



## RomaVersitas – Backbone of Europe’s Roma Academic Elite

*Interview with Mr. Nadir Redzeqi, Executive Director of the [Roma Education Fund](#), conducted by Ms. Sumea Rahim for [Roma Index](#) in 2016. Translated by Ms. Ajsel Amet.*

**Sumea Rahim (SM):** You come from Macedonia, but you have been working in Hungary for a long time. You currently serve as Executive Director of Roma Education Fund (REF) in Budapest and you are responsible for promoting the success of Roma students from European countries in education. How does it feel to work abroad and to help create the future of Roma students in Macedonia?

**Nadir Redzeqi (NR):** First, I would like to greet the readers of *Roma Index* and the editorial team of your magazine for giving me the opportunity to speak to students from my country. Although I have worked seven years abroad, the dynamics and scope of my professional responsibilities simply do not allow me to feel that I am abroad or at home. This is because of the same problems and issues that we have, that is, the degree of systemic discrimination and exclusion, are a heavy burden on each and every Roma, no matter whether s/he is more or less educated or whether sh/e lives in one European country or another. My sense of responsibility and obligation comes through activism in the civil sector in Macedonia. The eagerness and enthusiasm I felt as a youth has been transformed by now into a professional obligation because of my determination to be part of the Roma movement on my own terms and my vision about teamwork. The difference between my current position compared to those I had in Macedonia is the scope – every right or wrong decision, assessment or initiative is an opportunity to positively influence the lives of Roma pupils and students. Moreover, due to limited resources, REF is unable to support every request. This is the hardest and most challenging part of my work, knowing that some very talented and dedicated individuals cannot be reached and thus cannot achieve their aspirations to escape from poverty and to gain some perspective on their lives.

**SM:** After nearly 12 years in Macedonia, and thanks to the support of REF, RomaVersitas works as an independent student organization that actively contributes to development of the Roma academic community. Is it the success of those who supported the idea of RomaVersitas and certainly the product of generations that came?

**NR:** The success of RomaVersitas is because of the efforts, ideas and dedication of many students throughout the years. RomaVersitas structures are branded initiatives that REF is proud of primarily because it has preserved the uniqueness and independence of the self-organization of Roma students, and developed a culture of critical thinking and common action. These are the benefits and qualities that are built together painstakingly. I firmly believe that the quality of work and profiling of current and future generations have a strong upward trend.

**SM:** We would like to address the future of the Roma student organization, RomaVersitas. As a direct witness to the functioning of RomaVersitas in the previous period, today from the position of



a donor, tell us what is the purpose of supporting this important initiative/project in Macedonia and the region? What is the role of REF in supporting the higher education of Roma students?

**NR:** I do not consider REF to be a donor towards interventions it has originated and designed. REF has its own donors with whom we arrange and negotiate long-term plans and goals for the education of Roma children. As an individual and certainly as director of REF, my contribution is to make these plans relevant and effective for the needs and interests of the Roma community in all 16 countries of operation. The primary objective of REF and RomaVersitas is to support Roma students throughout their studies. From there arises the basic concept and support of REF for RomaVersitas that is open by design to the ideas and initiatives of members of these organizations in each country where it operates. The role of REF is to provide continuous support for successful study and, of course, to help in upgrading the quality and volume of student initiatives at the national level. I see RomaVersitas as the backbone of a future Roma academic community, which certainly should fight for its own place and influence in Macedonian society, primarily through collective and professional responsibility on behalf of their community. In that respect, as long as I am part of REF, my support and readiness for joint action and outlining of future Roma leaders in the fields of economics, science, politics and culture is and will be present.

**SM:** For a decade REF has supported Roma students through various types of support (scholarships, tutoring, languages, computers, design initiatives, etc.). Are you satisfied with the current method of operation of REF programs that directly or indirectly support them?

**NR:** When comparing what the Roma community had before the establishment of REF in 2005 with the present situation, of course, I'm satisfied with the achievements. But as a direct participant on the national and international level, especially within the Decade of Roma Inclusion, I carry a sense of disappointment about the missed opportunities for more success. I have to be objective to both myself and readers that REF and several international organizations were the sole supporters of Roma inclusion and so far we failed to change the attitude and responsibility of state institutions to the needs of Roma citizens. Current and future Roma students should know that the process was initiated and launched with the adoption of public policies for Roma integration and probably the process will last for several decades. As such, it will depend on the quality of organizing and actions of future generations, in particular, Roma who become academics.

**SM:** What changes can the Roma student population expect? Sometimes we get the impression that what is typical of the past – lack of sustainable programs, duplicated activities, and other unsystematic support levels – will also be part of our FUTURE?

**NR:** It's difficult to answer. Should it be based on the past ideas and experiences in terms of the Roma movement? Or on global developments and trends from a mainstream perspective? Many of us face this dilemma, because the level of uncertainty is growing while cycles of major changes are frequent and develop in a relatively short period of time. This Roma student population, in my opinion, will face more challenges than previous generations. This does not mean I'm pessimistic about the future of the Roma issue, but I want to remind you that the expectations are much higher when it comes to the responsibility of the upcoming Roma intellectual elite. Above all, I think that



internal competition will be greater than that among the previous generations of Roma leaders and academics. Also, it is clear that the competition will extend to elites outside the Roma community. The time of improvisation and unconditional support, if it hasn't already passed, certainly will slow down and enter a period when the Roma issue cannot be isolated from the overall development of society. Sustainability, coordination and partnership with other structures will remain a challenge to future generations, but it should be seen more as an opportunity than a problem. My generation spent nearly a decade acting and learning to perceive that our ideals, ideas and projects were too isolated, even stunted, regarding the development of Macedonian society. My point here is that Roma needs and problems are part of overall development. In our case, this means Macedonian society and as such we should and must seek systemic solutions and accountability from the institutions in charge (along with other communities).

