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Iulius Rostas

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Antigypsyism, education and the media: ways forward

Iulius Rostas

Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This article is a self-reflection of my work over a decade of challenging school segregation of Roma across Europe. I look at how segregation has been framed and how communication around equality in education with the public took place. The education system is an important pillar in producing and reproducing antigypsyism in society. I see school segregation as an important mechanism that perpetuates antigypsyism. I explore ways to attract support for equality measures in education. One important strategy is to engage with media in transmitting messages to an audience that was usually not the target of inclusive discourses that promote diversity and equality as societal values.

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Introduction

Through this article, based on the lessons learned from over a decade of involvement with Roma school desegregation across Europe, I aim to clarify some of the challenges regarding Roma school desegregation that were not clearly communicated to the public. I argue that Roma school segregation is a consequence of stigmatising Romani identity, it represents an expression of antigypsyism and that communication is a necessary ingredient in promoting school desegregation. In the beginning of the article, I define antigypsyism and I continue by describing the environment and raising few important questions regarding school desegregation. Later on, I present the ways Roma school desegregation activists have framed school segregation and, in the end, I present two case studies of engaging with the public.

Poverty is often seen as the main impediment for Roma in accessing education (UNDP 2002; Ringold, Orenstein, and Wilkens 2005). I disagree. In my view, as an educator, activist and someone who is also from a Roma background, racism towards Roma, the so-called antigypsyism, is

CONTACT Iulius Rostas  rostasi@ceu.edu  Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

key for understanding the low level of education amongst Roma. Antigypsyism in education is essentially reflected by the separation of Roma children from their non-Roma peers. Roma and human rights activists have called this practice segregation, a legal term mostly associated in the collective memory of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) people with the situation of African Americans in the United States or with the apartheid in South Africa. Roma school segregation consists of the physical separation of Roma children from their non-Roma peers in schools, classes, buildings and other facilities, including special schools or classes with adapted curricula. The separation practices in education impede the full realisation of the right to education of Roma children and their development as individuals and citizens in a democratic society.¹ In fact, racial segregation, as the experiences from the United States and South Africa have proven, affects not only the victims but also the whole society.²

Antigypsyism is a special form of racism against Roma: its core assumption is inferiority and deviance of Roma. Antigypsyism is about the way majority and institutions view and treat those portrayed in the public imaginary as 'Gypsy'.³ Unlike Romaphobia, which might suggest an unreasonable fear of Roma, the term 'antigypsyism' encompasses direct actions against Roma and emphasises its systemic feature by bringing into discussion the role of the state in producing and reproducing this illogical racially biased fear and hostility. Antigypsyism is therefore deeply embedded in social structures, especially in state institutions like the police, the military or the education system, and is constantly reproduced.

Academics and higher education institutions have played a major role in reproducing the non-identity assumption of Roma.⁴ End emphasised as a central ascription of antigypsyism the lack of ethnic identity of Roma, as people without roots, lacking a territory and living in the present (End 2014, 89–90). In addition, stigmatisation of Roma identity within the education systems happened through failing to include within the mainstream curricula any information on Roma history, arts and culture. Historically, antigypsyism has its origins in the attitudes of the Church towards the Roma as an expression of alterity (Fraser 1992, 60–83). Through policing, states have contributed to depicting Roma as social deviants for centuries (Van Baar 2011). Thus, state institutions and the Church have for centuries produced and reproduced antigypsyism which, I argue, is more than just a phobia. Antigypsyism includes a wide range of manifestations: from hate speech to discrimination, from denial of identity to forced eviction and mass expulsions and from racist jokes to mass killings and attempts to exterminate the whole group.

Context

I started working on the issue of school segregation in 2001 at a time when there were really few who thought this represents an issue at all for Roma in Europe. Due to the international political context, the environment was propitious to put Roma school segregation on the agenda of the governments in CEE with a significant Roma population (Danka and Rostas 2012, 49–52). Directly or indirectly, the CEE governments have recognised school segregation as an issue, either by adopting policy documents, regulations and legislation banning school segregation or making clear their position in political declarations. The peak of recognition of Roma school segregation was in 2005 when nine heads of governments from CEE adopted a political declaration backed by national action plans to launch a decade of efforts to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma in their societies – the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. Within their political declarations during the launching conference in Sofia, in February 2005, as well as within the national action plans, school desegregation was mentioned as a goal for government interventions.

