SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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ABOUT EDUMIGROM
The EDUMIGROM research project aimed to study how ethnic differences in education contribute to the diverging future prospects of minority ethnic youth and their peers in multiethnic urban settings. It made a departure by recognising that, despite great variations in economic development and welfare arrangements, recent developments seem to lead to similar disadvantages for certain groups of second-generation immigrants in the western half of the continent and Roma in Central Europe. Although formally enjoying social membership with full rights in the respective states, people affiliated with these groups tend to experience new and intensive forms of involuntary separation, marginalisation, social exclusion, and second-class citizenship. By selecting specific communities and schools in nine member states of the European Union (the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), the project explored in a cross-country comparative perspective how existing educational systems, policies, practices, and experiences in markedly different welfare regimes contribute to these processes of “minoritisation”. Considering that schools are key agents in knowledge distribution and socialisation, the project examined how educational practices in compulsory education conclude in reducing, maintaining, or deepening inequalities in young people’s opportunities for advancement and their access to the labour market, and, concurrently, how they are forging the social contacts, interethnic conduits, and strategies of identity formation of adolescents from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

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As the largest “visibly other” ethnic group among youth in Slovakia, Roma adolescents have been the focus of the EDUMIGROM research. Our subject has been Roma youth living or studying in towns – and who, in theory, have an advantage in comparison to their same-ethnic peers living in rural areas since they have more opportunities resulting from living in an urban milieu.

Framing of public and political discourse in Slovak society

During the past two decades of post-communist development in Slovakia, there have been several more or less distinctive shifts in the content and mutual relations of public and political discourses about Roma. In the beginning of the 1990s, minority issues, together with the so-called Roma issue – Roma had been placed in the de-ethnicised category of “citizens who are in need of special assistance” – were significantly reframed. Roma ethnicity was officially recognised by the Constitution and – together with all ethnic minorities – granted special rights, including those pertaining to the domain of public administration, education, and cultural protection.¹ The former state-socialist regime’s strategy for the comprehensive integration of Roma was labelled as “forceful assimilation” and social work services targeted at Roma in the field were considered offensive and cancelled.

The search for a new integration policy was rather half-hearted. Development of the welfare state has been continuously based on civic principles. But special assistance for Roma was also considered unjust preferential treatment. Yet the development of a Roma political and cultural identity and their political and cultural participation were perceived to be the issue of the day (Bacová 1992).

Since 1989, and to an even greater degree after the establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993 when Czechoslovakia was dissolved, minority issues have prominently featured on the political agenda and in accompanying public discourse. However, these were almost exclusively concerned with Hungarian minority issues, and Roma and other minorities were seldom targeted (Ondrejovic 2003).

The crisis of the Slovak economy (a loss of markets) led to massive layoffs and unemployment. In many areas, there were no prospects of new openings for years. Roma employed in declining sectors and in marginal positions lost their jobs first. Growing numbers of Roma have been living on social benefits. Moreover, financial protection for the unemployed has not been supplemented by public and social services for jobless families and communities.

¹ Special programs promoting Roma housing, education and living conditions had been unmasked as offensive for Roma by both Slovak and Roma experts. On the other hand, some newly granted rights, such as the right to use mother tongue in communication with public administration, are not available yet. In spite of the fact that Roma make up more than 20 per cent of the inhabitants in many Slovak villages (20 per cent is the present minimum condition for exerting this right), there is almost no staff conversant in the Roma language. The present government, which intends to lower the minimum to 10 per cent, are confronted with this problem (besides the budgetary aspect of an increased cost for bilingual public administration),
Today, Slovakia has rather large regional disparities (in employment, unemployment, average wages, the availability of services, transport network density, and other areas), and the risks of poverty are concentrated in marginalised regions. The possibility of exclusion is increased for Roma living in settlements located in these regions. However, though it is obvious that these are the structural factors of the Roma's desperate situation and that they can hardly be overcome individually or through self-help within the group, a perspective that blames Roma for their poverty is certainly dominant.

As Roma were overrepresented among clients of labour offices and as welfare beneficiaries, the apparent connection between welfare and ethnicity revived and deepened stereotypes and prejudices against the Roma. Public opinion had soon made joblessness identical with idleness and viewed Roma unemployment as evidence of their “moral otherness.”

Assumptions about cultural and moral differences (and apparent social differences) evolved into a considerable social distance. In general, the majority holds that Roma neither want nor know how to adapt to social norms. This negative opinion is not necessarily based on personal experience. To the contrary, according to surveys, those who have more frequent contact with Roma as neighbours, colleagues, friends, or relatives, express less negative attitudes. Thus, we must look for other causes of this image of Roma besides experience (Vašecka 2001: 225–50) However, more recent surveys do not support the positive impact of personal experience on social distance/accepting attitudes toward Roma. They show that the general concern about the living conditions of Roma is very low in comparison to the concern about the living conditions of other groups in Slovakia.2

The image of the idle and unemployed who do not want to accept that “there is no gain without pain” in our culture has often been used by all sorts of assailants and reformers of the social security system. Since 1990, all the Programme Manifestos of successive governments (with exception of the 2006–2010 Manifesto) have spoken about the necessity to increase the individual and group responsibility of citizens for their economic and social situation and decrease state paternalism and redistribution. The 1994–1998 Manifesto (Vladimir Meciar’s third government) even defines social justice (an equitable, ordered society) as the goal of the transition from state paternalism. It states: “we consider it social injustice if social benefits are taken by citizens who can work but do not want to”. The Manifesto also suggests that the transition to a new social policy would include the “elimination of social sponging” (Manifesto 1994: 49). An explanation of which social groups were meant as “spongers” was brought about by the next steps of the government. In accord with its Manifesto, the government launched the first reform of social assistance in 1998. The Act on Social Assistance classified long-term unemployed

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2 According to the 2008 European Value Study, almost half of the adult Slovak population is not very concerned or is not concerned at all about the living conditions of Roma in Slovakia. This is a positive development when contrasted with the 2004 survey, where almost 70 per cent respondents were of this opinion. This attitude does not vary according to level of education or other socio-demographic characteristics. In 2008, paradoxically, less than 10 per cent of Slovaks said that they were not very concerned or were not concerned at all about the living conditions of children in poor households. It is apparent that a declared sensitivity to the situation of children growing up in poor families is not transmittable to children in Roma families. Group prejudices are clearly stronger than the culturally expected compassion for small children.
(more than two years) as poor for “subjective reasons” and stipulated benefits for them on the level of 50 per cent of those who were poor for “objective reasons”. These measures hit Roma families markedly as Roma were preponderant among the unemployed and were one of spurs of Slovak Roma asylum-seeking in 1999–2000.

From the perspective of the integration policy, the prominent group that should be targeted by various inclusive and anti-discrimination instruments were Roma who live segregated in the so-called marginalised Roma settlements. According to estimates based on the last registers of district administration (1988), between 280,000 and 320,000 Roma live in Slovakia. About one-quarter claim Roma ethnicity in the census (Vano and Mészáros 2004: 5). Out of these, approximately 60 per cent live mixed with the majority population (though often in specific streets or blocks of flats) and one-third lives in separated or segregated (mostly) village communities, the so-called settlements. At least since 2002, the situation in segregated settlements has been recognised as a complex problem that calls for comprehensive solutions in all domains: education, employment, housing, health care, and others.

