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“Positive Discrimination” Policies for Inclusion of Europe’s Largest Minority: Examples of Educational Policies for the Roma Minority in Europe*

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Summary

There are approximately ten million Roma in Europe, living in almost every country on the continent. Roma are also one of Europe’s most vulnerable minorities. Research has shown that in practically every aspect of life, Roma are worse off than the average citizen. Roma have higher rates of infant mortality, lower life expectancy, lower per-capita income, and higher unemployment, all major indicators of social exclusion. The disadvantaged situation of Roma communities has been widely recognized at both the international and national levels (Open Society Institute, 2007), and a remarkably wide range of initiatives has been developed to address and improve their situation. Positive change, however, has been slow to manifest itself. The Roma are a more traditional community that is trapped in a so-called “dependency trap,” whereby they become dependent on social transfers that push them even further into poverty and marginalisation. Some experts argue that the only way to break out of this trap is through education. According to the human capital theory, there is a positive correlation between individuals’ education and the welfare of the state. Bevc (1991) argues that investments in education will pay off in the form of welfare and more sustainable societies. In Europe, education is primarily a competency of national governments. In many countries, much of the actual regulation of education is delegated to local authorities. Yet, as with most other aspects of public policy, international conventions and instruments, and intergovernmental organizations like the European Union contribute to the larger framework to which states adhere. There are several mechanisms that would better include Roma into national educational systems throughout the EU; one of them is the Roma teaching assistant pro-

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gram. Although well-recognized and widely implemented, this mechanism lacks a thorough international evaluation that would help support arguments for the program to become a standard practice. The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the Roma teaching assistant program in Slovenia. This paper is the first to present empirical research on Roma teaching assistants and although results of the research imply that this mechanism lacks in substance and that there is much room for improvement, a thorough evaluation will help guide future models.

Key words: educational policy, minority protection, positive discrimination, Roma minority



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Introduction

The convergence of ethnic relations and educational policies is the centre of many a social sciences' field of interest. Both concern major economic, political and cultural dimensions of society. As Genov (2005) described in the preface to *Ethnicity and Educational Policies*, these dimensions touch upon sensitive relationships between an individual and collective human rights, or between meritocratic arrangements and policies of positive discrimination. Moreover, the intersection of ethnic relations and educational policies often touches on matters related to the social exclusion of individuals and groups, and consequently the integration or disintegration of societal systems. Since most societies in Europe are multiethnic, educational policies often become ethnically and politically dividing issues. More precisely, political debates concerning education receive a strong ethnic dimension, allowing the ethnic aspect of education to take on a political dimension (ibid).

Ethnic groups in an underprivileged situation or discriminated against in some way need extra protection of their rights in order to better function in society. Especially vulnerable are those minorities which do not have a motherland to act as their patron, and through its mediations and interventions provide a favourable atmosphere for preserving and developing the national culture that links a minority to its motherland. The Roma are such a minority, whose boundaries and *responsibilities* extend beyond the limits of any one country. Since the EU's enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe, it has become obvious that the Roma are neither a small population¹

¹ Although the actual size of the Romani population in Europe is unknown, it is estimated to include as many as 10 million people (European Commission, 2004).

nor one that faces the typical minority problems. Many of the issues encountered by the Roma are common to all countries where a Romani minority lives. These include: (1) a low education level; (2) high unemployment; (3) poor housing conditions; and (4) dependency on social transfers.

To overcome this “dependency trap” beginning with the higher educational levels of Romani populations, many education policies of “positive discrimination” have been introduced throughout Europe. Although educational and other environments vary, all Romani students are subject to some form of segregation in education systems on the basis of their ethnic background. The desegregation of Romani education and the prevention of further segregation must be the backbone of governmental education policies that strive for equality of opportunity. Without integrating education, education policies concerning the Roma have little chance to succeed, as have been demonstrated over the past several decades. Desegregation policies should be comprehensive; they should include measures aimed at all relevant actors affected by the education process.

