

## **Roma in Poznań, Poland – discourse on their “assimilation”**

The aim of this report is to present the way Roma segregation in the society is perceived and conceptualised by the representatives of majority. This is a first step in the research to be done more extensively on social discourses on this topic – including media and administrative discourses.

This report is based on the analysis of scientific literature, documents circulated by Ministry on National Education, and the Ministry of Interior and Administration, reports and expert documents on minorities' education in Poland, articles in newspapers, and qualitative interviews. The latter were conducted between February and May 2011 with employees of educational institutions, teachers, headmasters and NGO activists engaged in the efforts aimed at improving the education and integration of the Roma minority in Poznań and Swarzędz<sup>1</sup> Interviews were preceded by several weeks of preparations which often focused on identifying people willing to take part in such interviews and meetings. We have to say that the subject of interrogations evoked a lot of unease among the people inquired to the degree that they were sometimes suspicious about the purpose of our research.

We also used a snowballing method in the process of interviewing in both case studies. Each interview lasted at least 60 minutes (on average app. 80 minutes), was recorded and transcribed. In the body of the report, citations from the interviews end with the initials of the interlocutors.

The interview guides and the list of interviews can be found in Appendixes I and II of this report. During the interviews, many questions were asked about the use of the material. The interviewees also expressed their concerns about the possibility of quoting them and, above all, about disclosing their names. In several cases, the interlocutors asked for turning the recorder off, because they thought that some contents may prove problematic and threaten their jobs.

In the course of preparing and conducting interviews, there was a clear reluctance and lack of understanding for the idea of a group discussion on the issues of multiculturalism and tolerance, especially among the employees of education-supervising institutions and some teachers. This confirms that tolerance appears as something obvious in Polish society, but at the same time public expression of opinions on socially sensitive topics, such as minorities' rights and the hegemony of the Roman-Catholic religion in Poland, raise some fears. In result, we actually failed to persuade more people to participate in the focus groups. To us, it is a piece of information important in the context of the topic studied and in fact supporting our view on the general attitude towards the debate on multiculturalism in Poland.

The structure of the interviews is given in Annex II, however, we have to emphasise here that we have conducted semi-structured interviews, treating the guidelines merely as a helpful tool for keeping the basic scheme of the interview. Spontaneous comments of the respondents were particularly desired as the views on the topics addressed during interviews are often

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<sup>1</sup> An economically vibrant town with more than 30 thousand inhabitants, a part of the Poznań agglomeration.

rooted in stereotypes. Simultaneously, questions about the situation of national minorities and the attitude toward religion proved to be quite embarrassing for many informants. In any case, we made all possible effort not to impose answers.

Some basic socio-demographic data about the informants, such as ethnicity or nationality, gender and workplace, are given in the list of interviews in Annex I below. In total, 16 interviews were conducted with employees of the Educational Board (*Kuratorium Oświaty*), the Department of Education of the Municipality of Poznań, teachers, principals, the head of a Romani NGO, a lawyer who works in the field of human rights, and one high school student.

Persuading the representatives of educational institutions to participate in the interviews was also a relatively difficult task. These institutions usually designate a person responsible for communication with the media and other outside parties. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain a greater spectrum of opinions held by the people working in them. Interviewees were mostly women, what reflects their numerical dominance in the Polish education system.

Interviews were conducted by one person, usually in the workplace of the informant. Only in one case it was conducted in a café, since the interlocutor did not want to talk at her workplace. She was afraid of being accused by her superiors of spreading unauthorised information about sensitive issues to someone from the outside.

In the first case study, we accepted the principle that interviews should be conducted with the representatives of the educational authorities as well as with the teachers involved in a bottom-up process of reforming and improving the education of Roma children in Poznań and its vicinity. We made this decision for several reasons. On the one hand, it is practically impossible to find Roma families willing to participate in an interview. The same applies to Roma children in public schools. It has to be said that their commandment of Polish is inadequate, particularly in the lower grades. On the other hand, experts and politicians at the (inter-)national level, whom we wanted to interview, were extremely elusive. Also, most of them are not very competent in their area of responsibility. Unfamiliar with the issues related to multiculturalism, an issue virtually absent in public discourses, they felt unprepared for a meaningful discussion about Roma education in Poland and refused to give an interview. (Some were ready to talk about the events organised by the European Union – such as the ‘Multicultural Year 2008’.)

