

Relevance of education for Roma children in Slovakia

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to discuss the education of Roma children in Slovakia and its impact on their professional lives in the future. It provides a very brief historic background of the minority and its current social status. It analyses statistics of education and employment of the Roma minority and illustrates the children's view on education by analysing short questionnaires aimed at finding out their future plans in education and living conditions. It also briefly mentions selected projects and organizations that work to change the current situation.

The paper is based on quoted sources and publications as well as author's qualitative research done by questionnaires.

Key words: Roma minority, Slovakia, education, employment, segregation

Introduction

In this paper, we discuss the topic of education of Roma children in Slovakia. Firstly, we briefly summarize the history of the minority in Slovakia. As this is a very extensive topic in itself, we only chose to concentrate on circumstances which illustrate the prejudice of general population towards the minority. We discuss the minority's current social status in the second chapter.

In the third and fourth chapter, we take a look at latest statistics about education of the Romani inside and outside of the school system and their employment. These statistics are provided mostly by the 2012 United Nations Development Programme research "Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku 2010" and we talk about the questionnaires, that we handed out to Romani children in a typical school with segregated classes in hopes of finding out whether they find their education important and relevant to their future lives.

In the final chapter, we mention just a few projects aimed to help the current situation of Roma children in Slovakia.

This paper was written to discuss, what is considered to be a controversial topic of the Romani lacking education. However, it is not always their own choice to leave the school

system too soon. Every child should have an equal chance to study, so how come they do not in a central european country like Slovakia?

1. Roma minority

The Roma originally came from northindian subcontinent, which they left in 9th-10th century. They continued to move across the continent, living as nomads. By the 14th century they arrived to the Kingdom of Hungary, a part of which was to become Slovakia. The Roma did not receive a warm welcome in Europe in general. In 1427 Paris excommunicated the minority for fortune telling and use of black magic. This let to Roma families moving from western Europe back to The Kingdom of Hungary.¹

In 18th century, otherwise praised sovereign Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II. planned to assimilate all minorities. In this plan, the Roma were given land in hopes of turning them into farmers, they were no longer allowed to speak their language, wear their traditional clothes, or marry each other. If a child was born to Roma parents, it was take away to be raised in a foster home. All children were to receive primary education.²

In 1782 an incident occurred in Hont, an area of today's Slovakia and Hungary, where 41 Romani were tortured and executed for eating Hungarian peasants. Upon further investigation Joseph II. found them not quilty, as all of their alleged victims were alive.³ A census that took place in 1893 shows 1.8% of Hungarian inhabitants were Roma. Out of those, only 6,5% were able to read and write, while 54% of the Hungarian majority could.⁴ During the Second World War, the Romani were deported to concentration camps, where around 300 000 of them died across the Europe. In Slovak State, the collaborating country of the nazi Germany, Romani were also put to work camps and forced labor by a nazi militia named Hlinka guard.

After the Second World War, a significant number of Roma families were relocated from the area of today's Slovakia to the area of today's Czech republic, as there were more job opportunities.⁵ The government meanwhile continued its efforts to assimilate the minority. 1958 marks the end of Romani's nomadism, when a law forbidding it was passed. The nomad families were forced to settle down, as their horses and wheels of their caravans where taken.⁶

¹ "Dejiny Rómov," Úrad vlády SR, <http://archiv.vlada.gov.sk/romovia/3632/dejiny-romov.html>, 24.3.2018

² "Austro-Hungarian Empire", Project Education of Roma children in Europe, https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/histoCulture_en.asp, 24.3.2018

³ D.M. Crowe, History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia, New York 1994, p.39

⁴ "Dejiny Rómov," Úrad vlády SR, <http://archiv.vlada.gov.sk/romovia/3632/dejiny-romov.html>, 24.3.2018

⁵ "Dejiny Rómov," Úrad vlády SR, <http://archiv.vlada.gov.sk/romovia/3632/dejiny-romov.html>, 24.3.2018

⁶ Ibid.

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 brought many changes across the whole society, including the Romani. In the same year the first Roma political party was established. In 1991, Principles of Government Policy of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic towards the Romani Minority were accepted.⁷ Since acceptance of this document, Roma have become equal with other minorities.

2. Is the minority problematic?

The first problem that comes to mind when thinking about the questions connected to the Roma minority is unemployment. The situation arose after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, as during the communist regime before the revolution, it was illegal to be unemployed. As of 2011, around 84% of the Romani capable of work report to be unemployed.⁸ It is important to note, that this information was self-declared and may or may not include seasonal or part-time workers.