National education systems themselves do include some institutionalised obstacles for Romani pupils, a fact that is easy to prove through the below-average education levels of the Romani population. According to Kirilova and Repaire (2003), the main obstacles precluding the better inclusion of Roma are poverty, isolation of the Romani community, cultural and linguistic barriers, low-levels of support from Romani parents, lower education standards, the placement of Romani pupils in special needs schools, and the widespread segregation of Romani pupils.

The productive interface of education and minority rights requires a multilevel approach that incorporates the following elements: (1) a clear policy at the macro-level for the democratic and harmonious integration of minorities on a national state fostering inter-group solidarity, national stability and progress; (2) constitutional guarantees and rights for minorities to preserve their language and culture; (3) a supportive educational policy to implement constitutional rights; (4) an avoidance of “minoritisation” and group isolation by promoting out-group contacts and inter-group learning; and (5) the self-determination of minorities at the micro-level, including the option to leave a group (Rolly in Genov, 2005: 29).

Education policies and EU

Despite the EU’s overarching framework for policy influence, every member state retains full responsibility for the content of its teaching and educational system. The accession process, however, has given the EU additional leverage over candidate state governments to encourage the improve-

ment of areas such as the protection of minorities and education, which otherwise remain national responsibilities.

The accession process has been a major force in influencing government policies for Roma. Enhancing the EU's leverage are political instruments, including the Regular Reports and Accession Partnerships, and funding, mainly channelled through the Phare programmes (Open Society Institute, 2007: 24–25). Roma, however, are not mentioned specifically as a target group in the EU's specific internal policy instruments primarily because they are already part of EU member states' overall social inclusion and anti-discrimination agenda. As well, the area of education is generally monitored by the EU's anti-discrimination and social inclusion agenda (*ibid.*). Though education is not an area of direct EU competency, it is a rapidly changing arena in which the European Union provides a forum for the exchange of ideas. In accordance with Articles 149 and 150 of the Rome Treaty, the Community's role is to contribute to the development of quality education. In a resolution passed on 28 April 2005, the European Parliament identified the need to take measures that overcome Roma segregation.

The EU has adopted two important anti-discrimination Directives, which members are required to implement into national law, and which form part of the *acquis* for candidate countries. Directive 2000/43/EC ("Race Directive") of 29 June 2000, which implements the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, and Directive 2000/78/EC ("Employment Directive") of 17 November 2000, which establishes a framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, require member states to create an impartial body to hear complaints of discrimination. In June 2007, the Commission announced it would take steps against a number of member states for failing to adequately implement these Directives.

To evaluate the effectiveness of Roma-specific policies and projects, and to gain more data on Roma, the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs: Anti-Discrimination, Fundamental Social Rights and Civil Society Unit commissioned a study on "The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged EU: Fundamental Rights and Anti-Discrimination." This examination gives a critical analysis of existing EU policies and concludes that there is currently little analysis of, or sufficient data collected to assess accurately the impact of education policies on ethnic minority groups, specifically for Roma. This not only results in the continued segregation of education, but also threatens the realisation of the goals derived from the Lisbon Agenda (Open Society Institute, 2007).

Roma minority in Slovenia

Historical documents reveal that Roma lived in the territory of Slovenia even before the 15th century. From the 17th century on, one can find much more detailed and frequent publications regarding Roma in Slovenia. Historians speculate that Roma began to inhabit Slovenia over three separate waves. Ancestors of Roma who live in the Prekmurje region (north-east Slovenia) came from Hungary, while those who live in the Dolenjska region (south Slovenia) came from Croatia (or other ex-Yugoslav countries). As well, a small community of Sintis came from Austria (second report submitted by Slovenia pursuant to Article 25, paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities).

