

Monitoring Local Implementation of  
the Government Strategy for the  
Improvement of the Condition  
of Roma in Romania  
in Timiș County

## BACKGROUND

Timiș county is the westernmost county of Romania, bordered to the west by Csongrad county, (Hungary) and to the south-west by the province of Vojvodina (Serbia). The Romanian counties neighbouring Timiș are Arad to the north, Hunedoara to the east and Caraș – Severin to the south-east. Timiș county is the largest county in Romania and has a population of 677,926. It is rightly considered a multiethnic county with a Romanian majority, (83.4% – 565,639), with Hungarian (7.4% – 50,556), Roma (2.4% – 16,084), Germans (2.09% – 14,174), Serbs (1.9% – 13,273), Ukrainians (1.07% – 7321), Slovaks (0.28% – 1908) and other minorities (Bulgarians, Turks, Russians, Tatars, Lipovans – 1.3%).<sup>1</sup>

### 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Timiș county, there has been almost no progress in implementing the objectives of the Strategy. At the time of writing, Timiș county had not developed a County Strategy for implementing the Strategy. Although the Strategy was initially received as an important step towards involving Roma in the resolution of their own issues and as a means to give Roma the status of equal partners in discussion, expectations have since fallen. According to one Roma representative, “I don’t think that the improvement of the condition of Roma is desired, the Government merely wants to show the EU that it is concerned with the Roma.”

Although the Strategy calls for a high degree of involvement of Roma in central and local bodies, there has been almost no effort to include Roma in decisions regarding Roma issues in Timiș county. A County Office for Roma (hereafter, BJR) has been established, but the time of writing the county-level Joint Working for called for by the Strategy had not been formed and none of the towns in the county had hired a local expert on Roma affairs. According to local Roma representatives, “Mayors request our services only when there are problems or when Roma are causing trouble. It is then that they remember us. When we come to them to solve issues regarding our community, they don’t have time for us.”<sup>2</sup>

Roma leaders assert that “the Strategy looks good on paper, but it cannot be practically implemented because there is no political will.” In particular, Roma representatives believe that Strategy implementation has not progressed at the Timiș county level

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<sup>1</sup> Population Census 2002, Ethno-demographic structure of population.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Bot Ioan, volunteer councillor, Lugoj, 29 June 2003.

because officials at the Prefecture do not fully understand the goals of the Strategy. In addition, lack of funding has been a serious obstacle to the activities of the BJR.

## 2. LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

### 2.1 Administrative bodies

#### 2.1.1 The county office for Roma (BJR)

The Timiș Prefecture County Office for Roma (hereafter, BJR) was established on 17 September 2001. The first Councillor for the Prefect on Roma Affairs (hereafter, Councillor) was appointed the same day, but resigned three months later for medical reasons. During these first months of operation, funding was insufficient to hire additional personnel for the BJR, although a staff of three was originally planned. The Councillor reported that working relations with other representatives at the county level was quite difficult, as communication was carried out only on an *ad hoc* basis.<sup>3</sup>

A new Councillor was chosen in February 2002, following a competitive selection process. The Councillor, a member of Roma minority and a former teacher at a special education school, has little direct experience working on Roma issues, but was the only applicant who had completed university, as the other applicants were students. At present, the BJR employs the Councillor part-time and also has five volunteer staff. The role of the Prefecture in implementing the Strategy has thus been limited, as the BJR's capacity to plan, organise, or coordinate activity is greatly constrained by the lack of personnel.

The volunteer members of the BJR are members of the Christian Democrat Union of the Banat Roma (*Uniunea Creștin Democrată a Romilor din Banat*) and were appointed by the President of the organisation, who is also President of the RSDP in Timiș county. The BJR volunteer staff has varying degrees of experience and responsibilities appear to be only loosely divided amongst the members. One of the volunteers has been appointed as the expert consultant, and appears to make most decisions unilaterally.<sup>4</sup>

Although the BJR maintains official working hours, no schedule is posted for the public, and clients cannot rely upon finding the staff in the office at any given time. According to the BJR staff, their field activities preclude adherence to a fixed schedule for the public.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Gheorghe Crișan, 17 of June 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mihai Nicolae, BJR expert-consultant, 27 of June 2003.

