

## **Croatia: Xenophobes Prey on Schoolchildren**

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Hostility towards minority groups is spilling over into the classroom.

Children from minority groups are facing a bitter hate campaign at the start of the school year, in a disturbing sign that intolerance is on the rise in Croatia.

Two young HIV-positive children have been driven out of Zagreb and objections have been raised over Roma pupils attending Croatian schools and the provision of Serbian-language education.

The plight of the two girls - Ela, 8, and Nina, 6, - was highlighted when the country's left-of-centre prime minister, Ivica Racan, received them in his office as a gesture of solidarity with disabled people.

But when Zagreb's local authorities offered to house the children - whose full names have not been disclosed by the authorities - and their guardians in a four-room apartment in a block of flats in the city, locals were outraged and threatened to wall up the entrance to the building.

As a result, it was decided to move the girls to the seaside town of Kastel Novi, near Split.

They encountered exactly the same hostility there, however. When parents heard that Ela - the older of the two - was due to go to a local school they started to withdraw their children from class.

Only one of the parents agreed to their child attending the same lessons as Ela. A special class was arranged for the two, but calls continued for the HIV-positive children and their guardians to be moved.

Kastel Novi residents were unrepentant when questioned about their behaviour. "I would prefer my children to be illiterate than sick," said one, Bosko Bilus.

In a separate development, Croat parents in Drzimurec Strelec, near the north-west town of Cakovec, blockaded one school in protest over their children being taught with Roma pupils. The education ministry gave way and agreed to separate classes for the two groups.

The parents' actions appear to enjoy widespread public support, with an opinion poll showing that 64 per cent of people were firmly against their children attending classes in which Roma pupils were in the majority.

Elsewhere, in the eastern town of Vukovar, Petar Mlinaric - leader of the opposition right-wing Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, formerly led by the late President Franjo Tudjman - threatened to mobilise army veterans to blockade schools teaching Serbian and using the Cyrillic alphabet.

Vukovar has the biggest concentration of Serbs in Croatia, and their representatives have long demanded separate schools. Racan's government was considering this option when Mlinaric launched his protest.

Local Serb leader Jovan Ajdukovic told IWPR, "We are not requesting exclusive rights, but the same as those belonging to any other national minority, such as Italians or Hungarians.

"We want educational autonomy in schools, so that the Serb minority - undoubtedly the largest in Croatia - can access the rights laid down in law and be taught in their own language."

However, Mlinaric insists such a demand is the thin end of the wedge. "This is not the ultimate goal of the Serb community in the Danube area," he claimed.

"Today they want schools, tomorrow they will want autonomy, and after that a return of Krajina," he said, referring to the breakaway Serbian statelet in Croatia that once included Vukovar.

Vukovar suffered massive destruction at the hands of the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav army during the war of independence, which is why any attempt by local Serbs to exercise their rights meets tremendous opposition from the Croatian community.

Fearing loss of public support, Racan's government has now backed away from all three controversies, in spite of its official opposition to segregation on the basis of race, nationality, or physical handicap.

The introduction of schools for ethnic Serbs has been postponed, little Ela will have to leave her school in Kastel Novi because of the protesting parents and Roma children in Drzimurec Strelec have already been placed in separate classes.

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