On the other hand, due to their relatively frequent “staging” on television (coverage of crimes, disasters, misery, neglected children, etc.), Roma living in the most desperate conditions have become representatives of typical Roma for the majority population. Almost all Roma who took part in our research complained that the fact that this image stood for the typical Roma in the eye of the public was painful.

As was already suggested, in the domain of policy, the “civic” and “ethnic” principles of integration policy have been competing and superseding each other in some periods, but in other periods they have supplemented each other instead, as these principles are connected to and operate in different sectors. Despite the fact that public opinion tends to identify some social programmes as “Roma programmes”, for instance, the construction of lower standard housing, the state social protection policy has always been “colour-blind”. Only pilot programmes and projects that were funded from abroad had clear ethnic targeting. However, targeted programmes for ethnic groups, not to speak about positive discrimination, have been considered violations of the principle of equal treatment.3 The concept of “cultural distinction” or “cultural difference” has been vague and still remains ill-defined, even making a rather dangerous identification of language difference with cultural difference.

The Romani language is the mother tongue of the majority of Roma children. According to official estimations, the Romani language (its Slovak dialect) is actively used by 80–85 per cent of the Roma living in Slovakia4 (Rómsky 2002). Despite this, the Roma language has not yet been used as a language of instruction at any school. The resulting language barrier is recognised as the root of difficulties that many Roma children experience in the formal education system. Instead of using their mother tongue as a

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3 Good example is the debate about the Anti-discrimination Act, in which equalising measures were blamed for bringing about unjustifiable advantage for some people because of the very fact of belonging to some ethnic group. On the other hand, speaking about “ethnic distinctiveness” is hardly discernible from group stereotyping, which is taken as offensive, too.

4 Roma living in southern parts of Slovakia speak the so-called “A-HI” dialect, which is close to Hungary. Small groups of Roma living in eastern Slovakia, the so-called “wastub makers”, speak a Roma dialect with some Romanian mixed in.
tool of integration (which is hardly possible since teachers do not know it and because teaching materials are lacking in the Romani language), zero grades and teacher assistants were introduced to reduce the initial barriers. Emphasis on the enrolment of Roma children in preschool education has also strengthened in the last decade. But being competent in the Romani language is not explicitly required from teachers and teacher assistants.

In 2008, the Romani language was officially declared as a re-codified and standardised language. The Eastern Slovakia Romani dialect was taken as the basis for re-codification as it is most frequently used in Slovakia. However, this act did not result in a drive to establish the Romani language as a language of instruction. It has been estimated that this process will take another two decades.

Debates about Romani language development and the recognition of language rights are often mixed with debates or claims for recognition of cultural differences. However, the frequent confounding of language and cultural distinctions, which is typical for an imported discourse like multiculturalism, has led to confusion in the Slovak language context, in which the term culture has a rather strong moral connotation. The phrase “cultural difference” can be easily understood as difference in morality and the line between claiming the recognition of cultural difference (of Roma) and suggesting that Roma do not accept general moral principles is very fragile.5

What naturally follows is a differentiated perception of the actual target group of both types of policies that can run parallel: the marginalised Roma settlement population versus the whole Roma ethnic group. An example is the social-democratic government of 2006–2010, which presented strong ethnic emancipation claims for Roma (the officially completed codification of the Romani language, for example), but on the other hand, continued with a colour-blind welfare policy and also programmes for marginalised groups (such as a preparation for comprehensive development projects for marginalised settlements that should draw resources from several European Union structural funds) which had been designed by the previous government.

Media discourse

There are not many systematic analyses of media discourse about Roma. Ondrejovic, in a study carried out in the 1990s, suggests that reports about Roma in the Slovak daily press at the time were rare and linked almost solely to reports about crime. At the same time, Roma incidents reported on Slovak Television seemed to imply that the Roma issue was the only real problem in Slovakia (Ondrejovic 2003: 149). In the political discourse of the 1990s, the two main characteristics that were ascribed to Roma

5 An important finding of our research is that the majority of Roma students interviewed feel quite uncomfortable with all questions concerning a “special or unique culture”, and they tend to understand “the offer to display your culture freely” as a form making difference and of othering. “Non-making difference” and “not taking into account the colour of one’s skin” was more desirable in their view.
were criminality and a sponging lifestyles. A critique of Roma’s desperate living conditions was considered a "propagandistic smear of Slovakia and Slovak treatment of Roma". Ondrejovič notes that in 1995 the media also reported some positive aspects of living with Roma. However, all of these examples were depicted as a miracle – because in the common sense, real Roma are lazy, they sponge on “our” work (also presented in the media). As a result, these reports do not have a positive effect, but just the reverse: prejudices are strengthened. In that period, the media dedicated very little space to the victims of racial violence (ibid.: 153).

Public policies and related discourses

The European Union accession process induced the Slovak governments to make new and more thoughtful efforts toward creating Roma policies. The Slovak Government has repeatedly recognised the priority of addressing the broad issue of Roma integration in several documents focusing on virtually all spheres of public policy. A document titled Basic Positions of Slovak Government’s Roma Communities Integration Policy was adopted in 2002 and its main aim was to set out solutions and concrete steps that would translate the declared political will to integrate the Roma in Slovakia into real life (over the long term). It recognised the generally disadvantaged status of Slovak Roma. It also asserted that the protection of minority rights is necessary but insufficient for stable integration, and therefore called for an adoption of temporary positive discrimination for disadvantaged groups in order to equalise their opportunities. No such measures have been implemented thus far. This hard-bitten assessment follows from the fact that teacher assistant and zero class programmes are in fact mere compensations for the government’s incapacity to secure similar rights for the Roma minority as are secured for other ethnic minorities such as Hungarians.

At present, the document does not exert a significant influence on political discourse. Principles and objectives have been introduced, including a program of comprehensive development for segregated Roma communities, but only on paper. All of the existing programmes have a partial character. The interconnection and harmonising of housing programmes with local social work programmes, and other programmes including systematic work with children and youth are still an exception to the rule and usually a result of NGO efforts. The only connection with present practice is an emphasis on education, which has been seen as a key to solving the various problems that Roma in Slovakia currently face. In actual political discourse, this emphasis has been mostly verbal, with only modest contributions to practical policy measures (these are the teacher assistant and zero classes programmes and the launching of a stricter and more transparent testing system when placing children in special elementary schools). More can be found in the policy programmes section.

However, in practice, integrated education means co-presence and not a special system of teaching. The 2008 School Act defines integration simply as the “common education of children with different abilities in the same class”.
Discrepancies in opinion about the appropriateness of an ethnic or civic approach have also been reflected in practical policymaking and policy language. On the one hand, there has been a recurrent effort to avoid making links between Roma ethnicity and destitute poverty. During the social-democratic government of Robert Fico (2006–2010), there was a rhetorical emphasis on the development of Roma ethnic identity and drawing on European Union structural funds in favour of marginalised Roma communities. The report that there is EUR 200,000,000 dedicated for this priority has repeatedly incited furious debates about preferential treatment of Roma as compared to the Slovak majority.

Iveta Radicová’s government (2010–present) has shifted again towards the de-ethnicisation of poverty. For instance, the term “socially excluded communities” is used instead of “marginalised Roma communities” (Programme Manifesto 2010). This shift seems to be chiefly informed by the growing negative reactions of public opinion toward any redistribution programmes in favour of Roma communities.