From reading the scientific literature in the field of education (Głowacka-Grajper 2006; Kwadrans 2007, 2008; Sułkowska-Kądziołka 2007; Weigl and Formanowicz 2007), one can get the impression that the *Program for the Roma community* (see below), despite its flaws, has given some good results and has improved the quality of education of this minority. However, opinions of volunteers and NGO workers are hardly heard and rarely taken into account in official documents and recommendations for schools and teachers. Local ideas and practices are not promulgated by the Educational Board in other regions. As a matter of fact, cross-regional meetings and trainings are not on the agenda of this institution.

In our interpretation of materials we applied the method of qualitative discourse analysis. We have looked for meanings and concepts emerging in the discussion on specific issues. Common ideas and statements have been integrated into themes that are of our interest and

that are helpful in understanding the attitudes of our interlocutors to tolerance, diversity and pluralism in school life.

### *Schooling Roma in Poznań*

In Poznań, as in most cities and provinces of western Poland, the number of Roma is difficult to determine because of their mobility. Census data from 2002 refer to 1086 Roma living in Wielkopolska (more than 3.3 million in total), while in the city of Poznań (ca. 570 thousand inhabitants), only 155 Roma are listed (Chrabąszcz and Gałęcki 2010: 37-38). Anna Markowska is a very prominent Roma leader in the city and she is president of the successful 'Bahtale Roma' Foundation<sup>2</sup> (which in Romani means 'Happy Roma'). According to her, the picture is even more confusing. She thinks that there are circa 100 thousand Roma in Poland, and more than a hundred big families about whom the authorities have no knowledge at all in the heart of Poznań alone<sup>3</sup>. She emphasises that:

'it's true that there are not many Roma people here [in Poznań], but it doesn't mean that the problem does not exist. In Poznań there are over a hundred families,. The social welfare officers complain that too many Roma ask for assistance, and at the same time the authorities claim that the problem does not exist' [AM].

Chrabąszcz and Gałęcki (2010) also emphasise that the dispersion of the Roma in western parts of the country is a myth, since it is a general feature of the whole group in Poland. This scattered and unstable pattern of settlement might be the major reason for significant differences and inconsistencies in the official estimates of the number of Roma in Poland. Indeed, statistics show that there are about 12 thousand Roma in the country, while Roma organisations claim that their number reaches 20 or even 40 thousand.<sup>4</sup> However, despite all these demographic uncertainties, the fact is that in Małopolska there are villages with Bergitka Roma who have settled there for generations, a phenomenon unknown in Wielkopolska. Therefore, attempts to transpose experiences directly from there have proven problematic in Poznań.

Local authorities, who in principle support Roma organisations, see Bahtale Roma's<sup>5</sup> undertakings in the field of education positively. The Foundation itself decided not to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bahtale-roma.pl/index.php>

<sup>3</sup> A review of the data is impossible at this point. However, the officials strongly argue that these blown up numbers are a part of Roma organizations' 'propaganda'.

<sup>4</sup> This discrepancy in the number of minority members given by officials and by minority activists is a common pattern in Europe, particularly in Central Europe. However, the difference in numbers claimed is especially striking in the case of Roma.

<sup>5</sup> Another significant organisation in the vicinity of Poznań is the association of 'Polish Roma'. Their activities focus more on (1) media releases, (2) the participation of its activists in events combating stereotypes about Roma and other minority groups, (3) the promotion of tolerance, and (4) active participation in groups engaged in the cause of minorities and their rights. Several attempts to meet the leader of this organization failed, so it is impossible to confront the strategies of these two Roma NGOs in our report. The headmistress of a school in Swarzędz, where this organization has its office, said that their activities boil down to the regular organisation of the Roma Culture Festival. All her attempts to start a discussion about the encouragement and facilitation of Swarzędz's Roma children in public schooling have been left unheard.

cooperate with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration within the framework of its above mentioned Program for Roma, since they perceive the bureaucrats' stand as rigid, disregarding local conditions and inflexible in the very domain of educational matters. Bahta Roma has been trying to implement an alternative educational program, based on the experience in schools run by the Foundation. Anna Markowska stated:

'We do not work with the Ministry of Administration, and the Ministry of Education understands better that we cannot do everything at once, we are not able to move every Roma to one district. So we are doing it by ourselves, and it is worth doing' [AM].

The Foundation is currently managing, in cooperation with and the help of various public school headmasters and local educational authorities in Poznań, late afternoon schools open to all persons who have Polish citizenship and who were not able to complete their education, or prefer extraordinary forms of education.

