

# Report

## Background

The issue of discrimination against Roma in every strata of life in East/Central Europe is of great importance to the Open Society Institute and its network of National Foundations. Although many National Foundations have implemented a variety of programs for Roma aimed at improving civil society, economic and educational prospects, it became clear that real change in the lives of Roma people will only happen if a serious attempt is made to address the underlying issues of rampant bias against the Roma in East/Central Europe.

The idea of drawing on the experience gained in the US for an anti-bias education program for East/Central Europe was first broached during informal conversations between Liz Lorant, OSI Network Programs Director, and Herb Kohl, Senior OSI Fellow and education expert. Given the enormity of the problem and the necessity to concentrate on an issue where a foundation-sponsored program could yield tangible results, it seemed best to try to focus on the issue of anti-bias education for teachers. Anti-bias education aims to help teachers overcome their own biases and hidden prejudices when dealing with students of a minority. It also provides them with the tools to teach their students both tolerance and greater appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity.

## What is Anti-Bias Education?

While a number of National Foundation are familiar with multi-cultural education, the ideas introduced by the anti-bias education approach were new to the conference participants. There are important differences between the two (see Appendix I: Tolerance vs. Transformation table): multi-cultural education posits that prejudice and discrimination are eliminated by people gaining information about different cultures and engaging in increased interaction with people who are different from themselves. For proponents of anti-bias (sometimes also called anti-racist) education, individual changes in behavior and attitude are necessary but not sufficient. Eliminating bias requires restructuring power relationships in the economic, political, and cultural institutions of the society. Anti-bias education seeks to develop skills that will help people work together to create systemic, institutional changes in the face of injustice directed at them or others.

## Pre-Conference Activities

In November 1997, a one-day round table was organized in New York between the top US experts in anti-bias education and a number of OSI program staff from New York and the National Foundations with extensive experience working either with Roma communities or the education system in the region (see Appendix II: November 1997 Participant List). The purpose of this meeting was for OSI to gain familiarity with the concepts of the anti-bias education approach and explore its adaptability to East/Central Europe. The consensus at the end of the meeting was that this approach is very relevant to the region. The US experts were then invited

to visit one country of the region with a high population of Roma to meet with communities, experts, visit schools, and gain first-hand experience of the region. (see Appendix IX: Trip Report by Linda Christensen and Bill Bigelow). It was decided that following the visits, key people from the region would be invited to Budapest in June 1998 to participate in a planning meeting, with the US experts conducting a series of workshops and working with the participants to plan future action. In addition, OSI also invited a trainer and a curriculum development specialist from the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Program to attend the conference and present their curriculum to conference participants (see Appendix III: World of Difference program description) . For its part, the Institute for Educational Policy in Budapest invited Steven Smith, a British anti-prejudice education expert to present his research and conduct a workshop.

### Conference Purpose

The purpose of the conference was to:

1. Expose people in the region to the key elements of anti-bias education;
2. Get feedback as to its applicability to the East/Central European context;
3. To assess the level of interest in an anti-bias network program; and,
4. To explore a variety of approaches to the development of a network program.

### Conference Participants

Although an anti-bias education program would ultimately be offered to all countries in the network, it was decided to invite only those countries with the highest population of Roma. There were 63 participants from 15 countries (see Appendix IV: Conference Participant List). A number of participants from Central Asia also asked to be included as the topic was of such great interest to them. Each National Foundation was asked to put together a 5-member team made up of staff running minority and education programs, as well as outside experts. In particular, the foundations were asked to send people who could contribute to the development of materials to be used in a future teacher training program (see Appendix V: Letter of Invitation)

### Conference Program

In keeping with the purpose of the conference, the program was divided into two parts ( see Appendix VI & VII: Conference Agenda and Description of Workshops):

1. Days 1, 2 and 3 offered participants a menu of approaches to anti-bias education. Participants had the opportunity to experience these approaches in workshop interactive settings.
2. Days 4 and 5 gave participants and OSI staff the opportunity to explore the feasibility of starting a network program in the area of anti-bias education.

### Conference Outcomes

There was unanimous agreement among participants that an anti-bias education program is key to changing attitudes in the region. However, participants felt that it should be available not only to teachers, but also to National Foundation Board members and staff, law enforcement officers, lawyers, judges, etc. All participants strongly supported the development of a new network

program. While some countries favored a more centralized approach with centralized training and production of materials, others wanted the support of specific US experts to develop in-country programs.

### Conference Evaluation

The participants' responses to evaluation questionnaires are summarized in Appendix VIII: Summary of Evaluations.

### Conclusions

Based on the feedback from the participants who worked in small groups during the last day of the conference, as well as extensive discussions between OSI staff and the US experts, it was determined that the following issues needed to be addressed following the conference:

1. Sensitivity training for OSI staff and Board
2. Advocacy initiatives within each country
3. Grant-making by local foundations to support local initiatives
4. At the school level
  - a. Development of anti-bias training materials for students and teachers
  - b. Development of Roma materials (fairy tales, history, etc.) to be used for all the students (not just Roma)

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