvian Romani).⁵⁹ Nevertheless, there are serious doubts about compliance of the educational programmes implemented by both schools to the minority educational programmes, as in both schools there are no subjects on the Latvian Romani language, literature, culture or history, and teachers of both schools have admitted that their Latvian Romani language skills are quite limited.⁶⁰

In addition, these practices are not being evaluated and monitored from the perspective of their compliance with the rights to education and minority education; no analysis has been carried out in order to determine whether these classes improve educational participation and achievement of Romani children. Despite absence of the analysis and lack of positive results, these establishments are supported and fostered by the state. Teachers of the Romani Ethnic Classes at the Ventspils Evening Secondary School receive funding from the Society Integration Foundation for holding seminars for teachers from other schools that work with Romani children to share their experience and practices for two years already.

⁵⁶ Law on General Education, Article 1, (10.06.1999 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 23.09.1999; 20.06.2000; 14.09.2000; 31.10.2002), <http://www.izm.gov.lv/default.aspx?tabID=3&id=912>

⁵⁷ LCHRES (2003) "The Situation of Roma in Latvia," p.28

⁵⁸ Data of the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, <http://www.izm.gov.l:8080/lv/default.htm> (6.09.2004)

⁵⁹ Interview with an administrator of the Romani Ethnic Classes, on 04.2004

⁶⁰ Phone interview with the director of the Sabile Secondary School on 08.10.2004 and data from the field work in the Romani Ethnic Classes of the Ventspils Evening Secondary School. (05-09.01.2004; 26-30.04.2004)

Although there is no official evaluation of these practices at national level, in the framework of the master thesis “Successes and Failures of Romani Children in the Educational System of Latvia” the fieldwork was conducted in one of these classes – the Romani Ethnic Classes at the Ventspils Evening School. The fieldwork was conducted in January and April in 2004 in the Romani Ethnic Classes of the Ventspils Evening School because these classes have been operating for the longest period of time in comparison to the other Romani classes and the number of Romani children enrolled there was the highest. In the next section, the analysis of specifically the Romani Ethnic Classes of the Ventspils Secondary Evening School is presented. The conducted analysis raises serious concern about observation of the rights of Romani children to the equal quality education, and to promotion and maintenance of their ethnic identity.

The main and legally justifiable difference between the mainstream schools and the Romani Ethnic Classes in Ventspils is that the Romani Ethnic Classes claim to use the Latvian **Romani language** in the teaching process. It is officially declared in the subject curricula of the first two grades and the Latvian language and mathematics classes for the third and fourth grade. The curricula state that these subjects are taught by bilingual methods – in Latvian and Latvian Romani. The school’s audit report says that teachers have basic knowledge of the Latvian Romani language.

However, the school’s practices do not conform to the minority education approach. The school has never stated the preservation of the Latvian Romani language and identity as a goal; neither could such intention be traced in practice. The teachers did not perceive promotion of the Latvian Romani language and traditions as their task, and only a few of them had Latvian Romani basic skills. They were not willing to admit that lack of knowledge about Romani culture and traditions imposes any limitations on their work. In some classes teachers even felt obliged to teach “Latvian culture”. Traditions and life style of Roma are seen mainly in a negative way – as something which hampers Roma from becoming a part of society which posses the “correct” values: “it is difficult to go somewhere with kids in general, so can you imagine how difficult it is to go with the Roma”; “Roma are much louder, more active, but when they become more cultural they are not like that”; “children are not able to focus, because they have not get used to a specific day schedule, to carrying out duties” – these are just few of the teachers’ statements.

During the two-week observation period, only once a first grade’s teacher used a few Romani words when teaching the Latvian alphabet. Although it was clear that sometimes pupils had difficulties remembering a correct word in Latvian, they never spoke to the teachers in Latvian Romani, while among themselves pupils of any age spoke exclusively in their own language. Also, when children were asked “Why don’t you study in Romani?”, they gave a number of ‘correct’ answers, such as “because we have to learn other languages”, but also “teachers do not know Romani.” A teacher admitted that the teachers do not know the Latvian Romani language well enough to be able to teach in it, they rather use individual words in the Latvian Romani language. The teachers expressed an opinion that the basic knowledge of the Latvian Romani language is useful but not crucial in teaching the Romani kids. The lack of Latvian proficiency thus does not seem to be considered a serious obstacle for acquiring education. This stance is in sharp contrast with the previously mentioned statement that the lack of Latvian language proficiency prevents Romani children from acquiring education.

The evidence obtained in the Romani Ethnic Classes indicates that theory and stated aims do not correspond to the actual school practice, and that minority education programme is not fully implemented.

It should be noted, though, that during the observation of the Romani Ethnic Classes the very same problems that are characteristic for the mainstream education emerged: eight out of eighteen pupils registered for the first grade in 2003/2004 had to repeat the grade; during the both observation weeks the number of students in classes were lower by average eight-ten pupils than claimed by teachers, in some classes there were only two pupils; no individual approaches or specific teaching methods are sufficiently used in the work of the teachers. Methods and forms of communication employed by the teachers rather revealed their pre-conceptions of Roma, than ensured the adjustment of the learning process to the child's specific needs and interests.

The teachers of the Romani Ethnic Classes had the same expectations towards the children as in a mainstream school: children have to come to school with the motivation to learn, a family has to provide support to child's schooling, etc.

There are other factors which negatively influence the learning and self-identity building process of the Romani children, for example, age difference among the pupils in the same class. During the school year 2003/2004 the age of only 60 per cent of the first grade students corresponded to the actual grade, other students were older, although it should be said that this is a considerable improvement in comparison to the first operational years of the school. If during the academic year 2003/2004 the youngest pupil in the first grade was seven years old (which is the usual age for a child to start school in Latvia) and the oldest was ten years old, than, for example, in the year 2000/2001 even a seventeen years' old pupil has started the first grade. The age difference among the pupils does not get even in the following years.

There were also some positive initiatives. Teachers of the Romani Ethnic Classes have managed to achieve more informal communication with the children. Children have overcome some psychological barriers in communicating with the teachers – if they feel like they have got something to say, they dare to interrupt, to volunteer ideas, and have no hesitation of going to the teachers' room during the intervals.

One of the significant positive initiatives is the Romani ABC, a learning aid developed specifically for Romani children by the two teachers from the Romani Ethnic Classes. However, this is the only specially designed for the needs of the Roma textbook, the other materials used are the same as in the mainstream school.

Despite a few positive initiatives, the overall observation is that the Romani Ethnic Classes provide education of inferior quality.

3.4. Assessment of segregated practices

There are almost no practical differences between the segregated practices implemented in Latvia, regardless of their official titles – pedagogic correction, mainstream education or minority education.⁶¹ As majority of these classes have been established only recently, it is difficult to conduct a systematic analysis of these classes. The study “The Situation of Roma in Latvia”⁶² notes that there are two key concerns – the quality of education at the segregated classes, and impact of segregation on the ability of Romani children to integrate into the mainstream schools and the mainstream society. There also other issues to be considered.

⁶¹ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, pp.19-26

⁶² Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 28

Enrolment

There is a possibility that enrolment of Romani children in the segregated classes is not a conscious choice of Roma themselves, but rather a choice imposed by educators and municipalities. According to some schools, such as Tukums Secondary School No 3 and the Romani Ethnic Classes at the Ventspils Evening Secondary School, a very small number of students are registered for school by their parents (as it is provided by Regulations No 446 of the Cabinet of Ministers). Teachers of Romani classes visit families (according to their knowledge and assumption about child's ethnicity) and persuade to register their children in the Romani classes. However, in the situation of Roma, there are two major concerns regarding this method: 1) teachers and officials are prescribing Roma identity to residents on the basis of teachers' and officials' perception of a person's ethnicity; 2) parents may not make a conscious choice of schools.

Emotional and physical segregation

Although Romani classes are parts of the mainstream schools, in some cases Romani classes are the only classes at the school which are organised in the second, i.e. afternoon, shift. This indirect segregation may negatively influence self-perception of Romani students, and it also deprives children of the possibility of everyday contacts with children from the other ethnic backgrounds. It may also reinforce the stereotypical perception of Roma as inferior by the other students, and may contribute to the wide-spread perception among non-Romani students and the broader public that Roma are a very closed community not accepting strangers.

Quality of education

The education in these classes is officially comparable to the education that is obtained by children studying in accordance with the general education programmes, and theoretically it allows graduates to move on to the mainstream schools. In reality, however, the special status and name of the classes are likely to have a negative influence on the ability of graduates to continue their education elsewhere.