Every Roma who wants to move from the public school to one of those supervised by the Foundation gets permission from the Board of Education. Since local educational authorities are currently more flexible towards Roma and their education, they eagerly support virtually all non-governmental initiatives in this field. This attitude is no doubt related to the shortages of other governmental programs, especially the one discussed above.

To explain this mechanism, one should remember about the often rigid attitude and dominant position of school headmasters described in the previous sections. Usually, headmasters, referring to the principle of equal treatment of individuals independently of their ethnic background, deny the promotion of Roma students to higher grades on the basis of their excessive absenteeism. There is no room for more flexibility. In this context, the local Board of Education gladly issues permission to transfer students to the afternoon school run by the Foundation. Thanks to this arrangement, teaching results statistics in regular schools are not spoiled. Moreover, the stakeholders are not forced to be differently tolerant to various students, to support individuals by all means nor at any expense. Simultaneously, the unwritten rule is that in the schools run by the Foundation, a flexible attitude towards school attendance is commonly known, but what is equally commonly recognised is that what really counts (there) is the quality of the material prepared for classes. This means that with some intellectual effort and lower respect for discipline, Roma students have the opportunity to finish a school operated by the Foundation

The Bahta Roma Foundation school experience leads to the following conclusion: Despite formal guidelines to promote the integration of Roma within the general educational system, it is better for all parties involved not to force Roma children to participate in the state sponsored integration programs. Regular schools are not ready for a proper implementation of the centrally advocated policy because of the lack of material resources and willingness to create a space for exercising cultural diversity.

A relative success of the Primary and Secondary Music Schools run by the Foundation encourages it to make plans for a further expansion of the curricula by including in it the general subjects taught in all schools<sup>6</sup>. Thanks to this, they could be transformed into regular

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<sup>6</sup> The Foundation is in charge of the following schools (they were open one after the other since 2006) :

public schools with additional classes in music. The Board of Education has some plans to apply the elaborated by Foundation schooling model in other o Wielkopolska's towns.

Practices in these schools represent an attempt to break the deadlock involving, on the one hand, a failure of universal education mechanisms in confrontation with the challenges related to the education of Roma, especially those who live in dispersion and, on the other hand, the lack of awareness that Roma should be integrated into the education system in a flexible and sensitive way. The activists involved in the particular project discussed here (and, as mentioned earlier, this is a joint initiative of open-minded headmasters, teachers who are not afraid to advocate tolerance in a multicultural social environment, members of the Foundation and the municipal and provincial authorities) are conscious of the difficulties involved in their undertaking, but they perceive it as a promising pragmatic solution that has many advantages in the view of the failure of other programs.

As for the authorities, their support can be interpreted as a response to the growing awareness of the lack of flexible social and educational policies in an increasingly multicultural Poznań. Accommodating multicultural challenges is an official responsibility of those authorities. It is thus fair to say that a reciprocal change in the perception of the relationship between local communities and local government does actually take place. These are admittedly only the first steps, but the desire to create alternative scenarios for socially relevant issues is comforting in this so far ethno-culturally homogenous country.

In the next sections we are going to investigate the material gathered during the interviews and we will attempt to point to the main challenges and projected scenarios for the grass-roots education of the Roma minority.

### ***General Impressions from the Fieldwork Experience***

The first striking thing in the interviews on the education of Roma – which were conducted among teachers, headmasters, activists, education officers and local educational authorities – is that almost every single interviewee had a great difficulty in defining the phenomena and concepts related to the Roma population. The interlocutors frequently use the word ‘Gypsy’ (a name which only recently has become officially politically incorrect), rarely correcting themselves afterwards. Education officers have a significant difficulty in talking about a different culture and finding neutral terms when defining it. It gives the impression that the interviewees look for words which would satisfy the interviewer and which would be interpreted as proving their ‘correct’ attitude towards minority groups. Terms such as ‘they’, ‘stranger’ or ‘others’ often appear in moments of hesitation. At the same time, in many conversations the interviewees make a straightforward statement on tolerance and openness

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1. Primary School for Adults (opened in 2009)– the program consist of a a one-year course designed to complement the education of those who did not completed the first stages of education. It is open to ever Polish citizen, and free of charge, but Poles are minority in it; it is attended mainly by Roma adults whose number varies between 55 and 100.
  2. Evening Gymnasium for Adults.
  3. Evening High School for Adults.
  4. Complementary High School for those who have partly completed secondary education.
  5. Primary and Secondary Music School – the Foundation plans to expand their offer and include obligatory curricula subjects into their curricula, and transform them into public schools with special music education.

towards others (often in the plural form), for instance: 'Polish people are very tolerant', 'we are open, others should learn from us' [EP]. They assure the interviewer of a high degree of tolerance towards the Roma or members of any other minority. Asked directly, they hardly ever remember experiencing any conflicts or problems with teaching Roma, or with negotiating with other social actors: 'the cooperation has always been very good', is a frequently repeated phrase. When in the course of the conversation any conflict is mentioned, the interlocutors are reluctant to give details.