Although Roma are traditionally nomadic populations, today there are two primary areas of their inhabitation in Slovenia: the Prekmurje and Dolenjska regions. These two big Romani communities have long dealt with quite different problems. Ancestors of the Roma in the Prekmurje region inhabited this territory earlier than those in the Dolenjska region, resulting in the former's higher social status, better integration in society and, to some extent, better living and housing conditions. Longer *co-habitation* with the majority population has helped to reduce tensions in everyday life as well as improved the status of Roma (especially as it regards to citizenship). The Roma community in the Dolenjska region did not have the necessary time or resources to establish itself as a homogenous advocacy group. There is a general assumption that the Roma in the Dolenjska region came, and are still coming (fleeing), from ex-Yugoslav republics, and have a lower financial and education status, which often results in them having to rely on other measures to survive. The stark differences in the respective communities' characteristics make the formulation of national policies on Roma issues problematic and insufficient. Policies that are acceptable for the Dolenjska region may be too dated for the Prekmurska region and vice versa.

The exact number of Roma in Slovenia is not known, though estimates range between 7,000 and 10,000. The actual number is difficult to ascertain largely because of problems related to carrying out an accurate census and gaining access to all the Roma living in Slovenia. The most frequent contact with the Roma is maintained by the Centres for Social Work, which in 2003 recorded 6,264 Roma. To give an idea of the disparity between population figures, only 3,246 people declared themselves to be members of the Roma minority in the 2002 census.² Databases on Roma educational levels are

² The relatively small share of Roma populations in Slovenia (only 0.5% of the total population) in comparison to other Central and Eastern European countries (in Hungary estimated at 4.5% of the total population, 4.8% of the total Slovak population) probably led to the fact that most if not all international comparative studies on Roma populations in Central and Eastern Europe have excluded Slovenia from their studies and statistics. This has generally re-

somewhat more accurate. According to the 2002 census, the vast majority of Roma (over 70%) never finished primary school and only 3% finished secondary school (around 25% finished primary school). The reasons for this situation are poorly researched. One possible indicator found in a 1991 study (Tancer, 1999) concluded the problem to be the poor quality of home environments (pupils had little support from parents when doing homework; pupils did not have the necessary means to study – a desk, quiet room, supplies; etc.).

There appears to be an overall hesitancy on the part of governments to specifically address and include Roma as a particular target group in their education strategies (Open Society Institute, 2007: 49). One the one hand, this may be seen as a sign of governments wanting to mainstream the issues. Some may argue that an overall education strategy will address issues to improve access to quality education for Roma. On the other hand, these strategies rarely include the specific elements that are fundamental for real educational improvement for Roma. The lack of direct targeting of Roma children blurs the focus of almost every policy approach. The Slovenian government prepared the Strategy for Educating Roma Minority in 2004, which includes mechanisms like: (1) enrolment of Roma children in pre-school education, (2) Roma teaching assistants, (3) adaptation of the curriculum (with an emphasis on language learning and auxiliary classes of Roma culture etc.), (4) additional education for teachers, (5) financial aid for schools with Roma pupils and (6) abolition of all forms of segregation. Of course, it is debatable how well (if at all) these mechanisms have been implemented. For the purpose of this paper we will focus on the mechanism of the Roma teaching assistant program and its effects on the educational system and inclusion of Roma pupils.

The Roma teaching assistant

As the name implies, a Roma teaching assistant helps regular teachers and acts as a mediator between administrators and Romani pupils. Placing teaching assistants from the local community into classrooms is a common strategy used by schools all over Europe to help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between schools and Romani communities. The premise behind this practice is the theory that teaching assistants will enable Romani pupils to be more academically successful. The teaching assistant helps children with language differences, provides a link between the home culture and the culture of the education system, and cultivates parental support. The teaching

sulted in unpublicised Romani issues in Slovenia along with a lack of comparative studies in this field.

assistant often becomes someone who everyone in the community respects and is a role model for the children as to how to be a successful person, both in their own culture and in the mainstream culture.