It is clear that an emphasis on the “civic approach” does not necessarily prevent stigmatisation and blaming the poor. Insufficient conformity with social norms and the moral insufficiency suggested by the name given to the targeted social category can also be a rich source of othering. Slovak (and Czechoslovak) legislation has traditionally used the term “socially maladjusted citizens”. If in older legal language (Act No. 100 of 1988 on Social Security) the term “maladjusted” was reserved for alcohol abusers and those released from prison, this term has since lost such specification in recent years. In Act No. 195 of 1998 on Social Assistance, the expression “maladjusted” is used to denote homelessness (described as lacking a place to reside and needing public provisions for bathing or washing). In the 2008 Annual Report on the social situation of the population, the target group for services for socially maladjusted citizens is specified by mentioning Roma communities in brackets. The phrase “socially maladjusted citizens” was publicly advocated as the politically correct term by Katarína Tóthová, the former minister of justice. In her view, if we speak about Roma rowdiness (which “provoked” Neo-Nazi marches on Roma settlements), we should avoid the term Roma and “[…] all the issue should be transferred to more general level dealing with socially maladjusted citizens” (Pravda 2009).

Policy programmes in education

Compulsory school attendance lasts ten years in Slovakia. The schools’ catchment areas are not compulsory for parents, and they can choose a school for their child outside the school catchment area in which they have permanent residence. On the other hand, the school in whose catchment area a pupil has permanent residence is obliged to enrol that child. There are several educational paths that compulsory education can take. The basic difference is between special and standard schools. The differentiation and tracking of students at standard schools take into account and include:
• enrolment or non-enrolment in preschool education and the resulting differences in preparedness of pupils at the time of their entry into primary education;
• enrolment in zero grade due to a pre-detected lack of preparedness for school and the subsequent continuation of study in the same class or the dispersion of zero-grade pupils into different classes of the given elementary school;
• differentiation and re-clustering of pupils according to their foreign language preferences, if this starts already at the primary level; and
• streaming of pupils in the beginning of the second stage of elementary education (lower secondary education) due to the transfer of accepted pupils to eight-year secondary grammar schools and due to their sorting according school results and special talents into specialised language and maths/science classes or less demanding classes.

All of these processes of repeated streaming are structurally embedded into the education system and directly or indirectly affect the schooling of all children, including pupils from minority backgrounds.

The so-called zero grades have existed since 1993 as a response to growing number of children not having attended preschool. In schools where zero classes are established, the regular first class curriculum is divided into two years – the zero and the first class. After completing the zero class, pupils may either continue their first class within the same class or be dispersed among other regular classes. The decision depends on the number of classes at the given school and is at the sole discretion of the school headmaster. Given the composition of zero grades, which are attended almost exclusively by Roma pupils, this decision may both track Roma children into de facto segregated schooling or, on the contrary, secure their schooling in ethnically mixed classes. There are no specific regulations in effect that would explicitly ban the grouping of Roma students proceeding from zero classes to separate classes in the first grade.

Importantly, enrolment in the zero class counts as part of the 10-year compulsory school attendance. If a pupil later repeats at least one class and she or he had been enrolled for the zero class in the past, compulsory school attendance is considered to be completed earlier than completing the last grade of elementary school. As pupils are not allowed to continue their elementary school studies after ten years of schooling, this measure implies that the chances of zero-class pupils to study in higher education are seriously curtailed.

Pupils with special educational needs that attend standard school – so-called “integrated pupils” and “pupils from socially disadvantaged environments” (SDE)² are important categories that are used to finance education and to define the targets of the teacher assistant programme.

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² A pupil is defined as being from a socially disadvantaged environment if he or she (1) is in material need and lives in a segregated settlement, (2) lives in an unsound household environment, including hygienic conditions and a high number of household members per dwelling, so there are no proper conditions for doing homework at home, (3) does not speak the language of instruction, (4) is in material need and did not attend preschool, and (5) is in material need and his parents did not finish nine classes of compulsory education. (School Act) This definition does not directly refer to Roma pupils, but it can serve this purpose as the SDE pupil can be used as a proxy for the most disadvantaged Roma pupils.
In 2003, the Slovak government introduced a fundamental change in the financing of elementary and secondary schools. At present, the so-called normative limits stipulate annual funding per child and take into account the location and size of schools, the number of schools in a municipality, the attendance of individually integrated pupils, the number of pupils from socially disadvantaged environments, the establishment of zero grades, and other specific conditions. The normative scheme of school financing produces differences in the scope and amount of funding for individual schools as it accounts for several external factors (such as geographical location or the size of the school), but more importantly, also for the internal composition of the student body and teaching staff (the presence or absence of individually integrated pupils or classes, the presence or absence of pupils from SDE, the presence or absence of zero grades and teacher assistants, instruction in the official language or minority language or both, the existence of a school dormitory, etc.). These features of the general framework further support and reinforce the possibility of divergent educational paths for different pupils within a single educational system.

The teacher assistant programme

This programme, which aims at mitigating disadvantages following from the difference in language of instruction and the pupils’ mother tongue as well as other aspects of the pupils situation, has been implemented since 2002 and is based on experimental projects with Roma teacher assistants which occurred in 1990s as a result of an experimental project run by the nongovernmental Wide–Open School Foundation. In 2010, the clause expired according to which teacher assistants do not need to have secondary or university (pedagogical) education. If in 2005–2006, the number of teacher assistants was 729 in 484 elementary schools, in 2009–2010 less than 400 teacher assistants worked at schools.

The responsibilities of teacher assistants are extensive and vary from cooperating with teachers during lessons, helping children from SDE to adapt to the school environment, eliminating language and cultural and social barriers, and organising extracurricular activities for pupils. The content of their work is designated by the school headmaster. Being conversant in the Romani language is not explicitly required from teacher assistants.

7 The financing of special schools is set out in a separate regulation and these are allocated a higher amount of finances per child in comparison to regular schools. Importantly, the limit for a zero grade pupil is 170% of the normative limit for a pupil in other grades of elementary school. The limit for a pupil with special educational needs in standard school (an “integrated pupil”) is 250 per cent of the normative limit for a pupil without special educational needs.

8 The way of supporting teacher assistant programme has changed several times during the EDUMIGROM research. At present, only schools with more than 100 pupils from SDE are now required to use the half of lump sum for SDE pupils for establishing the position of teacher assistant. It is clear that also in such schools there would be maximum of two teacher assistants.
School welfare programmes

School welfare programmes for children from households receiving material needs benefits were introduced in 2004. Support has been provided through meals and subsidies for school supplies. A motivation scholarship programme for elementary school and special elementary school pupils who have improved their marks was also introduced in 2004.

These programmes were meant both to compensate for cuts in social assistance, which had severely affected large families, and to increase pupils' motivation. In 2005, eligibility for welfare-related school programmes increased when children from households with income below the minimum subsistence threshold were also entitled to receive help, and not only children from households of benefit claimants. Moreover, with the exception of the motivation scholarship, welfare programmes have been made universal for all children in schools where at least 50 per cent of the pupils come from households that receive material needs benefits. This amendment has partially lowered the risk of stigmatisation, which had not been taken into account. On the other hand, such an arrangement encouraged parents to enrol their children in schools where such perks are accessible easily. Unfortunately, these are special schools. In 2009, the motivation scholarship programme was replaced by an allowance for school attendance that is preconditioned solely by regular school attendance.

