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The delegated school budgets and the education of Roma children

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It is clear already what will define the main trends in the education of Roma children and the educational integration in Bulgaria during 2008 and the next several years. It will be neither the Strategy for Educational Integratioin approved by the Ministry of Education in 2004 nor the Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion approved by the Council of Ministers in 2005; it won't be the efforts of Roma Educational Fund and OSI to promote desegregation of the so-called "Gipsy" schools situated in the biggest towns; it won't be the efforts of Roma NGOs to apply intercultural education. The education of Roma children and the educational integration will depend on the introduction of the so-called "delegated school budgets".

The Decision of Council of Ministers 20/21.01.2008 and the Instruction of Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Finance from February 8, 2008 accomplish the normative basis for applying the system of the delegated budgets for all school in Bulgaria. The process has begun with the National Program for Development of School Education and with the Law for the National Budget 2008 (art. 70-72).

The system of the delegated school budgets is based on defining the so-called "unified expense standard", i.e. annual allowance for the education of one student that includes all possible expenses and is not divided into type of expenses. This means that the annual allowance should cover teachers' salaries, maintenance of school buildings, utility expenses, study-halls (the so-called *zanimalni*), lessons in free-elective subjects, salaries for non-pedagogical staff, and so on. The budget of every school is compiled only on the basis of the number of students who attend the given school not taking into account any other factors; the opportunities of municipalities (that are owners of the schools) to support the schools with fewer number of students distributing amounts from the schools with higher number of students decrease to minimum.

According to the scheme for the delegated budgets introduction the municipalities should distribute among the schools at least 80 % of the amounts for education following the principle "number of students in a certain school". The other 20 % (at most) should be distributed by the municipalities among the schools answering additional criteria that reflect the local specifics and the municipal policy for education: such as distance from the municipal center, and so on. The "unified expense standard" for 2008 differs in 4 types of municipalities; the avarage case (the so-called "group 2") is 1051 BGN (nearly 540 euro) for a student.

The delegated budgets introduction is part of the real start of the long postponed structural reform of Bulgarian educational system. This step will have four important consequences for the overall educational system. First, the school principals will be fostered to become managers. Receiving strictly defined annual amount that is not divided into types of expences, the school principal will have the opportunity to prioritize the activities to be backed up, s/he will have the real stimuli to search for sponsors and parners, to establish public-private partnerships, to work for attracting more children in the school, and so on. The managment skills of the school principal will define the survival and the future of the certain school. Unfourtunately, this could manace the existence of many schools since most of the school principals in Bulgaria now do not have such skills and have never been trained in them.

Second, the system of delegated budgets will affect seriously the small schools, especially in the rural areas, and it will lead to the closing of many of them. Rough calculations show that for the normal existence of a school 250 000 BGN (i.e. 250 students) per year are necessary. Because of demographic reasons the vast majority of village schools does not have this number of pupils. Up to now most of the municipalities used the opportunity to re-allocate funds and to finance

additionally the schools in their villages because they realised the importance of their existence not only for the education of the children who lived in the village but also for the existence of the village itself. The delegated budgets eliminate this opportunity and will push the municipalities to close most of their village schools – from September 2008 or at last from September 2009. The other way is to preserve the school but with formal and poor educational process in them: low paid and not-motivated teachers, absence of groups for study-halls and lessons in free-elective subjects, and so on. Most probably many municipalities will apply the second option and will try to preserve their schools but the shortage of money will destroy completely the quality of education in them that is far from sufficient even now.

Third, the delegated budgets will strengthen the elite schools with big number of students, situated in the biggest cities: they will receive bigger budgets, their principals are much advanced in terms of managing skills and this will help them to meet the challenges of the structural reform, etc. I.e. the delegated budgets means less financing for the poorer and less populated schools and more financing for the richer and more populated schools.

