

RECI

Preschool and elementary schooling of Roma:
fostering opportunities for greater attainment
and early school leaving reduction

Baseline study

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1. Purpose, structure and methodology

The purpose of this Baseline study is to provide a **detailed overview of the situation of Roma children's inclusion in the educational system in Serbia, with a specific focus on the three local communities targeted by the Project "RECI - Preschool and elementary schooling of Roma: fostering opportunities for greater attainment and early school leaving reduction" (hereinafter: RECI Project), that is, Bela Palanka, Knjaževac and Prokuplje.**

The study aims to offer qualitative and quantitative data that are essential not only to understand the complexities of the phenomenon of early school leaving and drop-out of Roma children in the sphere of preschool and primary school education in Serbia, but also to lay the groundwork for further actions envisaged in the RECI Project (in particular for the development of an early warning mechanism intended to enable the institutions at the local level to identify all cases in which Roma children are at risk of drop-out and react in an adequate and effective manner).

The study contains 7 main sections (including this one). Section 2 provides a comprehensive and detailed overview of the situation of the Roma community in Serbia, highlighting the main tendencies and the specific challenges that the Roma face in terms of social integration, participation and coexistence with the rest of the population. Section 3 addresses the key aspects of the inclusion of Roma children in the Serbian educational system, focusing in particular on the roots, dynamics and consequences of early school leaving and drop-out of Roma children. Section 4 provides an overview of the legal and regulatory framework, spelling out the provisions that are most relevant to the object of the study.

Lastly, sections 5, 6 and 7 address the situation at the local level in each of the three communities targeted by the RECI project. Each section includes four sub-sections: i) a cursory examination of relevant legal and strategic documents at the local level; ii) an analytical overview of those stakeholders at the local level which play (or might play) a significant role in promoting and ensuring the inclusion of Roma children in education; iii) a detailed empirical analysis of the situation of Roma pupils in every preschool and primary school institution in each of the three communities; iii) a description of those issues and challenges related to overcoming the problem of early school leaving and drop-out of Roma children that are specific to each of the three targeted communities.

The study is based on a methodology that combines the analysis of legislation, policy documents and relevant reports with original empirical research conducted on the field, through data-gathering techniques such as participation in community meetings held in the scope of the RECI Project, personal interviews with relevant stakeholders, and surveys conducted with the staff of each preschool and primary school institution in the three communities in March 2016.

2. Overview of the situation of the Roma in Serbia: main issues and challenges

The situation and living conditions of the Roma population in the Republic of Serbia is very difficult, as it is characterised by a wide range of problems and challenges that stretch across fundamental dimensions of life such as social inclusion, education, employment, housing and participation in the cultural, economic and political life of the community.

The most up-to-date description of the situation of the Roma community in Serbia is contained in the **Strategy for the social inclusion of Roma men and women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016-2026**,¹ adopted by the Serbian government in March 2016. According to this document, in 2011 the total number of Roma citizens registered in the Republic of Serbia (Kosovo and Metohija excluded) was 147,604. The Strategy stresses how data on the situation of the Roma are generally scarce, outdated and unsystematic and partially collected, mainly on the basis of unverified and non-standardized methodology. However, it provides clear evidence of the significant challenges with which the Roma continue to be faced in a variety of domains, and which are directly related to their generally disadvantaged socio-economic situation.

The Strategy highlights how most Roma people are deeply affected by social exclusion and poverty, and continue to be victims of open as well as covert discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education and housing. In this respect, there appears to be an evident discrepancy between the capacity of the Roma to engage in economic activity as compared to the general population of Serbia. A key factor adversely affecting the socio-economic situation and prosperity of the Roma, according to the Strategy, is the proportion between active and inactive population, which in the case of the Roma is as high as 100:257 as opposed to 140:100 at the level of the Republic of Serbia. Furthermore, the Strategy stresses the existence of a high disproportion based on gender: the analysis shows that men make up 77,5% of the active Roma population, while the percentage of active women is as low as 22,5%. The main factors responsible for this situation are early marriage, the treatment of birth and maternity, as well as the level of education, which tends to be much lower for women than for men (see below).

The problems and challenges facing the Roma population in Serbia have been duly noted in the latest **Progress reports on Serbia issued by the European Commission**. The 2014 Progress report² is particularly firm in this respect. The Report states that Roma people living in the many informal settlements around Serbia are subject to very high

¹ Accessible at:

http://www.minrzs.gov.rs/files/2016_godina/Strategija_uljucivanje_roma/Strategija_za_socijalno_ukljucivanje_Roma_i_Romkinja_2016-2025.doc

² Accessible at:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20140108-serbia-progress-report_en.pdf

level of discrimination in access to social protection, health, employment and adequate housing, including basic sanitation, water and electricity. In addition to this, it is noted how international standards on forced evictions and relocations are not fully complied with by the Serbian authorities. Moreover, the Report states that in spite of some improvements, the Roma population, and especially Roma women, are still the most discriminated against in the labour market. The situation of women and children is further aggravated by the problem of domestic violence, which often goes unreported. Finally, the Progress report singles out early school leaving and drop-out of Roma children as a particularly critical issue.

The 2015 Progress report³ confirms that unfortunately no significant improvements have been made in regard to the situation of the Roma population in the country. In fact, it is stated that the Roma people continue to face difficult living conditions and discrimination in access to social protection, health, employment and adequate housing. In particular, the Report suggests that measures to address domestic violence in Roma families need to be stepped up. Finally, the problem of early school leaving and drop-out of Roma children is again given particular emphasis. Specifically, the 2015 Progress report recommends that teaching assistants and health mediators be employed in order to address the high school drop-out rate among Roma children and poor access to healthcare, and that such positions be included in the national qualifications framework.

³ Accessible at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_serbia.pdf

3. Roma children and education in Serbia: focus on early school leaving and drop-out

As highlighted in the European Commission Progress Reports on Serbia (see above), one of the main challenges facing the Roma population concerns inclusion in the educational system of the country. As a matter of fact, the percentage of Roma children attending preschool and primary school education is significantly lower than that of the general population, the rate of early school leaving and drop-out is higher, and the performance of Roma pupils tends to be less satisfactory than that of the other pupils (see the data reported below). The reasons for such severe discrepancy are various and complex, but they can all be related to the disadvantaged socio-economic situation of most Roma households in the country, particularly in rural settlements.

The **Second national report on social inclusion and poverty reduction in the Republic of Serbia**⁴ adopted by the Serbian government in 2014 contains salient information about the situation in the sphere of education. The Report concludes that the low quality of education results in an insufficient level of development of key competences among young people, insufficient degree of inclusiveness of formal education, as well as severe regional differences in the level of education.

