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PRESS RELEASE

Serbia's presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion is a chance to lead the way to better education for Roma

Belgrade and Budapest, 23 October 2008. The Government has made real efforts to tackle the problems facing Roma in Serbia as part of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. Now, upon assuming the Presidency of this international initiative that includes eight other countries, Serbia has an opportunity to show how true progress can be made. Roma in Serbia still lack equal access to quality education, with a less than 50% participation rate in primary school. Of those children who do attend, only half succeed in mastering basic principles of mathematics and language. The Government must immediately take action to address the barriers to school facing Roma children to ensure the better inclusion of Roma in all spheres.

These are the main findings included in the Open Society Institute (OSI) monitoring report *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma in Serbia*. The report surveys all existing studies and data on the subject, and further illustrates the situation with new, in-depth research conducted in three communities: Niš, Valjevo, and Zemun (Belgrade). Drafted by Jadranka Stojanović from the Fund for an Open Society – Serbia and Aleksandar Baucal of the University of Belgrade's Department of Psychology, the report is released today in Belgrade in cooperation with the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, within the scope of the Serbian presidency activities in the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

Roma children are an increasingly large proportion of the school-age population in Serbia, yet they perform very poorly in school. The OSI report explore why Roma children are at so great a disadvantage, and reveals a range of barriers that diminish the quality of education available to all children in Serbia, but affect Roma most of all.

The deteriorating condition of schools throughout the country inevitably makes it more difficult for teachers to create a good learning environment given the limited resources and poor facilities. Roma, who generally live in the poorest areas and attend some of the worst-off schools, disproportionately suffer the effects of the crumbling infrastructure. Teachers themselves are hobbled by a lack of materials that take Roma into account, as curricula have only limited multicultural elements. Teacher training includes little background on working in a diverse classroom or with children from deprived backgrounds. Without adequate preparation, teachers

must struggle on their own to give all children the help they need to succeed, which has an adverse effect on every child.

Serbia can boast of a number of successful programmes that support Roma children in schools, but, as most are confined to a few schools or a specific geographic area only, their impact is fairly limited. Roma Teaching Assistants (RTAs) have been very effective at both the pre-school and primary levels, working in the classroom to support Roma children, particularly in learning the Serbian language and creating a bridge between the school and Roma communities. However, these assistants are working in a limited number of schools only. The OSI report recommends that this initiative is extended to other schools and also strengthened through continuous training for the RTAs.

While segregation is not formally recognised in Serbia, the reports document cases in which Roma children appear to have been placed in schools for adult education. There is also evidence that Roma children in Serbia, as in many other European countries, are incorrectly placed in special schools for children with intellectual disabilities, largely due to culturally insensitive assessment procedures. The report calls for greater research into this problem, so that a suitable solution can be put into place.

The OSI reports demonstrate that despite considerable commitments made at the international level to improve education for Roma, the Government lacks data that would make it possible to properly assess both participation and performance of Roma children in schools. The Electronic Management Information System is a promising tool for better monitoring, not only for Roma children, but for all children in Serbia's education system.

The work of civil society organisations in improving access to, and quality of, education for Roma is recognised in the OSI report as a significant contribution to the success Serbia has achieved so far in this area. The continued cooperation between government and civil society will be crucial in the coming years.

It is now Serbia's turn to lead the Decade of Roma Inclusion. According to Jadranka Stojanović of the Foundation for an Open Society Institute and an author of the report, "while we can say that Serbia takes its responsibilities towards Roma seriously, there is still a gap between policy documents and their implementation. Education for Roma must be a first priority because this is where social inclusion begins."

Notes to the editors

The monitoring of *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma* is a multi country project covering eight countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. The monitoring was carried out by the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP) of the Open Society Institute (OSI), in cooperation with OSI's Education Support Program (ESP) and Roma Participation Program (RPP). Local partner organizations and experts conducted the research in each country. The full text of the reports, in English and in translation, is available online at <http://www.eumap.org>. More information on OSI is available at <http://www.soros.org>.