



Last chance for Roma?

Analytical overview of integration policies towards Roma in Slovakia, steps ahead and persisting challenges

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Introduction

Parliamentary elections took place on 5 March 2016 and voters could have voted for one of 23 political parties and movements. The results of elections were more than surprising for several reasons. One of them is a theory, that surveys and polls should reflect public opinion and somewhat more correspond to the results of the elections. This theory however, was not verified in practice as (contrary to the expectations, surveys and polls) a historically strong political movement KDH – Christian Democratic Movement did not get to the parliament at all and many other standard political parties received significantly lower number of votes. On the contrary, much of the lost political support to the standard parties went to new political parties. Right-wing extremist People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) got into the parliament.¹ In this case we can speak not only about surprise, but also concerns with respect to clear anti-Roma rhetoric. Even worse, if we extract the votes of first-time voters (young people who were not of voting age in the last elections and voted for the first time now, i. e. 18-22), this party would have won the elections.

Even though ĽSNS is not part of the governing coalition, it has its representatives at the top level² and a lot of support among the general public. Even though most of top politicians distant themselves from this extremist party, it is clear that we have to take them into account, as their support is growing. The party does not have a clear program. It is building its popularity mainly among lower- and middle-class, abusing the negative socio-economic trends.

¹ ĽSNS was established as a substitute for the dissolved and prohibited neo-Nazi movement Slovak Togetherness (Slovenská pospolitosť) mainly organizing anti-Roma marches. Slovak Togetherness clearly declared its sympathies towards the era of fascist Slovak state promoting fascist ideology during the World War II. On number of occasions media reported that members of ĽSNS continue their support to promoting fascism, including at social networks.

² As a result of equal distribution and negotiations regarding political representation in parliamentary committees, the party is also represented in the parliamentary committee for human rights and minorities. In the committee, the party is represented by Milan Mazurek known well for verbally attacking a Muslim family in Bratislava.



New government was formed by coalition parties: SMER-SD (SMER – Social Democrats), SNS (Slovak National Party), MOST-HÍD (Bridge) a #SIEŤ (#Network). It was quite surprising again as side-by-side this coalition brings together minority party (MOST-HÍD) and nationalists (SNS).

In the program declaration of the government, there were some specific measures, the aim of which was to bring change to Romani communities. In the fourth part of the declaration, in which the government deals with improving of economic, social and territorial cohesion, the government declares that it will:

- Grow the network of social fieldworkers and Roma civic patrols;
- Support development of missing preschool facilities and community centres in areas with concentrated marginalized communities;
- Support accessibility of preschool education;
- Prepare change of diagnostic tools for pupils of primary schools with the aim to minimize transfer of pupils from marginalized communities into special schools and classes;
- Secure more practitioners, mainly teacher assistants at primary schools and high schools;
- Provide further education of pedagogical employees working with children coming from marginalized communities;
- Initiate broadening of extracurricular activities within the ‘whole-day’ educational system;
- Increase financial literacy of people living in marginalized communities;
- Prepare a legal amendment to introduce personal bankruptcy;
- Engage affected communities in fight against usury;
- Promote better access of marginalized communities to healthcare;
- Develop the programs to deal with property rights to lands under the illegal buildings in marginalized communities;
- Support self-help models of construction of social housing with particular focus on sustainability of houses and flats.

Slovak Government in this program declaration expresses commitment to initiate the very much needed changes in Romani communities, however a question (again, same as with previous governments) remains whether they will implement and succeed. Several experts, mainly from the NGO sector warned that the program does not correspond with the Roma integration strategy until 2020 and that it does not adopt the principle promoted by the European Commission: explicit, but not exclusive Roma targeting. Program of the government does not deal with Romani ethnicity and frames the so-called “Roma theme” as an issue of social exclusion and marginalization.