The Report provides evidence that the capacity of the education system to respond to the educational needs of different vulnerable groups is still insufficient. Particular emphasis is placed upon the issue of early school leaving and the drop-out. The following data are particularly revealing in this respect:

Performance of the educational system	EU 27	Republic of Serbia, 2013	Serbia's goal by the year 2020 ⁵
Participation of children in preschool education (from 4 years old to mandatory education)	91,7%	54,8%	80%
Persons who interrupted education at an early stage and are not involved in any training (18-24 years old)	13,5%	25,3%	<15%

On the basis of the situation depicted in the table above, one of the key conclusions drawn in the Report that is of key significance for the objectives of the RECI Project is that:

“There is still no defined mechanism for the recognition and prevention of early school

⁴ Accessible at:

<http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Drugi-nacionalni-izvestaj-o-socijalnom-u-kljucivanju-i-smnjenju-siromastva-final.pdf>

⁵ According to the Strategy for the development of education in Serbia.

leaving and the drop-out of children from the educational system. The Ministry of education, science and technological development has adopted a number of measures, but these need to be further developed: their implementation and effectiveness should be monitored, and their possible introduction into the system to a higher extent should be taken into greater account.” (Report, p. 174)

The **Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 5 (MICS5)**⁶ of the situation of women and children in Serbia (with a specific focus on the Roma population) conducted by UNICEF in 2014 provides clear evidence of the disadvantaged situation of Roma pupils in comparison to non-Roma pupils in Serbia. Due to its clear focus on Roma children and education, MICS5 is by far the most relevant analysis for the purposes of the RECI Project, as it provides a detailed overview of the existing tendencies and challenges at the national level, which are key to understanding the specificities of the local context targeted by the Project.

In terms of development and education in early childhood, the MICS5 Survey reveals only 6% of the children aged 3 to 4 from Roma settlements attend preschool education programmes (the percentage is slightly higher in city settlements as compared to rural settlements, where it falls to 3%), while the general percentage in Serbia is around 50%. The main reasons for this are the difficulties in accessing education (43%), the cost of services (24%) and other excessive expenses (22%).

In terms of readiness for school education, the Survey shows that only 63% of the Roma children of preschool age coming from Roma settlements attended the preparatory preschool programme (PPP) in the appropriate age group. Moreover, there is a clear discrepancy in the attendance of the PPP which reflects the children’s socio-economic status. In fact, the PPP is attended by 59% of children from poor households and by 72% of children coming from more wealthy households.

In terms of attendance of primary and secondary education, the Survey reveals that only 69% of children at school age coming from Roma settlements attends the first grade of primary school, that 85% of children in the primary school age group attends primary school, and that 15% of Roma children do not go to school at all. The Survey also points out how in terms of school attendance the percentage of Roma boys is generally higher than the percentage of Roma girls.

Furthermore, the Survey shows that the degree of registration of children in the municipal register of births is lowest in Roma households (around 94%), and that it varies considerably in relation to the socio-economic situation.

With regard to child labour, the Survey indicates that in Roma settlements 4% of children aged 5 to 11 and 1% of children aged 12 to 14 were involved in economic

⁶ Accessible at:

<http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/userFiles/file/Aktuelnosti/MICS/Srbija%202014%20MICS%20Rezime.pdf>

activities up to a number of hours that is sufficient to classify their involvement as child labour. With regard to child marriage, 43% of young Roma women aged 15 to 19 are currently married, but this percentage raises to 52% in the case of uneducated or little educated women from poor households.

With regard to financial support provided by local authorities, 49% of households situated in Roma settlements has received financial support, as opposed to 4% of households in general in Serbia. According to the Survey, 41% of the poorest households have not requested financial support because procedures are too complicated and too expensive. A specific form of financial support is the child allowance (*dečiji dodatak*), which is provided to 60% of the children from the Roma population. Another specific form of financial support is the parent allowance (*roditeljski dodatak*), which is provided to 76% of children from Roma settlements.

The Survey also contains comprehensive data concerning the levels of literacy and education of Roma children in Serbia as compared to those of the general population of the country. The most relevant data are reported in the table below:

Indicator	Description	Serbia	Serbia: Roma settlements
Readiness for school	Percentage of children in first grade of primary school who attended PPP during the previous school year	98,1 %	79,9%
Rate of enrolment in primary school	Percentage of children in primary school age group who enrolled in the first grade of primary school	97,0%	69,1%
Rate of primary school attendance	Percentage of children in primary school age group who currently attend primary school	98,8%	85,8%
Pupils who complete primary school education	Percentage of children who enrol in first grade of primary school and succeed in completing the fourth grade of primary school	99,8%	96,5%

4. The legal and regulatory framework for the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system of Serbia

In terms of international treaties, through its Law on the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child⁷ the Republic of Serbia has been since 2001 a party to the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (and its two protocols), which protects children's rights by defining standards in the field of health services, education, as well as legal, civil and social services.

As the highest legal act, the **Constitution of the Republic of Serbia** from 2006⁸ in Article 64, Part II: Human rights and freedoms, addresses children's rights, stating in particular that: i) children enjoy human rights in accordance with their age and maturity; ii) every child has the right to a personal name, entry in the register of births, the right to know their origins and the right to preserve their identity; iii) children are protected from psychological, physical, economic and any other form of exploitation or abuse; iv) children born out of wedlock have the same rights as children born in wedlock; children's rights and their protection are regulated by law.

With regard to the area of education, policies are defined by a set of laws including the Law on the Foundations of Education and Upbringing, the Law on Preschool Education, the Law on Primary Education, and the Law on Secondary Education. The strategic framework for the development of the education system is introduced through the Strategy for the Development of Education of the Republic of Serbia for the period until 2020.

The **Law on the Foundations of Education and Upbringing**⁹ adopted in 2009 regulates the basics of preschool, elementary and secondary education, namely: principles, goals and standards of education, manner and conditions for conducting preschool education, primary and secondary education, types of educational programs, the establishment, organization, financing and supervision of the work of educational institutions, as well as other issues relevant to education. The Law on the Foundations of the Education System also introduces the position of the **pedagogic assistant**, who is tasked to provide assistance and additional support to students in accordance with their strengths/needs, as well as to their teachers with the aim to support their participation and performance within the educational system.¹⁰

⁷ Accessible at:

http://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_ratifikaciji_konvencije_ujedinjenih_nacija_o_pravima_deteta.html

⁸ Accessible at: <http://www.ustavni.sud.rs/page/view/139-100028/ustav-republike-srbije>

⁹ Accessible at:

http://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_osnovama_sistema_obrazovanja_i_vaspitanja.html

¹⁰ For a comprehensive and critical analysis of the legal framework and working conditions of pedagogic assistants in Serbia, see

The goals and principles underlying the activity of preschool education are regulated in Section 4 of the **Law on Preschool Education and Upbringing**.¹¹ The goals of preschool education are to support the holistic development and welfare of the child; the educational function of the family; further education and training, as well as inclusion in the community; the development of the potential of the child as a prerequisite for the further development of society and its progress. A key principle enshrined by the Law is that all children should be guaranteed equal rights and access to all forms of preschool education without discrimination on any grounds.

