

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: EUR 72/003/2008 (Public)

Date: 08 April 2008

Slovakia: NGOs call on Slovakia on International Roma Day to address discrimination of Roma in education

Amnesty International

Center for Civil and Human Rights (Poradňa pre občianske a ľudské práva)

Citizen and Democracy (Občan a demokracia)

European Roma Rights Centre

Milan Šimecka Foundation (Nadácia Milana Šimecku)

New Roma Generation (Nová rómska generácia)

Open Society Institute

People in Need - Slovak branch (Človek v tísní - pobočka Slovensko)

Roma Public Policy Institute (Inštitút rómskej verejnej politiky)

Wide Open School Foundation (Nadácia Škola dokorán)

Across the Council of Europe Member States racial, ethnic and cultural discrimination against Roma remains profound. Roma people continue to be largely excluded from public life and unable to enjoy access to adequate housing, health services and face discrimination in accessing employment. In many member states, the authorities are failing to ensure the rights of Romani children to access to education without discrimination. Some Member States continue to tolerate, and even promote, the diversion of Roma into special classes or schools where a reduced curriculum is taught.

We welcome the Council of Europe's efforts to call attention to the need for states to address the discrimination faced by Romani communities across its Member States, including the initiative by the Government of Slovakia, as Chair of the Committee of Ministers, to organize a European Conference on Roma Education on 8 April -- the International Roma Day.

We consider that the country occupying the Chair of the highest decision-making body of Europe's regional human rights based intergovernmental organization, and hosting this important event, should demonstrate exemplary commitment and strong leadership in the fulfilment of the principles enshrined in Article 3 of the Statute of the Council of Europe -- namely the respect for the rule of law and the enjoyment of human rights by *all* persons within its jurisdiction, without discrimination.

In order to fully honour these obligations as a Council of Europe Member State, we consider that the Government of Slovakia must engage proactively and systematically to redress patterns of racial discrimination and other human rights violations against the Romani minority in the country. In particular, we consider that concerted efforts and effective measures are needed to address the systematic erroneous placement of Romani children in schools for children with mental disabilities and the prevalence of other forms of segregated education of Romani children in some areas of the country. These conditions pose serious barriers to Romani children's realization of their rights to education free from discrimination.

A nexus of factors work together, creating barriers for Roma in accessing equal education, particularly at the primary school level. Physical isolation from mainstream society, the prevalence of extremely substandard living conditions in some Romani communities as well as high levels of anti-Romani sentiment in the Slovak society, all hinder access of many Romani children to the mainstream education system.

We note that the Government of Slovakia has adopted a number of measures with the aim of improving Romani children's access to education. However, we remain concerned that special measures have not been systematically implemented, and monitoring and assessing the impact of such measures on the education of Romani children remains inadequate. Furthermore, research by the undersigned organizations, along with the findings of other bodies and experts, indicate that the measures which have been in place in recent years have failed to address the problem of segregated and discriminatory education of Romani children in Slovakia. With the current school reform process, and discussions in the parliament on the first new Schools Act since 1984, the Government of Slovakia has a unique opportunity to ensure equal quality education for all children, including Roma.

In its priorities for the six months of its Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Slovakia emphasized the need to find "solutions to the difficult situation of the Roma, Travellers and related groups" as "in many cases they continue being victims of discrimination and prejudice and face grave difficulties related to education, housing, employment, social issues, etc." The occasion of Slovakia's chairing the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe is a real opportunity for the authorities to take significant steps to enhance the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights at home, and to encourage such enhancement across the Council of Europe region, including with respect to the rights of Romani people.

We therefore urge the Government of Slovakia, while still serving as the Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, to:

- **Make a clear and unequivocal political commitment towards ensuring respect for the right to education for all children and the eradication of all forms of discrimination in education, including segregated and substandard education of Romani children.** The government should ensure the genuine participation of representatives of the Roma community and should consult with civil society regarding the implementation of this commitment. This process of consultation should lead to concrete, targeted and effective steps by the Government of Slovakia to reverse existing patterns of segregated education of Roma and to prevent further segregation. **Romani children should no longer be placed in special or segregated schools or classes simply because they are Roma or because they are considered to be "socially disadvantaged".**
- Put forward **amendments to existing anti-discrimination legislation** which introduce an explicit prohibition of racial segregation in education, and use the opportunity of current discussion on the new Schools Act to demonstrate this commitment to equal education free from discrimination for all, including Roma.

Public Document

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK

www.amnesty.org