### *Main Challenges for Teachers and School Managers*

The challenges emerging in the education of Roma can be divided into several major categories. The first includes everything that is associated with cultural difference. It is considered by teachers and administrators to be the main cause of 'problems' in public schools and in the schools mentioned above, i.e. those less formal and granting a greater tolerance towards different behaviours.

The issues related to what one teacher called '*the normal behaviour*', i.e. the presence in class on a regular basis, and the conduct of children whose 'codes' were learned at the beginning of the first grade, seem to be the most often referred obstacles. Teachers frequently cite stories from everyday school life in support of their belief that the Roma must be taught some basic 'good manners', because only then can real education start:

'One day a student came to class without a pen. I gave him one a few days earlier. He didn't take it with him and had nothing to write with. Well, this is his problem. I'm trying to teach them that when you get something, you have to take care of it. The **standards** are to be maintained, e.g. that the phone is switched off during the lesson. They need to learn these things' [KL].

Another teacher is more pointed when he states:

'These are the **barriers** that can interfere to some degree. This year, a Roma student came to the middle school exam and I asked him politely to take off his jacket, but he refused. However caustic it may seem, one may say that they need to be dressed in order to be safe at the time when they want to flee... Some things are in the cultural system, we cannot change this culture, even if it is not polite to write an exam in a jacket. He didn't take it off. If I had forced it on him, he would have left the room. His father, who is a little bit more enlightened than others, although he did not finish any school, sent the son to school, because otherwise he would have run away' [PB].

This passage reveals yet another element of the student – teacher relationship: it is easy to see a *patronising* vocabulary and a pre-established assumption of cultural superiority.

Another teacher pointed to the discomfort established in the class by Romani students using their language, assuming that the domination of one (Polish) *language* is not only correct, but also *undisputed*:

‘When they start talking about something in Romani language and a Pole stands next to them, he gets confused. We had to demand that it not be done and it doesn’t always work quite so well’ [KL].

From the teachers’ point of view, ‘standards’ and ‘order’ are the key words used in the description of Romani students’ deficits:

‘[The sources of the problem are] mainly the disparities in knowledge and the mastering of certain skills that are necessary in school. They [Roma students] have skills that allow them to function fully in their communities, but they have problems with analysing, synthesising, reading comprehension, etc. We use the method of trial and error here, because we do not have regular textbooks. But pupils are eager. There is also some/a small problem with attendance, their regularity differs from our **standards**’ [KL].

‘I had to teach them how to keep **order**, throwing cigarettes and waste paper into the trash. But after all, I have the same problems with youngsters; they also need to learn it’ [KL].

Another significant obstacle in shaping proper relations between Roma students and the school are the internal *norms of Romani culture* that are the most frequently cited reason for Roma’s maladjustment to the universal educational system.

‘I think that the main problem is that the school interferes with the family model. They marry quickly, take a wife, and have kids. One of our pupils, Marek, who finished primary school, already had a wife and a child. And it is disrupting, because when there is a child, you have to take care of it – and they don't come back to school. This factor is more important than the alleged intolerant acts towards Roma that sometimes happen in schools’ [EN].

This opinion expressed by the school headmaster in Swarzędz who had only one Roma child attending her classes indicates a strong tendency to attribute the problems arising during schooling to the characteristics of *Romani culture*. This type of interpretation of the existing difficulties excludes the examination of other possible factors involved, i.e. those related to the structural determinants of the educational system. The attitude of a large part of the officials and public school employees can be expressed as follows: ‘the reasons for [the setbacks] must be sought in isolation, in the cultural closure [of the Roma]’ [EN].

Generalisations seem to be the main rationale of the experienced *otherness*:

‘Mainly because we are dealing with a different culture, we need to be very careful not to offend the student, because the Romani culture is not identical with the Polish culture. There are other requirements... these people are very close with their family, whole families come to class, also families with young children. I need to show a great deal of patience’ [MG].