The **Law on Primary Education and Upbringing**¹² provides that every person has the right to free and quality primary education in a public school. Article 5 of the Law states that a preparatory preschool program (PPP) is carried out in accordance with the law and is part of compulsory education.

Finally, the long-term trends and strategies in education at all levels are defined by the **Strategy for Development of Education of the Republic of Serbia until 2020**,¹³ which has been adopted in 2012. The Strategy determines the purpose, goals, directions, instruments and mechanisms for the further development of the education system. The focus is on achieving better quality, relevance, efficiency and involvement of children in the educational system. The Strategy sets out these specific objectives: increasing the quality of processes and outcomes at all levels of education; increasing the coverage of the population of the Republic of Serbia at all levels of education; achieving and maintaining the relevance of education, as well as increasing its efficiency.

In addition to the legal and strategic documents discussed above, the Roma are recognized as an extremely vulnerable group in the documents defining the priorities and strategies of the Republic of Serbia for EU accession, such as the National Strategy for Serbia's accession to the European Community (2005) and the National Programme for Integration into the European Union (2008). Also, acting in accordance with its commitment to improve the situation of the Roma, the Republic of Serbia joined the **Decade of Roma Inclusion** (2005), in the frame of which the Serbian government adopted four action plans containing measures aimed to improve the situation of the Roma community in terms of housing, employment, health situation and education.

The most relevant document addressing the issue of the social inclusion of the Roma population is the above-mentioned **Strategy for the social inclusion of Roma men and**

http://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Analiza_pravnog_okvira_i_aktuelnog_stat_ua_i_prakse_pedagoskih_asistenata.pdf

¹¹ Accessible at:

<http://www.mpn.gov.rs/dokumenta-i-propisi/zakoni/obrazovanje-i-vaspitanje/507-zakon-o-predskolskom-vaspitanju-i-obrazovanju>

¹² Accessible at:

<http://www.mpn.gov.rs/dokumenta-i-propisi/zakoni/obrazovanje-i-vaspitanje/759-zakon-o-osnovnom-obrazovanju-i-vaspitanju>

¹³ Accessible at: <http://www.vtsnis.edu.rs/StrategijaObrazovanja.pdf>

women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016-2025,¹⁴ which has been adopted in March 2016. The main objective of the Strategy is to improve the social and economic integration of Roma by reducing poverty and combating discrimination, and by creating the conditions for full access to the realization of human rights of Roma. This is to be achieved through the following actions: i) establishment of a mechanism for implementation, planning, monitoring and improvement of the adopted measures and activities; ii) developing the capacity and accountability of the state administration and local governments to effectively ensure the realization and protection of the rights of the Roma; iii) provide the necessary funds for financing strategic measures; iv) effective inclusion of representatives of the Roma community in the processes of designing and implementing strategic measures and the realization of human rights in the work, housing, education, social and health protection. The Strategy envisages specific measures aimed at developing the full capacity of the public administration to ensure the achievement of social equality between Roma and the elimination of the structural causes of poverty through four inter-related public policy areas: education, housing, employment and health.

The key document dealing with the situation of children in Serbia is the **National Plan of Action for Children**¹⁵ adopted by the Republic of Serbia in 2004. The Plan contains priority measures, activities and programmes that should be undertaken in order to create as favourable as possible conditions for children's development and social integration. In particular, it establishes the following goals: i) poverty reduction; ii) quality education; iii) better health; iv) improving position and rights of children with developmental difficulties; v) protecting the rights of children without parental care; vi) protecting children from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence; and vii) strengthening the country's capacity for solving children's problems. Among the strategic goals defined by the National Plan of Action for Children in order to achieve "Quality Education for All Children", the most relevant for the purposes of the RECI Project are the following:

- Strategic goal no. 2: "Increase the proportion of children covered by quality preschool education and take special measures to include children from population groups that are currently not enrolled in preschool."
- Strategic goal no. 3: "All children covered by quality primary education: enrolment of all children, keeping them in the school system, reducing the drop-out rate and increasing the number of children who complete primary education (by 2010)."

The national legal framework of the Republic of Serbia provides a set of affirmative measures intended to improve and consolidate the inclusion of Roma children in the

¹⁴ Accessible at:

<http://romskinacionalnisavet.org.rs/en/vesti/item/1167-strategij%D0%B0-za-socijalno-uklju%C4%8Divanje-roma-i-romkinja-u-republici-srbiji-za-period-od-2016-do-2025-godine.html>

¹⁵ Accessible at: [http://www.unicef.org/serbia/NPAfinalEnglish\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/serbia/NPAfinalEnglish(1).pdf); and in Serbian at: http://www.mup.gov.rs/cms_cir/decaipolicija.nsf/Nacionalni_plan_akcije_za_decu_cir.pdf

national education system. The policy study **Affirmative actions for the Roma in the field of education**,¹⁶ published by the Open Society Foundation and the Center for applied European studies in 2010, advances important considerations and valuable recommendations concerning the deployment of affirmative measures as a tool for improving the inclusion of Roma children in the preschool and school system. In the scope of the RECI Project, a particularly salient recommendation is the following:

Local school authorities should take full responsibility for informing the Roma community of the existence of affirmative action [...]. Municipal authorities Administration should help the local school administrations in accessing and mobilizing local Roma community. (p. 34)

¹⁶ Accessible at:

<http://www.cpes.org.rs/Publikacije/Afirmativne%20akcije%20za%20Rome%20u%20oblasti%20obrazovanja.pdf>

5. Situation at the local level: Bela Palanka

Bela Palanka is a town and municipality located in the Pirot District of south-east Serbia. According to the 2011 census, the population of the town is 8,112, while the population of the entire municipality is 12,051. According to the census, approximately 1,200 inhabitants are Roma. However, according to estimates of local stakeholders the actual number of Roma people living in Bela Palanka is probably higher (ca. 2,500-3,000) due to the fact that many of them are not officially registered. Hence, the Roma constitute approximately 25% of the entire population of the municipality.

5.1 Local strategic documents

With regard to inclusion of Roma children in education, the most relevant strategic document at the local level is the **Local Action Plan for Children (LAPC)**. The Plan was adopted in 2007 but part of its activities were never implemented due to the inability by the local administration to secure the required funding. On the basis of a previously conducted investigation of the situation in the community, the Plan identifies the following priority areas: i) reduction of child poverty; ii) better health for all children and sport as an element of personality development; iii) quality education for all children and improving the cultural life of children; iv) improving the position and rights of children with disabilities; v) protection of the rights of children without parental care; vi) protection of children from abuse, neglect and violence, and combating anti-social behavior; vii) better informing of children and parents.

