

CENTRAL EUROPE SLAMMED FOR ROMA PUPILS TREATMENT

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Despite some improvements, Roma children in the EU are still disadvantaged when it comes to education access, according to a study by an EU agency.

The report by the Vienna-based European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) argues that Roma and Travellers' pupils are still facing direct or indirect discrimination and exclusion.

"As a result, Roma pupils tend to leave education early, which deprives them of the qualifications that would enable them to compete later in the labour market," EUMC director Beate Winkler said.

The authors of the study, which is based on contributions from NGOs and experts across the EU, say that school authorities tend to segregate pupils because they think they have "different needs" or due to their problematic behaviour and learning difficulties.

"Segregation has taken place within a classroom by sitting Roma pupils in a different part of the room. Arrangements have also been made to instruct them in separate classrooms within the same school where they followed the same curriculum or a "simple version."

Another worrying tendency highlighted by the report is "the frequent placement of Roma pupils in 'special schools' for mentally handicapped children - still a phenomenon in member States like Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic."

The three central European countries also show cases of low school enrolment and attendance of Roma pupils, with their transition to secondary education remaining particularly poor, according to the report. In the Czech Republic, which has around 250,000 Roma citizens, 25 percent of Roma aged 12 and above have completed primary education compared to 73 percent of the majority population in 2005.

In Hungary, where between 400,000 to 600,000 Roma live, 88 percent of 5-year-old Roma are enrolled in pre-school education, but around 15 per cent did not continue with secondary education in contrast to a non-Roma average of 3.2 percent.

In Slovakia (300,000 - 450.000 Roma), about 0.53 percent of Roma children were registered in "normal" primary schools in 2004, while 7.62 percent were assigned to "special needs schools," almost 15 times higher.

EU social commissioner Vladimir Spidla told EUobserver he is aware of the difficulties these countries have to put in place policies improving the situation of the Roma communities.

"We cannot deny that they are trying hard but these worrying trends take years before a more visible change takes place and brings results," he said, adding that the issue will come under the spotlight even more when Bulgaria and Romania - with their large Roma communities - join the EU.

The EUMC suggested that national governments should focus on introducing more Roma related materials to schools, such as history and language books, and get properly trained teachers to deal with ethnically mixed classes.

Altogether, there are around 12 to 15 million Roma living in Europe, with 7 to 9 million of them living in

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the EU, which makes the Roma the single largest ethnic minority in the union.