This article is a critical reflection of the Roma school segregation movement and how my own experience as an activist in this movement has made me rethink my activist relations with the public and the media. Together with the contributors of *Ten Years After: A History of Roma School Desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe*, I engaged in such a reflection back in 2010–2011. Among the critical points raised then as to what the movement could have done differently included: (1) to more successfully mobilise Roma parents and communities, (2) to focus less on educational framework and processes, (3) to translate successful projects into policies in spite of the complexity of such a process, (4) to strengthen the link between litigators, parents and educators and (5) to use a more inclusive strategy to place segregation on the government agenda (Rostas 2012, 343–65). However, an overarching problem I identified in this reflection was the narrow approach that we took as activists. My colleagues and I, in promoting desegregation, emphasised the segregation of Roma children as a specific ethnicised problem, rather than being a societal problem. We did not focus enough on the mobilisation of those interested in larger educational reforms (e.g. disability rights activists) and we thought that we could promote desegregation quicker and with more success if we use the international political context dominated by the Euro-Atlantic integration of countries from CEE, in order to place segregation on the government's agenda. How did an issue, which received recognition at the top political level, become marginal in such a short period of time? What is the reason that Roma school desegregation receives such limited attention from governments, NGOs, educators and donors today? Were those actors that

advocated for desegregation wrong in placing an issue on the governmental agenda without the support of the public, especially of the Roma parents? Could greater media engagement have helped?

The article offers some answers to these questions and by doing so, answers the question: what could have been done better? I argue that one of the most important areas in which Roma school desegregation activists (the 'we' in this article) underperformed is in the communication with the larger public which includes communication with and through the media. Our mere assumption that we are fighting for the right cause and therefore the public opinion was not so important proved to be a key factor in explaining the failure to achieve social change when it comes to Roma and equality. In other words, our theory of change did not consider adequately the significant role public opinion could play in transforming society and ensuring the sustainability of reforms. Hence, communication with the public was not considered a top priority.

Segregation framing and communication

One of the strategic mistakes we made in promoting desegregation was not paying enough attention to communicating to the general public and the media. We considered segregation as an egregious form of discrimination and aimed at desegregation with all deliberate speed. We promoted desegregation using the favourable international context to promote our aim and we did not present segregation as an unacceptable issue in our societies. The way we thus framed segregation then influenced our communication with the public, which I now move on to explore.

We activists framed Roma school segregation as an education issue pertaining to human rights rather than as a social justice issue. For example, in Romania, the platform used to advocate for school desegregation was the steering committee of a PHARE programme.⁵ Using the experiences from neighbouring countries as well as cases documented by an NGO, we lobbied the Ministry of Education to adopt an internal regulation banning Roma school segregation. Thus, the context, the actors and the target of our messages and actions were strictly educational. As a result, the language and the tools to tackle the issue were limited to the specific field of education, such as training for principals and teachers, curricula reforms, promoting inclusive education and non-discrimination in school. Only later, the parents and local authorities became a target group of some activities within the PHARE programme. However, we did not initiate discussions about social inequality and injustices in local communities.

Articulating segregation as unequal access to quality education, and therefore a violation of the human rights of Roma, was important as it provided the opportunity to Roma human rights activists to use human

rights language. We did claim a violation of the Roma right to education before courts and international fora in the cases of Ostrava (Czech Republic), Košice, Prešov (Slovakia) Hajdúhadház and Jászládány (Hungary) and few other cases (European Roma Rights Center 2004). While international institutions, especially those concerned with human rights monitoring, have been sensitive to these claims, the focus of Roma human rights activists was primarily on international institutions. This was due to the relatively facile access to these fora, the use of a common language that was easily understandable to the members of these fora and the international context dominated by Euro-Atlantic integration. As a result, the campaign was externally oriented and the change was expected to happen mostly due to international pressure. However, when international pressure became a lesser priority, as was the case following the accession of CEE countries into EU in 2004 and 2007, the incentives and commitment of the governments to desegregate also subsided.