In the scope of the third priority area, i.e. quality education for all children, the Plan defines the strategic goals both in the field of preschool education and upbringing, and in the field of primary education. With regard to preschool education and upbringing, the specific goals envisaged in the Plan are the following: a) improvement of the existing conditions of educational work in preschool institutions; b) complete coverage of children in preschool education; c) introduction of modern methods of education in preschool institutions. With regard to primary school education, the Plan devises the following specific goals: a) Complete coverage of children in primary education; b) creating better conditions for life and work in schools; c) introduction of modern educational methods in primary schools.

The emphasis placed on the need to improve the coverage of children both in preschool and primary school education indicates that the problem of early school leaving and drop-out has been recognised as a priority to be addressed.

5.2 Overview of key stakeholders

Institutions of local government

The **Department for common affairs of Bela Palanka municipal government**

enforces regulations, organises and monitors the work of institutions in accordance with the Law on primary and secondary education (see above). Over the past years, the local government has realised several projects of cross-border cooperation as well as projects at the local level; they also expressed commitment to support the activities envisaged in the scope of the RECI project with a view to improving the situation of the Roma community and of the entire community. There exists good cooperation between the local government and the Ministry of Education.

The **Youth Office** aims at improving the quality of life and the situation of young people at the local level through the realisation of projects and cultural initiatives such as music and theatre festivals, sports events etc. It worked efficiently until two years ago, but it is currently inactive.

Public institutions at the local level

The **Centre for social work** aims primarily at providing services to socially vulnerable groups, such the elderly population, as well as marginalized groups such as the Roma population and people with disabilities. The Center keeps official records concerning the most vulnerable Roma families and individuals whom it helps through both material (financial) and non-material forms of support (i.e. professional and psychosocial support). Around 600 people are beneficiaries of the financial support provided by the Center for social work, 70% of which are Roma. Since every beneficiary supports on average 2 more family members, the total number of beneficiaries raises to approximately 1,800, half of which are children.

Citizens' association and civil society organisations

The **citizens' association "Đurđevdan"** has existed since 2001 and aims at the development of civil democratic society in the Republic of Serbia. The association has implemented projects in cooperation with numerous partners, with support from UNICEF, IOM, REF, UNHCR, ICS, Ministries of Education, Health, Economy and Water Resources, Youth and Sports. Over the past years, cooperation with other institutions at the local level has been satisfactory, while cooperation with the municipal administration has been rather weak due to the association's critical stance towards it.

5.3 Inclusion of Roma children in preschool and school education

In Bela Palanka there are two primary schools, **OŠ "Ljupče Španac"** and **OŠ "Jovan Arandelović"**, and one preschool institution, **PU "Dragica Lalović"**. Details about each institution are provided in the table below:

OŠ "Ljupče Španac"

Location: Bela Palanka.

Total number of pupils: ca. 600 in home school plus 20 in 'satellite schools' located in nearby villages, for a total of ca. 620 pupils.

Roma pupils: 211 Roma pupils (half boys, half girls), that is, 30% of the total number. Geographical distribution: 205 from the town of Bela Palanka; 3 from village Mokra; 1 from village Ghat; 2 from village Sinjac.

Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented autonomously in one class with Roma pupils only. The class has 21 pupils in total, out of which 19 are Roma pupils between 5 and 7 years old. 15 of them attend PPP regularly, while the remaining 4 attend only from time to time.

Pedagogic assistant: Yes (Ksenija Durmišević).

OŠ "Jovan Arandžević"

Location: Crvena Reka (village near Bela Palanka)

Total number of pupils: ca. 100 pupils

Roma pupils: 24 Roma pupils, that is, 24% of the total number. They come from the following settlements: Crvena Reka - 12 (6 boys and 6 girls); Dolac - 10 (6 boys and 4 girls); Tamnjanica - 2 (1 boy and 1 girl).

Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by the preschool institution "Dragica Lalović"

Pedagogic assistant: No.

PU "Dragica Lalović"

Location: Bela Palanka

Preparatory preschool programme: PPP takes place in the institution as well as in its departments in Crvena Reka and Dolac.

Total number of pupils enrolled in the PPP: 58 pupils.

Roma pupils enrolled in PPP: 3 pupils (1 girl and 2 boys). Important: there are more Roma children, but their parents have requested that they be enrolled as Albanian, Serbian or Egyptians.

Pedagogic assistant: No.

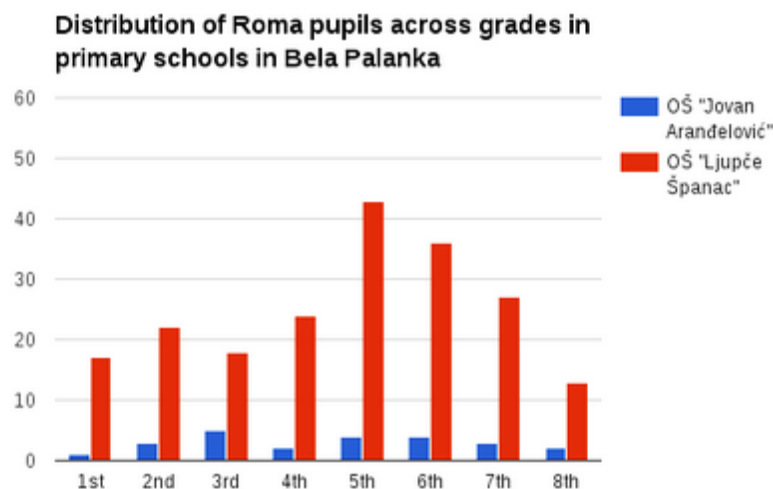
Over the past few years, **Primary school OŠ "Ljupče Španac"** has implemented some projects targeting problems affecting children of school age in cooperation with UNICEF, the Ministry of Education as well as local and regional associations. One such project is "Preventing dropout from the education system of the Republic of Serbia", which aims at reducing drop-out and early school leaving of children and youth through the **establishment and implementation of mechanisms for early identification of children at risk of dropping out, response and implementation of effective measures of prevention and interventions at the school level.** The project is implemented by UNICEF and the Centre for Education Policy (a Belgrade-based research centre which provides professional support to decision makers and practitioners in

developing, implementing and evaluating policies in the field of education).

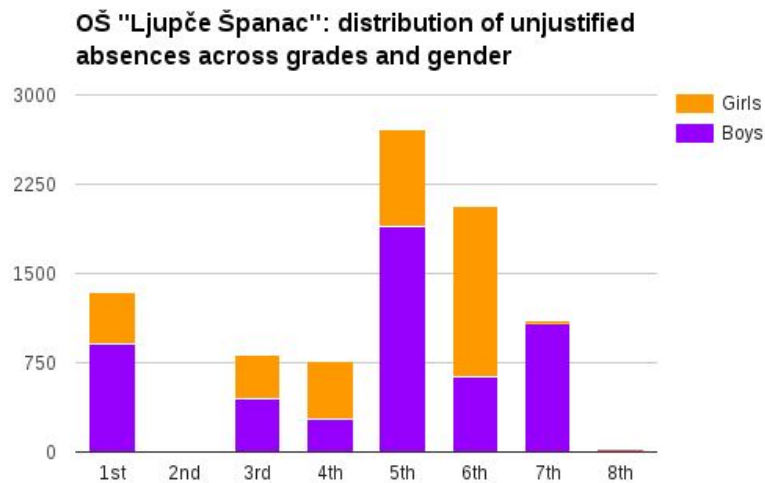
The staff of the **Primary school OŠ "Jovan Arandelović"** has established excellent interpersonal relationships, which contributes to a good school rating. In fact, the pupils achieved outstanding results in various school and extracurricular competitions while the teaching staff are committed to ensuring better working conditions for themselves and the children.

The **Preschool institution PU "Dragica Lalović"** has signed a Protocol on cooperation with 11 institutions dealing with children. The Protocol is binding and is related to information exchange, providing technical and professional assistance in preschool and upbringing work with children.

The following chart, which draws on quantitative data collected through field survey, illustrates the distribution of Roma pupils across grades in the two primary schools in Bela Palanka (in the school year 2015-16):

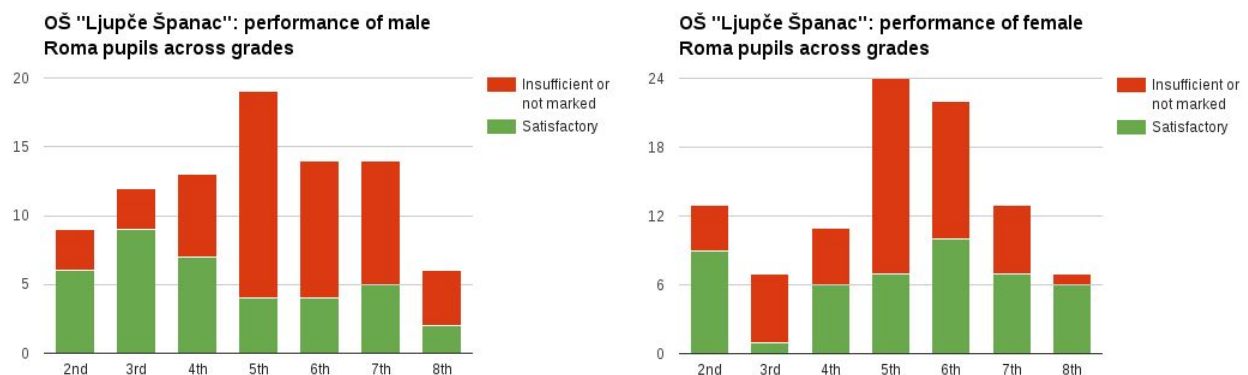


A key indicator of the risk of early school leaving and drop-out is the number of unjustified absences. The chart below illustrates the distribution of unjustified absences (each corresponds to 1 hour) across grades and gender in **OŠ "Ljupče Španac"**, the primary school with the greatest number of Roma pupils in Bela Palanka, in the first semester of the school year 2015-2016:



As shown in the chart above, the highest number of unjustified absences is registered in the fifth and sixth grades. The issue appears to affect both boys and girls.

Another key predictor of the risk of early school leaving is school performance. The two charts below shows the performance of Roma pupils (male and female, respectively) in OŠ "Ljupče Španac" during the first semester of the school year 2015-2016:



The two charts indicate that the average performance of Roma pupils, both girls and boys, is extremely low. The issue appears to be particularly acute in the middle grades (from fifth to seventh), but it is also prominent in the other grades.

5.4 Main issues and challenges concerning the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system

Although the above-mentioned local institutions have different approaches and responsibilities in their work with Roma children, there is wide agreement among the representatives of these institutions about the main issues and challenges concerning the inclusion of Roma children in preschool and primary school institutions. These are:

1. The low awareness of Roma parents of the importance of school education.

2. The tendency of many Roma families to leave their homes to perform temporary jobs in other regions of Serbia or abroad.
3. The disadvantaged material and life conditions of the majority of Roma households.
4. The issue of early marriage as a cause of early school leaving of Roma girls.

Below are reported the reflections and considerations made by selected representatives of local institutions.

The director of the **Centre for social work** stresses that the key challenge in regard to the education of Roma children is the low awareness of Roma parents, who tend not to value education and are therefore reluctant to cooperate with the institutions.

The **pedagogic assistant** employed at **OŠ "Ljupče Španac"** points out how many children (especially Roma) enrol in school at the beginning of the school year but then leave to a different town or country with their families in order to perform temporary jobs, most often in agriculture. On average, 3 children drop out the school every year. The average number of absences, whether justified or not, is significantly higher among Roma pupils than among other pupils. According to the pedagogic assistant, the main reasons for early school leaving among Roma pupils are the following: lack of support from the families and the local community; insufficient recognition of the value and importance of education by the parents; living in isolated, segregated, unstimulative and often inhumane conditions; lack of previous skills and work habits that are necessary in school, early marriage, low aspirations/expectations of Roma children; lack of effective mechanisms for monitoring the educational path of each child; insufficient ability to react on the part of the Centre for social work; non-implementation of legal procedures and norms regulating primary education.

In the opinion of the director of primary school **OŠ "Jovan Arandžević"**, the main issues regarding the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system are low attendance (which parents tend to justify also when it is not necessary) and the tendency of many Roma families to go abroad in order to perform temporary and seasonal jobs. These two problems undermine pupils' proficiency and their ability to return to school once they are back. As far as Roma girls are concerned, an additional reason for drop-out is early marriage. The greatest challenge is raising the awareness of Roma parents because they are often conservative and traditional, and do not value the educational process as much as they should.

As far as preschool institution **PU "Dragica Lalović"** is concerned, the 3 Roma pupils attend the PPP regularly (although they are very often children travellers), and their parents are cooperative and value the educational process. The director of the institution stated that the main challenge concerning the inclusion of Roma children in preschool education is the need to raise Roma parents' awareness of its value.

6. Situation at the local level: Knjaževac

Knjaževac is a town and municipality situated in eastern Serbia, in the Timočka Krajina region bordering Bulgaria. The municipality has a population of approximately 35,000 (including the 85 suburbs). More than 95% are Serbs, while the percentage of Roma people is around 2%. The estimated number of Roma is approximately 800 (but the number raises to more than 1,500 if one includes the Roma who are not officially registered at the municipality).

6.1 Local strategic documents

A key strategic document at the local level is the **Local Action Plan for the Education of Roma for the period 2013-2014**. The Plan identifies the main issues and challenges concerning the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system. These are: irregular attendance and lack of material resources (as Roma children are mostly from socially vulnerable families), little or low fluency in the Serbian language, inability of the parents to purchase toiletries and textbooks, discrimination and unfair treatment by the rest of the population in all spheres of social life. In addition to this, the Plan emphasises the need to develop an adequate database on the Roma population in Knjaževac, because the data from the census appear to be inaccurate.

