

# ERNE

European Roma integration good practice exchange and policy NEtwork

# RESEARCH

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# Introduction

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The ERNE project is an important initiative which tries to identify and exchange good practices, develop policy recommendations and raise awareness in the field of the integration of Roma children and adults in the educational systems. With this research the partnership intends to face the challenges existing for the integration of Roma citizens and to facilitate integration of Roma children in early childhood and their families, in four European countries (Croatia, Germany, Italy and Romania) in a special context such as the pre-primary school system.

The research has been conducted in the countries at three levels: a documental level on the existing educational systems, with a particular attention on pre-school education, and the actual situation of Roma population and especially Roma children in the educational field.

The second level is represented by the focus group interviews held to investigate the perceived level of integration into these services, the tools at disposal and the competences that according to the participants (stakeholders, political decision makers, educators and experts in the field of integration of ROMA) are required for an efficient integration of integration of Roma children and families.

The third tool consists of the identification and analysis of best practices that exist in the partner countries in order to ensure the access to preschool and school systems of Roma children and their stay in the system and to understand which are the most efficient means for integration in the partner counties.

The aim of this research, a part from the identification and analysis of best practices, is also to develop a policy recommendation paper for preschool level to be used in the partner countries on local, regional and national level.

# Pre-school education and the situation of Roma population in the partner countries

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## The educational system

All partner countries were asked to provide some information regarding the educational system in their countries. Hereby we summarize the pre-school education system in the partner countries.

### Croatia

The Educational system in the Republic of Croatia consists of the levels of preschool education, elementary education, secondary education and higher education.

Pre-school education is not compulsory and attendance at pre-school education institutions is not a prerequisite for enrolment at compulsory school. Compulsory education in the Republic of Croatia starts with the eight-year elementary education which is free for all children between the ages of six and fifteen.

Pre-school education (institutional) takes place from the time when the child is one year old and lasts until he or she is six or seven years old. It takes place in nurseries, kindergartens and the so-called 'pre-school' (a form of preparation for elementary school).

Croatia has had a long tradition of pre-school education, which has developed from institutions for the social care of children. The activity of pre-school education is regulated by the Pre-school Education Act (Official Gazette 10/97). The founders of pre-school education institutions are local self-government units (districts and towns), natural and legal persons and religious communities.

Pre-school education is realised through regular programmes, which last for 5 to 10 hours a day. Since 2000 there has been a growing tendency for children to attend pre-school education institutions. The 'preschool' programme, comprised of 150 hours of teaching (free of charge for the parents), involves around 95% of the child population in the year prior to their enrolment at elementary school.

Pre-school education includes children of the members of national minorities, such as Italians, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, Germans, Austrians and members of the Roma community. The regular programmes also include children with special needs, children with minor disabilities, as well as gifted children, for whom special educational and developmental programmes are being developed.

### Germany

The educational system in Germany is very complex, because each of the sixteen states (Länder) shapes its own education policy and there is no 'standard' across the country. Compulsory education in Germany start with elementary school (Grundschule), which is for children between the ages of 6 and 10. Regarding pre-school education in Germany, which is not compulsory, day-care facilities for children are structured as follows:

1. Day nursery: care for children under 3 years old in one or more groups
2. Kindergarten: care for children from 3 years old to school starting age in one or more groups
3. After school club: care exclusively for school children
4. Other Facilities: care for children of various ages, which can be in combined groups of children of day nursery, kindergarten and/or after school club ages or providing care for children grouped according to their ages or a combination of these two options.

In the western regions day-care is more widely available than in the eastern regions, whereas in eastern Germany there is greater availability of day nurseries. This is a result of both parts of the divided Germany developing differently from 1949 to 1989.

## Austria

In the Document: “Roma in Austria - An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 - Political and legal measures”, reported in 2011 to the EC by the Austrian Federal Chancellery, the relevant aspects of education policy are expressed in that way (excerpts):

*Austria’s overall education policy (which is not aimed expressly at Roma) encompasses a number of Roma-specific activities. These include, in particular, teaching in Romani or funding Roma institutions that support children’s educational development, e.g. by offering early years language support, training nursery teachers or even providing afternoon or whole-day nursery sessions.*

And

*In principle Austria avoids the implementation of segregation measures in the education sector. On account of linguistic differences, e.g. where several different languages are used in the teaching of ethnic groups, pupils may be taught in groups which are based on their origin. This is however offset by the sense of community which is promoted within the classroom itself, within the school as a whole or outside the school environment.*

Austrian Federal Chancellery 1014 Vienna, 2011, pg. 12

Pre-school education regulations in Austria follow in principle – like all legal regulations – the Human Rights, the Austrian Constitution and the regulations in the treaty of 1955 for the II Republic Austria. Additionally the general approach concerning minorities in Austria is defined in the ratification of the Framework commitment in the law concerning national minorities from 1998 (Rahmenübereinkommen im BGBl. III Nr. 120/1998) and the law concerning “Volksgruppen” (Volksgruppengesetz 1976). Since 1993 “Roma, Burgenland-Roma, are accredited in the meaning of this law.

For Pre-School regulations is important that these are not, like school law in general, are national and central issues, but in the Federal Republic Austria the legislation for Pre-School issues happens at provincial, decentralized level.

So, there exists no common, compiled overview about all relevant regulations concerning minorities and/or Roma in all provinces.

But, some regulations at national level are relevant for all Pre-School activities in the provinces, especially concerning support of language competences in early childhood, in the identification of language competences in early childhood as a base for targeted support measures and the national education framework for all elementary education institutions (Bildungsrahmenplan für Elementarpädagogik, 2009).