Framing segregation as a human rights issue had other advantages too. Human rights could be used as a theoretical framework to comprehensively describe the situation of Roma to outsiders and it was a language easy to learn for activists aiming to improve the situation. However, relating cases to the wider human rights framework can often fall short of really getting to grips with the local context. In addition, localised issues such as identity and power relations – two important dimensions to be considered when analysing the situation of Roma – are not included as part of the problem. For example, human rights could be useful in describing the segregation in Ostrava (Czech Republic), Vidin (Bulgaria), Cluj (Romania) or other places but it will not explain the root causes of the marginalised position of Roma within these local communities. Moreover, as redresses for human rights violations are claims against the state, the public understood these repeated claims made in a hard-to-understand language as some kind of privileges for Roma (Osiatynski 2009, 77–80). Without being targeted by a sustained campaign and explained what is at stake in an easy and comprehensible language, the public was left alone to understand the complexity of Roma school segregation. Sometimes, the opponents of school desegregation managed to have better communication with the public, to manipulate images and/or to provoke speculation around existent fears and negative attitudes towards Roma in local communities, as it was the case in Ostrava (Czech Republic), Hajdúhadház (Hungary), or Sofia and Vidin (Bulgaria), to give just few examples where opposition to Roma school desegregation was strong. In all these cases, school inspectorates and principals managed to convince the non-Roma parents that mixing student cohorts will lower the quality of education their children would receive and would create tensions between Roma and non-Roma pupils. These communication shortcomings combined with the social distance towards Roma were reflected in the so-

called 'white flight'; the migration of non-Roma students from schools with significant proportion of Roma pupils to those schools with few or no Roma students.

Framing Roma school segregation as a matter of social justice presupposes a change in focus and target of actions. As an educational issue in the human rights frame, the focus of the actions was narrow, consisting of those from the education system and outsiders with a direct interest in the issue. The language was a technical one, inaccessible to many stakeholders, especially parents. Moreover, educational experts could claim that they know best what is to be done based on their qualifications and dismissed the claims of activists for equality and community participation in education. In fact, in all the cases I was directly or indirectly involved with, I witnessed such claims from education experts. Using the social justice frame repositions the focus of activities to internal or local actors who have to deal with a situation that some actors consider it unfair. The messages and the language involved in communicating to and among these actors is a simple one that could be easily understood by all actors, using familiar terms from their everyday life such as fair, just, equality etc. This framing puts the actors in dialogue and the root causes of the situation are analysed with the aim of finding a reasonable arrangement for all parties. Thus, the claim for equality in education and the solution are found usually at the local level with the participation of multiple actors rather than imposed from outside the community by a decision of a court or a policymaker.

Case studies

In this section, I use two examples of my involvement with media in promoting Roma school desegregation. Both cases are from Hungary, involving online media, one website popular among centre-right and right wing supporters – hir24.hu – and another one popular among liberal and leftist groups – abcug.hu.⁶ In the first case, the discussion on school segregation took place in the context of the Curia (Hungary's Supreme Court) decision in Nyíregyháza case, which stated that separation of children by ethnicity is justifiable if the school provides religious education.⁷ The second interview took place as a result of the lecture I gave at the Central European University on 10 February 2016 'Ethnicity Power and Inclusion: Why Policies towards Roma in Europe Are Failing' (also a forthcoming book of the same title).

During the hir24 interview, I touched upon important messages to be sent to a wider audience but I could also talk about more technical issues such as the judicial balancing of the best interest of the child against freedom of choice of school by parents. While explaining the decision of the Supreme Court to the audience, I emphasised that segregation does not only mean unequal education, but bad education for all. In my view,

education consists of transmitting knowledge, skills and values through different pedagogical strategies and methods. I showed that socialisation is an important component of education that is often overlooked by experts. I also showed that values and socialisation do matter in education, offering the example of the interwar Germany, which had the highest educated population at the time but because of the lack of education for democracy, the same well-educated population brought Hitler into power. Thus, good education means also internalising values and learning skills that make us good citizens not just a competitive labour force.

Three other important messages I was able to cover in the interview. First, the support of the teachers and the need for their continuous professional development. It is a characteristic of the educational system in CEE that teachers are not prepared to manage a diverse group in the classroom. Often teachers and school principals are criticised for separating Roma pupils from their peers. Nevertheless, one should also recognise that teachers did not receive training on managing ethnic diversity nor the diversity of needs of pupils. Second, antigypsyism is a historical phenomenon and past experiences has proven that the assimilation of Roma is not an option. The third point is that investing in Roma education makes economic sense. Such policies will be beneficial not only to Roma but to society as a whole.