Connected to the problem of unemployment are the poor conditions many families of the minority live in. According to the community that they live in, we can see three different groups of Romani in Slovakia. Segregated communities live completely separated from the rest of the population. Separated communities live in separate parts of an area, where other population lives, for example, they live in a separate block of flats within a city, or on one side of a village, while the other side is inhabited by majorital population, or other minorities. Difused communities live, as the name suggest, completely difused between the rest of the population, usually in a bigger city.

⁷ Ibid.

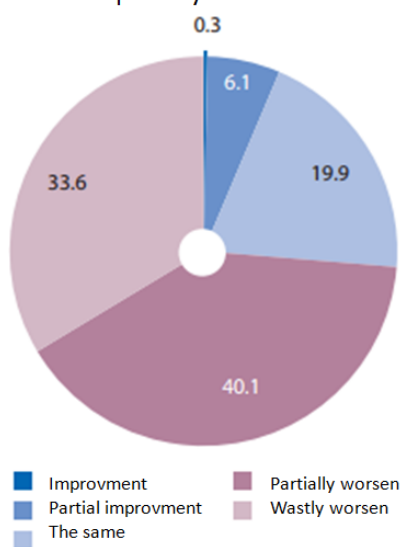
⁸“Obyvateľstvo podľa národnosti, stupňa najvyššieho dosiahnutého vzdelania, súčasnej ekonomickej aktivity, postavenia v zamestnaní, odvetvia ekonomickej činnosti a pohlavia,“ Štatistický úrad SR, <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>, 19.11.2017

	Average income (€)
Segregated	99
Separated	102
Difused	119
Geographically close general population	305

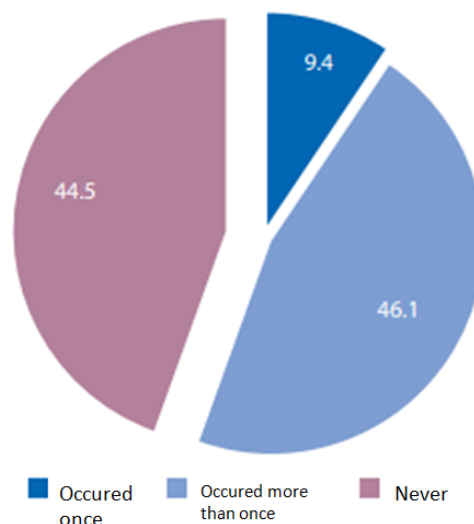
1 Comparisson of average income per person per month⁹

The table above shows us a comparison between the average income per person per month in different communities. It also provides a good comparison with geographically close general population. As we can see, there is a difference of 20€ per person per month between the segregated and the difused population. However, the truly eye-opening point is the fact that a member of geographically close general population earns around three times as much as any Romani.¹⁰

Roma households according to their financial situation in the past 3 years



Roma households according to occuring situation of „not having anything to eat for children“



⁹“Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010,“ Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.184, 23.3.2018

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹“Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010,“ Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.191, 209, 23.3.2018

The two charts above show over 73% of the asked Romani thinks their financial situation got worse, as of 2010. Over 55% of the families surveyed had a situation of not having any food for their children.¹²

According to the same paper, only about a half of the families asked had a shower or a bath with running water at home, around 30% have a bath without running water. Almost a fifth of the surveyed families used a bucket to clean themselves.¹³

In areas of poverty, generally, we can see a higher criminal rate. It is a popular strategy for some Slovak politicians to build their campaigns on linking the higher criminal rates in poverty ridden areas with the Roma minority. We do not have any ethnic data proving this link. These politicians believe however, that not collecting the ethnic data is a mistake due to unnecessary political correctness.

In January 2018, a former minister of internal affairs, Robert Kaliňák¹⁴ visited a Romani village and spoke about the importance of collecting this data.¹⁵ If the new minister that is going to succeed Kaliňák will proceed with this plan, is not yet known. Perhaps the best example of a political campaign build on racism and prejudice is that of Marián Kotleba, a neo-nazi, who won 14 parliament seats in 2016. He often speaks about gypsy terror, or addresses the minority as “gypsy parasites“. He was also proudly wearing a Hlinka guard uniform on numerous occasions.