The overall approach for education of Roma in the pre-school / elementary education phase is expressed in the strategy document “Roma in Austria” by the Austrian Federal Chancellery in 2011:

### Pre-school education

*In 2008, following an agreement between the Federal Government and the Provinces (pursuant to Art. 15a of the Constitutional Law) “on the expansion of pre-school facilities, the introduction of compulsory early language support in pre-school institutions and the creation of a national pre-school education plan”, the “Early Support 1+1” education model was introduced for all pre-school children. Children whose knowledge of German is inadequate are given support in pre-school institutions to enable them to cope with the level of*

*German required of them, in accordance with standardised language skills models, on entering primary school.*

*Moreover, following the introduction of compulsory free half-day nursery education, since September 2010 children in their last year before starting compulsory education have been required to attend suitable pre-school institutions for at least 16-20 hours on at least four days a week in all Austrian Provinces. This half-day attendance is free of charge and eases the burden on families. As a result, all children should receive the best education available to them and the best start in life, irrespective of their socio-economic background. In addition, in order to achieve this objective, early years teachers are being given initial and further training in the assessment of language skills and early years language support.*

*Examples of measures taken in the Provinces include: the provision of dedicated support measures in Viennese pre-school institutions for children with language support needs, which is aimed in particular at the educational needs of migrant children. Some nurseries in Vienna are also supporting non-German speaking children by employing early years teachers who speak their mother tongue. This maintains a connection with their cultural roots.*

Austrian Federal Chancellery 1014 Vienna, 2011, pg.12f.

By the reason that in the Federal Republic Based on some previous discussions and explorations the consequence of the concrete situation in Austria is that there could not be given e detailed overview about strategies and policies of institutions and organizations in the area of Pre-School education in Austria concerning minorities in general and Roma, Sinti et.al. in special, see quotations in the paragraph above.

## Italy

The Italian system is organized in three cycles of education: pre-school education (ages 3 to 6 years), first cycle of education (ages 6 to 14 years), second cycle of education (ages 14 to 19 years) and third cycle of education (from the age of 19 years on).

Pre-school education is not mandatory and it is provided for a term of 3 years (ages 3 to 6 years). Compulsory education starts with primary school, which is the first segment of the first cycle of education, and lasts 10 years, from 6 to 16 years of age.

In Italy the traditional pre-school services are: nursery school from 0-3 years (asilo nido) which can be public (52%) or private (54%); kindergarten from 3-5 years (scuola d'infanzia) which are mainly public (75%) but can also be private (25%). There are a number of non-traditional services, the so-called integrative services (servizi integrativi), whose names change depending on the region where they are settled. The laws and principles regulating all nursery schools and integrative services in Italy are regional and can differ a lot. The most relevant integrative services are: family space for families with very young children (0-3 years), called "spazio-famiglia", these are protected spaces where it is possible to play, meet other parents, discuss with educators on different topics; and playground, called "ludoteca", these are similar to the first one but children are usually 12 months to 5 years old.

## Romania

The Romanian educational system is based on a tuition free, egalitarian system. Access to free education is guaranteed by Article 32 in the Constitution of Romania. Education is regulated and enforced by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Pre-school education, such as kindergarten, is optional under the age of six. At the age of six, children must join the "preparatory school year", which is mandatory in order to enter the first grade.

Schooling starts at the age of seven, and is compulsory until the tenth grade (which corresponds with the age of sixteen or seventeen).

In Romania there are two main kind of services of pre-school education:

- Nursery schools (Crese) up to 3 years old. They offer two types of programs: daily program (10 hours per day), and weekly program (1 week) in which case the child is taken home only in weekends. The main task of these institutions is to answer the basic needs of each child: the physiological and the security ones. Generally they are state owned.

- Kindergartens (Gradinite) state- and private-owned schools, set up by the County School Inspectorate and the Inspectorate of Bucharest. They offer various types of programs: normal program (5 hours per day), long program (10 hours per day), providing educational activities and social protection (meals, rest hours), weekly program (1 week) targeted mostly on children from families facing economic hardships, providing educational activities as well as social protection (meals and accommodation).

The pre-school education is organised by age classes: the lower class (3-4 years old), medium class (4-5 years old), upper class, preparatory for school (5-6 years old). A class comprises an average of 15 pupils (a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20).

There are also other auxiliary services provided for the children with special social, psychological or physical needs, such as: centres for counselling and family support; maternal centres, community centre of resources for child and family.

## Situation of Roma population in the partner countries

Partners were asked to provide some basic information about the situation of Roma population in their cities and regions. The findings of this short research show that Roma population has basically the same main disadvantages in all partners countries: linguistic difficulties, cultural differences, poverty and lack of hygienic conditions in their homes, that often lead to health problems. Hereby we summarize their situation in each partner country.

### Croatia

There are more than 300 Roma people living in separate settlements in Koprivnica, where P1 is based, and a few hundreds more in surrounding villages. Children are often without required social and pre-school set of skills and competences; they are often in inferior position to their peers in classroom, exposed to prejudice, stereotypes and stigma both as Roma people and as poor. Language barrier in combination with family deprivation and bad financial situation seems to be the key problem and the reason why they are often held back not being able to overcome the gap. Their parents following their traditional perception of raising children put pressure on children to leave school at the early age, get married and to get qualification instead being a participant lifelong learning frame.

### Germany

The district of Neukölln, in Berlin, can look back on four years of intensive debate on the issue of immigrants coming from South-Eastern Europe, especially from Romania and Bulgaria and especially since their entry in the European Union. The predominant proportion of the families who have immigrated from these countries are ethnically Roma. It is clear that education, healthcare and accommodation comprise the three most important areas to act upon on a local level, as these people are usually coming from extremely disadvantaged living conditions. Therefore there is a direct need for resources and policy.

Despite the eased process of official registration a large proportion of these immigrants were not officially registered, or because they migrated onwards again or because they only got themselves legally registered at a later time, thus the increasing wave of immigration of those wanting to stay long-term was at first not recognized. Therefore as the physical space in the integrated secondary schools in North-Neukölln is already at full capacity, extra small classes had to be set up in schools in South-Neukölln, that are dedicated to migrants especially from Romania and Bulgaria and with no knowledge of German.

Because of the linguistic barriers there is an urgent need in secondary schools for additional teaching staff, interpreting and cultural mediators as well as practical learning methods. Moreover the children must attend nurseries as early as possible, in order to facilitate early language learning and to raise their educational prospects regardless of background.

### Austria

The Pre-School education debate in Austria is a rather young phenomena. In the last years the importance of the topic increased, and elementary education is now recognized as an important part of the education system, some regulations concerning language support, identification of language competences, national quality frameworks and the compulsory last Kindergarten – year were implemented by law.

But, nevertheless, the Pre-.School area of education is a field of further development, also in the view of inclusive measures and minorities.