Every six months, the BJR sends information regarding the local level implementation of the Strategy to the Office for Roma Issues in the Department for Interethnic Relations, part of the Government General Secretariat. These reports do not give sufficient detail to indicate whether the BJR initiated the activities listed, or to what extent it took part in more general projects, and there is no information regarding the concrete results of their actions. Attempts to verify or collect more detail on these activities were unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup>

There are few connections between the BJR and Roma NGOs in Timiș county and most of these organisations stated that the BJR did not provide support for the elaboration of projects.<sup>6</sup> In fact, some NGOs expressed concern that the BJR had complicated the implementation of certain projects, through the dissemination of inaccurate information, or by failing to provide information to NGOs and their partners.<sup>7</sup> NGOs representatives report that believe that the staff of the BJR lacks the training and skills to effectively implement the Government Strategy.<sup>8</sup>

According to the BJR staff, the lack of funding is the most serious obstacle to Strategy implementation. The BJR members indicate that their activities would improve if the Government and the EU increased the financial resources available for Strategy implementation. Indeed, the resources available to the BJR are extremely limited – even the office furniture was provided by a staff member, and there is no assurance that travel expenses will be reimbursed. A structural issue may also be impeding the level of BJR activity, as the majority of funds are allocated by county councils, and not by the Prefecture. According to one local Roma representative, “... as long as the BJR functions within the Prefecture and not within the County Council, nothing will move.”<sup>9</sup>

Within the Prefecture, there are concerns that the lack of support from Roma civil society is hampering the activities of the BJR. Some Prefecture employees have suggested that local Roma communities must unite and elect a leader to represent themselves, to participate in resolving the issues related to Roma.<sup>10</sup> However, as these employees acknowledge that there has been no discussion of the Strategy at local

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Florin Vlad, BJR councillor, 17 June 2003. The councillor on Roma issues refused to provide detailed information about specific activities on the grounds that the BJR expert-consultant was not available.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with Laurențiu Crăciun and Ramona Sein, president of Roma Acces Association, respectively president of Parudimos Association, 23 July 2003; with Olimpia Leonte, coordinator of the Legality and Rights project, Timișoara, 12 July 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ramona Sein, president of PARUDIMOS Association, 23 July 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ramona Sein, president of PARUDIMOS Association, 23 July 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mircea Barbu, editor of the radio broadcast in Romani language at Timișoara Radio, 12 of July 2003, Timișoara.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Gheorghe Crișan, prefect councillor, 17 June 2003.

meetings, efforts to transfer responsibility from the government to civil society appear disingenuous.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.1.2 Local experts on Roma affairs

None of the towns in Timiș County has yet hired a local expert on Roma affairs. In 22 towns the authorities have requested funding for a local expert post, but no support has been identified in any of these towns.<sup>12</sup> There were intentions to employ a local expert on Roma affairs in Jimbolia, but the candidate was instead hired as a social mediator. A vacancy was advertised in Timișoara for a local expert on Roma affairs, but neither of the two applicants appeared for an interview.<sup>13</sup> The vacancy for a Roma expert in Timișoara is within the Timișoara Community Centre for Social Work and the candidate will work under the supervision of the Centre rather than the Mayor or the BJR.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1.3 Local joint working group

Although most representatives agree that establishing a county Local Joint Working Group in Timiș would be an important step in Strategy implementation, it has not yet been formed. This Working Group should comprise representatives of both public institutions and NGOs active in the relevant fields and which could contribute to the implementation of the Strategy. However, in December 2002 a structure named “The County Council for Roma” was instead established.<sup>15</sup> As this name is similar to the main county administrative structure, it could create misunderstandings. Indeed, there already appears to be confusion regarding its function, as the “expert-consultant for Roma affairs” appears to regard the County Council for Roma as the Joint Working

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Grigore Rus and Suci Nicolae, councillors of Timiș County Council, respectively of Timișoara Local Council, Timișoara, 16 July 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Banloc, Becicherecu Mic, Biled, Cărpiniș, Cenad, Cenei, Ciacova, Comloșul Mare, Făget, Giarmata, Iecsa Mare, Jebel, Jimbolia, Lovrin, Lugoj, Moșnița Noua, Peciu Nou, Periam, Recaș, Sacalaz, Sânmihaiu Roman, and Sannicolau Mare.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the chief of the Human Resources Department of the Timișoara city hall, 22 of July 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Maria Stoianov, chief of the Communitarian Centre Iosefin, 25 July 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Minute of establishment of the County Council for Roma, Timișoara, 7 December 2002.

Group.<sup>16</sup> The County Council for Roma has a five-member executive; four of these representatives are members of the Timiș BJR.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 Housing

In Timiș county accomplishments in the field of housing are inconsistent. The BJR was involved in seeking a solution to the problem that a number of houses built without proper authorisation by Roma families in Timișoara were in danger of being destroyed by the authorities. However, the necessary construction authorisations have not been obtained to date and some houses have already demolished. Some Roma believe discrimination is a factor in these cases: “... I think this is all about racism and envy, because there are other people who have houses built without proper authorisation, but they have not demolished them, like in the case of the Roma”.<sup>18</sup>

Giarmata Town Hall took the only concrete measure for the resolution of the issues connected to the right of property for the lands and houses of the Roma. In partnership with the Roma Women Association For Our Children (*Pentru Copiii Noștri*), it received Phare funds from the Partnership Fund for Roma to legalise Roma property in Giarmata market town.<sup>19</sup> A total of 27 properties were entered into the cadastre through this project, 24 for houses and three for land. Although the Giarmata Town Hall initiated the project, the Local Council has not supported it and those involved with the project report a lack of support from some councillors.<sup>20</sup>

The problems arising from the Roma community’s lack of property documents are acute in Timișoara. In December 2003, 36 people were evicted, including 20 children. These families have lived their homes for 60 years and they are presently living on the same land in a temporary structure made of cardboard and cellophane.

