



POLICY BRIEF No 2019/23, MAY 2019

Roma Integration in Greece: The Aspect of Education

Elena Kokkinou

Key points

Approximately 175.000 Roma are estimated to reside in Greece (1.55% of the population), and therefore the Greek government is obliged to protect this minority's human rights. Their seclusion from the Greek society has been resulting to higher criminality rates and unsanitary conditions in areas where they settle. Meanwhile by decisions of the Council of Europe all Member States have committed to implementing more radical measures to speed up the integration of Roma in their society. One of the key areas of integration is education, in which our country has been left behind by our fellow Member States. School is undoubtedly of high importance to address issues that concern the Roma minority such as high unemployment rates and unsanitary living conditions. However, over half of Roma children have never attended school, while those who do attend usually drop out at the early stages of adolescence. As a result a great percentage of Romani people states not being able to read Greek or being able to read the basics. The measures we've taken so far to encourage their participation in the Greek education system seem to be inadequate apart from the "Education of Roma Children" programme by the Kapodistrian University and the "Roma Children in Macedonia & Thrace" programme by the Aristotle University. Thus in order to achieve the Roma integration in our country we could do the following:

- ◆ Schools in areas with high concentration of Roma families must be staffed by teachers specialised or specifically trained to deal with multicultural classes.
- ◆ Organise school activities that will help Romani children make a positive connection to school
- ◆ Hire Roma individuals who have escaped the gypsy way of living to mediate between schools and Roma families.
- ◆ Equipping multicultural schools with school psychologists.

Elena Kokkinou is an undergraduate student at the Department of International and European Studies, University of Piraeus.



Introduction

The issue of Roma integration has been bothering both our country and the European Union greatly over the past few years. It is of great importance to take action in order to speed up the process of combating social exclusion of the Roma minority and therefore the consequences it breeds such as rise in criminality rates, establishment of ghetto settlements and of course the violation of their human rights. Considering the fact that the Romani are the largest minority in Europe -estimated approximately at 10-12 million people- (European Commission, n.d.) it's obvious why the European Union is so fixated on eliminating their segregation. One of the key areas that the European Roma integration framework strategies (NRISs) is focused on is education; an area on which our country seems to be lacking in comparison to other Member States (European Commission, 2017). Most Member States have made significant progress in this certain area leaving Greece and Romania behind (European Commission, 2017) which could make one doubt our country's commitment to this goal. Taking into account our obligation to report annually to the European Commission regarding the measures we've taken to aid the integration progress (European Council, 2016), it seems essential for our government to be more radical concerning our national Roma integration policy.

What is the current situation?

According to a study made by the Hellenic Ministry of the Interior (Hellenic Ministry of the Interior, 2013) the percentage of enrollment in schools is rather low: 54% of the parents state that at least one of their children has never attended school. But even among the children that did enroll to school 89% of them dropped out at the early stages of adolescence (12-13 years old) mainly pleading to personal or social excuses such as: He didn't want to attend school, it doesn't fit our lifestyle, etc. Over half of the respondents have never attended school while 33.4% have only attended some primary school grades (Table 2.1.1). It is also found that 66.9% of the respondents can't read Greek, while 11.8% of them can read a little bit, 13.2% can read quite well and 8.1% of them state they can read very well. Of course these statistics include the older generations which tend to be less accustomed with the Greek language. However the difference regarding school attendance isn't all that great as most students drop out as was stated earlier.



Ages	Didn't attend school	1-5 Primary school grades	Primary school graduate	Few Secondary school grades	Secondary/High School Graduate	Total
0-18	178	202	24	26	3	443
	40.2%	47.9%	5.4%	5.9%	0.7%	100%
19-35	231	101	42	10	11	405
	57.0%	27.4%	10.4%	2.5%	2.7%	100%
36-55	143	42	10	2	3	202
	70.8%	21.8%	5.0%	1.0%	1.5%	100%
56+	62	8	2	0	0	72
	86.1%	11.1%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
Total	614	375	78	38	17	1122
	54.7%	33.4%	7.0%	3.4%	1.5%	100%

Table 2.1.1: Romani level of education by age Group as derived from “National Strategy for Roma Integration” by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2013.

How does it affect us?

According to the Council of Europe approximately 175.000 Roma reside in Greece, which is a great percentage on the total population of 11 million people. Therefore, according to the United Nations Minorities Declaration in 1992 we are obliged to protect their existence and adopt appropriate legislative measures so as to encourage maintaining their culture while adapting in the country they live in. However the Roma minority does not seem to want to fit in. They maintain their gypsy way of living, posing threats to both public health, due to unsanitary living conditions, as well as law and order, as they often resort to theft or other criminal activities, unable to get a proper job. The peculiarity of the Romani is what has led the European Union to urge its members to actively enforce their integration (European Council, 2016). Education is a key factor to fixing this situation. The employment rates are after all tightly connected to education level (Hellenic Ministry of the Interior, 2013) and certainly education would eventually lead to more sanitary living conditions.



