

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## External Document

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## Croatia: The Roma and the right to education Factsheet

### The Roma in Croatia

In the 2001 census approximately 9,000 people declared themselves as Roma out of a total population of 4.4 million. Estimates suggest that their number is between 30,000 and 50,000. The largest Romani communities are in the Medimurje and Varaždin Counties in northernmost Croatia, making up approximately 30 per cent of the total Romani population. Roma also live in Osijek-Baranja County, Sisak-Moslavina County and the capital, Zagreb. Many Roma live in informal settlements, built without planning permission and lacking basic infrastructure and services. Romani languages are used by almost 80 per cent of the Romani population. Estimates suggest that between 12 and 13 per cent of the Roma live on less than 4.3 US dollars a day, compared to between 2 and 5 per cent of the rest of the population. According to some sources, approximately 80 per cent of Romani households have no steady income and virtually all Romani women are not (officially) employed.

### Legal framework and national plans for Roma inclusion

The Constitution provides that "Everyone in the Republic of Croatia shall enjoy rights and freedoms, regardless of race, colour, gender, language, religion, political or other belief, national or social origin, property, birth, education, social status or other characteristics". The Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities provides that "Members of national minorities shall have the right to education in the language and script which they use". The Constitution enshrines the principle of free and compulsory primary education. A National Programme for Roma was adopted in 2003. It has a section on education, which includes a number of measures to promote the inclusion of Roma in schools. Croatia is taking part in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, a regional intergovernmental initiative "to reduce disparities in key economic and human development outcomes for Roma through implementing policy reforms and programs designed to break the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion". An Action Plan was adopted in 2005 to improve the situation of Roma in the areas of education, employment, access to health care and housing.

### Exclusion from pre-school and primary education

Despite improvements (especially in the Medimurje County) in recent years, the majority of Romani children in Croatia are not included in pre-school programmes. Many Romani children of school age have no or only limited command of the Croatian language when they begin attending school.

An estimated 86 per cent of Romani children at the age of seven attend elementary school. Attendance rates reach close to 95-100 per cent for Romani children aged between eight and 12, and gradually decrease for older children. Only approximately 70 per cent of Romani children at the age of 15 are attending elementary school. Virtually all non-Romani children between seven and 15 attend school.

It is estimated that only 27 per cent of Romani pupils enrolled in elementary schools complete their elementary education. In some schools, 90-100 per cent of Romani children do not complete elementary education.

### **Main barriers in access to education**

Racism and discrimination. Negative stereotyping by teachers results in low expectations of Romani children and other discriminatory attitudes. Segregated "Roma only" classes appear to be increasingly rare.

Long distances between settlements and schools, overcrowded and cold houses, poor sanitary conditions in the settlements, lack of adequate clothing and insufficient financial resources to meet costs associated with education continue to deny children the full advantages of education.

Linguistic barriers and lack of multicultural curricula. Failure to include Romani language, culture and traditions in school curricula.

Insufficient access to pre-school education and lack of Romani teaching assistants, especially in certain areas of Croatia.

Lack of training for teachers and Romani assistants.

### **"Roma only" classes in Medimurje**

In the school year 2000/01 almost 60 per cent of Romani elementary school pupils in Medimurje County were reportedly placed in a total of 24 segregated classes, and in 2001/02, in the primary schools of Macinec and Kuršanec, around 83 per cent and 88 per cent respectively of all Romani children were taught in separate classes.

In April 2002, the families of 57 Romani children filed a lawsuit with the Cakovec Municipal Court charging the Croatian Ministry of Education, Medimurje County and the primary schools of Orehovica, Macinec, Kuršanec and Podturen with the segregation of Romani children on the basis of their ethnic origins. In September 2002 the court rejected the complaint, ruling that the alleged lack of adequate knowledge of the Croatian language justified the creation of separate Roma classes. In December 2002 the families of 15 Romani children filed a complaint with the Croatian Constitutional Court, alleging that the segregation of Romani children in Croatian schools amounts to a violation of Croatia's Constitution. The case is still pending.

In December 2004, the 15 complainants filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights alleging as well that in previous proceedings before the Cakovec Municipal Court, notes attached to the Macinec school's submission stated that "Romani parents are frequently alcoholics, that their children are prone to stealing, cursing and fighting, and that as soon as the teachers turn their backs things go missing, usually 'insignificant and useless objects, but the important thing is to steal'". The case is still pending.

Although "Roma only" classes appear to be increasingly rare, negative stereotyping among teachers working with Roma remain.

### **Recommendations to the authorities in Croatia include to:**

Ensure that the placing of any child in separate primary school classes or groups is not discriminatory, is always based on reasonable and objective criteria, and takes place only when it is necessary and in the best interest of the child.

Take steps to ensure that Romani culture, history and traditions are included in school curricula in all areas or schools with a significant Romani population.

Take steps to ensure that Romani children, especially in areas not adequately covered by existing initiatives, have access to pre-school programmes of a sufficient duration, which should incorporate Romani culture, history, traditions and language, as well as Croatian language.

Take steps to ensure that Romani assistants and mediators are employed in a systematic and comprehensive way in all schools and pre-schools with a significant Romani population.

Take steps to ensure that teachers and other staff working in schools, especially where they work with significant numbers of Romani pupils, receive training on Romani culture, history, traditions and language, with the involvement and cooperation of Romani organizations.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566  
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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