## Italy

Regarding the area of Florence, where P6 is based, a high percentage of the Roma population is coming from Romania. As in Romania discrimination against Roma is even stronger than in Italy, they are often excluded from the public health care, education and the labour market also in their own country. So when they come to Italy they often don't have access to basic health care services (as they don't even have the health insurance card in their country) and they often live in camps and overcrowded homes without the basic hygienic conditions. Therefore when they first get in contact with the educational system, at the primary school, they are already in a disadvantaged situation in comparison with the other students.

Regarding the national level it's Abruzzo the region where Roma communities are more established. Since a certain time, in the town of Giulianova (Teramo district – Abruzzo), lives a Roma community counting about 200 people. Among them there are 90 minor and 60 of them are children in the period of the compulsory education. In 1998, the Roma children exclusion was substantial; most of the Roma minor were signaled to the judicial authority and the presence of Roma youngster into L'Aquila boot camp (minor jail) was at the first place in Italy, taking into consideration the relationship between territory extension and inhabitants.

Early school leaving of Roma female children is high and is often due to cultural reasons. At the age of 9/12 Roma female children change their role in the families and inside the group identity. They are considered women and they start to collaborate with the other women in order to support the family. In this period, Roma female children can meet people of the opposite sex exclusively at the attendance of a relative, in order to protect them from bad encounter. This cultural background produces the not regular school attendance and, therefore, the desertion from the process of teaching/learning.

## Romania

Statistics in Romania show that just over half of all Roma children (51%) attend school and that 7% of Roma men and 3% of Roma women completed secondary school compared to 73% of men and 61% of women in the general population.

The main barriers to educational attainment of Roma students are the lack of competency in the local language by Roma children, poverty among Roma families, prejudices against Roma children and low teacher expectations of Roma students, but difficulties of integration can also arise because parents do not know how to or where to go to enroll their children in classes. Moreover, the lack in basic hygiene and necessary immunization can be seen as a health problem in public schools and can justify the exclusion of Roma children from school. In Romania for example, school directors assert that Roma children cannot be integrated into school because they would cause schools to fail health inspections.

Statistics from Romania suggest that socioeconomic characteristics have a prevailing influence on the school attendance of Roma children. For example Roma children who live in mixed communities are twice as likely to attend school regularly than those who live in Roma neighborhoods, villages, or settlements, as well as children, whose father is employed or whose mothers had completed more than eight years of schooling, were more likely to attend school regularly. Therefore socioeconomic characteristics need to be taken into account, when examining the impact of education programs on education enrollment, attendance, and attainment indicators for Roma students.

Unlike compulsory schooling, there is no evidence that the proportion of Roma completing secondary school has increased over the last two decades. Preschool activities, that are not compulsory, prevailed to be almost inexistent in Roma communities.

In order to facilitate Roma school attendance training programmes for non-Roma teachers started in 1997 to teach using the Roma language. As a result, the number of Romanian children studying in the Roma

language has increased from 150 in 1992 to 1717 in 1998, but this represents only a very small fraction of the Roma children in Romania.

The integration according to the operators: level perceived and competencies required (from the focus group interviews)

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The focus groups have been held within particular contexts: environments that are particularly sensitive to the theme of intercultural education and especially to the integration of Roma population. This is why people attending the focus groups have a certain idea of what integration is and what needs to be put in place.

## Profile of interviewees

All partners except of P2 and P3 invited relevant stakeholders and experts to the focus group discussions. P2 and P3 were not able to install a focus group because they mainly cooperate with the district/local administration, therefore they do not have this kind of focus group.

Most of the people interviewed are working in preschool education or in the field of Roma integration since many years, therefore have a deep knowledge and expertise regarding local Roma communities.

The participants of the focus groups were educators, Roma teaching assistants, teachers, presidents and representatives of associations, organizations, social welfare centers, schools and libraries, counsellors of pre-school and school services, as well as the following representatives and organizations:

- Representatives of Roma association “Step by step” – in Croatia
- Family Center of the County Koprivnica – Križevci – in Croatia
- Director of Public Library of Koprivnica – in Croatia
- Representatives of local and regional government (City Koprivnica and County of Koprivnica and Križevci) – in Croatia
- Educators and the president of *Il Cenacolo*, an associated cooperative of P6, working in partnership with the Municipality of Florence and offering several services and projects for migrants, refugees and Roma – in Italy
- An educator of *L’Abbaino*, another associated cooperative of P6 managing nursery schools and services for children of the pre-school age
- The coordinator of *Medici per i Diritti Umani (MEDU)*, a charity association, member of the International Federation of Human Rights Organizations (IFHRO) – in Italy
- The president of the *Fondazione Romani Italia (Italian Roma Foundation)* who is also the representative of the Roma communities – in Italy
- Otilia Clipa, Dean of Faculty of Education Sciences, the structure that is preparing primary school and pre-school educators – in Romania

## Perception of Roma culture within the educational themes

According to our interviewees’ experiences the first time when Roma children get in contact with the education system is at the primary school, as it is compulsory while kindergarten is optional in all partner countries. Before the school period they are taken care of in the family. Entering the educational system means also integration, and Roma children start school with the same interests and motivation as other children, as well as they are subject to the same educational content as other children, but since the beginning they have disadvantages, such as linguistic problems, poverty, lack of the basic hygienic conditions at home (and consequently health problems) and other people’s prejudices. It’s a period of big

frustrations for them and they don't have their parents support, as well as they don't see examples of success linked to education in their environment. Therefore it's a vicious cycle and without support they can't manage to stay in the system.

There are already some initiatives in partner countries, in order to help the integration of Roma children and to prevent early drop-out:

In **Croatia** the primary school "Braća Radić" in Koprivnica is using a Roma-Croatian dictionary, they organize Roma dance shows and they have Roma teaching assistant to help them to learn and adopt new contents. In the Public library in Koprivnica since 2007 there is a "Roma corner" with books, written in Roma language and in a few other languages as well, dealing with Roma themes. Since 2011 the library provides also basic computer and information literacy training for all library users, including groups of Roma elementary school students and Roma young adults without elementary school attending local Open university.