What have we done so far?

Offering allowance to Roma in order to enroll their children seems to have a reverse result and school just doesn't seem appealing to neither the kids nor the parents. Instead the parents encourage their children to stay home and take care of their younger siblings or work with them. According to teachers the lack of support from their families is what keeps them behind (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016). Furthermore, the many attempts that have been made with actions that aim to sensibilise and motivate parents and children to attend school seem to be in vein mainly due to the instability of the teaching faculty in the schools near Romani settlements. Usually teachers don't choose such schools and therefore the teaching is done by substitute teachers who transfer every year and can't be properly trained to deal with this peculiar situation (Zaikou, 2015). Programmes such as "Education of Roma Children" implemented by the Kapodistrian University of Athens or "Roma Children in Macedonia and Thrace" implemented by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki seem to have somehow boosted the presence of Romani children, mainly in primary education, according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2016). These programmes included Professors of psychology and pedagogy, their students, as well as mediators who were of Roma origins and intended to make a positive association to school and convince both children and their parents that school would help them lead a better life. They therefore prove that when properly trained the educators could bring the intended result.

What can be done? Recommendations

- ◆ First of all it is extremely important to reinforce inclusion of Romani children in compulsory education (Primary and Secondary school). To achieve that, schools in areas with large numbers of Roma families such as Menidi, Aghia Varvara, Megara, etc. must be staffed by teachers specialised or specifically trained to deal with multicultural classes.
- ◆ After-school activities could also contribute by making the children make a positive connection to school.
- ◆ The mediators that were used in the "Education of Roma children" programme seemed to be very efficient. Thus it may be wise hiring Roma people who have escaped the gypsy way of living to mediate between schools and Roma families.
- ◆ Last but not least a school psychologist could also be helpful for the children to adjust smoothly into our culture by supporting Roma children while also helping Greek children understand diversity. A school psychologist seems to be essential for multicultural schools at the modern stage of the Greek society where minorities are often secluded, as was proved by the Roma case.



Conclusion

The issue of Roma integration is not something we should take light of. The consequences of their segregation are conspicuous and pose threats to the proper operation of the state. The peculiarities of their gypsy customs and their denial to abandon them render the task more difficult but the partial success of past programmes proves that it is definitely not impossible. Education is admittedly one of the key areas to achieving integration and should the government adopt a more purposeful approach the results would undoubtedly be more efficient.



References

Council of the European Union (2016) *Accelerating the Process of Roma Integration – Council Conclusions (8 December 2016)*. Retrieved from data.consilium.europa.eu

European Commission (2014) *The European Union And Roma – Factsheet Greece* retrieved from ec.europa.eu

European Commission (2017) *Midterm review of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies SWD(2017) 286 final*. Retrieved from eur-lex.europa.eu

European Commission (2018) *Report on the evaluation of the EU framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 {SWD(2018) 480 final}*. Retrieved from eur-lex.europa.eu

European Commission (n.d.) *Roma Integration in EU countries* Retrieved from ec.europa.eu

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018) *Roma Integration in Fundamental Rights Report 2018- FRA opinions*. Retrieved from fra.europa.eu

General Assembly resolution 47/135 *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (18 December 1992)* available from www.ohchr.gr

Hellenic Ministry of Labour and Social Security (2011) *Εθνική Στρατηγική για την Κοινωνική Ένταξη των Ρομά*. Retrieved from www.esfhellas.gr

Hellenic Ministry of Labour and Social Security (2018) *Πρόγραμμα «Ένταξη και Ενδυνάμωση των Ρομά»*. Retrieved from government.gov.gr

Hellenic Ministry of the Interior (2013) *Εθνική Στρατηγική για τους Ρομά*

Katsikaris L, & Koumalatsou E., & Ntontis D. (2016) *Local engagement for Roma inclusion Locality study Aghia Varvara (Greece)*. Retrieved from fra.europa.eu

Katsikaris L, & Koumalatsou E., & Ntontis D. (2016) *Local engagement for Roma inclusion Locality study Megara (Greece)*. Retrieved from fra.europa.eu

Parthenis C., & Fragoulis G. (2016) *“Otherness” as Threat: Social and Educational Exclusion of Roma People in Greece*. Retrieved from eric.ed.gov

Parthenis C., & Tseliou E. (2014) *Πρόγραμμα: « Εκπαίδευση των Παιδιών Ρομά»2010-2013*. Retrieved from www.keda.uoa.gr

Zaikou I. (2015) *Τα αθέατα εμπόδια στην πολιτική ένταξης των Ρομά: αντίστροφος ρατσισμός και αυτογκετοποίηση. Ο ρόλος της εκπαίδευσης* (Master's thesis) University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Available from ΨΗΦΙΑΔΑ. Retrieved from dspace.lib.uom.gr