The article from abcug.hu is based partly on my lecture and partly on the interview I gave on school segregation and inclusion policies. The major messages that come out of the article are that school segregation is a major problem that Roma continue to face in Hungary and that colour blindness is not a solution. I framed segregation as an issue of structural discrimination against Roma that is ignored within the government strategy targeting Roma. I presented 'colour blindness' as an approach that would just sweep the diversity of needs of ethnically diverse schools and communities under the carpet rather than solving them. Thus, identity and ethnic relevance of social inclusion policies are important ingredients for successful policies. One important clarification I made was between segregation and minority education, emphasising that those schools that do not use Romani language in teaching part of the curricula, such is the network of Christian Roma Special colleges or the Gandhi Gymnasium, are segregated schools. Other topics I touched upon in my interview and were cited within the article were the need for curricula reform and teacher training for diversity and inclusion and the economic argument in investing in school desegregation.

I cannot present data on the impact these messages had on the general public. However, the feedback I received so far from those that interviewed me as well as from the audience indicates that my messages reach out to people. Hir24 is the second largest news portal in Hungary with more than half-a-million readers. The interview I gave was shared 250 times on

different social networks and it was the headliner for that day. In general, the audience picked ideas and agreed or disagreed in their comments on social networks. The few racially biased comments have been deleted or not allowed by the administrator of the site. The abcug.hu article was shared almost 400 times and received more than 15,000 likes on different social media. I continue to believe that the only effective strategy to promote school desegregation is to continue to communicate and to attract support from other groups interested in reforming educational systems.

In this article, I argued that education systems play a central role in producing and reproducing antigypsyism in European societies. School segregation is the most important form of expression of antigypsyism in education as it represents a structural factor reproducing inequalities between Roma and non-Roma in society. Based on my experience in engaging with media, it is crucial to reach over the aisle and increase the support for equality measures in education. While many will find this objective challenging, it is important to remember that promoting inclusive discourses about diversity and equality as societal values cannot be realised unless those who have never been the target of such discourses are also included.

Notes

1. Segregation is different from assigning children in the last row, as physical separation in the first instance significantly limits the socialisation of pupils during educational processes. In addition, assigning children in last rows has an individual aspect while school segregation requires a collective impact and was defined by courts an egregious form of discrimination.
2. Genevieve Siegel-Hawley (2012) How Non-Minority Students Also Benefit from Racially Diverse Schools, The National Coalition on School Diversity Brief No 8, October 2012.
3. I provide a larger analysis of antigypsyism and its impact on policies in my forthcoming book *Ethnicity, Power and Inclusion: Why Policies towards Roma in Europe Are Failing* (Rostas 2017). In addition to inferiority and deviance, antigypsyism incorporates other assumptions regarding Roma: orientalism, nomadism, rootlessness and backwardness.
4. For example, Michael Stewart says that 'with the exception of Gypsy intellectuals who run the Romani political parties, the Rom do not have an ethnic identity' (Stewart 1997, 28). Zoltan Barany also says that 'Gypsy ethnic identity is weak' but does not present proofs for his statement, preferring to cite Stewart (Barany 2002, 77). Leo Lucassen, Anne Marie Cottaar and Wim Willems have also denied the ethnic identity of Roma (Lucassen, Willems, and Cottaar 1998). Marek Jakoubek has repeatedly challenge the existence of Roma as an ethnic group (Brabenek 2005). Donors and higher education institutions which aim to build a Roma elite have ignored identity components of their programmes. Affirmative action in Romania's secondary and tertiary education, Roma Versitas in Hungary or, until recently, Roma Access Programs at Central European University are just few examples.

5. The Programme of Community aid to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – PHARE – was the main financial instrument of the pre-accession strategy for the countries which have applied for membership of the European Union.
6. The articles are available in Hungarian at <http://24.hu/belfold/2015/05/06/labon-lojuk-magunkat-a-romak-elkulonitesevel/> and <http://abcug.hu/ugy-probaljuk-segiteni-romakat-hogy-azt-sem-tudjuk-kik-azok/>.
7. For details regarding the case, please see Chance for Children Foundation's website <http://www.cfcf.hu/en/ny%C3%ADregyh%C3%A1za-resegregation-case>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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