In **Italy**, and in Florence, in particular, there are some pre-school services offered by the municipality and // *Cenacolo*, a social cooperative. These services include a playroom, a bar and initiatives, events, organized in the courtyards where many families (Roma, Italian and other nationalities) live together. A kind of approach towards these services has already started and bigger children come with their small brothers and sisters, therefore also the mothers start to come and meet with the educators and the other people. But the general impression is that they mostly use the playroom as a "parking" instead of considering it a resource and an opportunity, or they consider school as a duty and they don't take advantage of it. Therefore educators agree that a double-support (children and parents) would be necessary. This double-support already exists in Abruzzo, the region where the Roma population are the most established in Italy, where there are projects aimed at the drop-out prevention of Roma pupils, such as Roma social mediation and Distance learning school for Roma female pupils (for details, see the Best practices of Italy). Both projects foresee a strong collaboration between the school, the children, the parents and the cultural mediator and have very positive results.

In **Romania** the Roma culture themes are not compulsory, however they always introduce the topic of tolerance in the curricula. The teachers can decide by themselves what themes should be introduced. Unfortunately the diversity is present in educational curricula as concept, but often not in the content, it depends mainly on the area and on the educators. For example in the communities with a large Roma population the situation is different and there is an intensive use of Roma culture. But usually the teachers are adjusting the curricula and methodology on the target group: the children.

### Professional tools at disposal

Partners consider the main useful "tool" the involvement of educational specialists, Roma teaching assistants or cultural (linguistic) mediators. These persons speak the language and take part of the local Roma community therefore can help to understand Roma culture, to clarify abstract contents for Roma pupils and to improve their language skills, to mediate in conflicts and communicate between parents and teachers.

Hereby we list some concrete examples of tools from partners counties:

In **Croatia** the Roma-Croatian dictionary, introduced at the primary school “Braća Radić” in Koprivnica, represents the most useful tool. Another tool used by the representatives of an association of people with disabilities is the organization of “Half-day stays” for preschool and school children with disabilities. Roma children participate in the program 3 times a week and get socialization help and help in case of learning disabilities. Also the cooperation established between the school and the Police Department is useful, with the participation in parent–teachers meetings. They provide legal service and can clarify consequences regarding early aggression on schools, problem of skipping school, physical punishment, leaving children unattended, behavior on buses.

In **Italy**, in the area of Florence, the *MEDU* charity association provides accompanying services to Roma families in order to introduce them to the public health care system (to public offices or to the doctor) and they elaborated informative brochures regarding all administrative and health care issues, available also in Romani language and with images, in order to facilitate comprehension. Regarding the educational system the use of cultural mediators is the most useful tool as they are part of the community and can create a bridge between Roma population and the local community or the education system. This is also shown by the good practices of Abruzzo region, where several projects have been implemented in order to foster the integration of Roma children and all projects foresee a strong collaboration between the schools, the children, the parents and the cultural mediator (for details, see the Best practices of Italy).

In **Romania**, the focus group didn’t define specific tools. The educators address from case to case the specific needs of Roma children in the optional activities, by involving them in creative and tactile activities. As well, in order to motivate the children, the specific capabilities are stressed out. In the kindergarten the children are much more open to Roma, as compared with the schools, therefore at that level of education there are no specific tools required. However, educators agree that the most useful professional tools available for educators are debates, extracurricular activities, mass-media tools, use of internet, stories and role-plays, thematic workshops and thematic weeks.

## Obstacles and facilitators in the integration of Roma in education

All partners found the same main obstacles in the integration of Roma children:

- **Language barrier:** Roma children come to the first class of primary schools often without having adequate linguistic competences and can’t follow the educational contents.
- **Cultural differences and Roma traditional perception of raising children:** parents put pressure on children to leave school at the early age, get married and to get qualification as soon as possible instead of staying for years at school. According to the focus groups, Roma families often don’t recognize the opportunities that education can offer, they rather see it as a duty.
- **Poverty:** Roma families often don’t have the money to buy the books and other learning materials for their children, therefore since the beginning they are disadvantaged compared to their classmates.
- **Poor hygienic standards** in Roma families’ homes that often lead to health problems.

Therefore what would really facilitate the integration of Roma children in education, according to the partners findings, is the presence of cultural mediators or Roma teaching assistants, who speaks the

language and who takes part of the local Roma community, in the educational system and a strong collaboration between these mediators, the teachers and the families. If they collaborate since the beginning they discover immediately the main problems and can resolve them effectively.

Social assistance, such as meals at the school, school bus for children, after-school opportunities is absolutely necessary to foster integration and mediators should inform the families since the beginning regarding these supporting possibilities and also these information should be available in their language. Support is more effective when it's easily accessible (near home) and when there is already a relationship of confidence. Therefore the involvement of Roma families is fundamental and the most effective would be to find all the information and support needed near home and in their language instead of going in different offices to understand what kind of services are provided for their children.

Another important facilitator could be the class-group. It would be important since the beginning not to let prejudices arise, but to get to know each other first and start cooperation. Taking advantage of the others, in the case of disadvantaged Roma children, starts when the class-group excludes them, therefore Roma children self-convince themselves that anyway they can't manage to do it (to learn, to be part of the community, to succeed) and they start finding excuses. The prevention of these kind of situations would be essential.

## Changes in the attitudes and educational strategies

In **Croatia** the presence of Roma families has caused a change in the attitudes and educational strategies in their community and on national level. The first concrete example is the presence of Roma teaching assistants at schools, that are financed on the national level, but they have also several projects aiming at social inclusion of Roma families and their inclusion in the labour market. Some of them are financed through local community and some through EU-funds. It is clear that the project of cooperation between the school and the Police Department, mentioned above, and the help of Roma teaching assistants at schools prevent children from skipping school and lead to a better communication with Roma parents and less segregation of Roma children in the class. Also, there are fewer Roma pupils who finish their compulsory education.

In **Italy** educators stated that the attitudes of people hasn't really changed much unfortunately and it's a work that should start "from the bottom", not from the state: everyone should look around in his/her own environment and start to open towards the others, get to know the people around and approach the others as single individuals in order to deconstruct his/her own stereotypes. Although there are different initiatives in the area of Florence, where the Italian partner is based, in order to create informal meeting possibilities to families, such as informal events in courtyards to involve families living there (for example the *Mixité* project run by *Il Cenacolo*), people are not informed about them. Therefore schools could help to give more visibility to these projects.

In **Romania** there have been changes in the educational services (but not necessarily in the strategies). Communication and interaction with families has improved and there is more understanding for the particular problems.