‘I watched this student, Natalia, and I noticed that in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade history class these cultural differences in education started to appear. They [Roma] look at things

differently. For us, some things are important, while this girl was living in a different reality, in the Romani world. She was constantly saying: “our customs this, our tradition that” [EN].

### ***Mutual stereotypes***

Some teachers openly admit that one of the factors adversely affecting the relations between Poles and the Roma are the *prejudices* transmitted to successive generations in all social strata:

‘I think that the situation in schools would be improved if the stereotype of Roma in the common consciousness was changed for the better. It might not be so visible with children, but ... (...) When *Gypsies* come to the store, everyone holds their wallets and bags close to their body, me too.’[EN]

One can get the impression that in response the Roma ignore the attempts at disciplining them through the education of their children. Maybe this behaviour can be interpreted as a deliberate sabotage of assimilating them into dominant society, a kind of cultural resistance.

### ***‘This Should Not Be Tolerated, Why?’***

The low effectiveness of the education of Roma is, inter alia, attributed to the fact that the institutions represented by both officers and headmasters do not enforce the law of compulsory education. Deputy Director of the one of Secondary Schools, stressed the need of a strict execution of this law:

‘We [Poles], as a society, we do not learn from the mistakes of others. In Slovakia, the state has adopted one good, important rule – there is no mercy, when it comes to the duty of parents to send their children to school, they must comply to the rule. We have this situation in the case of Roma – if you say that they may be absent in some classes or you don’t react to high absence rates, the effect is that Roma children in Poland abandon school and everyone will be is happy with this’ [PB].

A similar view is shared by the employee of the City Department of Education (*Wydział Oświaty Urzędu Miasta*):

‘mandatory education should be imposed. This should not be tolerated, why? [not complying to this duty should be punished]. If I do nothing, I give silent acquiescence’ [EP].

The claims to treat Roma from the common, *dominant civic perspective* are put forward together with opinions that there exist vast differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’, which are also recognised as another reason for Roma’s educational maladjustment. The following statement clearly expresses this perception:

‘They have no religion, only a catalogue of ethnic rules, they have this council that considers all internal matters, they are locked up so much’ [PB].

‘Roma **are not** like this – they come to class and do not treat the school as a place with certain rules and canons: they eat during teaching, talk, walk around like ten-year-olds, they can mobilise themselves [i.e., focus their attention] for 10-15 minutes only’ [PB].

### ***Rigid Rules***

One of the distinct topics is also the clear need for changes in the curriculum, and the methods of evaluation and classification of Romani students. Teachers and headmasters share the opinion that it is not possible to achieve results with the current *rigid rules* that define educational success:

‘A 29-year-old Polish woman approached me once, she started her adult life quite early (...) and she hadn’t finished the last semester of the primary school [in the pre-reformed system of 8-grade primary school]. She was working in a company, was a **normal person** living in a **civilised** way. She was interested in starting secondary education. Her request to the Board of Education was rejected, officials informed her of the necessity to finish 6<sup>th</sup> grade of a primary school, then 3 years of junior high school [gymnasium] and after all that, her secondary education [lyceum] dream could be fulfilled. (...) This system has no gaps, but someone should have the right to decide on a different form of determining the stage of education one is currently at, otherwise we face absurd situations’ [PB].

As mentioned earlier, local education officers have changed their philosophy of dealing with Roma students in the course of time and try to ease the obstacles that are in the way to obtaining the best possible education results by Roma children. ‘In the case of Roma children, the Board tells us to turn a blind eye to the lack of evidence of earlier stages of education’ [EN]. With the officers’ blessing, teachers and headmasters have prepared the ground for greater flexibility in response to the specificity of Romani children’s education, which gradually increases the number of pupils completing some level of education. They have used the goodwill of the authorities in an attempt to increase these statistics, and it is a proof that something can be done in this respect.

‘I stick to the rules, but not very stiffly. If in a school for adults Roma... come and present their skills ... if you refine them, work at home. I’m not very strict with the level of absenteeism’ [MG].

Nevertheless, these absenteeism numbers and teaching results are still disappointing and in fact demonstrate a partial failure of the education system<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Assuming that more than 100 Roma families reside in Poznań [AM], which amounts to at least 400-500 people, the fact that the Board of Education database consists of 38 students enrolled in public primary schools [JCH] and the number of students in secondary schools run by the ‘Bahtale Roma’ Foundation is between 20 to 30 [PB], is a rather unsatisfactory outcome of the efforts described within the framework of this report.

