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## PRESS RELEASE

### **Roma children face extensive barriers to quality education, new report reveals**

*Sofia and Budapest, 27 June 2007* - Many of Bulgaria's Roma children continue to face discrimination, isolation or exclusion from education, concludes the "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma in Bulgaria" released today. The report produced by the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program of the Open Society Institute is a comprehensive analysis of basic educational indicators and major barriers and constraints that prevent from Roma in Bulgaria to enjoy equal access to quality education. It is the first comprehensive report on Roma education ever produced in Bulgaria.

The dire situation of education for Roma in Bulgaria is documented in the report. The importance of pre-school (kindergarten) attendance for future schooling success is generally acknowledged. It is particularly important for the many Roma children whose first language is not Bulgarian. In Bulgaria, however, 35 per cent of Roma children do not attend pre-school, compared with less than 7 per cent of ethnic Bulgarian children.

The drop-out rate among Roma in Bulgaria stands at 20 per cent compared to just 2 per cent of ethnic Bulgarians. However, considering the low rates of actual school attendance among Roma, for which there is no official data, the overall number of Roma who in fact receive an education in school is very low. Less than ten per cent of Roma in Bulgaria have even partial secondary education.

Many Roma communities are isolated from majority society, in segregated settlements and urban ghettos. Schools serving these communities generally have close to 100 per cent Roma enrolment, and the OSI report documents the low quality of education available in these schools.

The report highlights that no comprehensive plan for school desegregation has been elaborated in Bulgaria. According to Krassimir Kanev, Chair of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and author of the report, "until the government gets its act together things are unlikely to change and Roma kids are paying the price".

In mainstream schools Roma children are frequently placed in remedial classes where they are given lower quality education and as a result hardly any opportunity for future employment.

The report also reveals that, despite widespread international condemnation, and even after new placement procedures were introduced in 2002, the number of Roma children who are inappropriately placed in special schools for children with disabilities remains disproportionately

high. In some special schools up to 95 per cent of the students are Roma. Roma placed in special schools do not have the opportunity to earn a diploma that would give them real employment prospects.

The OSI report includes 49 concrete recommendations to the Bulgarian government on how to change the situation. It also contains original material gathered in three case study locations: Nikolaevo, Veliko Turnovo, and Vidin. Research conducted in these three communities demonstrate the serious inequalities that persist in education in Bulgaria.

In Vidin Municipality the report documents an appalling practice of village schools which enrol Roma children at the beginning of the school year, transport them for a month or so from distant neighbourhoods to the village schools and then, when the school files the appropriate documentation and receives a subsidy, it immediately stops transporting the children, who are later reported as drop-outs.

The case study material also present examples where change was made possible through active participation in desegregation initiatives and efforts to introduce more material on Roma history and culture in the classroom. These positive initiatives, however, were carried out mainly by local civil society organisations and by their nature can only have limited scope.

Lack of implementation, follow-through, and political will have blocked the way towards achieving the goals set out over the last eight years of public policy. Education is one of the priorities of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, and Bulgaria, which currently hold the presidency of the Decade, will need to show that its commitment to this international initiative will result in concrete efforts to overcome the barriers to equal access to education in the country.

#### Notes to the editors

The monitoring of *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma* is a multi country project covering the nine countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. The monitoring is 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 NGOs and experts conduct 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>.

The Bulgarian report was prepared in cooperation with the Open Society Institute, Sofia. It was researched and drafted by Krassimir Kanev, Reporter, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, together with Iossif Nounev, Consultant, State Expert at the Ministry of Education and Science; Evgeni Evgeniev, Researcher; and Teodora Krumova, Researcher, Amalipe Centre for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance.