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EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND EUROPEAN UNION JOINT PROGRAMME 'ROMED'

CASE STUDY ZIAR NAD HRONOM

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

SLOVAK REPUBLIC, Ziar nad Hronom

Ziar nad Hronom is an example of how a good idea (that of bringing together local stakeholders through a CAG to achieve progress in Roma integration) can become meaningless if it does not take into consideration the complex reality on the ground. It suggests that it is unrealistic to expect immediate improvement in communities facing a combination of mutually-reinforcing factors, like unregulated land, unemployed and marginalised people, anti-Roma prejudice, a weak NGO sector and lack of financial resources. In such a situation, the establishment of a CAG and drafting of a joint action plan risks turning into a "box-ticking" exercise in response to donors' demands. It can raise people's expectations and demotivate them in the long run if such plans are not part of comprehensive integrated approaches coordinated with the National Roma Integration Strategies and matched with financial resources.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Ziar nad Hronom is a medium-sized city in Banskobystricky region, with a population of about 20,000 residents. During the 2011 census, 2.84% of them declared themselves to be Roma (1.94% in 2001). Experts, however, put the number of Roma higher because many do not report Roma ethnicity. The Joint Action Plan refers to "1,600 Roma listed" but does not specify by which criteria they have been "listed". Most of them are dispersed (integrated in the city). The most marginalised Roma live in a segregated settlement "Kortina" in the outskirts of the city.

Kortina emerged in 2007 when the municipality decided to privatise a hostel where several Roma families lived. Some of them were not paying the rent regularly and were creating problems for the municipality. When an investor popped up and expressed an interest in the building, the city administration decided that privatising the hostel would be an elegant way of getting "rid" of the Roma-related problems. The hostel was sold and the new owner evicted all families, both those paying and non-paying, in violation of the existing legal obligations regarding evictions which require the provision of alternative accommodation.

Having become homeless overnight, the Roma squatted on the outskirts of the city, which have gardens and garden houses. From the initial two families who squatted there, there are currently 85 families with an estimated 400 residents. The area is not suitable for permanent residence. It has no water supply or sewage system. In the zoning plan, the plots are either "gardens" or "forest", in both cases with restricted construction rights.

The community uses a water spring some 350-400m away. According to the situation analysis in the Joint Action Plan, only ten families have access to electricity but visibly all huts are connected. Electricity consumption is measured through a common meter; the amount due is distributed equally among users. Again, some are paying, others are not. There are cases of blackouts by the municipality due to unpaid bills and, as a result, some of the residents install their own generators and wish to separate and be independent from the municipality for the electricity supply.

The people in Kortina experience prejudice on a daily basis, as if it was their voluntary choice to live in such conditions. The "get rid of these gypsies" attitude is still broadly shared. It was only three years ago, after an outbreak of hepatitis in the Roma neighbourhood, that attitudes started changing and some support for tackling the problem at its source started emerging. More advocacy work would definitely help but, based on the interviews with local stakeholders, there are no strong and influential NGOs "working in the city for the city". The existing active NGOs (including the ROMACT National Support Organisation SKOLA) are not working in the Roma community in Kortina and most of their projects are targeted outside the city.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The CAG was established at the beginning of 2014 with the assistance of the national facilitator, Ingrid Kosova. It included four social workers (Roma women), one health assistant and three activists from the settlement (Roma men). The CAG conducted several meetings. Short-term and long-term goals were set and an action plan was drafted with the support of the Head of Department of Social Policies in the Municipality, Ing. Minarova, and her colleagues. The plan has four “immediate” and five “long-term” priorities. The immediate priorities are lack of access to water, lack of access to electricity, “inability of the kids to spend time in the playground of the majority” and “poor hygiene habits of children entering the zero grades”.

The short-term goals envisage the relocation of a community centre, currently located in the city, to the segregated settlement (with the argument “to be close to the community”) and hosting it in a “container unit”¹. A playground for children in the settlement was also among the priorities. Another goal shared by both the CAG and the representatives of the Social Department of the municipality was to improve the “hygienic conditions” of the people from the community through the establishment of a “hygienic centre” (public showers and washing machines, also in the ghetto, estimated cost 9,000 EUR).

In April 2016, when the evaluator visited the project, the community centre was where it used to be in the city centre and there was no playground.

There was no “hygiene unit” either and the Joint Action Plan gives some clues as to why. All four immediate priorities envisage “measures” for addressing them, but three out of the four state in brackets that they are “conditional on putting the land in regulation”. The current status of the land (gardens and forests) does not allow for any construction and no permanent infrastructure (water, sewage system) can be legally laid there.