## Competencies needed when working with Roma population

The most important competences needed for educators in order to work with Roma population are the cultural and linguistic competences, as children can't overcome the gap and language barrier resulting from not attending kindergartens and not learning the local language – this is the finding of all focus group interviews.

Usually in Roma communities it's the man who speak better the local language, as they go out more often and have more contact with the local people and the labour market. But to get in contact with Roma children it's better to start approaching their mothers, who often don't speak the local language. Therefore a cultural (and linguistic) mediator is needed, not only to translate but also to create a bridge and confidence between the Roma community and the educators.

Moreover, all partners stated that it's essential to be aware of some cultural aspects. For example a Roma woman can't let a man enter her home if her husband is not there. So it's a teamwork: the cultural mediator creates the bridge but also women educators are needed in order to enter in the families' homes. The focus groups highlighted the importance of being a good communicator when working as an educator with Roma communities, and to have the capacity to involve parents and children to the local activities and programmes.

## The cultural mediator: pros and cons

Although findings of the focus group show that cultural mediators is the most important "tool" in order to facilitate the integration of Roma children, sometimes they can represent an obstacle.

First of all the cultural mediator has to be a member of the community. He/she can be a resource who helps to understand their culture, but being part of the community the mediator may not want to visit certain families with whom he/she doesn't have a good relationship or may have even more prejudices against Roma people. In Florence, for example, a high percentage of the Roma population is coming from Romania, where discrimination against Roma is even stronger than in Italy. Therefore if a cultural mediator comes from Romania, may have even more prejudices against Roma people than the Italians.

Another finding of the focus groups was that although cultural mediators can help the integration of children, but the action should be directed more to the families than to the children as they create the background situation of these pupils.

## Best tools of communication and involvement of families in the service

All partners highlighted the importance to involve Roma families both in educational and extra-scholastic activities, in order to facilitate the integration of Roma children.

In **Croatia**, for example, the primary school "Braća Radić" invites parents, Police Department representatives and Roma teaching assistant(s) as a mediator in a dialogue. They provide parents legal service and consequences regarding early aggression on schools, problem of skipping school, physical punishment, leaving children unattended, bus behavior. Regarding the communication in classes the most

important thing is not to separate Roma and local children, but to include them with an accent on showing their talents. There is also another initiative of the school, the “Black – white group”, which consists of older non-Roma mentors who teach younger Roma pupils on how to behave in buses. They also organize belly dance shows which help Roma children to show their talent and socialize.

In **Italy**, according to the focus group participants, it’s the people who should start to open towards the others, make him/herself questions, approach the others as single individuals in order to deconstruct their prejudices. Therefore it’s a work that should start from the bottom and that can be facilitated by creating informal occasions where all people can meet and start communication with each other. In the suburbs of Florence there are already some projects taking place, such as the *Mixité* project mentioned above: informal events in courtyards to involve families living there. But these projects would need more visibility, which could be helped by schools.

In **Romania** the main difficulty is that most of Roma families don’t recognize the need of education, especially the pre-school education. The impression of the educators is that Roma parents see kindergarten (and pre-school education in general) as an extra-stress, an extra work to do, therefore they prefer to stay at home with children. There are also the language problems and cultural differences, mentioned above, and a general lack of interest for the education.

# Best practices

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Participants of the focus group interviews were asked to provide and discuss some best practice examples in the field of Roma integration in the pre-school system, and to select two of them that they consider the most interesting ones to be shown to the project partners of other countries. Hereby we summarize these best practice examples chosen for each country. Also P2, the partner from Germany, sent us two examples of best practice, which we include in our research.

## Croatia

The **Public Library Fran Galovic provides services, activities and programs**, aimed at raising awareness of Roma people needs, their language and culture, such as:

- Roma corner: collection of 200 books for children and adults, fiction and non-fiction, that deals with Roma themes and topics on different expert levels; the books are written in Roma language and a few other languages as well;
- In-house library training programs for professionals on cultural and educational competences, and knowledge about Roma people;
- ICT training: basic computer and information literacy training for all library users, including groups of Roma elementary school students and Roma young adults without elementary school attending local Open university (introduction in using computer programs, emailing, Internet retrieving, introduction in library catalogues and online library services). A free ICT support for Roma people 'Jump in the train for a better world' has been awarded by EIFL as Europe winner.
- Workshops: such as World Roma Day Creative workshop on children rights;
- Reading workshops for Roma parents and children: „babies in library“, that allows babies to learn to talk, explore and expand their cognition, socialize with peers, learn to use services of library and to spend quality time;
- Round tables for social inclusion of Roma and for their successful education with the participation of key stakeholders, Roma associations, politicians, social service providers;
- Meetings with Roma parents once in a year;
- Exhibitions of books on Roma topics dictionaries in Roma languages;
- Attending national conferences concerning Roma and organization of round tables with key stakeholders, Roma associations, politicians, Centre for Social Welfare, Croatian Employment Service etc.

So far all these programs attracted more than 500 Roma and non-Roma children, teenagers and young adults, which increased to 80 the number of Roma children and teenagers who have a library membership card. Also parents and children participate at the workshops, a dozen of them stay at Children department of the Library on a daily basis, playing and doing homework on the computer, reading children's magazines, borrowing DVD movies, and sometimes books, after the school waiting for the bus to take them home. Their computer and information literacy skills have become better.

The project is funded by the City of Koprivnica, in the frame of the library programs for Roma, financed through the action plan of the Croatian Government "Decade of Roma from 2005 -2015". Also, Roma ethnic minority issues were placed among the priorities in the further development of City.

Another best practice is the presence of **Roma teaching assistants in the elementary school “Braća Radić”** in Koprivnica. The Roma teaching assistant/expert has been introduced since 2012 as assistants and experts in classes in order to help Roma children to adopt Croatian language, facilitate understanding of abstract terms, facilitate communication between parents and teachers, and be mediator in conflicts. Roma assistant helps Roma children mostly in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade since there seem to be the most problems with understanding and adopting of new content in Croatian. The Roma teaching assistant helps also in the additional activities of the school such as collaboration with associations, police department, public open university, library.