Fourth, the delegated budgets will affect in a significant degree the quality of educational process unless special measures for providing this quality are initiated. It is possible many school principals to give up all free-elective classes and all study-hall groups in order to save money although it is clear that these are the lessons that make the school process interesting and their impact on children's education is obvious. It is possible many school principals to expand the teacher horarium¹ in order to save money which means that teachers will have more lessons for the same payment. This will make the teachers unmotivated. If additional measures are not initiated now, the structural reform would deteriorate the quality of education although its long-term positive impact on the quality of education is obvious.

Affecting the overall educational system, the delegated budgets will have many consequences for the education of Roma children and for the educational integration as a whole. First, the closing of many village schools will decrease sharply the educational level of rural Roma that is too low even now. Vast part of Roma children from villages with closed schools would not continue their education in another settlement because of cultural and social reasons even if free bus transportation is provided. The culturally determined frustration of many Roma parents to allow their children (especially their girls) to attend a school in another village or town could seem unserious in the eyes of public officials who have no knowledge about Roma culture. But this frustration is real and it would lead to many drop-outs among Roma children from the rural areas. There is also a serious problem with the parents whose children study in the accepting schools (the so-called "focal point schools"): the latter are not ready to accept the Roma children. At this stage no one envisages serious work with parents (both in villages with closed schools and in the focal point schools) in order to make them prepared for the change. And no one envisages funds for such a work.

Second, the delegated budgets will strengthen the segregated "Gipsy" schools situated in the Roma ghettos in the biggest Bulgarian towns and will completely enervate the weak efforts for desegregation. Since the segregated schools have big number of students (some of them are the biggest schools in the country in terms of number of students) they will receive the biggest subsidy although (this is a public secret) the quality of education in them often is questionable. At this stage the structural reform is based only on the number of students and does not take into account the quality of the pedagogical work; the desegregation of the ethnically segregated schools is not part of the structural reform.

Third, the delegated budgets could lead to full disband of all existing forms of intercultural education and in this way to leave Roma children without any opportunity to learn about themselves at school. Up to now "Folklore of the ethnoi – Roma folklore" and "Mother Romani tongue" are taught as free-elective subjects. The interest for some of them is huge and growing: for example "Folklore of the ethnoi – Roma folklore" is studied in more than 200 schools even

¹ According to Bulgarian legislation Ministry of Education defines the horarium-minimum. The horarium-maximum is defined by the school principal

without significant support by Ministry of Education. Since the delegated budgets most probably will decrease sharply all free-elective lessons (see above) it is normal to expect that they will decrease sharply the free-elective lessons in intercultural education as well although the interest of children and parents is huge and the need of them is obvious.

The reforms in Bulgarian society since 1990 up to now occurred as a rule on the expenses of the poorest and most marginalized parts of the population; they hardly affected Roma. Is it possible this scheme to be changed now when the real reform in the education system is about to start? What is the winning strategy for us, the Roma activists and for the Roma community as a whole to avoid the manace the structural reform in the education to worsen the level of education of Roma that is too low even now. What should we do in order to make the reform supportive and not distructive for the Roma educational integration?

First, it would be a mistake to criticize the introduction of the delegated budgets as a whole and to require their abolishment. From one side sich a requirment is unrealistic and would be waste of efforts. From the other side, the reform in Bulgarian education is undisputably necessary and the delegated budgets are part of this reform. In mid-term and long-term perspective the reform will result in raising the quality of education and will favour all Bulgarian citizens, including Roma. The problems appear now, in short-term perspective and they are linked not with the delegated budgets themselvs but with the way they will be introduced. The low level of the “unified expense standard”, the unprepareness of many schools and especially the lack of additional mechanisms for supporting and guaranteing the most vulnerable schools and the quality of educational process in them and others form the main short-term problems. The winning strategy is not to attack the educational reform itself but to advocate for its enrichment and complementation with additional mechanisms that will guarantee that the reform would support the Roma educational integration.