In the specific field of preschool and school education, the main strategic goal envisaged in the Plan is the improvement and successful inclusion of Roma children in education. This goal is broken down into several specific objectives: i) full coverage of Roma children; ii) equal quality of education; iii) minimising the drop-out of Roma children; iv) overcome spatial segregation in schools; v) elimination of all forms of discrimination against Roma; vi) fostering Roma cultural identity.

6.2 Overview of key stakeholders

Institutions of local government

The **Department of Economic and Social Affairs of Knjaževac municipal government** enforces regulations, organises and monitors the work of institutions in accordance with the Law in the field of primary and secondary education (see above). Since 2005, funds from the local budget are allocated for the following activities: free snacks for all pupils of the three local primary schools, transportation to/from school for pupils who live in the villages, textbooks for the third child in every household, for socially vulnerable and internally displaced persons. The third child is entitled to free kindergarten, while the other above-mentioned categories are entitled to free snacks in the kindergarten. The municipality cooperates with actors from the civil sector, primarily through a call for tender for financing projects by citizens' associations (15 million dinars will be allocated in the current year).

The **Youth Office** is committed to improving quality of life and the situation of young people aged 15 to 30 years at the local level. It is currently not active.

Public institutions at the local level

In addition to the usual services relating to material benefits and financial support, the **Centre for social work “Dr Mihajlo Stupar”** has developed a number of additional services, such as in-home assistance to the elderly and home assistance for children with special needs. A small number of Roma families make use of the two aforementioned programs. Roma make up about 70% of the beneficiaries of financial assistance provided by the Centre. The Centre possesses official information concerning the most vulnerable Roma families and individuals, who are beneficiaries of both material and non-material assistance (i.e. professional and psychosocial support). The Director of the Centre points out the tendency of many Roma beneficiaries to misuse and dissipate the received material benefits, which adversely affects the effectiveness of the service.

Citizens’ association and civil society organisations

The **Directorate for Roma strategy and integration** realises initiatives in the field of care for children, youth, elderly and women, marginalized groups, particularly the Roma, with the goal of improving their situation through the enhancement of the educational performance of Roma and interventions at all levels of the educational process. The Directorate implements a project on an annual basis, using funds obtained from the Municipality.

The citizens’ association **Centre for creative development** works with children and youth in Knjaževac in the promotion of volunteering.

6.3 Inclusion of Roma children in preschool and school education

In Knjaževac there are three primary schools, **OŠ “Vuk Karadžić”, OŠ “Dimitrije Todorović-Kaplar”** and **OŠ “Dubrava”**, and one preschool institution, **PU “Bajka”**. Details about each institution are provided in the table below:

OŠ “Vuk Karadžić”
<p>Location: Knjaževac.</p> <p>Total number of pupils: ca. 530 pupils.</p> <p>Roma pupils: 45 Roma pupils are currently enrolled (27 boys and 18 girls). Their geographical distribution is the following: 21 pupils live in Knjaževac, 4 in the village Suva, 10 in the village Podvis, 6 in the village Orešac, 4 in the village Crvenje.</p> <p>Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU “Bajka”; in the ‘satellite schools’ located in Podvis and Vasilj, the school implements PPP autonomously.</p> <p>Pedagogic assistant: No.</p>

OŠ “Dimitrije Todorović-Kaplar”
<p>Location: Knjaževac.</p> <p>Total number of pupils: n/a (allegedly, this school has the highest number of pupils of all three primary schools in Knjaževac).</p> <p>Roma pupils: ca. 100 Roma pupils are officially enrolled, but less than 70 regularly attend.</p> <p>Geographical distribution: 79 pupils from settlement Niški put, 9 pupils from settlement Tunel, 11 pupils from village Vina, 1 from village Štipina, 1 from village Balanovac, 2 from village Valevac, 5 from village Sastavak.</p> <p>Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU “Bajka”.</p> <p>Pedagogic assistant: Yes (Marija Simić).</p>
OŠ “Dubrava”
<p>Location: Knjaževac and Minićevo.</p> <p>Total number of pupils: n/a.</p> <p>Roma pupils: Most Roma pupils (ca. 45) attend the satellite school located in Minićevo.</p> <p>Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU “Bajka”.</p> <p>Pedagogic assistant: Yes, in Minićevo.</p>
PU “Bajka”
<p>Location: Bela Palanka</p> <p>Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented in the institution as well as in all three primary schools.</p> <p>Total number of pupils enrolled in the PPP: 197 pupils in total.</p> <p>Roma pupils enrolled in PPP: 10 Roma pupils are currently enrolled in PPP (4 girls and 6 boys, all aged 6).</p> <p>Pedagogic assistant: Yes (Mila Kujić).</p>

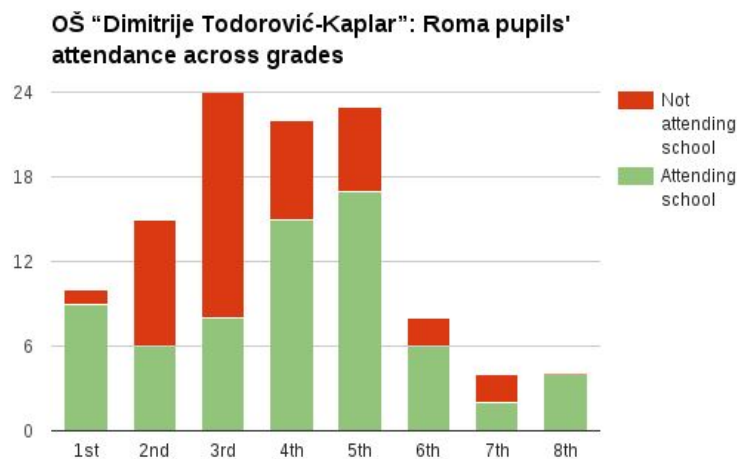
Over the past few years, the primary school **OŠ “Vuk Karadžić”** has cooperated with the Office for Roma people, the Municipality, the Centre for social work, as well as with the health and non-governmental sectors. Roma children are involved on an equal footing with other students in all school activities (sections, events, public performances, sports events). The school provides special support and learning assistance to Roma pupils.

Primary school **OŠ “Dimitrije Todorović-Kaplar”** cooperates with the Health centre which provides up-to-date lists of children in school age and carries out systematic check-ups. It also cooperates with the Centre for social work, which provides certificates for those pupils whose parents are beneficiaries of financial assistance in order for them exercise the right to free snacks and textbooks. Furthermore, twice a month the school organises bilingual workshops with students in lower grades in cooperation with the National library “Njegoš”.

Lastly, preschool institution **PU “Bajka”** cooperates with the local Health centre in monitoring the health of all children enrolled in the PPP and carrying out systematic

check-ups. The Health centre provides detailed data concerning the number of children expected to enrol in the PPP every year. The Centre for social work (see above) issues certificates to children from socially vulnerable families in order to exercise their right to free snacks and textbooks.