Another programme that is more or less directly beneficial to disadvantaged children is community social work. It targets primarily, but not exclusively, segregated Roma communities. Its aim is “to eradicate the causes of their social deprivation through the permanent work of a community social worker and an assistant to the community social worker”. Community social workers and their assistants provide daily consultations, advice, the mediation of information, or contacts to various institutions; accompany clients on their visits to official institutions and proceedings held in the clients’ interests; and make other professional interventions as necessary. In addition, community workers cooperate with municipal representatives (mayors and town clerks) and local organisations. In some localities, they accompany children to school. Community social work is provided by municipalities and funded on a project basis from the Social Development Fund. The limited period of projects and the lack of regular calls for funding community social work have caused irregularity in this service and often a loss of trust on the part of clients. The 176 settlements in which community social workers were active during this period represent less than one-third of all settlements containing the larger Roma communities. In 2010, about 300 social workers and 350 social work assistants worked in the field in marginalised Roma communities. According to experts, several thousand such social workers would be needed to have an actual impact on life in these communities (Topky 2010).

9  The maximum amount of benefits with all allowances is lower than the amount of the subsistence minimum for the majority of household types.
Main findings of the Slovak EDUMIGROM research

As was mentioned above, Slovakia has a stratified educational system that streams pupils according to their school results. This characteristic is most visible at the second stage of elementary education, where students either attend more prestigious grammar schools, standard elementary schools, or special elementary schools. Within standard elementary schools, streaming is manifest in classes with better students or classes that specialise in maths, languages, or other subjects.

Our research has covered all elementary schools (both standard and special) in the towns under study. However, as we discovered later, the so-called “collected special classes” that existed in two elementary schools were not included in the sample. As a result, the often-quoted evidence of brutal segregation of Roma youth is lacking. Although Roma children prevailed in the special school in Hrdé, Roma formed a smaller proportion in the same type of school in Krásne. According to the teachers, the predominance of Roma children in the special schools is also a consequence of the resistance of non-Roma parents to this form of schooling.

Neither town has a large segregated community of Roma. Instead, they are spread throughout the town. However, there are localities in both towns where the concentration of Roma is higher, and there may be blocks of flats where they are the sole inhabitants. Moreover, the instable housing situations of many poor Roma families, partly caused by the municipalities’ privatisation policy for public housing in the 1990s and 2000s, forced them to move from town and settle in nearby villages. Because of these currents, few urban Roma youth who were dispersed among their peers from the majority appeared in the town schools. However, segregated Roma schools are mostly to be found in villages located nearby. Meanwhile, “white flight” of children from better-off families living in these nearby villages is rather easy and they target the town schools. In the sites under study, the results of this “white flight” are such that certain town schools work with almost a 100 per cent concentration of non-Roma students. These are, as a rule, local elite schools in which non-Roma students with mostly middle-class backgrounds separate themselves from all the others.

Most of the Roma pupils in our survey attend schools that belong to average or less prestigious schools according to local criteria. Most of the graduates of these schools continue their study at vocational or technical secondary schools. This preference is closely interlinked with lower school performance and socio-economic and educational family background. Destitute living conditions (about 60 per cent of the Roma pupils in our sample live in families without a regular monthly income), contributing to parents’

10 This is because pupils from these classes did not bring proof of informed consent from their parents, which was a precondition for their participation in the survey. In one case, the headmaster decided that special class pupils would not manage to fill in the questionnaire and therefore did not disseminate the request and informed consent forms among these children.

11 “White flight” is the strategy of non-Roma parents to enrol or reassign their children to another school if the number of Roma pupils in their current class or school is judged to be too high.
expectations that their children would provide for their household livelihood as soon as possible, seems to be the main reason why Roma pupils leave school too early: in fact, about one-third of the Roma pupils surveyed intended to quit school in the following year.

With one exception, all the interviewed pupils attended ethnically mixed classes. Both Roma parents and teachers advocate the benefits of mixed classes. They consider the presence of "white children" to be important for providing a pattern to follow and stimulus for striving harder. Despite the fact that a majority of pedagogues support the integrated education of non-Roma and Roma, almost all elementary schools implement streamlining and divide pupils according to their school grades and special talents for math and languages. In large schools with several parallel classes, the A class is without Roma as a rule, while the least demanding classes have a (relatively) higher share of Roma. As a result of streaming, such schools have elite classes based on competitiveness filled with strongly motivated pupils striving for knowledge, while other classes are dominated by relaxation and fun as the main principle of, and reason for, school attendance.

A concentration of lower achievement pupils in one class means that, most of the time, Roma pupils attend class with non-Roma classmates who also have poor results, low motivation, and who can hardly be expected to “pull them” into majority society. Almost all of the interviewed Roma pupils attended such classes.

Teaching in classes with individually integrated students\(^{12}\) was valued by different parties differently. Parents of these students point out that at some schools better students get more attention from teachers than their weaker classmates. But the parents of the better students complain that the demands of individually integrated students have been retarding the teaching process. Complaints about teaching occurred in those classes with individually integrated students. School headmasters confirmed that such classes are often overcrowded with more individually integrated students than is allowed. Pedagogues teaching in these integrated classes do not yet have special preparation for this teaching (it is still not a part of the pedagogical curricula) and teachers lack supervision and assistance.

We have observed that, with parents’ cooperation, schools are prepared to support (very) weak pupils, smooth out their problems, and promote the regular continuation of their studies. Without the parents’ willingness to cooperate, the school behaves passively, as it has neither the tools nor a mandate to lend a helping hand to children who are not especially motivated.

According to teachers, a high level of absenteeism in the second class of elementary school\(^{13}\) is the main cause of Roma failing at school. Schools consider themselves rather helpless in their fight against Roma absenteeism. Both schools and municipal social workers criticised their counterparts as

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12 As we have already explained, individually integrated students are students with learning difficulties and or health problems that are taught jointly with students who do not have such difficulties.

13 Not all absences are unexcused. According to teachers, Roma pupils and their parents are very skilful in securing doctor’s notes without justification and even without medical examination. If absences are excused in this way, the family does not lose child allowances and allowances for school attendance.
insufficiently responsive and both sides felt overburdened. Social workers said that they could hardly keep up with their versatile and contradictory tasks and an undue number of clients/pupils. They thought that teacher assistants should have to work “in the field”, too. The situation is also complicated by the intervention of physicians who tend to issue sick notes for Roma pupils without examinations and after the fact (after the real or assumed recovery).

In general, our survey has brought additional support to the PISA (2007) findings concerning two important aspects of the school system in Slovakia. First, the impact of family backgrounds, that is, of the highest attained education of parents, on the school performance of children was shown to be decisive. Our data suggest a particularly strong correlation between parents' education and children's school results. This implies that children with less educated family backgrounds are seriously disadvantaged in schools. The second important finding of the PISA survey that is confirmed by our data is the existence of significant differences among schools concerning the overall school achievements of pupils enrolled in these schools. Strong differences among schools, as the PISA survey also recognises, are the outcome of the formal existence but permeability of school districts and right to choose a school, which is fully granted to pupils' parents. The extensive application of this right, mainly by more affluent, well-educated families, has gradually resulted in a concentration of pupils with a particular type of family background in specific types of schools. In our sample of all the elementary schools located in the two selected towns, there are, on the one hand, schools in which children of university educated parents or parents who have at least a graduation certificate predominate and where children from blue-collar families are rather rare. On the other hand, there are schools where children with parents who have university degrees are almost absent and where children from families without an educational tradition dominate.