3. Education of the minority

The table below shows education achieved by Romani over 16 years of age and outside of the school system. As we can see, over 18% did not finish their primary education and almost 60% have primary education only. Almost 5% attended a special school¹⁶- a school for children with special needs, which will be discussed further later in the paper.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p.70

¹⁴ Robert Kaliňák left The ministry of internal affairs in March 2018 after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, which led to the biggest demonstrations across the country since the velvet revolution. Prime minister Robert Fico resigned from his position just a few days later.

¹⁵ K. Filová, “Kaliňák avizuje štatistiku "rómskej kriminality",“ Pravda (25.10.2017), <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/446097-kalinak-avizuje-statistiku-romskej-kriminality/https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/446097-kalinak-avizuje-statistiku-romskej-kriminality/> 23.3.2018

¹⁶ “Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010,“ Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.92, 23.3.2018

	Unfinished primary education	Finished primary education	Finished secondary education	Higher education	Special school
Women	19,3	63,3	12,5	0,2	4,7
Men	17,5	56,2	21,4	0,3	4,6
	18,4	59,75	16,95	0,25	4,65

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2 Education of the Romani outside of school system, aged 16+

As for children within the school system as of 2010, aged 6 and above, the table below shows that around 20% of children are in either a special school, or a special class.¹⁸ There are several reasons behind this fact. The first being an incorrect diagnosis of children prior to commencing their education. Romani language is a mother tongue for almost 55% of Romani children,¹⁹ and not understanding Slovak, or Hungarian well leads them to perform poorly at tests before attending school for the first time. The schools also receive a bigger subsidy for a student with a special need. Second reason for such a big part of the Romani children in special classes, or special schools is the white flight phenomenon. It occurs if a non-Romani parents take their children from one school to another, because they do not want their children in the same class/ school with Romani children in fear of their bad influence. This leads to segregation of classes and school, which is, of course, prohibited, yet relatively common. As an example, the district court in Prešov deemed a school in Šarišské Michal'any guilty of discrimination against Romani children for segregating classes in 2011.²⁰ Even today there are many segregated schools and classes, mostly in the eastern part of Slovakia.

Nevertheless, according to the UNDP research, about 26% of the Roma children in special school attend this kind of school for its easier program, 24.5% of them attend because of their mental disorder, 12% of them were consulted about attending it as a better choice, over 10% attend because it is closer to their homes, less than 8% attend because of their test

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.97

¹⁹ Ibid., p.39

²⁰ M. Jesenský, "Súd prikázal škole prestať segregovať rómske deti," Korzár (9.1.2012) <https://presov.korzar.sme.sk/c/6209394/sud-prikazal-skole-prestat-segregovat-romske-deti.html>, 24.3.2018

results and 6,5% attend because it is cheaper. Around 1% attend because of a physical disability. The rest, around 11% stated either a different reason, or none at all.²¹

3 Romani children aged 6+ within school system

Primary school	72,3
Special primary school	15,0
Special class in primary school	3,6
Special primary school for physically disabled	0,3
Secondary vocational school	5,2
Secondary school with school-leaving examination	2,6
Special secondary school	0,7
University	0,2

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The table below shows us that in a special class in a primary school, almost 91% of the Roma children are in a segregated class. The rest share the class with non-Roma children. In a special primary school, around 65% of the Roma children have no non-Roma school mates. Even common primary schools visited by Roma children, 31% of them attend a school visited by fellow Romani only.²³

As a result, these children have no chance to communicate with their peers outside of the Roma communities and often grow up thinking the other children simply do not want to be friends with the Roma.

²¹ "Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010," Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.97, 23.3.2018

²² Ibid.

²³ "Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010," Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.98, 23.3.2018

	Primary school	Special primary school	Special class in primary school	Secondary vocational school
Roma children	31,1	65,2	90,9	14,3
More Roma than non-Roma	16,3	15,2	0,0	16,7
Half Roma, half non-Roma children	15,6	14,4	9,1	21,4
More non-Roma children	32,2	3,0	0,0	33,3
Almost no Roma children	4,7	2,3	0,0	14,3

4 Distribution of Roma children in schools and classes²⁴

Attending a special class/school has a great impact on a child's life. The programme is less demanding for a child without a special need, so it does not develop the child's potential as a normal programme would. This leads to a limited choice of secondary education, if a child can obtain it at all. Obviously, all of this results in a very difficult situation while looking for an employment. The sad reality of educating the Roma children is clearly illustrated by the fact, that 37.9% of adult Roma report to have problem with reading, writing, or both, while only 1.7% of general population do.²⁵

