

ROMA SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (BOOK REVIEW)

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Abstract: This review offers a brief outline on an edition by Iulius Rostas, co-published by the Roma Educational Fund and the Central European University Press in 2012. The structure of the book, its main findings and its academic significance are summarised by the reviewer.

Keywords: education, Roma, desegregation, Central and Eastern Europe

It is considered one of the most significant principle to emphasise the demand of equal treatment of pupils at schools even though they come from such vulnerable groups of our societies as the Roma. *Ten Years After: A History of Roma School Desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe* edited by Iulius Rostas (2012) is a book devoted to describe and explain how this demand has been put into practice recently.

The role of education regarding equal access and equity in our societies is rather a commonplace. One's educational index (i. e. score on ISCED ranking) may be considered as a significant marker because higher level of schooling leads to better labour market chances and improved health and living conditions. It is needless to explain the necessity of inclusion, social integration and the essential need for school desegregation in today's democratic societies – still, this issue remains one of the most burning challenges especially for the diverse Romani/Gypsy communities (the Roma) in relatively new-born democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Despite of their differences of several natures all five countries represented in the present edition, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia have significant Roma populations – up to 10 percent according to some estimates in particular cases.

2007 was proclaimed to be the year of equal chances in the European Union, the decade between 2005 and 2015 is devoted to Roma Inclusion, where one of the most emphasized policy-making priorities regarding the Roma is schooling and education. On the level of declared recent intentions of international policy making the preference of the issue is unquestionable.

Several anthropologists, sociologists and educationalists however agree that although childhood and school are inseparable concepts in the modern European thinking of the representatives of the majority of societies, schooling is not necessarily taken as an a priori universal or cultural value for the Roma.

Rostas, a human rights advocate, free-lance policy researcher and consultant who has conducted training, evaluations and offered technical assistance to different organizations regarding Roma national minority initiatives of Rom origin himself from Romania seems to contradict this view through his personal example when compiling an edition regarding the progress of the decade-long Roma school desegregation process in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia at the millennium – on national levels. The knowledge of the expert contributors of the book comes from their experience gained while working in these countries and focusing on the subject matter.

Analyzing desegregation efforts of the targeted region from a variety of perspectives, combining sociological approaches to education and policy analysis, legal analysis, as much as comparative politics, the publication approaches Roma inclusion in education through school desegregation as an interdisciplinary issue of numerous contributors (the most knowledgeable scholars, practicing lawyers,

and activists about these subjects) edited by Rostas who introduces and concludes his report in a clearly structured, reader-friendly way.

As he notes in his introduction, the idea of the book was born as a conclusion of several discussions the editor has had with his professional acquaintances, realizing that experts of different possible approaches of the issue do not necessarily have “enough information available on the subject to piece together the whole puzzle” (2). Regardless of relative geographical closeness for instance representatives of the same field in one country may have no access to relevant data of the other. Also, individual knowledge of these experts in numerous cases has not been documented and published properly.

Rostas’ recent edition is divided into three parts. One of the most significant consequences of the first part consisting of three chapters, which is an analysis of institutional reflections of international organizations, national governments and NGOs related to school segregation is the undefined nature of the basic concept, i.e. segregation itself. By covering inter-governmental, governmental, and non-governmental approaches to school segregation and analyzing public policies, legal documents, existing empirical data and studies, as well as data collected through individual interviews with human rights activists and lawyers we may conclude what a challenge it is to pose a legal definition applicable to the majority of relevant cases.

In-depth interviews with Roma activists who assume(d) a leading role in the desegregation process in the five countries and adequate national policy reviews from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia compile the second part of the book. The interviews cover topics such as the ways segregation became a public interest issue during Transition, the first phase of the post-communist period. Relevant strategies of the political agenda, desegregation programmes and policies, and assessment of the current situation is offered in the case of each country. As each interview is critically reviewed by a policy or educational expert from the concerned country the reader may gain a clear picture regarding the issue in the countries analyzed. The balanced representation of gender concerning contributors also adds to the democratic approach of these chapters.

The third part of the book consists of the conclusions of the editor who attempts to identify possible trends and solutions of school desegregation processes. Although in public discourse there seems to exist a shared consensus concerning the undesirable nature of segregation that is against human rights standards, Rostas points out specific differences and contradictions or paradoxes in the five countries researched. This concluding section raises challenging questions and proposes several possible scenarios for the future of the school desegregation process, aiming at identifying key issues, which countries of Central and Eastern Europe need to face in order to move forward from their current state of affairs.

Illustrating the wide range of international experts amongst the contributors of this book let us mention some significant representatives of various fields examined throughout the edition. Sociologist Taba from Romania and long-ago state school teacher and policy officer Ryder from the UK compose a chapter on institutional responses to segregation, including governments and non-governmental organisations. Lawyer Danka from Hungary adds to the role of international organisations in combating school-desegregation. Together with Taba sociologist Surdu from Romania completed a guide for the interviews published in the book – conducted by Rostas, Taba and Surdu. The Romani interviewees consist of policy expert Russinov from Bulgaria, activist Vesely from the Czech Republic, former MEP Mohacsi from Hungary, President of the Board of the REF Bercus from Romania and policy expert Orgovanova from Slovakia.

At the closing phase of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in agreement with Rostas we may conclude that what he summarizes in the present edition is not the history some readers might expect from the book (343). Instead of a complex and coherent history of Roma desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe offering a romantic and very happy ending the reader is invited to follow a story of ever-changing political environmental scenes with disappearing and new-born actors – due to some characteristics of dynamics of post-communist societies. The finishing quote at the end of the book by the former Czech President Vaclav Havel according to which the treatment of the Roma will be a

litmus test of civil society echoes Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts regarding democracies, including new-born ones: you can judge them by the way they treat their minorities.

References

Rostas, I. (Ed.) (2012): Ten Years After: A History of Roma School Desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe. Roma Education Fund (REF) – Central European University (CEU) Press, Budapest – New York, pp 377, ISBN 978-6155053139 (hardbound).

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