**SM:** RomaVersitas has clearly defined objectives in terms of its strategic priorities to support the development of the Roma academic community. Is this enough to change the status of Roma in Macedonia?

**NR:** Like any other structure, RomaVersitas also has to set strategic objectives and priorities for its actions. If that is enough for change depends on many factors like the aspirations that your organization will set. I'd like to point to several challenges that remain regarding Roma emancipation in Macedonia. Political and civil activism had a good start in the early 1990s, which, unfortunately, transformed from collective organization to small uninfluential structures. The moment for building an ideology of Roma emancipation was missed and everything that followed thereafter focused on fulfilling the interests of small groups and individuals. RomaVersitas will grow to maturity once you restore collective dimension in the organizational culture of action. To get to that stage, you should have accomplished Roma intellectuals who will be willing to sacrifice their personal interests on behalf of collective ones.

**SM:** When you talk about an international organization, we talk about international problems and solutions. What is your experience? Can we talk about common, similar problems in terms of development and support of Roma students?

**NR:** Roma needs and problems are local and national. And as such the interests and solutions should be sought at those levels. Specific issues or support from an international level is positive, but unfortunately insufficient. The problems are very similar, but also very specific in and outside any country. Therefore, it is very dangerous to generalize the Roma issue in one frame. Somewhat naively we allowed ourselves to be placed in the framework of problematizing our needs over all these years, which according to me, is why the entire energy and demands work together to legitimize international organizations related to Roma issues.

**SM:** Are you satisfied with the achievements in Macedonia in terms of the ordinary life of a Roma family. What can be expected in the future, because the fact remains that there are many unresolved problems? How can REF contribute?



**NR:** Although I am abroad, work often brings me home, so I have the opportunity to be directly informed about developments here. I have friends and relatives who, before 2009, had a better life, but also several now live better than before. What is alarming not only for Roma but for the whole of society is the level of intolerance and alienation among citizens. Economic inequality and huge gaps are quite visible, and many of my acquaintances who were in the so-called “middle” class are now living on the verge of poverty. The problems seem not only unsolved, but larger and more complex. REF, according to its mission, invests in skills and education of Roma. Obviously, this support is given to individuals with hope and faith that they will actually be carriers of new quality of knowledge and above all acting in the interest of future generations. REF, from this year on, began to favor pedagogical studies, natural sciences and interdisciplinary studies in order to better serve the quality and competitiveness of Roma graduates. However, the choice and quality of studies remains a decision of the students themselves, which certainly through activities of RomaVersitas should have its strategic direction and membership policy determined according to the needs of Roma integration.

**SM:** Can RomaVersitas still hope and expect support from REF and in what direction?

**NR:** REF is in process of building a long-term strategy for the period 2017-2031. In that context, certainly the RomaVersitas network of organizations will be part of the priority models of action in which it is possible to bring new content and activities and, of course, new standards for action. It is desirable that the RomaVersitas network grow in quality and influence, primarily as a laboratory of knowledge and ideas, profiling leadership skills and organizing the community on the local and national level.

**SM:** Overall, how satisfied are you with the results of the Roma Decade 2005-2015, and what is its follow-up, the 2020 Initiative?

**NR:** The Decade of Roma Inclusion was a process in which we learned a lot, a process that the community would not be able to raise by itself in the next 50 years. The 2020 Initiative is a logical product of the Decade, which is regional coordination of the countries aspiring for EU membership. Through this initiative we have managed to coordinate a development focus on Roma issues in the region. I was directly involved in proposing the initiative, knowing that countries in the region had no legally binding mechanism for coordination with members of the European Union within the EU Framework for Roma Integration. The priority of the 2020 Initiative is to strengthen the institutional ownership and capacity of Roma-focused units in all candidate countries. According to the experiences of the Decade, all countries in the region have adopted public policies without serious political debate, the result being that we have a poor allocation of funds for implementation of the Roma strategy from the state budget. The idea of 2020 Initiative is, in this period, for Roma-focused departments to gain the capacities and mandates to implement the Roma strategies funded by state budgets and EU IPA funds.

**SM:** What is your final message to our readers?



**NR:** I have many topics that I want to discuss and share with our students which I cannot convey here due to limited space. I hope that I will have an opportunity to meet with students at some of the activities of RomaVersitas in future. In meantime, I wish your readers successful studies and timely graduation.

*Box*

**SM:** Roma students created *Roma Index* against a background where Roma have almost no public voice. It is a “voice” for the expression of their rights, mapping their problems and life situations? What is your opinion?

**NR:** My recommendation is to target ambitious goals. The voice for your individual rights, rights of the Roma community, need to be heard by all – institutions, politicians, experts, activists and media. It will not be enough until you start building and influencing public opinion and reasoning within and outside Roma community. I know it is difficult in a society of extractive institutions and controlled media, but I certainly know that Macedonia has had better times of building inclusive institutions and free media space. *Roma Index* stands a good chance to build opinion and attitudes not only among students but also their families, civil society and political parties. Share it, organize formal and informal debates, forums and public events where you think your voice will be heard and respected.

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