### *Implicit Motives*

Apart from all these culturally-based dimensions invoked by the interviewees, in order to describe their encounter with another culture we have to mention one more issue, the one reappearing in many conversations and hovering over all the attempts to create a new quality of education.

From time to time, teachers and headmasters mention the financial aspect of the Foundation's educational initiative, namely the fact that the Foundation encourages Roma in their educational efforts in a rather unconventional way – by granting them scholarship for each day spent at school. One of the teachers clearly states that Roma adults attend the evening school only because of the financial benefits:

‘Their attitude towards the Foundation is fully demanding. It is not a secret that the Foundation must “wheel-and-deal” to encourage them to go to school. In the Primary School for Adults, most people know that this is a purely financial incentive. Of course, the Foundation may have problems with that, but the question is whether the officials understand this complex interrelationship’ [PB].

The Foundation's president states openly:

‘And we help those who attend our school. We apply for scholarships, 50 PLN per person per one day spent in school, and it allows the family to deal with schooling for a day. So there must be some material support, without it the Roma will not manage’ [AM].

She emphasises it quite distinctly: ‘Financial support is extremely important. As long as it does not exist... the schooling will not be effective’ [AM].

If we consider not only these strongly voiced opinions of some officials concerning the Roma attitude toward financial support for schooling, but also their demands in other areas, i.e. claims concerning the method of teaching and assessment of Romani children in public schools [JCH], it appears that the education of Roma is a multi-faceted issue. Whereas different social forces are intermingling here, it still remains without a plan for the future.

### *Conclusions*

The above-presented case of a grassroots organisation promoting education of Roma in schools raises a few questions. First, it seems that, what regards the education of Roma, there is a certain level of bureaucratic schizophrenia among both local and central authorities. On the one hand, the authorities support the Roma minority (when financing educational programs and their evaluation), but on the other, there are limited results of governmental initiatives. Could it be the lack of will that causes the long-lasting neglect in the field of the education of the Roma? There is no decisive activity directed at creating a well-functioning alternative to the current practices. And the authorities seem to believe it is the minorities' duty to match the majority culture. Roma have to know their responsibilities if they want to

live in peace. Some efforts are made not to provoke accusations of intolerance and discrimination in the education system, but there is no really programme designed to change the inefficient education system. It seems that grass-root initiatives, similar to the one of the Bahta Roma Foundation, are most promising, since they take into account local context and needs.

Looking at the issue of Roma education from the perspective of the three-fold concept of Accept (Tolerance – Acceptance – Respect), those responsible for education make a good use of the concept of tolerance, but they would not use it to meet the others' needs. The universal state education requirements apply to everyone; this is the only message which the officials seem to send to the representatives of the Roma community. The officials clearly hinted that they see no other possibility of cooperation than the enforcement of universally applicable rules to all children, regardless of their origin or nationality. This is usually followed by a statement that changing these rules occasionally may happen only by good will of particular officials and teachers, and that this should not actually take place at all. These strategies of coping with 'the Roma problem' are accompanied by vigorous declarations of tolerance as a 'natural' feature of every Pole, especially of teachers. Therefore, it is not the question whether acceptance or respect is the next level. Officials believe that it is not their duty to pay respect to Roma's culture and practices, but the Roma who should accept the reality of the education system in Poland and respect the majority's assumptions.

Oddly enough, the fact that Roma are usually Roman-Catholics speaks in their favour from the perspective of civil servants and teachers. It gives officials hope that Roma will eventually 'civilise'! The ideal is the assimilation model rather than striving for mutual respect for differences. This is consistent with the interviewees' conviction that only 'Polishness' legitimates and determinates the rules, and that it defines the so-called normality. The model of a national culture reinforces the desire for homogenization.

As for the group of activists, i.e. the people devoted to real improvement in the educational situation of the Roma in Poznań, there is a remarkable similarity of discourses used to legitimise the activities in favour of the Roma community. They also use arguments about the necessity to civilise them and to impose or restore normalcy, teaching them a proper range of reactions and behaviours. One can say that this group aims at the acceptance of diversity rather than merely tolerating it. It also has more experience in direct contact with the members of the Roma community. They are therefore more likely to express their awareness of the need to change the general attitude towards the Roma and sometimes even support their right to remain culturally distinct. However, the tone which prevails in the analysed discourse is patronising. No argument for respecting the cultural difference of Roma appears in the state-based educational process. Even the activists running the Romani organisation would rather improve better use of? The existing system than introduce new rules of the dialogue between the majority society and the Roma. The initiatives presented in this part of the report, which are aimed at creating and supporting public schools co-managed by the Roma, can cause a return to the tradition of segregation. Having an alternative school as recommended by the elders, Roma pupils and students will not be interested in the inclusion into mainstream education.