The CAG does not exist now. A few active members continue their efforts for improving the conditions in the community independently. One of them is Michal Choler, a former member of the CAG. He lived in the hostel and was paying rent regularly, but his family was evicted with the rest. Michal has a dream of going home one day, turning on the tap and having flowing water. He also has a vision that the municipality lays down the central water supply pipes and each family “on their own account and with their own labour” connects their houses to it. He admits that relationships in the neighbourhood are tense, with everyone seeking rescue individually.

Ingrid Kosova sees demotivation as one of the reasons for such individual rescue strategies. The CAG raised expectations and, when nothing really happened, people got even more frustrated and demotivated. *“ROMED2 resembles to me the Decade of Roma Inclusion, which also had big plans and raised expectations but not much happened when real financial resources were not committed”*.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

In 2015, the municipality “improved” the access to the spring, laying the road with old chunks of asphalt – leftovers from old tarmac replaced in the city. Instead of dumping it, the asphalt was brought into the neighbourhood and “utilized” for “rehabilitation” of the muddy road.

Ingrid Kosova recalls the many meetings and discussions with various departments in the municipality. There is a willingness to solve the problems but it is not shared by all departments. The Social Department is “on board” but the others defer to legal constraints preventing them from taking action. The Mayor’s attitude was also positively evolving, unlike public attitudes in regards to Roma. Seen

¹ These are modular constructions erected from specially engineered containers. Each container is one room fitted with the respective appliances depending on the purpose of the room.

from today's perspective, the national facilitator would have invested more in direct work with the individual members of the municipal council persuading them to vote in favour of taking action: *"Having a Joint Action Plan is not enough – a comprehensive integrated approach to the challenges of the marginalised Roma is needed. It has to be matched by financial commitment."*

The Head of the Department of Social Policy of the municipality admits that the majority of residents in Ziar do not accept Roma and, nearly eight years after she started work on this issue, she still meets fellow citizens who ask her "when will you remove these gypsies?". She recognises the committed work of the local field social worker, Adriana Sarkoziova, admitting that without her there would be no access to the neighbourhood and no contact with the Roma community, yet *"instead of increasing, the number of field social workers was halved"*. Ing. Minarova also regrets that Ziar nad Hronom has vocal NGOs but they work elsewhere, they do not work in the city to change the majority's attitude towards the Roma.

Results and impact in the communities

The CAG in Ziar nad Hronom was established, the Joint Action Plan was drafted and listed the real problems the community of Kortina faces. Yet one wonders what its practical value can be if there are no legal channels to address the priorities that were set therein? The community needs a comprehensive, integrated approach to solving all interrelated challenges and not short-term initiatives detached from the reality that demotivate people in the long run. No wonder both sides (the people from the community and the institutions involved) are no longer excited, albeit for different reasons.

Any comprehensive approach needs bold determination and resources. Both are scarce in Ziar nad Hronom. The city is not among the 150 priority municipalities and a shortage of financial resources is expected. Anti-gypsy feeling is another real challenge. The local authorities seem to follow the general mood, putting all Roma (those paying their rent and those who did not) under a common denominator. The "resentment of the majority" is also used by some local councillors as an excuse not to act. Indeed, one cannot expect the municipality to legalise construction on the current land, but investing in social housing is a perfectly legal (but unused) option.

Investing in long-term solutions in a segregated settlement like Kortina (for example, in a decent water supply and sewage system) requires not just huge financial resources but is also against the latest regulations regarding ESIFs (EU Structural and Investment Funds), which prohibit spending of the latter on measures reinforcing or contributing to segregation. Even if the land was regulated, building and connecting a water supply and sewage system to the neighbourhood would fall into this category. This locks the local authorities and the community into a tough choice between the ineligible short-term improvement responding to emergency needs and an unrealistic "integrated" solution. As a result, no sustainable improvement for the community is in sight.

Lessons forward

ROMED2 in Ziar nad Hronom did not yield tangible results on the ground but provides a number of important lessons. Firstly, it suggests that it is not realistic to expect immediate improvement in places like Kortina which face a combination of factors, like unregulated land, unemployed and marginalised people, anti-Roma prejudice, a weak NGO sector, and lack of resources. The establishment of the CAG and drafting of a plan does not help. Given the high expectations it raises, it may even contribute to further demotivation. It also shows that only comprehensive integrated approaches coordinated with the national strategies and matched with financial allocations have a chance of success.

Secondly, the regulations concerning ESIFs on non-segregation need to be implemented with the real people in sight. Obviously, one should not allow the erecting of segregated villages with EU money,

but pretending that this ghetto does not exist until the next outburst of hepatitis is not an option either. Addressing the emergency needs on a temporary basis might be an option if it is part of, or conditional to, the existence of a comprehensive integrated solution.

Thirdly, any action violating the national and international legal obligations (such as mass evictions without provision of alternative accommodation) is not acceptable. It only triggers even more serious, and financially expensive, implications.