The issue of early school leaving and drop-out emerges clearly from the data on attendance from **OŠ “Dimitrije Todorović-Kaplar”** in the first semester of the school year 2015-2016, which are shown below:



As shown in the chart, the problem of drop-out is particularly acute in the early and middle grades, while it tends to decrease in the higher grades.

6.4 Main issues and challenges concerning the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system

In terms of inclusion of Roma children in the educational process, the representatives of the above-mentioned local institutions and organisations highlight the following issues and challenges as most relevant:

1. The low awareness of Roma parents of the importance of school education.
2. The tendency of many Roma families to leave their homes to perform temporary jobs in other regions of Serbia or abroad.
3. Lack of a stable and sustainable system of providing support to the Roma population at the level of local government institutions.

Below are reported the reflections and considerations made by selected representatives of local institutions.

The former **Mediator for Roma issues** (usually called “Roma mediator”) pointed out how the position of mediator for Roma issues in the municipality of Knjaževac has recently been abolished due to austerity measures enforced through Serbia’s Budget System Law reform, which introduced new savings and minimised expenditures in the

public sector. This clearly shows how after decades of donor projects the local government institutions still do not have a stable and sustainable system for providing support to the local Roma population.

Furthermore, in her opinion, the **Health mediator** works well despite the constraints established by the Ministry of Health. She also stated that the level of inclusion of Roma children in education is quite high because there exist clear and effective procedures for engaging Roma parents, issuing the necessary documents, arranging medical check-ups and compiling school enrolment lists. Finally, she evaluates the cooperation among the key stakeholders and institutions as being very good.

The director of the **Centre for social work** stresses how the material situation is not necessarily the main cause of early school leaving and drop-out of Roma children. More often the problem is that their parents do not value education enough.

The **pedagogic assistant** at primary school **OŠ “Dimitrije Todorović-Kaplar”** points out that the main reason why as many as 44 Roma pupils do not regularly attend school is that their families go abroad for longer periods in order to perform temporary jobs. Furthermore, she emphasises the relevance and significance of the work of pedagogic assistants, who play a key role in establishing and developing contacts with Roma communities and families. As a result of their engagement, both pupils and parents have better contacts with schools, absence from school is reduced, and pupils’ proficiency has significantly improved.

The drop-out rate of Roma pupils is particularly high in **OŠ “Dubrava”** (satellite school located in Minićevo) due to the fact that most Roma families go abroad to perform temporary jobs.

According to the director of **OŠ “Vuk Karadžić”**, the majority of Roma pupils attend school regularly. The only challenges in this regard, as far as this specific school is concerned, are the decision of one family to enrol its 3 children in a different school (which they however do not attend), and the fact that some Roma families move abroad for longer periods of time taking their children with them.

The **pedagogic assistant** employed at preschool institution **PU “Bajka”** stated that Roma pupils regularly attend the PPP and are accepted by the rest of the children. Roma pupils enjoy attending the PPP and accept the obligations included in the programme. She also stresses that the main reason for which Roma pupils are at risk of early school leaving is the fact that their families often leave to work abroad for longer periods of time.

7. Situation at the local level: Prokuplje

Prokuplje is a town and municipality located in the southern part of Serbia. It is the administrative center of the Toplica District of Serbia. According to the 2011 census, the town has a total population of 27,333 inhabitants, while the population of municipality is 44,419. Around 40,000 inhabitants are Serbs, around 2,000 are Roma.

7.1 Local strategic documents

The key strategic document at the local level is the **Local Action Plan for Children (LAPC)** adopted in 2006. The LAPC included strategic and specific goals in the following areas: i) Reducing child poverty; ii) Better health for all children; iii) Quality upbringing and education for all children; iv) Protecting children from abuse and neglect and reducing child delinquency and behavioural problems; v) Improving the position and rights of children with disabilities; vi) Improving the position and rights of children without parental care; vii) Better informing of children and enhancement of cultural facilities; viii) Increasing birthrate in the municipality of Prokuplje.

The former **coordinator of the team for the development of the LAPC** stated that the drafting of the LAPC was based on surveys conducted with approximately 600 Roma families living in settlements, as well as with Roma youth and Roma leaders. Since the LAPC has expired, there is a need to develop and adopt a new/revised LAPC.

7.2 Overview of key stakeholders

Institutions of local government

The **Department of Social Affairs (Service for Education and Culture) of Prokuplje municipal government** enforces regulations, organises and monitors the work of institutions in accordance with the Law in the field of primary and secondary education (see above).

The function of the **Office of the National Council of the Roma national minority** is to represent the Roma minority at the local level in the field of education, culture, information in the minority language and official use of language and script.

The local **Children and Youth Office**, opened in 2009 with the support of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and UNICEF, aims at improving the quality of life and the situation of young people aged 15 to 30 years at the local level. In addition to children and young people, direct beneficiaries of the Office are organisations that work with them (international, national, and local institutions) as well as NGOs.

Public institutions at the local level

The **Centre for social work** provides support and assistance to individuals and families in order to improve and preserve the quality of life, eliminate or reduce the risk of adverse life circumstances, as well as create opportunities to live independently in the community. The Centre has nearly 2,000 beneficiaries of Roma nationality.

Citizens' association and civil society organisations

The **Roma citizens' association "Prokuplje"** is a non-profit organisation active in the field of child care, youth, elderly, women and marginalised groups, especially the Roma. It specifically aims at improving the situation of the Roma community in regard to the educational process.

The **Cultural and educational centre "Toplica"** promotes innovative approaches in the areas of non-formal education and vocational training.

Lastly, the **Topica Centre for democracy and human rights** has carried out more than 40 projects, whether independently or in cooperation with partner citizens' associations and institutions.

7.3 Inclusion of Roma children in preschool and school education

In Prokuplje there are six primary schools, **OŠ "9. Oktobar"**, **OŠ "Nikodije Stojanović - Tatko"**, **OŠ "Ratko Pavlović - Ćićko"**, **OŠ "Milić Rakić - Mirko"**, **OŠ "Svetislav Mirković - Nenad"** and **OŠ "Vuk Stefanović Karadžić"**, and one preschool institution, **PU "Neven"**. There is also a **Primary school for adult education**.

Details about each institution are provided in the table below:

OŠ "9. Oktobar"
Location: Prokuplje. Total number of pupils: ca. 1000 pupils. Roma pupils: ca. 100 Roma pupils, that is, 10% of the total number. Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU "Neven". pedagogic assistant: Yes (Aleksandar Baktijarević).
OŠ "Nikodije Stojanović - Tatko"
Location: Prokuplje. Total number of pupils: ca. 1000 pupils. Roma pupils: ca. 100 Roma pupils, that is, 10% of the total number (most of them come from the settlement Carina). Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU "Neven".