There are doubts about the quality of this education. There are also reports that some subjects mandatory in general education curricula are missing in curricula of pedagogic correction classes (for instance, the English language in pedagogic correction class in Ventspils Secondary School No 5).⁶³

Rights to preserve their identity and culture

At present, none of the Romani classes provide children with the opportunity to learn about Romani culture or history.⁶⁴

Possibilities of further integration

Although the goal is allegedly to help the Romani children to integrate into the regular classes eventually, there have been no results so far.⁶⁵

It should be noted that no evaluation of effectiveness of these classes – no reports on academic achievements, drop-out rates, etc. – have been conducted neither by the state nor by the municipalities and schools.

⁶³ Interviews with teachers in Ventspils on 26-30.04.2004 and the phone interview with a teacher from Talsi Elementary School on 02.09.2004

⁶⁴ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.28

⁶⁵ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.28

3.5. Special education

In Latvian legislation “special education” is classified as one out of three specific types of general education.⁶⁶ The Law stipulates that the special education programmes are developed for students with mental and physical disabilities and special needs. Children are enrolled in these schools in accordance with the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, which provide that a child may be enrolled in school on the basis of the application of his/her parents and the conclusion of a state or municipal pedagogic medical commission.

The term “special needs” includes not only children with mental and physical disabilities, but also children with behavioural, developmental or serious social problems, who despite being of average or above average intelligence nevertheless need special help in order to achieve.⁶⁷

In practice, there are sixty-four schools for children with mental and physical disabilities. In 2002/2003, there were 325,503 students enrolled in full-time mainstream general schools, while 10,250 children (3.25 per cent) attended special schools and special classes. Re-integration of these students into mainstream schools is almost non-existent – in 2002, only seven students were transferred to the general mainstream schools.⁶⁸

According to the Department of Statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science, in 2003/2004 150 Romani children (10 per cent of all Romani children registered in the mainstream schools) were enrolled in special schools. There is also sporadic data available about the number of Roma in these schools from the individual municipalities – in Daugavpils, Jelgava and Jurmala about 1 per cent of Romani students attend the special schools, while in Jekabpils and Valmiera the number of students attending special schools reaches 40 per cent.⁶⁹

The inability of the mainstream education to deal with Roma is reinforced indirectly by Romani parents. Applications of Roma parents to accept their children in these schools could be motivated by their poor financial conditions and the fact that in special schools everything – food, lodging, clothes, and books – is funded by the state.

4. Examples of good practices

A recent and promising initiative regarding education of Romani children is a project ‘Qualitative Education for Roma Children’ implemented by the Education Initiative Centre in the academic year of 2003/2004 in the territories of three municipalities – Jēkabpils, Jelgava and Valmiera. The key task of the project is to eliminate the barriers set by the educational institutions, which prevent Romani children to be included into the mainstream education system. The outcomes of the project are yet to be evaluated.

The target audience of the project was not only Romani children but also their parents, teachers and school administrators, social workers, local and regional government officials and others. It covered the three regions of Latvia, where the number of Roma is among the highest (Jelgava, Jekabpils, Valmiera – according to the official data, twenty per cent of Latvia’s Roma live

⁶⁶ Law on General Education (10.06.1999 with amending laws of 05.08.1999; 23.09.1999; 20.06.2000; 14.09.2000; 31.10.2002), <http://www.izm.gov.lv/default.aspx?tabID=3&id=912>

⁶⁷ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Reviews of National Policies for Education. Latvia, (<http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/1401071E.PDF>, (12.03.2004), p. 129

⁶⁸ Data of the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, <http://www.izm.gov.lv/default.aspx?tabID=7&id=825>

⁶⁹Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p. 27

there⁷⁰). The project was implemented from September 2003 to July 2004. The project received 87 per cent of funding (EUR 93,543) from EU Phare and state programme 'Social Integration,' which is administered by the Society Integration Foundation, while co-funding in the amount of 13 per cent was ensured by the Open Society Institute, Jelgava City Council of Jelgava, Jekabpils Valmiera, and Regional Councils of Jelgava and Valmiera.⁷¹