The school cooperates with the associations in Koprivnica which includes Roma children into the “Half-day stay for preschool and school children with disabilities”. Roma children participate in the program 3 times a week and get socialization help and help in case of learning disabilities.

The positive effects of these services are not visible immediately, impacts are expected in the long run. However, according to the teaching staff, with the help of Roma teaching assistants, Roma pupils follow and adopt new skills and knowledge easily. They also feel more comfortable in school, they also interact and mingle with other non-Roma pupils so the impression of segregation of Roma and non-Roma children isn't so obvious. Teachers also have a better insight into their level of knowledge of Croatian and they are willing to adapt teaching materials to the needs of Roma children. Thanks to these services there are fewer Roma pupils who have been held back and more Roma pupils seem to finish their compulsory education (primary education).

The program of public services is financed through national initiative with the action plan of the Croatian Government “Decade of Roma from 2005 -2015” and National program for Roma and the project „Literacy in Croatia “.

## Germany

**Just in Time** is a project set up in October 2012. It has been actively recruiting volunteers as mentors since February 2013. Its aim is to help adolescents and young people with an immigration background to integrate into German society, to encourage them to overcome prejudices they hold against one another and also to help them to develop and use their free time constructively. Different activities are organised, such as sightseeing excursions, games in the park, cooking courses, in order to teach them also other skills such as cooking, time keeping, using public transport, how to behave acceptably socially. The excursions are important as most of the young people stay in their neighbourhood and know nothing of the town in which they live or about the transports.

Activities are lead by social workers and young volunteers, otherwise known as mentors, usually in pairs. Another section of the project is to develop one-on-one mentoring between a volunteer and a pupil. In theory the two should have similar interests and the mentor should be able to help them find, for example, a sports club or music group where the pupil can develop their interests, they could help them with their homework if necessary, whilst also helping them integrate into German life. The idea behind recruiting young mentors, students for example, is that the small age gap between the two allows for an easier connection. The aim is to form these relationships naturally through group activities. There are currently six

mentors. Whilst all activities take place in German the mentors often speak at least one other language and sometimes need to use it in order to help the most recent arrivals to Germany.

There is a limited amount of money for certain types of activities e.g. 30€ for a cooking course, but a larger budget for excursions.

The ages of the young people who participate in the project range from 13 to 18. The group activities mix all children from all immigration backgrounds and ages together.

The project is funded via federal ESF.

In Berlin especially in the district Neukölln there is no access to pre-school educational Networks or projects. It is common understanding that small children and the integration activities work best in addressing the parents – especially the women. Therefore the other best practices we summarize hereby are addressed to parents: adult education courses at VHS Neukölln, the model project *Stadtteilmütter* and the projects in Neighbourhoods.

The **Volkshochschule (VHS, which means adult education centre) Neukölln** has vast experience at its disposal, having taught German as a foreign language courses for years. Nonetheless, the first attempts at establishing a German course for Roma in a primary school were not successful due to a lack of uptake. In the meantime it has become obvious that new ways of teaching languages and literacy need to be found. One possibility for example is the tandem system, whereby a German teacher teaches together with a Roma mediator. The courses have to pursue a much more practical and ‘to-the-point’ orientated focus. Furthermore the special characteristics of the families need to be taken into consideration, meaning that due to the many young children and the current bad state of care the courses have to incorporate families as they are. Alongside numerous courses in the Harzer neighbourhood additional German courses for mothers are being offered at primary schools out of district funds. Experiences show that a differentiation is necessary from other target groups such as newcomers from Spain or Greece.

Since in their first attempt the carers being trained did not complete a sixth month long schooling, there is now a special course for applicants with a Roma heritage, the **model project *Stadtteilmütter*** (means *trained carers*). Teaching began in February 2013 so that the well-trained *Stadtteilmütter* can then be brought into work on site after the summer holidays. At present there are 4 participants who refer to themselves as Roma.

Neukölln has 11 neighbourhood management areas with a special need of development which receive funding from the EU/federal/regional programme ‘*Soziale Stadt*’. **Small projects tailored to the local needs** can be financed through this. The resources for such projects are often limited and depend on the agreement of an awards committee which is comprised of local representatives. Courses which are focused on the needs of the communities living there, especially on Roma or which promote cooperation are particularly funded by the following neighbourhoods: High-Deck-Siedlung, Donaustraße, Richardplatz Süd, Flughafenstraße, Ganghoferstraße, Körnerpark and the Schillerpromenade.

## Austria

There exist a lot of good and best practice examples for **early language support** in Pre-School institutions, see eg.:

[http://www.integrationsfonds.at/sprachliche\\_fruehfoerderung/good\\_practice/](http://www.integrationsfonds.at/sprachliche_fruehfoerderung/good_practice/)

but, most of the examples are targeted to all ethnic, language, nationality groups, not focussed single on Roma.

This principle is related to the approach in principle, not to establish additional measures with elements of segregation, but individualizes and person-targeted support concerning the needs and demands of each person and each group.

A special approach of some institutions in Austria is to **support Pre-School activities in other countries**, eg. Caritas in Romania, see eg.:

<http://www.caritas-linz.at/auslandshilfe/projekte/europa/rumaenien/bildung-schenkt-zukunft/>

## Italy

At national level it's Abruzzo the region where Roma communities are more established in Italy, therefore we present two best practices of this area. In the context of Giulianova - Abruzzo, dominated by a high level of Roma juvenile delinquency (see on p. 8), it seemed necessary to start a project for the romani population in order to prevent the disadvantage and to give answers to the needs, involving first of all the compulsory education schools, families and children. That means that was found mandatory make an investment for the future. In 1997 was started an effort of planning sustainability towards the integration of romani population dwelling in the territory. In 1998 had started the 3 year **project "Roma social mediation"** supported by the Municipality of Giulianova and by the funds of the law 285/96 and managed by the association Opera Nomadi Abruzzo.

Roma families gain the access to the service through a planned meeting with the cultural mediator from the association Opera Nomadi. At the end of this series of meetings the association selects 40 families counting 60 children and plans together with them an individual integration path involving different environments starting from school and work places. Three cultural mediator are present into the school and follow continually Roma children both at school and at home, starting from elementary school to high school. The association started too, continued education course for the teachers of the school, giving acquaintances and skills about romani culture and Roma background. In reference to the job context, the association gets through to local corporates in order to advocate for a social responsibility and to encourage to experiment Roma people employment. Regarding communication, the association promoted several local actions for the purpose to advocate public opinion towards Roma problem, both as knowledge of this culture and as active collaboration to support Roma children into the elementary schools.