Pedagogic assistant: No.
OŠ “Ratko Pavlović - Ćićko”
Location: Prokuplje. Total number of pupils: ca. 1000 pupils. Roma pupils: Very few Roma pupils. Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU “Neven”. Pedagogic assistant: No.
OŠ “Milić Rakić - Mirko”
Location: Prokuplje (near the Roma settlement “Ćerkez”). Total number of pupils: ca. 700 pupils. Roma pupils: 74 Roma pupils (40 boys and 34 girls) are currently enrolled, approx. 10% of the total number of pupils. Their geographical distribution is as follows: approx. 50 pupils come from Ćerkez mala, 10 from Klisurica, 8 from Novo naselje, 7 from Mala guba, 3 from Petrovac, 1 from Džungla and 1 from Božurna. Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU “Neven”. Pedagogic assistant: Yes (Goran Hasanović).
OŠ “Svetislav Mirković - Nenad”
Location: Village Mala Plana (5km from Prokuplje). Total number of pupils: ca. 300 pupils. Roma pupils: n/a. Preparatory preschool programme: PPP is implemented by PU “Neven”. Pedagogic assistant: No.
OŠ “Vuk Stefanović Karadžić”
Location: Village Žitni Potok (28km from Prokuplje). Total number of pupils: ca.100 pupils. Roma pupils: ca. 90 Roma pupils, that is, 90% of the total number. Preparatory preschool programme: No. Pedagogic assistant: No (despite various request be assigned one by the Ministry).
PU “Neven”
Location: Prokuplje. Preparatory preschool programme: Total number of pupils enrolled in the PPP: 226 pupils. Roma pupils enrolled in PPP: 20 Roma pupils (12 girls and 8 boys, all 6 years old). Their geographical distribution is as follows: 7 pupils from Carina, 4 from Romska mahala, 4 from Berilje, 3 from Prokuplje, 2 from so-called “Romsko naselje” (in Dobrička street). Pedagogic assistant: Yes (Zvonko Živković).
Primary school for adult education

Location: Prokuplje.

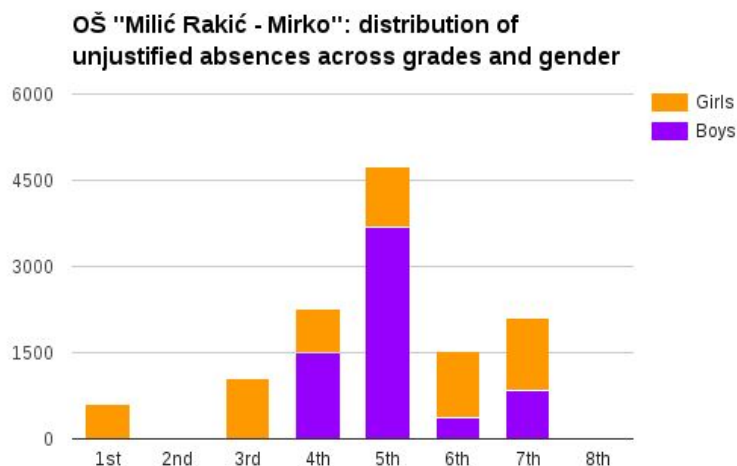
Roma pupils: 55 Roma pupils are currently enrolled (32 boys and 23 girls). They come from three locations: Berilje, Carina and Guba. Two thirds of the pupils are enrolled in the fifth grade.

Adult education assistant: Yes (Saša Ališanović).

Most primary schools have established good cooperation with the other institutions at the local level, as well as with other educational institutions. The primary schools **OŠ “Nikodije Stojanović - Tatko”**, **OŠ “9. Oktobar”** and **OŠ “Vuk Stefanović Karadžić”** have established a partnership with the **Roma citizens’ association “Prokuplje”** (see above). This partnership was a key asset in the implementation of a UNICEF-funded project (from 2002 up to date) for the establishment of educational centres (*društveni centri*). One such educational centre was established in Prokuplje (in the biggest Roma settlement); its activities include teaching, creative workshops and workshops with Roma parents.

The primary school **OŠ “Milić Rakić - Mirko”** fruitfully cooperates with the local institutions. In particular, it reports irregular school attendance to the Centre for social work and the Municipality. Additionally, health check-ups are executed in cooperation with the Health centre.

The chart below presents the situation in terms of unjustified absences of Roma children in this primary school. The chart shows that the issue of irregular attendance is particularly acute in the middle grades, and it seems to affect boys more than girls.



The Prokuplje **Primary school for adult education** has signed a Protocol on cooperation with the local Centre for social work, and also cooperates with local Roma NGOs. It also cooperates with the police if such need arises. The school regularly celebrates the International Roma Day through commemorative programmes. In cooperation with NGOs, it implements a small campaign for the enrollment of pupils and

the prevention of drop-out. It also implements peer education activities in collaboration with secondary schools. Lastly, it cooperates with the National Employment Service by realising programmes offering professional orientation to pupils.

The preschool institution **PU “Neven”** cooperates with both the governmental and non-governmental sector in organising debates, conferences, donations and surveys. It does not implement activities that specifically target Roma pupils because all Roma pupils who are included in the preschool system regularly participate in the ordinary activities realised by the institution.

7.4 Main issues and challenges concerning the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system

In the opinion of the local stakeholders and the representatives of the institutions and organisations listed above, the main issues and challenges regarding the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system are the following:

1. The tendency of many Roma families to leave their homes to perform temporary jobs in other regions of Serbia or abroad.
2. Disadvantaged material life conditions.
3. Early marriage (especially affecting Roma girls' school attendance).

The reflections and considerations made by selected representatives of local institutions are reported below.

According to the former **coordinator of the team for the development of the Local Action Plan for Children (LAPC)**, the cooperation among local institutions is currently at a satisfactory level, but it was at a much better level up to 2-3 years ago.

He stresses that the main problem when it comes to inclusion of Roma children in education is that many Roma families have moved abroad (predominantly to Germany) to seek asylum or health care. These are mostly socially disadvantaged families. In his opinion, the problem of early school leaving and drop-out needs to be addressed in a systematic and comprehensive way, because its roots are in the socio-economic background of the Roma population.

In the opinion of the **pedagogical assistant** who works at the primary school **OŠ “Milić Rakić - Mirko”**, the main challenges regarding the inclusion of Roma children are temporary stays abroad and the difficulty in recognising diplomas earned abroad in cases in which pupils did not complete the full grade.

The **adult education assistant** who works at the **Primary school for adult education** stated that the Roma youth enrolled in the school attend classes quite irregularly. The reasons are manifold. Roma girls aged 15/16 are prone to leaving school due to early marriage. Moreover, many Roma families move abroad for long period of time. Most of

the students have also had problems with the law. Nonetheless, he points out, not a single case of violence has been recorded in the school over the past two years.

In the opinion of the **pedagogical assistant** employed at the preschool institution **PU "Neven"**, the main issues affecting the attendance and inclusion of Roma children in the educational system are related to their material life conditions and to the custom of spending longer periods of time abroad with their families.