Within the framework of the project, five inclusive classrooms at the mainstream schools were organised, and total of sixty-three Romani children were enrolled in the general classes at the mainstream schools. The formation of the inclusive classrooms was accompanied by the development of the support centres for Roma parents and organisation of eleven seminars on the following topics "Children rights and their advocacy," "Society without prejudice," "Inclusive classrooms," "Anti-prejudice education," "Developing of a child-centered classroom for five-seven-year-old children." Nine workshops for Roma and non-Roma parents, as well as twenty-seven consultations for parents of Roma children, teachers and other participants were held. Ten children's books have been translated into Romani, and copies were distributed to the inclusive classrooms. The total number of participants was 826. Among them 217 parents, 364 teachers and school administrators, twenty-two social workers, forty-five local and regional government officials, and 178 others. The Society Integration Foundation has approved the continuation of the project to be launched in fall 2004. The project was reflected in the local and national mass media.⁷²

5. Main actors involved

Until now no comprehensive attempt by the state to offer solutions to the educational problems faced by Roma has been made. All good practices were initiated by individuals of non-Roma origin, municipalities and schools. But it should be noted that since the very beginning till now the segregated Romani classes have been morally and practically supported by the Romani activists and leaders on the national and regional levels. The Leader of the National Roma Cultural Association initiated formation of a special Romani class in Riga; in Tukums the Head of the Romani NGO "Nova Drom" provides his support in identifying and enrolling Romani children in the Romani classes in Tukums. Nevertheless, this support may be explained by a lack of analysis of these practices, and recently some Romani leaders have started to doubt the feasibility of segregation practices and advocate for inclusion of Romani children into the mainstream schools.⁷³ As a result, presently some segregated classes (in Tukums and Kuldiga) claim that the local Romani activists support them, while others (in Ventspils and Talsi) state that they do not have any relations with the local Romani NGOs.⁷⁴

Involvement of Romani parents in the decision-making processes has been very low. School administrations claim that in the majority of cases Romani parents are not interested in their children's schooling or in any other school's activities.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2001), *The Results of the 2000 National Census in Latvia: Collection of Statistical Data*, p. 202

⁷¹ The Society Integration Foundation

<http://www.lsif.lv/lv/?id=24> (20.10.2004)

⁷² The Education Initiative Centre, <http://www.iic.lv/Projekts003.htm> (20.09.2004)

⁷³ Interview with a leader of a Romani NGO in Ventspils, 25.07.2004

⁷⁴ Phone interviews with school officials on 10.2004

⁷⁵ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, pp. 19-25

6. Studies on the attitudes of the majority of population

According to a number of polls, Roma is among the least favourite ethnic groups in Latvia and have a negative image in general.⁷⁶ In a very recent study conducted in 2004, only Muslims and Kurds were evaluated less acceptable than Roma as potential friends and spouses.⁷⁷ Attitudes of the majority population towards Romani children as classmates of their children have been studied only once – in the framework of the study “The Situation of Roma in Latvia.” When asked “What would be your attitude if a Romani child joined your child’s classroom, almost half of the respondents (48.9 per cent) said that their attitude would be the same as towards any other classmate, 2.9 per cent claimed that it would be more favourable than toward any other classmate. However, 19.6 per cent and 9.8 per cent would be somewhat more cautious and considerably more cautious respectively. The remaining respondents were ready to take more active steps – 4.5 per cent would tell his or her child to avoid the Romani classmate or would look for another school, while 1 per cent would try to make sure that a Romani child does not attend this class. Interesting, that among respondents whose children already attend classes together with the Romani children, the number of those who would be positive and neutral was higher by 10 per cent. It should be noted that respondents were more tolerant towards Roma as classmates of their children as compared to having Roma as neighbours, colleagues or family members.⁷⁸

7. Studies on the attitudes of Roma towards education

As there is no national policy or overall strategies and practices targeting Roma, it is not entirely surprising that there is also no deep study on the attitudes of Roma towards the education. It would be highly recommended to conduct a study about the ways of life and attitudes of the contemporary Latvian Roma, as teachers and education officials often manipulate with allegations that Roma do not want to be educated, and explain the lack of inclusion of Romani children in the education system by their unwillingness to study.