The description of the Roma teaching assistants' profession varies from country to country; however, some basic parallels can be drawn. Their main tasks are to help pupils master the official language of the country, facilitate a process of communication between the teacher and pupils, form a positive attitude towards the education process, and facilitate the full integration of pupils into the school environment, while taking their age and needs into account. In addition, they should assist the teacher by encouraging children to take part in school activities, and create lasting cooperation with parents. The Roma teaching assistant also actively participates in the education process and extracurricular activities (under the guidance of the teacher), assists the teacher in selecting appropriate methods, aids and attends pedagogical meetings. All the mentioned responsibilities of Roma teaching assistants' should be the foundation for their job description; however, some education systems vary in their focus. Some countries only emphasise additional help in classes with Romani pupils, others emphasise the teaching assistants' role as a translator and cultural mediator.

In reality, according to Rona and Lee (2001), the work of Roma teaching assistants often looks very different. In many classrooms, teaching assistants are seen serving snacks to pupils, cleaning up after teachers or pupils, or watching over pupils on the playground while the teacher takes a break. Instead of being seen as a role model for pupils, the teaching assistants are placed in the position of babysitters or maids. Though the strategy is intended to provide Romani pupils with the tools to meet curriculum standards, it often turns into a vehicle for keeping marginalised pupils in subservient positions. If the purpose of the teaching assistant is to help pupils succeed academically, then they must be seen as equal partners in the classroom. Institutionalisation of the mechanism is therefore a must; detailed descriptions of professional and work obligations should be standardised (either on the national or supranational level) and its implementation carefully monitored.

The Roma teaching assistant in Slovenia

The Strategy for Upbringing and Education of the Republic of Slovenia (adopted in 2004) lists the Roma teaching assistant as one of the mechanisms for including Romani pupils in the education system. Currently, there is no job position with the title "Roma Teaching Assistant" due to the still-unexecuted *Catalogue of Competencies for the Profession*; however, in practice it

is recognised as a *Teaching Assistant for Auxiliary Help to Romani Pupils*, with a very similar job description.

*The Catalogue for the Roma Teaching Assistant Profession*³ will enable the education of Roma teaching assistants in the future. The Catalogue has been approved and adopted by the Ministry of Education and Sport, and there is currently an ongoing process of educating the first group of Roma teaching assistants. According to the newly adopted Catalogue, the Roma teaching assistants will have to (among other things): help pupils overcome linguistic barriers, help pupils with homework, motivate pupils to actively cooperate during classes, foster a bilingual culture in the classroom, integrate elements of Romani culture into the education process, encourage pupils to integrate actively into extracurricular activities and cooperate in them, organise extracurricular activities in the Romani community, communicate in Slovenian and in Romani, be familiar with the educational means and education system in the country, master different approaches to helping pupils with linguistic difficulties, and help parents and teachers better communicate.

According to some of the aforementioned tasks that the Roma teaching assistant will have to master in the future, we cannot conclude that the current group of *teaching assistants for auxiliary help to Romani pupils* is working in compliance with them. The main unanswered questions for the current group are how are they performing, how do they perceive their profession, how are they perceived by their co-workers and principals, and finally how do they perceive the roles of the *teaching assistant for auxiliary help to Romani pupils* (how would they improve it and what are their general observations so far).

Making an evaluation at this stage (prior to the full implementation of the Catalogue) is not only important to analyze the current situation, but also to help future teaching assistants learn from the experiences of their forbearers, and to (if necessary) modify the Catalogue for the Roma teaching assistant profession at the earliest stage possible.⁴

³ The catalogue of basic skills and education for the Roma teaching assistant profession was published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia on 6 April 2007.