There is improvement in the education of Roma children, and there is a need of good will from the Romani activists and community elders, as well as city officials and ordinary

teachers. It also requires the educational institutions' employees and school headmasters to develop local strategies for coping with high school absenteeism of the Roma children, as well as to prevent the wasting of funds and implementation of ineffective or inefficient plans and programs. The key issue seems to be the cooperation on the level of municipal institutions and policy makers, as well as among volunteers and NGO activists, for the preparation, implementation and evolution of the most effective solutions and new ideas of local education professionals.

In the case of schooling for the Roma minority, both officials and teachers support the model of a *unified education*. It is legitimised by the 'civilizational mission', in this case modelled on the 19<sup>th</sup> century intelligentsia's attempt to civilise the masses of unenlightened peasants in a partitioned country. The possibility of adjusting school curricula to the Roma peoples' culture or expectations is not mentioned at all. Including some knowledge about their culture in these curricula, or making allusions that their cultural values or lifestyle are worth popularising, is a completely alien idea. Roma's cultural features and habits are treated as an obstacle in the way to a successful education. The thought that Romani culture contains valuable elements, or has enriching potential for existing norms is inconceivable. Roma are distinct and distant, which implies a notion of cultural racism. No partnership can be seen in the writing and publishing of special textbooks for Roma, and little partnership can be seen in the reforming of existing curricula to make them square to Roma's cultural images and needs. They should simply assimilate to the dominant culture (*Leitkultur*), which is *normal* and obvious. Roma's failures are caused by their cultural habits, which shows that cultural determinism is a popular view among educators. The most successful programs are developed at the local level by young volunteers, advocates of tolerance, and those vividly interested in Romani culture. As the case in Swarzędz shows, getting financial support for local undertakings is not the main problem<sup>8</sup>. The persisting stereotypes about Roma and the images of a unified educational policy in a dominantly Polish state are the main obstacles.

Therefore, there is no acceptance for the Roma cultural distinction in the Polish educational system. The Bahtała Roma Foundation's efforts to increase Roma children's (and adults') participation in education are partly successful, but again, they can also lead to the ghettoization of children. The Foundation's schools, though officially open to all interested – and financed from public funds – in practice attract Roma students. In this way, a segregation of children actually takes place. One of our interviewees has paid attention to this problem, and warned against the further expansion of this kind of an educational model: 'in the end we'll face the situation when they won't come to normal schools' [EP], especially that they meet mostly their kin in the Foundation's schools; one should also not forget that the financial gratification for attendance involved can obscure the educational drive of students. One has to admit that the functioning of this school is a result of the cooperation between the major stakeholders, i.e. bureaucrats, teachers, headmasters and Roma activists (although not all take part in it and the Roma organisation in Swarzędz is against the Bahtała Roma initiative<sup>9</sup>), and

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<sup>8</sup> As president of the Bahtała Roma Foundation, Anna Markowska admits that funds devoted to the education and other social and cultural purposes of Roma are considerably high, especially that there are not that many Roma in Poland. The main shortcoming in the field of education is the lack of a coherent strategy that would take into consideration the local demographic patterns and economic possibilities.

<sup>9</sup> As mentioned, the many attempts to interview the Roma Association in Wielkopolska were unsuccessful. This organisation criticises the Bahtała Roma initiative, which is based in Poznań, for facilitating segregation.

represents a novelty in the field of multiculturalism, but it is hard to call them spectacular; between fifty to a hundred students attend the Foundation's schools at all levels of education. Its educational assumptions and methods do not diverge significantly from the existing standards. One can summarise the whole issue by saying that the education of Roma in Poland is caught between a Scylla of ineffectiveness and a Charybdis of segregation. The ideas implemented in Swarzędz represent a move in a good direction, but do not assure full success.