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<sup>16</sup> Florin Vlad, Roundtable, Timis Prefecture, 27 November 2003. The so called “BJR expert-consultant” is Nicolae Mihai, president of the Christian Democrat Union of the Banat Roma, and leader of the RSDP Timiș.

<sup>17</sup> Minutes of establishment of the County Council for Roma, on 7 of December 2002, Timișoara, and the report of Timiș prefecture to the Romanian government, 7 April 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mircea Barbu, editor of the radio broadcast in Romani language at Timișoara Radio, Timișoara, 12 July 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Phare RO 9803.01.010, Partnership Fund for Roma, scheme of grants with the total value of €900,000 distributed for 30 financing contracts.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with Olimpia Leonte, coordinator of the project Legality and Rights, 12 July 2003, Timișoara; Iadranca Bișin, Legality and Rights project assistant, Timișoara, 11 July 2003.

## 2.3 Social protection

The Timiș County Directorate for Social Work does not provide social work services targeting the Roma community specifically. The Timiș County Agency for Employment has not organised any qualification or professional reorientation courses for Roma “because no Roma person came to us and asked for such a thing”.<sup>21</sup>

The Roma Women’s Association in partnership with the Timișoara City Hall is implementing a project to provide professional training, legal and psychological counselling, and women’s rights awareness orientation for approximately 50 Roma women and girls.

## 2.4 Health care

The position of health mediator has been added to the list of recognised professions in Romania, and the National Strategy calls for the training and coordination of such health visitors in Roma communities. Although three Roma in Timiș County have completed health mediator courses, organised by the Ministry of Healthcare and Family in partnership with Romani CRISS, the Directorate for Public Healthcare has not yet hired a health mediator. The PARUDIMOS association made an official request to the Directorate for training and hiring mediators in the seven largest towns, but the Directorate did not respond. According to the staff, the Directorate lacks the resources to implement such measures.<sup>22</sup>

The Timiș Directorate for Public Healthcare has organised several campaigns for the identification and prevention of infectious diseases in Roma communities in the Cunti district of Timișoara, Banloc, and Sacălaz.

## 2.5 Economic initiatives

The Timiș Directorate for Work and Social Solidarity (hereafter, DWSS) sent a draft partnership agreement to the County Office for Roma in 2002, but to date has not

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Sorin Munteanu, manager of the County Agency for Employment, Timișoara, 26 July 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Paul Jurchescu, doctor within the Directorate for Public Healthcare, Timișoara, 3 August 2003.

received a reply.<sup>23</sup> The DWSS has signed a partnership with the PARUDIMOS Association, and has made space available for the association to develop its activities.

In order to identify potential employers who will hire Roma citizens, the Timiș County Agency for Professional Training and Occupation organised a job fair for Roma. Nine of the 96 employers invited to participate were Roma, but none of these nine took part.<sup>24</sup> The number of jobs that were available was relatively small and most required only a low level of qualification. There were a few jobs where a higher level of education was required, such as an insurance agent. Of the 227 visitors to the job fair, 113 were Roma; 14 Roma found work through the fair, including four women.

In Jimbolia, with Phare funding the Mayor's Office collaborated with the Roma Access Association to offer three-month vocational training for 34 people.<sup>25</sup> Twenty-one Roma men received training in bricklaying and 13 Roma women in sewing, and all the participants graduated from the training course. At present, most of the men who graduated from the bricklaying course have found work abroad.

Between November 2000 and December 2002, the international project RECITRAVE was developed in Timișoara, with participation from a county in three EU member states and the Timișoara City Hall. The objectives of this project included the social reintegration of the Roma, recycling, job creation, and development of a strategy for the socio-economic development of Timișoara city. The European Commission, at the proposal of Commercial of London Borough of Bromley, financed the project.<sup>26</sup> However, when the project concluded, no Roma remained employed. Moreover, the city hall refused to release the final report to the Roma partner organisation (the Social Cultural Association of Banat Roma), even after an official request.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Radu Groza, executive president of DWSS, Timișoara, 14 July 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sorin Munteanu, manager of the County Agency for Professional Training and Occupation, Timișoara, 26 July 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Phare RO 9803.01.010, Partnership Fund for Roma, scheme of grants with the total value of €900.000 distributed for 30 financing contracts.