⁴ For the purpose of evaluation we conducted a survey among three target groups; Roma teaching assistants (or teaching assistants for auxiliary help to Romani pupils, as they are currently known), teachers (those who cooperate with Roma teaching assistants on a daily basis) and principals (of those schools where Roma teaching assistants are present). Since preliminary research had revealed that Roma teaching assistants are scarce (we could only detect 17 of them) the survey targeted the whole population of assistants. To gain sensitive data (like possible segregation, which is illegal, but still practiced in some schools) we made all participants anonymous, allowing them to speak with us outside the school environment.

Romani pupils and the curriculum

Each of these three groups (teachers, principals, and Roma teaching assistants) was interviewed and their responses were compared to see if groups have different opinions. If possible, we would like to establish the reasons for these disparate observations. One question pertained to the curriculum, the national standard of what pupils have to learn in class each year. Since there is a prevailing public view that the curriculum is too extensive, we asked them about their opinion on this, especially how they assess the extensiveness of the curriculum for Romani pupils.

When comparing answers from all three groups of respondents (Table 1), it is obvious that *all* teachers believe that the curriculum is too extensive for Romani pupils; however, only half (52.9 per cent) of Roma teaching assistants agree. It remains open to discussion which of the groups' opinions is more accurate. Should more weight be given to the teachers' opinions given that they are the ones who have been trained to professionally assess and value their pupils' knowledge or are the Roma teaching assistants' opinions more applicable since they know and understand Romani pupils better?

Table 1: Extensiveness of the national curriculum

I assess the curriculum as ...	Teachers (N=13)	Roma teaching assistants(N=17)	Principals (N=10)
Too extensive for the majority of Romani pupils	100%	52.9%	60%
About right	0%	47.1%	40%
Not extensive enough for the majority of Romani pupils	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Survey "Research on solving the problems encountered by the Roma, with a special emphasis on the inclusion of Romani pupils in the education system", Faculty of Social Sciences, 2008.

Since Romani pupils are obviously handicapped (see Table 3) in the education process, we asked how (if) teaching could be made more effective. The results show that the most appropriate mechanism would be an increase in the number of teaching staff. This is not surprising, but what is astonishing is that, while almost half the teachers and a third of the principals wish to have handbooks in Romani, the Roma teaching assistants expressed no need for this. This figure perhaps can be attributed to the fact that almost 40% of Roma teaching assistants do not speak Romani (as we will discuss later in the article) yet still puzzling because they would likely benefit from translated handbooks.

Table 2: Mechanisms for more effective teaching

For the more effective teaching of Romani pupils I (we) would need...	Teachers (N=13)	Roma teaching assistants (N=17)	Principals (N=10)
Additional staff	76.9%	82.4%	80%
Handbooks in Romani	46.2%	0%	30%
Teaching is effective, we do not need anything	0%	11.8%	10%
A more flexible timetable	30.8%	41.2%	20%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Survey "Research on solving the problems encountered by the Roma, with a special emphasis on the inclusion of Romani pupils in the education system", Faculty of Social Sciences, 2008.

Language barrier

Evidence from previous surveys coupled with our own experiences abroad show that Romani pupils have a poor knowledge of the official language. To quantify these assessments, we included some questions on linguistic communications between Romani pupils, Romani parents and teaching staff. Almost all Roma teaching assistants (94.1%) encourage Romani pupils to speak in Slovenian⁵. Parents also are in favour of their children speaking Slovenian in school. According to the Roma teaching assistants, more than 70% of Romani parents prefer the Roma teaching assistants to speak to their children in Slovenian. Only one Roma teaching assistant had an experience with parents who preferred their children communicate in Romani. The teachers had a similar assessment.

In our preliminary interviews we found indications that Romani pupils have problems understanding teachers (as they speak only in Slovenian). Thus, we asked our respondents if Romani pupils should attend some additional hours of Slovenian language classes. More than 58% of the Roma teaching assistants, 69.2% of the teachers, and 80% of the principals agreed. The opinion of the Roma teaching assistants again differed slightly. It seems as if they do not perceive the poor knowledge of the official language as being a fundamental obstacle for Romani students. One may suspect this to be a consequence of the mediation and translation of the Roma teaching assistants, but given the fact that more than half (52.9%) *only* communicate in Slovenian at the workplace speaks against that. Even more, up to 37.5% of

⁵ One Roma teaching assistant leaves the decision to the pupils themselves, but none encourages pupils to speak in Romani.