As a result of teachers' and pupils' lowered expectations towards school performance, the majority of pupils from these classes choose vocational schools. Besides decreasing the pro-educational atmosphere in "standard classes", streaming, and related types of class reorganisation at the second stage of elementary school, other difficulties are created. Reorganisation, required by middle-class parents who want more demanding specialised education for their children, puts preadolescent-age children (age 11) in the complicated situation of having to build their personal relations anew. Such an emotionally demanding and personally disconcerting situation has made both sides tend to fall back on stereotypes and prejudices. As a rule, Roma pupils who experienced this situation in the fifth grade remembered long-standing interethnic tensions and fights. A similarly demanding situation is experienced by pupils who have had to change schools several times.

In sum, our research supports the findings of the PISA surveys that selection of pupils for advanced classes and the desertion of the most active and motivated students negatively alters the composition of the class and decreases the motivation of those who remain, including teachers.
• Roma pupils are concentrated in the “weaker” schools in town according to local criteria
• The school results of Roma pupils are worse than the school results of their classmates, but coming from jobless households and/or households without regular income seems to have a stronger relationship with school results than ethnic origin.
• The school attendance of Roma pupils in the higher years of elementary schools is poor.
• The economic and social background of the family strongly determines the motivation of pupils to continue further in their education.
• Schools are not able to counteract the disadvantages of children from poor household backgrounds and “convince” unmotivated pupils of the necessity of further schooling.

Somewhat contrary to our expectations, Roma pupils do not express a higher level of dissatisfaction toward school in comparison to their Slovak or Hungarian peers. Instead, the contrary is true. Pupils from upper-status families, studying in better schools and having better school results are more critical about interpersonal relations and the school atmosphere than pupils from lower-class families, studying in “weak” schools and having worse school results. Although some students complained about the insensitivity of teachers and verbal hints at their ethnicity, a majority of students in both towns consider school as a neutral or pleasant place. We formulated several preliminary hypotheses to explain this. One claims that there are huge differences in how teachers deal with pupils at different schools. Because teachers at weak schools have lower expectations towards pupils, they feel happier since they do not feel that they are under so much pressure. This explanation was supported in interviews and focus groups with students as well as teachers who admitted that they lower their expectations in the case of weaker students and only demand attendance and from time to time “an interest”. The majority of the teachers interviewed suggested that their credo is to uncover “anything weaker students are good in” and to encourage and appreciate these skills. They stated that they try to use every occasion to praise Roma students for their achievement in any area. Mostly, they appreciate their willingness to help them with organisational issues and other things that do not concern their school results. Simultaneously, the majority of teachers expressed great frustration about the educational prospects of Roma students. They see only a minor and temporary effect of their pedagogical effort. Without instruments to attract Roma pupils (at the second stage of elementary school), they feel helpless and consider the situation desperate.

14 Examples of such behaviour were given mainly during the Roma pupils focus group in Hrdé. The initiator of their recalling was Paula, a very eloquent and self-conscious Roma girl, who was a smart and sensitive observer as well. During the follow-up workshop, Paula submitted both sides to a fierce critique: teachers as well as Roma students.

15 Regardless of their various “surviving education” strategies, students share an unwillingness to learn at home. Furthermore, their parents usually do not want or are not able to help them learn. According to the students, success at school depends on one’s willingness to learn and to work hard, but also on the pressure and control of one’s parents. However, one important finding is that Roma students do not reject those Roma students who manage to have good marks and do well at school. In fact, the opposite occurs: successful Roma children are admired by their peers, though not followed. This finding that excellent school results are not “punished” by exclusion from the peer-group is important. At the same time, peer-group socialising in cool attitudes to school seems to be important way in which Roma pupils protect their self-esteem.
According to the second hypothesis, however, pupils from better schools and who generally have well-educated parents are more prepared (by their family milieu) to openly express their views, and thus are more critical than pupils from weak schools. The higher satisfaction of Roma might be an artefact indicating their reluctance to express their feelings to a stranger like a researcher. Moreover, the atmosphere in the classes that they attend is far from "pro-achievement" for a majority of classes in the Slovak schools under study.

Our experiences from the case study suggest that the original assumption of the project – that school is perceived by Roma pupils as a more or less oppressive institutional setting – is not completely groundless. However, after the transition to the second grade of elementary school, Roma pupils are to a large extent released from the systematic impact of the education system and much more exposed to peer-group culture than are, for instance, Slovak pupils whose after-school time is much more institutionally controlled. In peer-group socialisation, Roma pupils learn from older schoolmates "not to be so immersed" in how the teachers frame the education process, examinations, and other school situations. It seems that Roma pupils might tend to develop a certain indifference or unconcern toward teachers’ assessments by learning how to cope with poor school marks without losing their self-esteem. They like school mainly because it is a place to meet friends and have fun. There are also other important reasons for appreciating school. Some students suggested that their school is the only place where ethnic differences are not noted. For a majority of students, teachers are those who do not make distinctions according to ethnicity. This does not mean that there are not incidences of incorrect behaviour by teachers. We have several documented cases of insufficient sensitivity in teacher-pupil communication.

Instances of inappropriate pedagogical communication were reported in both towns. However, more frequent reporting need not mean that there is more rudeness and discrimination at a given school. Silence can often cover oppression and linguistic expropriation, while more emphasis on discrimination, monitoring, and a prompt critique of any infraction can suggest more self-consciousness and self-assuredness on the part of Roma students.

In addition to ethnic and socio-economic differences, gender differences seem to be a division line that produces conflict situations and injustices at schools while also influencing interpersonal relations among pupils and between teachers and pupils. Above all, girls perform better than boys in almost all subjects. However, we have found that gender differences in school grades are significant among Slovak and Hungarian pupils but they disappeared among Roma pupils. Roma girls do not perform better than Roma boys. If a gendered disposition makes Slovak and Hungarian girls more adaptable to school, more responsive and skilled in dealing with the rhythm of the education process than boys, then

16 School clubs are available only for pupils in lower classes (first stage) in Slovakia, and Roma pupils are far less engaged in extracurricular activities than non-Roma pupils are.

17 Teachers’ verbal attacks occur in stressed, conflict situations and as technique of discipline pupils by using "jokes" or "hints" about Roma pupils.
Roma girls do not appear to have this special quality. Interviews in the community study do not bring any evidence of different expectations of Roma parents about the behaviour and school results of their sons and daughters.\(^{18}\)

For Roma pupils, ideas about adult life are much more connected with blue-collar jobs than for non-Roma pupils. Secondary vocational school is an easy option for most of them. Due to the demographic decline and finances that depend on enrolment figures, secondary schools compete for students and they lower their demands/entrance conditions as much as possible. Contrary to non-Roma students, who, as beneficiaries of the massively lowered entrance requirements, tend to enrol into all types of junior technical and higher secondary schools, even with poor grades, Roma pupils’ ambitions reflect better their real school performance than the ambitions of non-Roma pupils.

Good relations with non-Roma peers are far from being taken for granted. In both residential communities, Roma students recall experiences of being rejected by their classmates: such experiences occur already in preschool. One important finding of the community study concerns circumstances that make interethnic friendships and friendships among children from different social strata (children from families with different levels of attained education) increasingly difficult. Besides territorial separation, which has been growing, non-Roma parents intervene actively and negatively if they sense the formation of cross-ethnic relationships with their children. They sometimes ask teachers to prevent contacts between their children and Roma children. Non-Roma parents with small children also carefully examine the ethnic composition of school in order to avoid schools with an undesirably high number of Roma pupils.