The table below shows a comparison between the economical activity in Roma population and geographically close general population with concluded education. Over 61% of the Romani with less than primary education are unemployed, while only less than 19% of geographically close general population with the same education, or lack thereof, are. On the opposite side, we have the Romani who successfully finished a secondary school with a school-leaving exam, out of whom just 37.5% are employed and over 40% are unemployed. In geographically close general population, almost 82% are employed, while only about 6% are unemployed.²⁶ As we can see from this table, while education has indeed a huge impact on employment possibilities, this impact seems to change with the colour of our skin. The Roma, even with sufficient education face difficulties connected to deeply rooted prejudice when finding a job.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p.103

²⁶ "Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010," Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.125, 23.3.2018

	Less than primary education	Finished primary education	Secondary without school-leaving exam	Secondary with school-leaving exam
Roma population:				
Employed	5,6	9,8	26,3	37,5
Retired	12,3	4,0	2,3	3,1
At home	20,9	18,2	14,3	18,8
Unemployed	61,2	67,9	57,1	40,6
Geographically close general population:				
Employed	12,5	57,5	65,4	81,6
Retired	56,3	15,2	6,3	2,4
At home	12,5	12,1	8,2	9,8
Unemployed	18,7	15,2	20,1	6,2

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4. Questionnaires

In January 2018 we visited a school in a village in eastern Slovakia. As the headmaster faced the pressure of non-Roma parents to segregate the classes and feared the white flight phenomenon could potentially close the school, the classes were indeed segregated. For this reason, the name of the school is not mentioned.

We handed out questionnaires to students of 5th and 6th grade. Originally, the questionnaires included some more questions about the children's living conditions (for example, questions about electricity, or water supply), but these were removed as requested by the headmaster, because they could be viewed as sensitive.

We tried to formulate the questions to be clear and not too invasive into anyone's private life. All the questionnaires were to be answered anonymously- in hopes of receiving truthful answers. However, some teachers noted that the children still might have felt embarrassed to answer truthfully and they questioned the validity of some of the children's answers. Another minor challenge that was faced were lower comprehensive skills of some children. If anyone had a question or trouble understanding any part of the questionnaires, they would be addressed individually.

²⁷ Ibid.

Lastly, there was a significant number of children not present in the school that day. Total number of children in segregated classes of 5th and 6th grade present at school the day the questionnaires were handed out was 21. The children did not know about the questionnaires in advance, so their absence was caused by other reasons, most probably by the beginning flu season that even closed the school for a few days in February.

As for the questionnaires, every child was given Questionnaire 1, where they answered whether they think school is important, if they plan to finish primary school and if so, whether they plan to finish it within the standard 9 years. All of these questions had two choice answers- yes/no. It also had an open question on what language they speak with their parents.

Each child that answered “yes“ on whether they want to finish the primary school, was given questionnaire A, which asked them if they want to continue to study at secondary school, and if so, what kind of secondary school would they prefer. It also included a questions about whether they want to get higher education and what motivates them to study. All of these questions had choices the children chose from.

Each child that answered “no“ on whether they want to finish the primary school was given questionnaire B. This included an open question on number of family members and questions with choices about whether their parents are employed, whether they have a place to study at home and whether their relatives are willing to help them with studying. We expected the majority of the children asked to answer “no“ on whether they want to finish the primary school. On questionnaire B, we expected these children come from large families without a place to study, mostly with unemployed parents. As we see from the results, these presumptions were not correct.

All of the children asked answered that they think school is indeed important. 19 children answered that they want to finish primary school, in contrary to our previous expectations. 16 of them plan to finish their primary education within the standard 9 years- this is, unfortunately, where we see the children not answering truthfully. Despite this question was explained several times and was worded as clearly as possible, the children's answers do not add up with the information we got from teachers- for more than a half of these children it is no longer possible to finish their primary education within standard 9 years, as they repeated at least one grade already.

Children report to speak mostly Slovak at home, many stating eastern Slovak accent specifically. Some combine Slovak with Romani, which is referred to as “villager language“. 2 children list Hungarian as the language spoken at home.

19 children were given Questionnaire A. 17 of them state that they want to continue to study at secondary school. 8 of these would like to get a school leaving exam, 2 would not and 7 do not know yet. 6 children would like to get higher education at university. As for the motivation for studying at this age, vast majority is motivated by better employment possibilities in their future, a couple of children added that they study to be smart.