Roma teaching assistants do not speak Romani at all.⁶ If one of the main tasks of the Roma teaching assistant is to create a linguistic bridge between the school and Romani pupils, then not knowing (or not speaking) Romani should be considered unacceptable.

Relations between Romani pupils, Roma teaching assistants and teachers

When comparing the relationship between Romani pupils and Roma teaching assistants and between Romani pupils and their teachers, it is obvious that Roma teaching assistants have a friendlier and more mentor-like relationship with the Romani pupils. more freely with them than with the teachers. The teachers, however, do not agree. Another discrepancy arises in responses on whether Romani pupils are more obedient to teachers or to Roma teaching assistants. Both teachers and teaching assistants believe the students to be more obedient to them, respectively.

When we compare the teachers' and teaching assistants' opinions on the main problems of the teaching process for Romani pupils, we conclude that the Roma teaching assistants are more critical of the Romani pupils than the teachers. The latter see the institution of the school and school system as the main culprit for poor educational performance. The main problems for Romani pupils are, from the perspective of the teachers, the inadaptable curricula and the excessive content that pupils must master in one year. Roma teaching assistants on the other hand rank *unequal knowledge and skills of Romani and non-Romani pupils* and *low attendance of Romani pupils* the highest, shifting the blame to the Romani pupils themselves (see Table 3).

The amount of time Roma teaching assistants spend in classrooms is extremely important in order to provide the necessary assistance. Although the Catalogue and the *National Strategy* do not mention the specific amount of time the Roma teaching assistant should spend in the classroom, it is obvious that Romani pupils would benefit more if the assistant were present at all times. Again the answers of both groups vary. Almost half of the Roma teaching assistants stated that they are present all of the time, while the majority of teachers answered that they are present only some of the time (see Table 4). More disturbing is the fact that a good share of the assistants spends time with Romani pupils separately. According to Slovenian legislation, the segregation of pupils based on ethnicity is forbidden.

⁶ It should be emphasised that the great majority of those who do not speak Romani would like to learn it (85.7%).

Table 3: Main problems in the teaching process

The main problem in the teaching process is...	RANK Teachers (N=13)	RANK Roma teaching assistants (N=15)
Inadaptible curricula	1	4
Excessive content pupils have to master in one year	2	3
Lack of auxiliary teaching materials	5	5
Low attendance of Romani pupils	3/4	2
Inadequate way of teaching	6/7	7
Unequal knowledge and skills of Romani and non-Romani pupils	3/4	1
Don't see any problems	6/7	6

Survey "Research on solving the problems encountered by the Roma, with a special emphasis on the inclusion of Romani pupils in the education system", Faculty of Social Sciences, 2008.

Table 4: Attendance of the Roma teaching assistant in the classroom

Together with the teacher I am in the classroom ...	Teachers (N=13)	Roma teaching assistants (N=15)
All of the time	0%	47.1%
Only for part of the instruction	81.8%	29.4%
Only in the afternoon	0%	5.9%
Very little time; mostly I spend time with Romani pupils separately	18.2%	17.6%

Survey "Research on solving the problems encountered by the Roma, with a special emphasis on the inclusion of Romani pupils in the education system", Faculty of Social Sciences, 2008.

The Roma teaching assistant as a profession

Since the Roma teaching assistant is a relatively new profession, and because few individuals hold these positions, it is crucial to evaluate the circumstances in which Roma teaching assistants currently work. Such an evaluation could provide important information for future improvements to the work environment of Roma teaching assistants and possible corrections of their tasks and competencies.