The services and tools provided are:

- Presence of 3 Roma cultural mediators in the school and in the district, 4 days per week
- Presence in the district of 2 social operator with social secretary tasks and raising awareness action around the local territory and in the local corporate
- Employment of 3 educators/entertainers for the diffusion of knowledge of Roma culture.

From 1998 to 2000, 40 families and about 60 children have benefitted from the service and the results are extremely positive: the early school leaving has been nullified, at the end of the service the USSM (Office for minor social service – department of the tribunal of minor) pointed out a decrease of warnings to the judicial authority, there is a good level of employment in some local corporates, where Roma people are still occupied and also the public opinion regarding Roma question has been improved. The project “Roma social mediation” had been supervised and evaluated by the National observatory for adolescence and childhood of the Welfare, and it was considered one of the first 8 projects among 90 national projects supported by the funds of the law 285/96.

Another best practice is the **Distance learning school program for Roma female pupils**, at the Public junior high school “Foscolo-Fermi”, managed by Associazione RomSinti@ politica, funded by the Municipality of Pescara (funds of the law 285/96).

As early school leaving of Roma female children is high because of cultural traditions (see p. 8), it was found necessary to start a project based on the idea to overtake the cultural gap and let female Roma children to gain a right to education, essential not to be excluded in the future.

A planned action that put the respect of the cultural differences as base to overtake the cultural gap that stops the full realization of the human person into a determined context. What about cultural difference? Start from there and don't delete it.

Facing the described cultural background and on the base of the failure of previous project about Roma children school education, it was needed to build an innovative project starting from the peculiarity of the Italian laws about education: what is mandatory is the gained level of education, not the school attendance. Precisely clause 34 of the Italian Constitution speaks about compulsory instruction and says: *“Basic education, given for at least 8 years, is mandatory and free”*. In order to organize an action able to answer to the education needs of the Roma female children it was started a consideration about a regulation of the Minister of Education on “paternal school” (O.M. 330 del 27/05/97) and on the landmark about distant schooling, given into a European advice of the ministers of education (n.4, February 2000). The planned action have been set up on the model of homeschooling in the Unites States.

It is possible to access to this service through the collection of information about early school leaving: warning from the school, from the social services, associations, local institutions, etc. After a deep analysis of the true motivation of the child school leaving, the association RomSinti@ politica together with the school involved, have planned a meeting with the parents to explain the education project and agree upon the study program that the Roma female children are going to realize. A part of the study program will be taught at school, the other part will be realized in the family home and supported by Roma cultural mediator. Every year, before starting the planned activities, teachers and cultural mediators have predisposed 7 learning units, each one composed of several didactic units. This didactic material is explained by the teachers and consigned to the Roma female children, together with exercises to do at home with the Roma cultural mediator. At the end of the school year, the Roma female children have the exams in order to be admitted to the attendance of the following class.

The service duration is eight months. It starts in November and it ends every year in June. During this period the Roma female children arrive at school during the afternoon for 2 days a week, attending a class exclusively composed by Roma female children and meets the teachers to develop a precise study program. It is a single holistic service.

Between 2000 and 2005, the period in which the project was active, 40 Roma female children were involved in it. In June 2005, 23 Roma female children have obtained the elementary license and later the junior high school leaving qualification.

## Romania

The best practice presented hereby is a project of a **bilingual kindergarten in Kalderash Community Sărulești**, funded by UNICEF.

One of the project's preparative activities was to obtain the necessary approval for the kindergarten from the responsible school authorities. The County School Inspectorate from Călărași immediately agreed and approved the initiative, so the bilingual kindergarten was, from its beginning, a public kindergarten. This meant that the teacher's salary was covered, from the beginning, by the County School Inspectorate and, after the end of the project, the kindergarten's maintenance would be also covered by the responsible school authorities.

The bilingual kindergarten was opened at 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2004 and a number of 20 Roma children with ages between 3 and 6 years, who were supposed to be enrolled in the bilingual kindergarten, were selected to attend the classes.

The regular pre-school education curriculum was improved in a way that ensured also the education for identity and the self-esteem building for Roma children. It is a bilingual (Romani–Romanian) and culturally adapted curriculum. Themes on Romani culture and history are largely present in the lessons' planning. The didactic materials were, all of them, bilingual.

The activities planned in the service were:

- Beside the regular pre-school education activities, there were also developed some interesting extra-curricular activities, mainly meant to develop the ethnic conscience and to build the self-esteem of Roma children. Among them, one was the Christmas celebration "Santa Clause is Rom" / "O Phuro Crăcuno si rrom", during which children sang Romani old songs, danced after traditional Romani tunes and told poems in Romani language;
- A very important activity was the selection of the Roma teacher for the kindergarten. She was selected by a specialized commission composed of the project's coordinator, an experienced Roma teacher, the Roma School Inspector from Călărași County School Inspectorate. The selection criteria were the following:
  - Professional qualification;
  - Experience in working with Roma children;
  - Native speaker of the Romani language;
  - Abilities in working with pre-school children.

The selection commission for the children was composed of the project's coordinator, the project's assistant, a social assistant and the pre-school teacher. The selection criteria were the following ones:

- Low-income family;
- Number of pre-school children in the family;
- Parents' will to enroll their children in the kindergarten.

In order to facilitate the relationship between the Roma community / families and the kindergarten, a Roma mother from the community was employed as a school assistant during the whole project. Her activity was very useful, because she succeeded to convince the Roma parents to enroll and keep their children in the kindergarten.

The direct beneficiaries of the bilingual kindergarten were 20 Roma children with ages between 4 and 9 years. Indirectly, the whole Roma community from Sărulești (600 Roma families) benefited from the fact that their children began attending preschool education.

Another best practice is the **Mobile Kindergarten for Roma children**, funded by the Ministry of Education and Research, Amare Rromentza Center.

The background of the project was the fact that - according to surveys - the poor school participation of Roma children is due to, between other reasons, the poor participation of Roma children in kindergarten/pre-school education.

This project proposes a possible pattern for changing school: mobility, both in space and in method.

