

PRESS RELEASE

Without integrated education, there can be no European integration: schools are failing Roma in Slovakia

Bratislava and Budapest, 21 July 2008. Roma children make up an increasingly large proportion of the school-age population in Slovakia. Yet as Slovakia reforms its education system, Roma children are put at an even greater disadvantage. In Roma-majority areas, pre-school places are insufficient, school closures create overcrowding, and pressures to keep enrolment figures high encourages special schools for children with intellectual disabilities to recruit from Roma communities. Even as Slovakia takes further steps towards European integration, a significant part of the population remains marginalised. With so many Roma excluded from quality education, their prospects for employment remain poor, and true integration for all Slovakia will be out of reach.

These are the main findings included in the Open Society Institute (OSI) monitoring report *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma, covering Slovakia*. The report surveys all existing studies and data on the subject, and further illustrates the situation with new, in-depth research conducted in three communities: Lučenec, Prešov, and Zborov. Drafted by Slovak experts and activists Katarína Šoltésová, Elena Gallová Kriglerová, Stano Daniel, and Mirka Hapalová, the report is released today in Bratislava.

In late 2007, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the segregation of Roma children in the Czech Republic's special school system constituted discrimination, in the case *D.H. and others vs. the Czech Republic*. The OSI report reveals that Roma in Slovakia are up to 28 times more likely to be transferred to a special school; despite recent procedures designed to ensure children are appropriately assessed for intellectual disabilities, there are indications many Roma without disabilities are placed in special schools. The school financing system has given schools an incentive to place children without disabilities in these special schools; parents may also see a financial advantage, as some children are eligible for a motivational stipend for good marks, more easily awarded in a special school.

According to Stano Daniel, an author of the report, geographic isolation and segregation in separate neighbourhoods contribute to the rise of all- or majority-Roma schools. "In these schools, the quality of education is clearly lower: teachers are less likely to be qualified, facilities are in bad condition, relations with parents and the community are poor. National and local

programmes must be developed to counteract ‘white flight’ and ensure that schools throughout the country offer a real education, not just a place to keep warm on a winter’s day.”

The Ministry of Education has acknowledged the importance of pre-school for Roma children, and introduced an alternative “zero year” to ensure children have some preparation before beginning the first grade of primary school. While this measure is aimed at “children from disadvantaged backgrounds”, in practice classes are primarily made up of Roma children, creating an early form of segregation even through a measure aimed at better integration.

Roma teaching assistants have been an effective way to support Roma children in the classroom in a number of countries. In Slovakia, the report indicates, the position does not require that the assistant speaks Romanes, which limits the extent to which an assistant can really work with Roma children and aid integration. A lack of financing for the position puts a burden on schools involving teaching assistants, further reducing the number of such assistants working in the classroom. Teachers have little access to training on how to work with a diverse classroom, curricula are inflexible, and the training that is available tends to be too unsystematic and comes through civil society organisations rather than a concerted Government effort.

Throughout the accession process, the European Commission called the Government to account for the bad situation of Roma in Slovakia. Yet since joining the EU, Slovakia’s Roma are not much better off, despite Slovakia's commitment to the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 and other national initiatives to improve their position. Now, with open borders and the coming adoption of the Euro, integration seems to be increasing; but until Roma children enjoy equal access to quality education, there will remain a barrier to a truly inclusive and integrated society.

Notes to editors

The monitoring of *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma* is a multi country project covering eight countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. The monitoring was carried out by the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP) of the Open Society Institute (OSI), in cooperation with OSI’s Education Support Program (ESP) and Roma Participation Program (RPP). Local partner NGOs and experts conducted the research in each country. The full text of the reports in English and in translation is available online at <http://www.eumap.org> and <http://www.osf.sk>. More information on OSI is available at <http://www.soros.org>.