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## **Annex I**

*List of interviewees (in alphabetic order)* [All interviews were recorded and transcribed in Polish. ]

1. [AM] – female, chair of ‘Bahtale Roma’ foundation, NGO activist working on the improvement of life conditions for the Roma community in Poznań; education is one of her areas of expertise; she is the leader of the team coordinating actions concentrated on improving the education of Roma described in this report [4 March 2011]
2. [AP] – female, headmaster of Kindergarten no. 186 in Poznań, first pre-school institution in Poland offering a special group for foreigners’ and migrants’ children – the so called ‘multicultural group’ (the program closed after a year) [5 April 2011]
3. [EN] – female, headmaster of Primary School no.1 in Swarzędz, interested in the multicultural history of the town, used to teach 3 Roma pupils [13 April 2011]
4. [EP] – female, employee in the Department of Education in the Municipality of Poznań, responsible for kindergartens and solving difficult problems in the department; she coordinated the multicultural group in Kindergarten no. 186 [17 March 2011]
5. [ES] – female, spokesperson for the Educational Board of Poznań [7 March 2011]
6. [JCH] – female, employee of the Educational Board of Poznań, responsible for primary schools, previously a headmaster of a big school [10 March 2011]
7. [KL] – male, headmaster of a high school in Poznań, coordinator of the Foundation’s school for adults, teaching geography and math [14 March 2011]
8. [KM] – male, history teacher in a ‘good’ high school in Poznań, he removed a cross from the wall in his teaching room, declared atheist [21 April 2011]
9. [KZ] – male, Representative of the Regional Police Commander for Equal Treatment, often engaged in solving tensions of multicultural nature [19 February 2011]
10. [MG] – female, vice-principal/headmaster of Gymnasium no. 25 and the Foundation’s school for adults in Poznań [6 May 2011]
11. [PB] – male, vice-headmaster of Gymnasium and Lyceum run by the foundation, activist, former headmaster of a big school for adults [8 March 2011]

12. [PP] – male, Governor's Representative for Minorities, actively engaged in supporting NGOs working for the benefit of minorities in Poznań, focusing his personal interests on the Roma community [22 February 2011]

## **Annex II**

### **Interview-guide for semi-structured interviews (list of issues)**

#### **I. Case Study 1: Education of Roma**

##### **1. Teachers, headmasters, vice-principals**

###### Part A (general information)

1. Personal information – name, occupation, specificity of the connection to the education system (previous history of employment), role in the present work place
2. Role in the process of organizing and/or running the Foundation's school(s)
3. Previous experience in teaching Roma pupils before starting cooperation with the Foundation's initiative
4. Previous experience in teaching any other non-Polish pupils/students
5. Personal experiences of contacts with non-Poles
6. General opinion on multicultural policies in Poland
7. General opinion about multicultural policies in Polish schooling system (documents, textbooks, curricula) – general knowledge and own encounters within the work history period

###### Part B

1. General opinion about the Roma minority education level, state programs and their effectiveness
2. Main challenges for diversity in Polish schools
3. Examples of good/bad practices of accommodating diversity in school life
4. Memorable episodes, events related to teaching Roma children
5. Memorable episodes, events related to contacts with Roma parents
6. Main challenges in cooperation with officials
7. Main concerns related to the future of Roma minority education
8. Diagnosis of the most pressing problems in the education of Roma (other minorities)
9. Proposals of solutions to the most severe problems
10. General opinion on tolerance towards minorities in Poland
11. General opinion on tolerance towards minorities in Poland in schools
12. Personal meaning of the term 'tolerance'

##### **2. Local officials**

###### Part A

1. Personal information – name, occupation, specificity of the connection to the education system (previous history of employment), role in the present workplace, main responsibilities
2. Role in the process of organizing/coordinating multicultural education; *[if applicable]* role in supporting the process of the Foundation's schools' functioning?
3. Previous work experience in cases related to Roma pupils in the history of employment
4. Previous work experience in cases related to minorities other than the local Roma community
5. Personal experiences of contacts with non-Poles
6. General opinion on the multicultural policies in Poland
7. General opinion on the multicultural policies in the Polish school system (documents, textbooks, curricula) – general knowledge and own encounters within the work history period

#### Part B

1. General opinion on the Roma minority education level, state programs and their effectiveness
2. Main challenges for diversity in Polish schools
3. Examples of good/bad practices of accommodating diversity in school life observed in school life
4. Memorable episodes (both positive and negative) or events related to contacts with Roma children, parents, activists
5. Main challenges in the cooperation with other officials, school teachers, school headmasters
6. Main concerns related to the future of Roma (and other) minorities' education
7. Diagnosis of the most pressing problems
8. Proposals of solutions to the most severe problems
9. General opinion about tolerance towards minorities in Poland
10. General opinion about tolerance towards minorities in Poland in schools
11. Personal meanings of the term 'tolerance'