With the change of the government and its structures, there was also the government’s plenipotentiary for Romani communities coming to the office. On 7 April 2016 a new plenipotentiary Ábel Ravasz was appointed and substituted his predecessor Peter Pollák. On the contrary to him, he does not have Romani origin. Ravasz was nominated by political party MOST-HÍD, thus giving him priority over Romani members of the party, e.g. regional politician Stanislav Vospálek or mayor Štefan Vavrek. With him coming to the position there were some staff changes in the office of plenipotentiary, which could be a threat to number of initiatives and projects already in preparation or already running. In his declaration Ravasz expresses his will to fight poverty in Romani



communities and implement necessary measures in the key areas, such as education, employment and housing.³

Support from European Structural and Investment Funds - ESIF

In the programming period 2014 – 2020 two priority axis of Operational Program Human Resources are being implemented, focused on support to Romani communities. Operational Program Human Resources is dealing with Roma-related themes through:

- **Priority axis 5 – Integration of marginalized communities;** and
- **Priority axis 6 – Technical infrastructure in municipalities with presence of marginalized Romani communities.**

Improvement of social and economic inclusion of Roma through support to desegregation and development of accessibility of education, employment, health care and housing within the upcoming period are the main topics of **measures under the priority axis 5**. Section of European Programs will primarily invest in the so-called soft measures, such as support for activities in community centres.

Measures under the priority axis 6 are targeted at physical, economic as well as social regeneration of neglected communities and at provision of support to social enterprises. Particular projects will lead to improved access of inhabitants from separated and segregated Romani communities to housing, drinking and sanitary water, adequate infrastructure and regular removal of waste in line with hygienic norms. Also, increasing of capacities of kindergartens through reconstruction or new construction.

The total ESIF financial allocation on problems of marginalized Romani communities during the current programming period has been set to 383 million EUR and was set like this by the previous plenipotentiary for Roma communities Peter Pollák. Recipient of the financial sources of the European Social Fund is the office of plenipotentiary, which declares the objective of the most effective use of the funds. Within the ministry of agriculture and regional development a Regional Development Office was established in March 2016. Head of the office publicly declared their ambition to implement projects to support employment of Roma and education of Romani children.⁴ From the declarations of the Regional Development Office it is clear that their interest in Roma and improvement of their living conditions implies their effort for the office to be the recipient of financial support from European funds.

Situation in specific areas of interest

In the next part we will present an overview of policies, measures and projects in specific priority areas as they have been declared in the long term. Often, anti-discrimination and fight against social exclusion are included among the priority areas, however no significant changes have been presented by governments so far and the leadership role in bringing the Romani and non-Romani communities together has been taken by nongovernmental organisations and artistic groups. One exception may be the ministry of culture with its grant scheme to promote culture of national and

³ Declaration of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Romani Communities Ábel Ravasz on the occasion of International Roma Day, 8 April 2016, <<http://www.minv.sk/?tlacove-spravy&sprava=8-april-je-medzinarodnym-dnom-romov-narodnostna-mensina-dnes-a-o-sedem-rokov>>

⁴ Aktualne.sk, Ekonom Anton Marcincin: Rómom nie je čo závidieť!
<<http://aktualne.atlas.sk/slovensko/spolocnost/ekonom-anton-marcincin-romom-nie-je-co-zavidiet.html>>



ethnic minorities. This is often used to present Romani culture to general public. Results of their work are however, often shadowed by anti-Roma statements by government representatives or police interventions against Roma.

Health and healthcare

In 2016 the project “Healthy Communities” financed by the European Social Fund and European Fund of Regional Development continues and continues to fight for its existence. It is a successful project and possibly one of the few projects aimed explicitly on Roma with big part of the involved people being Roma, who found jobs in the project, too. Project operates directly in the field and 90% of staff are people in the field. Currently the project is implemented in Central and Eastern Slovakia in 239 localities. Altogether 257 employees work in the field and communicate with 750 doctors and 100 kindergartens and schools. The main part of work of the assistants and coordinators of health education, as the fieldworkers are called, is education on health and prevention of diseases. They work primarily in localities and with people whose households do not follow the hygienic standards or lack basic hygienic means (e.g. running water). According to the doctors working in these problematic localities, the project is a big benefit: “Assistants and coordinators work in the community and not only they spread knowledge, but also identify all infectious diseases immediately.”⁵ This project is an excellent in-between part on the way to full inclusion of Roma, mainly from the perspective of interwoven key areas – health, employment, education. In this context it is absurd that this successful model is destined to end. In recent period there were issues with funding of the project, even though the project is supervised by such relevant partner as the ministry of health. During the process of collecting data for this report the employees have been experiencing second month without pay, while they continued their work.⁶