In the framework of the study “The Situation of Roma in Latvia” focus groups and interviews with Romani representatives were held.⁷⁹ Among other issues, attitudes towards education were discussed. The lack of funds was the most widely acknowledged reason why Romani children do not go to school. Parents’ concern about the well-being of their children at school is another reason why they sometimes keep children out of the classrooms. The pessimistic attitude of Roma toward their own situation in general is reflected in the attitude towards education of their children, as they perceive all efforts to be in vain. It is important to note, though, that almost all respondents mentioned that their attitude towards education has improved since the collapse of the communist regime.

Conclusion

The situation of Roma in the field of education is very alarming: the last 2000 census shows low educational levels among Roma, low enrolment rate of Romani children has also been admitted by a number of educators and officials; the recent data indicates that despite the positive birth rate

⁷⁶ The poll "Attitudes of Latvian Residents towards Different Ethnic Groups" conducted by the research company SKDS in 02.2004. Out of given fourteen ethnic groups Latvian residents ranked Roma as the least favorite ethnic group in Latvia. According to another survey, almost half of the respondents claimed that their attitude towards Roma at the work place would be slightly or very cautious, while 5.8 per cent would avoid and ignore them and 3 per cent would do something that s/he would be fired. Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.7

⁷⁷ Baltic Institute of Social Science (2004), *Ethnic Tolerance and Integration of the Latvian Society*, p. 64

⁷⁸ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, pp. 68-69

⁷⁹ Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (2003), *The Situation of Roma in Latvia*, p.22

the number of Roma in mainstream schools is dropping. The mainstream education fails to ensure that many Romani children are enrolled and complete compulsory primary education. Although educators and education officials claim that one of the key reasons is their unwillingness to study, there is a number of other factors within the educational system, political and economic situation, which account for failures to include Roma in the mainstream education system and which should be addressed.

The existing international and domestic legal framework ensures a good basis for the observation of basic norms concerning children rights to education, minority education and anti-discrimination. However, attention should be paid to the further elaboration and practical implementation of some norms regulating the education in Latvia, such as mandatory pre-school education for all children, free choice of school, development of curriculum meeting the needs of diverse society, training of teachers in multiculturalism and work with diverse children.

Legal acts guarantee to the ethnic minorities residing in Latvia a possibility to study in their native tongues, and leave room for adjustment of the school curriculum to the minorities' special needs – studies of their own traditions, culture and history. However, minority education issues have been up to now mainly discussed from the perspective of the language of instruction and the need to study the state language. It has resulted in the implementation of various practices, whose effectiveness has not been evaluated. In the case of Roma, it is particularly important that in all cases decisions about their education are taken not by Roma.

However, until now no overall official evaluation of successes and failures of the mainstream education towards Roma has been conducted and, as a result, no complex or specific national policy or programme aimed at the improvement of the situation of Roma in the field of education is developed. Considering the data on the low educational level of Roma, the lack of national educational policies, strategies and programmes targeting specifically Roma and covering the whole territory of Latvia may be interpreted as a non-inclusive policy towards Roma, even if it is not officially formulated.

The existing individual attempts to provide education to the Romani children are made by the individual schools and municipalities. All these attempts imply segregation of Romani children. Despite the obvious drawbacks, segregation practices are very rarely condemned by educators in Latvia and, in fact, are seen as an appropriate approach to addressing the issues of Roma education.⁸⁰

Both the mainstream school and the segregated Roma classes have a number of practices which contribute to the exclusion of the Roma children from the mainstream schools and are discriminatory. Both models perceive Roma as deviant from normal.

The key criticism towards the mainstream school is that it expects all children to be able to follow the same programme implemented with the same methods. It is modelled for an “average” pupil, leaving the ones deviate from the “norm” out. The chances of a Roma child, coming to a mainstream school from a poor family and without pre-school education, to ‘survive’ the mainstream school system are almost nil.

Although there are some good initiatives and adjustments made particularly for the needs of Roma, such as the development of the ABC learning aid for Roma children, in general segregated

⁸⁰ Interview with the Head of the Minority Department of the Ministry of Education and Science on 10.01.2004, Head of the Ventpils School Board on 07.05.2003

classes cannot be evaluated as an educational model which ensures equal quality education for its pupils and is a liberated choice of parents. The main results achieved by the segregated classes for the moment is equipping children with the basic reading and writing skills. Education in modern societies, however, is required to fulfil much broader spectrum of functions.

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