The previously mentioned *Catalogue of Competencies for Roma Teaching Assistants* includes a list of knowledge and skills that individuals must obtain in order to become a Roma teaching assistant. One of the main criteria is to speak Romani. We found that at work more than half (52.9%) of the teaching assistants use only Slovenian and 47.1% use both Slovenian and

Romani. This implies that the new generation of Roma teaching assistants will have to either learn Romani or actually be Roma. Since the *Catalogue* came into force only recently, it is quite reassuring that 68.8% already know the content of the *Catalogue*. Further, almost all of those who are familiar with it (92.3%) hope to achieve the profession of *Roma teaching assistant*.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the interviews is that both the principals and the teachers view the latter's role to be an important and necessary mechanism. Further, both groups hope the teaching assistant program will become institutionalised and more common in the future. Almost all the Roma teaching assistants (94.1%) wish to stay in their current position in the coming years and more than half of the principals (62.5%) wish to employ more Roma teaching assistants.

Roma teaching assistants are usually employed as full time workers, working on a contractual basis (usually for a one-year period). When organising employment, many principals have problems finding qualified staff and financial resources. The institutionalisation of the teacher assistant profession would provide principals with appropriate assistants as well as more funding to pay their wages. In this particular case, the true value of the new *Catalogue* is evident.

Conclusion

To date, education is a “contested terrain” in both occidental and non-occidental civilisations, in traditions to be modernized, in systems to be transformed, and in modern democratic societies with pluralistic actors of knowledge production and value dissemination. Education may contribute to conserve, change or redefine cultural identities. It may be a useful instrument towards peace and the harmonious coexistence of linguistic and religious collectives (Rolly in Genov, 2005: 22).

As Europe's biggest minority, the Roma should be entitled to special protection rights within each member state, and at the EU-level. To date, EU Directives do not encroach deep enough into Roma-related problems nor seek to institutionalise mechanisms that have a long-lasting positive effect on the Romani population. According to the theory of human capital, the first issue one must address in order to untangle other societal issues (employment, housing, health, etc.) is education. In the field of education there are several mechanisms that have proven to have a positive effect on the success of Romani pupils. One of those is the Roma teaching assistant, which is a “positive discrimination” mechanism of similar description regardless of the country it comes from. This implies that the EU could offer a unified description of the profession and help to institutionalize it in all countries with a Romani minority. Studies conducted in some CEE countries

show that implementation of the Roma teaching assistant has had a positive impact on: (1) attendance levels; (2) the number of drop-outs; and (3) the average grades of Romani pupils. There are also some indications that Roma teaching assistants have had a positive influence on non-Romani pupils since they provide extra help and enrich the cultural environment. Yet we should also note that some education experts, as well as human rights activists and Romani parents oppose the introduction of the Roma teaching assistant. Their argument is that the integration of Romani children into mainstream education would not be achieved if a third person must translate instructions into Romani. Such a measure puts Romani pupils in an inferior position compared to non-Romani pupils.

Based on the empirical data gained from the research of the Roma teaching assistants in Slovenia, we can propose several actions and guidelines for the further integration of Roma teaching assistants in education systems. First, a formation of guidelines and recommendations are needed for principals and teachers who work with Roma teacher assistants. The amount of time Roma teaching assistants spend in the classroom along with the teacher must be regulated. As well, teaching assistants must be given proper instructions on how to communicate with parents of Romani pupils (and how often) and what kind of didactical tools they need. Second, governments must set a minimal quota of Romani pupils in each class, providing school principals a tool to know when a Roma teacher assistant should be employed. In classes where there are too few Romani pupils we suggest giving teachers additional education and offering them financial incentives. Last but not least, the poor knowledge of the official language is one of the main problems Romani pupils encounter. Not all Romani children, however, have the same level of knowledge. A language test should be conducted for all students in order to detect their level of knowledge. If the pupils have a satisfactory level of the official language, then a Roma teacher assistant may not be needed.

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