The majority of pupils say they do not make a distinction between friends on the basis of ethnicity. As in the survey, they emphasise the role of mutual understanding and common interests. On the other hand, most Roma pupils have only Roma friends. In practice, interethnic friendships are rare. Interethnic cooperation in the school setting is often formal, a courtesy cooperation that is limited to practical, functional issues. Dominant frontal teaching reduces the experiences of more authentic cooperation. Shrieking abuse at Roma pupils is one of the most common practices used to exclude Roma pupils from the in-group.

In the only school that does not implement streaming (pupils attend the same class from the first to last year of elementary school), all the actors involved report good cross-ethnic relations. The time that has been spent together helps to rob skin colour of its distinctiveness, to discard stereotypes that could be used in interactions with strangers, and allows children to know each other personally.

In this regard, our research identified several institutional gaps or gaps in the pedagogical process. In neither of the schools do special programmes exist to promote newcomers’ integration in the class. No attention is given to the quality of relations in ethnically mixed classes. Although collaborative interethnic relations are a desirable state of affairs for all school headmasters and educators, their development

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18 We only interviewed a limited number of Roma parents (13), and we are not sure that our sample was sufficiently diverse and covered all possible types of parenting.
and maintenance are not deliberately organised, neither by the schools nor by any other institution. Pedagogues avoid interfering among students, and they rely on the "spontaneous" development of friendly relations. (Since parents of non-Roma children have often discouraged them from establishing friendships with Roma children, the development of interethnic relations is hardly "spontaneous" in character.) In individual interviews, neither pupils nor teachers suggested the existence of any targeted programmes to improve this situation.

Though all schools have teacher assistant programmes, this programme in fact consists of one employee who usually works exclusively with pupils attending the first class. Neither of the schools has programmes targeting Roma pupils and/or cross-ethnic communication at school. There is a lack of methodical aids, teacher in-service training, and a clear system of rules. Disappointingly, except for one teacher assistant, no one recognised these shortcomings.

According to our findings, due to their precarious financial situation, Roma pupils have more often been deprived access to various leisure-time activities that other pupils enjoy. They usually do not participate in school trips or other school events, such as song contests or dancing lessons. Several reasons have been presented to explain this. The problem is that schools have neither the resources for free-of-charge spaces nor funding for extracurricular activities. Moreover, the preferred model of one-semester's enrolment for free-time activities is too restrictive and inconvenient for Roma students.

In the narratives we collected, there is an apparent lack of "positive ideology" about being Roma, and it is evident that Roma families do not develop, sustain, or transfer such an ideology. Both teachers and pupils divide Roma into two groups according their "civilising habits" or lack of them. Although Roma accept this division, they have to work hard to distinguish themselves from the broad and very stereotypical category of Roma as people with deficient hygiene, unclean clothes, and bad manners. In the interviews, many Roma criticise this unjust generalisation and lumping of all Roma together. There was an evident wish among interviewed students to be approached individually and not as members of an ethnic group or any other group. A desire for autonomy and agency, constrained until recently, has overlapped with a desire to earn money as soon as possible.

We have also examined delicate issues of personal identity and various experiences with one's ethnic identity. We have found that Roma pupils, especially Roma boys, show significantly higher levels of strong approval for all self-appraising statements. However, a higher level of self-appraisal by Roma pupils is reflected neither in their school results nor in their higher aspirations for further education or type of work. We think that we should be very cautious about the interpretation of these findings as in-depth interviews with Roma students and the follow-up workshops with research participants (November 2010) have supplied us with very contradictory information in this regard. The possibility of different patterns

19 There was one exception: one teacher assistant also organised after-school activities/sports.

20 During the follow-up workshops that were intended as a form of participant validation of our findings and interpretations, we have been confronted with both zealous support of the finding that non-Roma students are far less self-confident in comparison with Roma students as well as its fierce refusal: “I would keel over if this was true of Roma.”
of “questionnaire behaviour” should be taken into account. The most workable interpretative solution of ethnic and gender differences in self-appraisal might possibly remain on the level of communicative practice and socialised patterns of speech behaviour. A positive self-regard might also be linked with other practical concerns of everyday life. Roma pupils have to learn to cope with frequent doubts about their abilities from those in their environment. Slovak pupils live in much more stable conditions in this regard; they are not “forced” to prove that they are “better” or “not the same” as “other schoolmates of the same ethnic origin”. Roma pupils’ high level of self-appraisal may simply be a continuation of their more persistent struggle against the negative presentation of Roma in general opinion. Self-recognition may often be a very individual attitude that they form thanks to their well-developed ability to “ignore them”.

Policy recommendations

Although it is now very popular among the Slovak politicians to emphasise that the destitute situation of Roma (in Slovakia and other Central European and Balkan countries) is “a problem which the EU must reflect on and solve”,21 it is clear that the main responsibility is on domestic policymaking at all levels of the government and on well-orchestrated efforts on the state, regional, and local levels. Though the following policy recommendations in four key areas are addressed to individual levels of government, it is clear that almost every recommendation addressed either to the central government/state level, regional level, or local/municipal level should be implemented in cooperation with all of the levels.

Improve education for minority ethnic youth

An aspiration to improve education for ethnic minorities is crucial not just because of the need to provide human rights and equal opportunities to all the citizens of the Slovak Republic, but also because of the obligation to protect their human potential from waste and destruction. The main aim here is to propose measures that could contribute to improving the educational inclusion of children with Roma minority backgrounds.

There are some complications we face in this endeavour. The imagination and impetus for social reform (though supported by strong research evidence) is seriously blocked (or at least aware of its limits) by two important conditions that can hardly be removed. One is the actual objective of financial consolidation (due to the economic crisis), which guides decision-making on all public administration levels. Cuts in public expenditures are the task of the day, and it is difficult to suppose

21 For instance, see the deputy prime minister Rudolf Chmel’s comments on January 14, 2010 in the daily Slovak Spectator.
that any proposals that create demands on the public budget will be considered seriously. The second limiting condition is dominant public opinion and the existing habits and ambitions of parents belonging to the majority. It is more than probable that the recommendations given below would be intensely objected to. For that reason, a systematic campaign explaining the importance of integrated education (in the widest sense), and a better and more comprehensible advocacy of both the increase of public expenditure in the domains of education, public housing, employment policy, and welfare (and an advocacy of the necessity to promote and secure egalitarianism in Slovak society) is also urgently recommended.

**State level**

- In general, it is necessary to lower the weight of economic criteria in educational policy and strengthen the understanding of the educational system as the fundamental mechanism for developing and reproducing democratic relations in society.

- It is necessary to increase the value of the financial standard for schools with pupils from a mixed social background (for all pupils if the share of pupils from SDE is higher than (the agreed) quota), in such a way that classes can have less pupils than at present and more teacher assistants. It is important to increase the normative so that a given school can offer teaching, curricula, and after-school programmes that are attractive for pupils from all types of family background. The attendance of such a socially/ethnically mixed school will be beneficial for all pupils, not only for those from SDE that need to be “pulled” upward. A change in the normative can prevent further closings and mergers of elementary schools caused by the overall population decrease. It is of great importance to stop school closures in smaller villages since schools are often the only institutions that can organise or provide space for leisure-time activities.

- In order to make the individual integration of pupils with special needs and the teaching of children from socially disadvantaged environments (SDE) manageable and effective, an assistant teacher should be provided for every class with individually integrated students. For that reason, it is necessary to multiply resources for this programme.

