



Opening Scouting to the Roma Community in Slovakia

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The Roma community, often referred to as 'gypsies', is seen as a problem in most European countries, due in part to their nomadic and exotic culture. In eastern and central Europe the Roma community is the region's most marginalised and vulnerable minority. In Slovakia, the Roma population is around half a million, from a total population of five and a half million people.

Poverty is widespread within the Roma community and many live in ghettos on the edge of urban centres in unhealthy housing. There are high levels of unemployment, partly due to low level of education within the community. The children are most affected. As many as half of Roma children do not complete primary school and Roma children often end up working on the streets to support their families. This results in the community becoming more and more marginalised from the rest of society in Slovakia.

Reacting to this situation, some Roma youth leaders have founded a small independent 'Club of Right Roma Boys and Girls' in 2000 with the aim to provide Roma children with more educational opportunities. These youth leaders developed an interest to the Scout Method and decided to transform their 'Club' into Roma Scouting. They enter in contact with the leaders of the Slovak Scout Association, who were able to welcome them and listen to their expectations.

The Roma Scouts were accepted as a district within the Slovak Scout Association and this has enabled them to keep some of their specificity while being integrated into the National Scout Association.

- An education programme has been designed to meet the specific needs of Roma children and youth. Literacy rates among children and adults are very low. The programme takes into account Roma people's particular interests and skills such as music, dance, Roma culture and sport.
- Roma Scouting has retained its own symbols, uniform, badges, flags, hymn, etc., as well as the Slovak national badge.
- An Advisory Council for Roma Scouts, which reports to the National Council, has been formed and its members receive training and support in Scouting and strategic planning to strengthen their management capabilities.
- Trained Slovak leaders and Rovers, who were interested in the project, are now providing leader training for Roma leaders and training Roma Scouts and Patrol leaders.

Through the project there is now a more tolerant attitude towards the Roma community in non-Roma Scouts. There are now many positive examples which help to eliminate the prejudice against the Roma community in Slovakia. The participation of Roma children and adults in scouting is having an impact on the wider community. Results show that many Roma Scouts are more active and responsible students and their school attendance and school grades have improved. Conversation with parents reports an improvement in their relationships with their children. There are also noticeable changes in public life with Scouts (young people and adults) being more active in volunteering and community service,

The results of the work have been validated by experts in the professional sphere and the project has been described as one of the best projects for Roma children and youth in the field of education. The media are also following the project closely and being very appreciative.

Future plans include to build a network of both Roma and non-Roma volunteers who will work directly in the field, visiting Roma settlements and communities with the aim of setting up new groups with the help of local community leaders.

The project has generated energy and enthusiasm in Slovak Scout leaders and Rovers. Many are volunteering to organise camps and training courses. Scouts from both communities performed songs in public and a CD has been produced.

This project is instrumental in helping a minority community to use Scouting as a tool for education and development and reducing prejudice and intolerance towards the Roma community in Slovakia. It is hoped that similar projects are launched in other European countries where similar problems exist.

Young people, Rovers and Scout leaders involved in this project deserve the title of 'Scouts of the World'.