<sup>26</sup> The total project budget was €312,552, of which €33,908 was contributed by Timișoara City Hall.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Ioan Mirescu, president of the Social Cultural Association of the Banat Roma, 23 August 2003.

## 2.6 Justice and public order

The Giarmata Town Hall, in partnership with the Roma Women's Association, issued 30 identity cards and 25 birth and marriage certificates and other personal documents.<sup>28</sup>

A number of NGOs, including the Social Cultural Association of the Banat Roma, and the PARUDIMOS Association, together with the Timiș County Police Inspectorate are developing the "Equal Chances" project, related to the reintegration of young people on probation. The project is financed by the Measures of Trust programme of the European Council.

The Humanitarian Association Saints Peter and Paul, in partnership with the Timiș County Council; Timișoara City Hall; Timiș County School Inspectorate; the Police Inspectorate; Timișoara Penitentiary; with the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology (Timișoara West University); the Clinic of Forensic Medicine; and the Social Cultural Association of the Banat Roma, have developed the project "Equal Chances in Justice."<sup>29</sup> The project offers support to 260 Roma convicts by providing social and educational programmes during their detention, for better subsequent reintegration.

## 2.7 Child protection

There is no partnership between the Roma NGOs and the Timiș County Child Protection Directorate to date. However, the directorate's staff includes seven Roma employees.

## 2.8 Education

There are 28,172 children in Timiș county who attend school, of whom 2,332 identify as Roma. Roma children are the most numerous school dropouts, especially among elementary pupils. In order to decrease this phenomenon, six schools established daily reintegration classes in 1999.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Phare RO 9803.01.010, Partnership Fund for Roma, scheme of grants with the total value of €900,000 distributed for 30 financing contracts.

<sup>29</sup> Phare RO 9803.01.010, Partnership Fund for Roma, scheme of grants with the total value of €900,000 distributed for 30 financing contracts.

<sup>30</sup> Elementary and Secondary School no. 5 Lugoj, Elementary and Secondary School no. 4 Timișoara, Elementary and Secondary School Becicherecu-Mic, Elementary and Secondary School Dudeștii – Noi, Elementary and Secondary School no. 1 Jimbolia, Timișoara Energetic School Group.

An inspector who handles the issue of Roma children is hired half-time within Timiș School Inspectorate. The Inspectorate elaborated a strategy for integrating the Roma children in society, dating from a 2002 a project proposal for Phare funding.

A variety of NGOs and educational facilities have undertaken measures to improve the education of Roma. These include:

- a partnership between Timiș School Inspectorate and the Roma Women's Association For Our Children with the purpose of starting an educational project for Roma children;
- In Timiș county "A Second Chance" programme, implemented by the Timișoara Technical College and the Auto School Group; 21 pupils are part of the programme, most of them Roma;
- The foundation Education Centre 2000+ is financing the programme MATRA "Equal Chances for Roma Children through Education" in 5 schools from Timiș county;
- The Timișoara Intercultural Institute's Eurrom project, financed by the European Commission, Socrates – Comenius Programme, which trained and supported teachers in developing activities for working with Roma children.

## **2.9 Culture and denominations**

Starting in 2001, the Christian Democrat Union of the Banat Roma, in partnership with Timiș Prefecture, annually organise celebrations for International Roma Day on 8 April.

Starting in July 2003, on the initiative of the PARUDIMOS Roma Students Association in partnership with Timișoara Radio Station, a hour-long radio transmission in Romani is broadcast weekly. With Phare funding, Roma students' associations from Timișoara and Cluj have agreed with local television stations to train a team of young Roma in television broadcasting at the regional level.

## **2.10 Public participation**

Although many Roma from various localities participated in the 2000 local elections for town councillors, only in Lenaouheim (Grabaț) was a Roma candidate elected to the town council. Otherwise, no civil servant identifies as Roma.

The Social Democrat Roma Party does not have a legally registered branch at county level, but the Banat Roma Christian Democrat Union seeks to represent Roma in the political sphere.<sup>31</sup>

## **2.11 Communication and civic participation**

Activities in the areas of communication and public participation have been organised by NGOs and the Timișoara Intercultural Institute. Several round-tables with local authorities and Roma leaders were organised in this respect. Also, they implemented, in partnership with Roma Social Cultural Association in Banat a project called “Together with Roma from Banat: for a sustainable local development”, project funded by the Council of Europe.<sup>32</sup>

PARUDIMOS Association implemented a project called “Investment for the future” in order to improve the organisational capacity of the Roma communities; 14 young Roma were trained in fields like communication, community development, legal issues, and fundraising.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mihai Nicolae, president of the Christian Democrat Union of the Banat Roma, BJR expert-consultant, 27 June 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Round-table, Timișoara, 27 November 2003. The project was implemented in the Periam and Satchinez villages.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Ramona Sein, president of PARUDIMOS Association, 23 July 2003.