The kindergartens were open for one month. In order to start the activities, the school administration of the county was contacted. The counselors and the information offices started discussions with the school managers within the envisaged areas and signed partnerships for the use of one classroom in the school, for the ad-hoc Summer-Kindergarten. The counselor have also selected a teacher for each Summer-Kindergarten and supervisors for assisting the children in the schools but also on their road to school and back home.

Each kindergarten teacher has evaluated the initial level of the children, in terms of knowledge and abilities. After this, they have developed a curricula, adjusted on the children needs. The curricula and the methodology were different and particular for each kindergarten, from case to case.

Activities planned in the service:

- Organization of a "Summer-kindergarten", for 7 days, for the Roma children that never attended the pre-school institutions;
- Set-up a number of 10 information and counseling points in 10 counties;
- Selection of 4 communities (on criteria as number of pre-school children, number of Romani CRISS co-workers as mediators or counselors, existing partnerships with the schools in the area) in Soldanu/Calarasi, Botosani, Giulesti/Bucuresti, Mogosoia/Bucuresti.

The total number of the children at the summer kindergartens were 85, with the age between 5 and 8 years. After the 4 weeks of activity, the children were well prepared and ready to enter in the primary school, in the 1<sup>st</sup> class.

## Conclusions

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Within this research first we have studied the educational system in the partner countries, with a particular attention to pre-school education, the situation of Roma population in the partner countries and we summarized the findings of the focus group interviews and the best practices provided by experts in the field. With this research we intended to create the basis of a policy recommendation paper for preschool level that can be used in the partner countries on local, regional and national level.

The first main finding of this research is that the main obstacles in the integration of Roma communities in education are basically the same in all partner countries, such as the language barrier (lack of adequate linguistic competences in the local language), cultural differences and Roma traditional perception of raising children (importance of getting married and get qualification as soon as possible), poverty and poor hygienic standards (that often lead to health problems).

The second main finding is that although in all partner countries compulsory education starts at primary school at the age of six or seven, there is the possibility for everyone to attend pre-school education services, but Roma communities prefer to keep their children in the family. Therefore when they start primary education there is already a gap between Roma children and their classmates, due to the reasons listed above. This could be prevented by integrational pathways at an earlier stage of education, but according to the focus group interviews Roma families often don't recognize the opportunities that educational services, both at pre-school and at school level, may offer and they rather see them as a duty.

However, there are several initiatives in all partner countries that aim at the social inclusion of Roma children and families, by involving them in the activities of local libraries, schools, associations or by the involvement of cultural and linguistic mediators or teaching assistants in these activities in order to facilitate communication with the Roma communities. All these initiatives, listed in the Best practices section, are quite successful and show that involving Roma children and their families in local activities since the beginning and providing them activities addressed specifically to overcome the main obstacles listed above are the main tools in order to prevent their early school-leaving and segregation.

# Annexes

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## GOOD PRACTICES

We kindly ask you to write a report addressing **two good practices** for the social inclusion of ROMA children in the preschool system . It is possible to indicate good practice both nationally and at European level, either directly experienced in your daily activity or not directly experienced by you, but that you consider particularly effective..

We remind you here what we mean by 'Good Practices':

*Activities, services, projects and legislation in the sector of ROMA and education in which you identify effectiveness and efficiency in performance with respect to their integration*

## FORMAT

1. Indicate the **name** of the project or service/GOOD PRACTICE
2. Indicate the source of **funding ( IN CASE)**
3. Describe the **legislative context** in which the good practice is founded. If POSSIBLE
4. Explain **how** the good practice is accessed
5. **Describe services/tools** provided by the good practice /project etc....
  - A) What activities are planned in the service, e.g.:
    - Socialization activities (such as sports, participation in a theater group, recreational activities)
    - Activities of teaching and improvement of language (such as language, micro-language or literacy courses)
    - Activities of legal advice and mediator
6. Does the good practice consist of one of the above-mentioned activities, or of the interaction of several?
7. Report the **quantitative results** achieved through the implementation of the service

## ERNE: European Roma integration good practice Exchange and policy NETWORK

### THE INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN FAMILIES IN THE SERVICES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD: LEVEL PERCEIVED, COMPETENCIES REQUIRED TO OPERATORS, EXISTING BEST PRACTICES

#### FOCUS GROUPS

**Frame:** the f.g. should be held with a group composed of stakeholders, political decision makers, associations, NGO, and expert in the field of integration of ROMA which has been identified on a basis of good reputation, good intercultural approach and relevant presence of ROMA families and kids

**Participants:** minimum 6 and maximum 10 people. Approximately:

- 1 strategic manager (president, member of the board directors,...)
  - 1 coordinator of preschool services
  - Educators
  - Auxiliary workers
  - Representatives of parents that are already members of participative bodies
- Duration:** minimum 1 and ½, maximum 2 and ½ hours

#### **Ways of conducting**

- The group should be conducted by a couple: 1 facilitator and 1 observer, that has the task to record the group dynamics and the contents of the exchanges/discussions.

#### **Agenda of the meeting:**

Introduction to the meeting: where is it placed, motivations, objectives, use of results,..

**First round** of suggested questions

- How long have you been working in preschool education or in the field of ROMA integration?
- What place does diversity and especially Roma culture has within the educational themes?
- The professional tools at your disposal are.....
- What is an obstacle and what makes easier the integration of different people in groups such as the school?

**b. *Second round of suggested question***

- Do you think that presence of ROMA families has caused a change in the attitudes and educational strategies within the service?
- If yes, where did you most notice this change? (i.e., communication with families, individual attention towards the children and their families, quality and diversification of the proposal
- What competencies are needed in order to work with ROMA population ?
- The cultural mediator: pros, cons, other.....according to your experience
- Communication and involvement of families in the service: best tools you know and difficulties you may face.
- Which good practice you know at NA level in terms of real integration of Roma children in preschool? (PLEASE FILL IN THE GOOD PRACTICE FORMAT)
- .....

notes:

The minutes of the focus groups, summarised in **max2pages in English** containing the most important ideas and topics, should be sent to the following e-mail address: [cooperazione@formazione.net](mailto:cooperazione@formazione.net) by **10 of June 2013**, in order to allow Formazione Coeso Network to make a draft and the results of the focus group .