Only 2 children were given questionnaire B. They both come from a large families of 7 and 12 members. They report their parents are employed, they have a place to study at home and their relatives are willing to help them with studying.

In conclusion, children of 5th and 6th grade do indeed find their education relevant for their future, in contrary to our expectations. They plan to proceed with secondary education. Yet according to the 2012 UNDP research which we discussed earlier, 18,4% of Romani outside of the school system do not have their primary education finished and 59.75% have primary education only.²⁸ So why were the answers of our questionnaires so positive? When and why do these children decide to leave the school system before obtaining sufficient education?

Let's look into the UNDP research one final time:

5 Reasons for not proceeding with secondary education (%)

Being uninterested	29,0
Fees, cost of clothing...	24,0
Work, housework	14,0
Bad school results	13,8
Wedding	10,6
Childbirth	2,7
Health reasons	2,0
Not allowed by parents	1,9
Missing schools	1,6
Different	0,4

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The table above shows 29% of Romani outside of the school system left it because of not being interested. But 5th and 6th graders we asked, quite surprisingly, planned to continue to

²⁸ "Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010," Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.92, 23.3.2018

²⁹ "Správa o životných podmienkach rómskych domácností na Slovensku v roku 2010," Regionálne centrum Rozvojového programu OSN pre Európu a Spoločenstvo nezávislých štátov v Bratislave, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/undp-sprava-2010_na-web.pdf, p.94, 23.3.2018

study at a secondary school. 24% of people asked left the school system because of fees and costs.³⁰ And this at least is something the state could objectively have an influence on.

5. Improving their education

There are more and more organizations and projects aimed at helping the situation of educating Roma children. We selected just a few to represent Slovakia's efforts to change. Teach for Slovakia is a 2-year programme for university alumni, who teach mostly socially disadvantaged children. In Slovakia, these are automatically associated with Roma children. Teach for Slovakia was established in 2014 and is a partner organization to the well-known network Teach for all. Their motto is "Because every child should have a chance to succeed in life".³¹

Office of Government plenipotentiary for Roma communities provides scholarships and partially covers commuting costs to Roma students. It also suggest to extend the compulsory education as a way to keep Roma children in schools for longer.³²

Roma education fund was founded in 2005 and it is an international organization, which operates in Slovakia as well. Its goal is to close the gap in school results of Roma and non-Roma children. It provides scholarships to students with good results, helps adults with further education and helps children to get pre-primary education. It also works to integrate Roma language and culture into syllabus.³³

As for Ministry of education, science, research and sport of the Slovak republic and Ministry of Internal Affairs, they plan to make pre-primary education compulsory for children from marginalized Roma communities. In these kindergardens, the children can learn Slovak language in a sufficient level to commence primary school, as well as basic hygiene and fine motor movements.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Prezident Andrej Kiska prijal účastníkov programu Teach for Slovakia," 18.4.2014, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezident-andrej-kiska-prijal-ucastnikov-programu-teach-for-slovakia/>, 1.4.2018

³² "Návrh koncepčného riešenia stredného odborného vzdelávania študentov z marginalizovaných komunít," Úrad splnomocnenca vlády Slovenskej republiky pre rómske komunity, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/romovia/publikacie/koncepcne_riesenie-final.pdf p.8-13, 1.4.2018

³³ "Rómsky vzdelávací fond," Roma Education Fund, <http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/romsky-vzdelavaci-fond> 25.3.2018

³⁴ "Rezort vnútra zvýši v škôlkach vzdelanostnú úroveň detí z rómskych komunít," Ministerstvo vnútra SR, 20.12.2017, https://www.minv.sk/?spravy_rk&sprava=rezort-vnutra-zvysi-v-skolkach-vzdelanostnu-uroven-deti-z-romskych-komunit 25.3.2018

In conclusion, in Slovakia, Roma often face racism and prejudice. These cause education to be harder to obtain, which results in challenges while finding a job. Overall, the way we treat these children in Slovakia's education system is one of the reasons for the conditions they live in, as this problem can be seen across past generations. As a society, we have to work together to improve the situation and to treat each and every child equally.

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K. Filová, “Kaliňák avizuje štatistiku "rómskej kriminality",“ Pravda (25.10.2017), <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/446097-kalinak-avizuje-statistiku-romskej-kriminality/https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/446097-kalinak-avizuje-statistiku-romskej-kriminality/> 23.3.2018

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