- The present way of funding teacher assistant programmes does not secure a sufficient number of teacher assistants at schools. A higher number of teacher assistants is also desirable at the second stage of elementary school where problems with absenteeism culminate. Ideally, they should be of the same ethnicity as the target group. Being competent in the Romani language should either be a precondition for this job, or those who know it should be paid a bonus.

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22 The means of support for the teacher assistant programme has changed several times during the EDUMIGROM period. At present, only schools with more than 100 pupils from SDE are required to use half of the lump sum for SDE pupils in order to establish a teacher assistant position. It is clear that in such schools there would be a maximum of two teacher assistants.
• The worst school results and decreased motivation for further education often occur in classes where Roma children have ended up during the streaming of students. To secure a more open educational system without the premature closure of educational opportunities, this streaming has to be eliminated or at least restrained. However, such steps are not possible without a thorough and long-term discussion with parent organisations and the general public.

• In addition to streaming, a “white flight” tendency also contributes to the segregation of Roma students. The escape of non-Roma children from ethnically mixed schools is facilitated by the lack of compulsory school catchment areas. It is probably not realistic to propose that the government reintroduce compulsory catchment areas. However, the government can require the delineation of new catchment areas in such a way that a more even social mix of pupils would occur (that is, children from all social strata, from better and worse neighbourhoods) in each catchment area and to require strategic planning of the composition of school neighbourhoods to be part of the municipal economic and social development plan (which municipalities are obliged to have and update in order to be eligible for European Union structural funds).

• The government (the School Act) should strengthen the rights of schools and teachers to actively influence the collaboration of children with different ethnic origins and involve parents in devising the most suitable forms of support for interethnic collaboration.

• Teamwork among students during the lesson should be required to a greater extent and teams of mixed ethnicity should be promoted for these activities. The right of the class teacher to form the groups and designate seating arrangements should be strengthened (though in negotiation with parents).

• Appropriate material and organisational conditions should be created to make sure that the integrated education of children with learning difficulties and children with health and mental disabilities will be fully inclusive. The possibility of establishing so-called “collecting special classes” in standard schools should be banned. Psychological diagnostics should be continuously updated and the line which divides “normal pupils”, “pupils with learning difficulties”, and “pupils with disabilities” should be set carefully, keeping in mind the demand of inclusion.

• Preschool preparation should be much more generously supported that it is currently. Preschools are not available in the most deprived areas. Transport to and from preschool should be free of charge.

• Attendance of zero class should not be included among the years of compulsory school attendance. The length of compulsory school attendance should be extended to 12 years and a vocational certificate as a basic minimum for those who will not continue their studies through upper secondary education.
• Teachers who work with children from socially disadvantaged environments (SDE) should be better rewarded and provided with free-of-charge supervision and further education and training. Trainings should focus on the competency to deal with SDE children. This may be implemented in study programmes of specialised schools and pedagogical universities or by a national centre that would also offer supervision for teachers of SDE students.\textsuperscript{23} The training should be compulsory and the Slovak Ministry of Education should cover most of its costs. The unqualified teacher would have to take this course before beginning his or her post or during the first months of employment.

• The government should follow the Hungarian example and also make completing the first nine years of compulsory education a precondition for acquiring a driving licence.

\textit{Regional level}

• Each regional self-government is responsible for the organisation of secondary education in its region. Therefore, sustaining Roma children at institutions of secondary schooling and strategic planning for how to prevent massive school leaving after the tenth completed year of schooling should be a more focused on aspect of regional social planning. At present, there are no programs dealing with early school leaving. Special programmes to support the retention of Roma students at school should be devised, special assistance/counselling should be targeted at secondary school students that are at risk of leaving school. Labour offices and other institutions operating in the region should be involved in these programmes.

• Since high unemployment and the impossibility of finding a job despite having a vocational training certificate or an even higher education diploma is very discouraging for Roma students and is the rationale for early school leaving, it is of paramount importance for labour offices to improve programmes for school graduates as well as job mediation services within and outside the region. Individual plans for job-seekers should be less formal and involve less paper-work.

• As school absenteeism is often covered by the confirmation of illness (a sick note) issued by physicians without examinations, it is necessary to punish such behaviour as a professional failure. Since regional self-government is responsible for the organisation of healthcare in Slovakia, it should take away physicians’ licences as a sanction for such actions.

\textsuperscript{23} Such a centre can, for example, organise psycho-social trainings for teachers or facilitate a communication network between teachers of SDE students to share experiences. At present, a platform for the exchange of such experiences does not exist.
Local level

- There should be better organisational linking and cooperation among schools in particular municipalities. One school on its own is too weak to have an impact on its external surroundings and to resist the pressure of middle-class parents towards more streaming and ethnic segregation of students. Municipalities should discourage competition among schools for more (gifted) students and create more cooperation in the effort to provide good schooling for all children and to decrease the number of dropouts in their areas.

- Municipalities should stimulate the improvement of cooperation among social workers in the field and schools, especially in dealing with pupils with absences. The municipalities should have a special plan for decreasing school absences and dropouts in their districts.

- Students’ clubs should be made available both at the first and second level of the educational system and should be free of charge. This may be very useful for SDE students who often have inappropriate conditions at home for doing homework. Such clubs can be jointly run by several schools in the municipality or by specialised NGOs.

- There should also be stronger support for NGOs that provide free-time activities for SDE children. These activities give children opportunities to spend their free time in a meaningful way and can also give them more self-esteem – especially when they can share what they have learned or created.

Improve interethnic relations within and outside the educational arena

State level

- Improving interethnic relations is a crucial task in Slovakia since the improvement of other areas is essentially preconditioned by public consent. A high level of animosity and prejudice requires a much more concerted state intervention. According to historical experiences, novels and other forms of art have strong power to rouse sympathy towards vulnerable groups, probably much more efficiently than various analyses and theoretical argumentation. For that reason, the state should start supporting art projects that can stimulate imagination, empathy, and understanding. In Slovakia, the last non-historical film that had Roma characters as its key heroes was made in 1977. It is time to support the creation of films that would emotionally educate the Slovak population and teach them to empathise with the life of children growing up in poor families and neighbourhoods, as well as their struggle to escape poverty and succeed in concert with majority society.
• Social mixing should be also a principle that directs the state support of housing policy. State support for providing rental municipal housing should be preconditioned by securing a social mix of tenants in housing units.

Regional level

• Regional self-government has various competencies that can influence the inhabitants’ quality of life and, indirectly, interethnic relations as well. Areas with concentrated poverty have many problems, such as housing, which cannot be solved at the municipal level, and even if there is direct municipal responsibility (for construction of public rental housing), the present arrangement blocks mobility to places with job opportunities (only those with permanent residence in the given municipality can rent public apartments). Regional self-government should carry out its functions through the organisation of important public services (public transport, healthcare, etc.) and can require that these services become more considerate and more inclusive.
• Regional self-government should also support the active participation of Roma citizens in public affairs.

Local level

• The development of public spaces where children can spend their leisure time free of charge through sports or cultural activities should be supported. Effort should be invested in protecting the reputation of such facilities against being stigmatised as an infrastructure exclusively serving poor people and certain ethnic groups.
• Municipalities’ housing policies should be open to public discussion. The conditions required to create a social mix in rental housing should be thoroughly debated and consensus should be sought. Examples of socially mixed housing policies from Denmark and other countries should be thoroughly studied to feed such debates with good examples and evidence.