Second, Roma activists, together with teachers, school principals, trade-unions, municipal officials and representatives of the Ministry of Education and its regional structures should prepare clear criteria for distinguishing between village schools that could not be preserved and maintained schools that could be preserved. The issue of closing a school is always painful; it often means closing the village itself. But it is clear that there are schools that can not be maintained because the number of students in them is too small and the quality of education is too low. It is difficult to have a quality education in schools with 30-40 students and they should be closed despite the santiments. At the same time there are village schools with more children, with good level of educational process and with the real perspective – because of demographic reasons – to grow up and to have more pupils during the forthcoming years. Obviously these schools could and should receive special support in order to be strategically preserved. It is necessary both types of schools to be differentiated on the basis of clear criteria. After this, serious work with the parents from the first group of schools (that can not be preserved) is necessary in order to convince them that their childrens’ education in another settlement is necessary and they should support it. Serious woirk for raising the quality of education in the second group of village schools (that can be preserved) is necessary as well.

Increasing the amount of the “unified expense standard” is good mechanism for distinguishing both types of schools. The present amount of around 1051 BGN is unrealistically low and will bring to the abolishment of almost all village schools. Advocacy efforts for negotiating new amount of at least 1300 BGN are necessary. Such an amount will show which schools could survive in a natural way in the rural areas.

It is necessary also to make the criteria for defining the so-called “protected schools” more precise.² The idea of the Ministry of Education to provide certain schools that can not be completely maintained but that can not be integrated in focal-point schools because of geographic

² Ministry of Education and Science intends to proclaim certrain schools that could not be completely maintained as “protected” and to provide them with special help and higher subsidy. The criteria for choosing these schools are not completely clear, they relate mainly to the distance and the time a student should travel if the school is closed.

reasons with “protected” status should be wellcomed. At the same time advocacy efforts for incorporating more factors (including culturally and ethnic sensitive factors) in the criteria for proclaiming a school for “protected” are necessary. In this way – as a temporary step – many village schools with Roma students could be saved. Meanwhile a serious work with Roma and non-Roma parents to convince them that schooling in another settlement is necessary should be carried out.

Third, the Roma activists could do their best to convince the Ministry of Education to include mechanisms that bind structural reform in education with the educational integration of Roma children. Roma activists should prepare such mechanisms – together with all other stakeholders – and to negotiate with the Ministry of education about their approval. The incorporation of “work for integration of Roma children” as additional component in the formula for distributing the subsidy for the schools provided by the municipalities within the “unified expense standard” is a good example for such a mechanism. The Instructions of the Ministry of Education from February 8 allows the incorporation of additional component “work with students from the ethnic minorities” and many municipalities now use it in order to reallocate more funds for the village schools that integrate Roma students. In this respect, serious work should be done in two direction. From one side the component should be “**integration** of Roma students” and not just “**work** with Roma students” to insist that additional amount is provided for the integration of Roma kids in ethnically mixed city schools and in village schools in the way envisaged by the Strategy for Educational Integration approved by the Ministry of Education in 2004. If the component is just “**work** with Roma students” it would stigmatize the Roma children as children with special educational needs (i.e. children with mental disabilities) and would support additionally the segregated “Gipsy” schools. From the other side, work for introduction of mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the way schools spend the additional amounts for Roma integration is necessary.

Fourth, advocacy efforts for convincing the Ministry of Education to establish National program for support of intercultural education (similar to the other national programs steered by the Ministry) should be carried out. The schools could finance their free-elective subjects in intercultural education as well as similar activities within this Program. The same Program could finance also work with Roma parents in settlements with schools that should be closed as well as work with parents in the accepting schools. Such a Program will not duplicate the work of the Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities since the last is established as a structure for raising funds from foreign donors. A National program for support of intercultural education could be financed by the state budget as well as by Human Resources Development Operational Program in which intercultural education is priority.

These four directions for advocacy work are not the only possible: they could be complemented with many others proposed by all Roma and non-Roma NGOs that work for Roma educational integration. But it is necessary urgent actions to be initiated since the start of the structural reform is a fact now and its oucomes for the Roma educational integration (if no additional mechanisms are incorporated) seem disturbing.