Issues of ethnic inequalities and welfare

State level

• The entitlement to social benefits and social inclusion programmes is income dependent, and the national poverty line or “subsistence minimum” is the key instrument in determining this. It is, therefore, necessary to regularly examine the adequacy of this
testing instrument in relation to the cost of living and the requirement to secure the social integration of the citizen. The easiest way to approximate the subsistence minimum to the real poverty line is to use the standardised measurement developed for comparing the populations’ living conditions across the countries in the European Union (the so-called EU-SILC surveys). The EU-SILC surveys set income poverty line at 60 per cent of the average income and define the subsistence minimum at this level. Making the testing instrument more realistic in relation to living costs will increase the coverage of students by social inclusion programmes and decrease the current stigmatisation associated with them.

- Insufficient school attendance at the second grade of elementary school and ending compulsory education without finishing eighth or ninth grade is fatal for many Roma youth as it complicates their possibilities to continue their education on a secondary level. This situation can be partially improved by changes in the allowance for school attendance. It is recommended that the age of entitlement for the school attendance allowance be increased to 13 years (as the start of entitlement) and to change the conditions of its payment so that it gives schools the main (or much more important) word in deciding when to suspend allowance payments. Such a practice can be based on the generally well-assessed experiences of paying motivational scholarships to students by class teachers or schools. In contrast, the present system (mediated communication with the intervention of labour offices and social workers) leads to unclear responsibility that is shifted from one institution to another. At present, the monitoring procedure is complicated, intermediary, and very protracted. (The school reports the absentee to the labour office, a letter is sent to the family, and if the situation does not improve, the municipality and its social fieldworkers are asked to communicate with the absentee’s family.) If teachers were sufficiently rewarded for this extra administrative task, there should not be any special problem with such a change.

- It is necessary to continue the meal and school aid programmes, ease the conditions for participation in these programmes, and extend these programmes to secondary schools, as the costs for school materials at vocational schools are often unmanageable for low-income families.

24 A testing and upgrading of the subsistence minimum in relation to living condition costs (by the minimum basket method) was last completed in 1997 in Slovakia.

25 This allowance was introduced in 2009 and replaced former motivation stipend. The allowance is designated for all children fulfilling compulsory school attendance. Students attending secondary schools can apply for social stipend.

26 The amount of the school allowance is an important part of the budget of a poor household as the total amount of benefits with all allowances is less than the substitute minimum. We recommend using the allowances that currently belong to younger pupils to make all meals at school, including snacks, free of charge.

27 See the recommendation on subsistence minimum testing.
• The current program for the reimbursement of travel costs should be extended both to pupils from low-income households who have to travel to school within their school catchment area and to secondary school students from low-income families. In the case of secondary school students, the present system of social stipends does not take travel costs into account at all.

• It is necessary to set minimum standards of housing and neighbourhood/public services which should be secured for all inhabitants of Slovakia no matter where they live (access to electricity, drinkable water, access to hygiene, public transport, etc.) These standards should become included among the criteria used when allocating state support for housing and other projects.

• It is necessary to define low-income community centres as a social service and to finance them through the state budget. The financing of other important programmes such as social fieldwork should no longer be project based (and thus dependent on structural funds) but receive regular funding from the state budget.

• It is also desirable to set a norm for social workers and for social custody workers concerning the number of clients (families). Thirty families per social worker should be the maximum.28

Regional level

• The Slovak settlement structure is a very dispersed and comprises many small municipalities that are often unable to provide sufficient services to their residents. Regional self-government should become more active in coordinating and securing access to public and social services. Access to sport and leisure-time activities for vulnerable youth should become a priority in regional planning.

• Regional government should also improve the dissemination of information about secondary education facilities and all support programmes (such as allowing poor students to live free of charge in some secondary vocational schools’ dormitories). There should be changes made in students’ travel tickets, whose price is still very high.

• Regional government should actively assist municipalities with social planning and preparing projects to improve access to social and public services for youth, which has been totally neglected in such planning thus far.

28 At present, it is common to have to work with more than 300 families.
**Local level**

- Securing access to drinkable water, electricity, and hygiene should be the standard followed by all municipalities by law. A legal requirement would eliminate municipalities’ reluctance to do social planning and prepare social development projects. Hygienic stations (washroom, laundry) should be easily accessible. Insufficient personal hygiene is generally the most stigmatising, and washrooms should also be made available at schools, as many children travelling to schools from distant settlements do not have the possibility of caring for their most basic hygiene at home.

**Improving the achievement of minority and citizens rights**

Although the 12th paragraph of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic guarantees social and human rights for all minorities in the state, in reality their implementation is often problematic. Many prejudices still exist which could only be removed through long-term endeavour and edification.

**State level**

- In national politics, struggles and fluctuations between a civic and ethnic approach toward the Roma minority should be replaced by the peaceful division of appropriate spheres for the application of these principles. We recommend and support the present trend to de-ethnicise welfare and social service programmes (for instance, using the term "socially excluded communities" or "concentrated/cumulated poverty" instead of the term "marginalised Roma communities"). A continuous reference to the ethnic target group of these programmes strengthens the association of Roma with "dependency", which is personally humiliating and also nourishes prejudices against Roma among the “taxpayer” majority.

- At the same time, outside the welfare field it is necessary to support Roma ethnic self-awareness and self-confidence in various ways and to assist them with the habituation of declaring Roma identity even in written communication. Public education should be provided when forms that ask about ethnic origin (“národnost”) need to be filled out. It also seems very important that teachers start to provide small encouraging and clarifying counselling and assistance (according to clear rules) when parents enrol their child at school.

- Special attention should be given to devising programmes that would dissociate Roma from backwardness and social dependency. The role of television is crucial. Roma men, women, and children should appear on TV not only as “examples of destitution” or “examples of successful escapes from destitution”, but in many neutral contexts in which colour and its stereotypical associations would be irrelevant.
• There is the necessity to (re)launch a wide public discussion about the rationale of introducing ethnic quotas in (some) occupations, jobs, and positions.

• In Slovakia, the level of ethnic prejudice, especially prejudice against Roma, is high and growing. Therefore, all possibilities for human rights education should be used and strengthened. The principle of equality should be at the forefront, and education about the social destructiveness of prejudice should be incorporated in the Civics and Ethics curricula. In addition, curricula should both encourage and require critical thinking.

Regional level

• Regional self-government should support the creation and participation of Roma NGOs and ad-hoc advocacy groups. These groups should be consulted and involved in the assessment of policies that could have an impact on Roma communities and the living conditions of poor people in the region.

• Regional self-government should support the networking of Roma organisations and a forum for sharing experiences among them.

• Regional self-government should cooperate with municipalities in uncovering all cases of ethnic inequalities and in preparing and monitoring an action plan on minority and civic rights.

Local level

• Municipalities should also support the creation and participation of Roma NGOs and ad-hoc advocacy groups. They should be consulted and involved in the assessment of policies that could have an impact on Roma communities and the living conditions of poor people in the municipality.

• Municipalities should prepare an action plan on minority and civic rights in cooperation with NGOs and ad-hoc groups (all ethnic groups) and cooperate with them during monitoring and assessment.

29 Perhaps this could be best achieved by creating a new subject that would include this kind of “social education” and the current Civics and Ethics contents. However, this may prove difficult to implement since a new subject might demand specially qualified teachers.
Literature


Documents

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