Employment

In the area of employment number of programs are opening. These are focused on long-term unemployed job-seekers, many of whom are Roma. One of the programs was titled “**Way out of the circle of unemployment.**” Project’s funding of 50 million EUR should cover approximately 7000 people. Employer has to hire them for full-time or part-time employment for at least 15 months. A contribution in the amount of whole price of work will be paid to the employer for up to 12 or 15 months, depending on the length of previous unemployment of the newly hired employee.

The previous government launched a project to support employment of Roma with the use of so-called “social aspect in public procurement.” In practice, this means an obligation to offer a social benefit with candidacy in public procurement, e.g. employment of certain percentage of unemployed Roma. With certain regional development programs this has been made compulsory for all municipalities listed in the Atlas of Roma Communities 2013. Aim of these measures in the programs of regional development specifically targeting Romani communities is to use the potential of local labour in municipalities with Romani communities, e.g. in reconstruction of kindergartens, community centres, finalizing technical infrastructure, etc.

⁵ <<https://www.istp.sk/clanok/9700/Narodny-projekt-Zdrave-komunity-zamestnava-257-asistentov-osvety-zdravia>>

⁶ Oficiálne vyjadrenie riaditeľa Zdravých komunit, n.o. k súčasnej situácii, máj 2016,

<<http://www.zdravekomunity.sk/sk/oficialne-vyjadrenie-riaditeľa-zdravych-komunit-no-k-sucasnej-situacii>>



In the programming period 2014 – 2020, building and support for operation of **community centres** is a significant activity. These provide social services, low-threshold programs for children and youth, (non-formal) educational services. These centres were verified already in the past right in the environment of Romani communities. In comparison with social workers located outside of the community, the centres in the community offer wider spectre of services focusing on improvement of financial literacy and support to employment of Roma.

Project of the so-called **Roma Civic Patrols** is another one which was verified and showed its benefits. During 11 months of implementation it employed tens of Roma. Roma Civic Patrols worked in municipalities with marginalized Romani communities and were providing help in various areas. Main goal of the project was to help decrease criminal activity, keep public order and in general improve relationships between majority and Romani minority. General public evaluated the project positively, but the realization of the project ended as a result of lack of funding.

In 2016 a **National Project Social Fieldwork and Field Work in Municipalities with Marginalized Romani Communities I.** was launched. Its main objective is to support social inclusion of disadvantaged Romani communities with respect to specific needs and living conditions. The project was supported by the European Social Fund in the total amount of 25,100,000 EUR. The project has been verified by practice, as it has been implemented in our environment for the second time and for more than a decade now. Even though the project has been operational for more than 10 years, no government introduced it into the system and social work in Romani communities remains being provided only on the basis of project funding.

Education

Project **Investment in Early Childhood – Support for Social Innovation and Roma Integration** was one of the projects implemented in the previous programming period and supported within the EC PROGRESS program. This project was focused on pre-primary level of education with the aim to improve knowledge base of children coming from marginalized Romani communities and thus provide them with needed competence for their entry into primary school. Activities of the project were directed at pedagogues in kindergartens, practitioners, children from marginalized Romani communities and their parents. From our perspective the project was of very high quality and benefits contained already in the design. As SGI reports in their evaluation – to continue the project few recommendations have to be implemented to secure right realization and effectivity of resources.⁷

Project **Education of Pedagogic Employees towards Inclusion of Marginalized Romani Communities** was implemented during the 2011 to 2015 and was financed by the European Social Fund. Main activities included:

- Education of pedagogical employees and other practitioners
- Support of all-day educational system
- Technical support of activities of the national project.

Project was implemented at 200 schools throughout whole Slovakia with the exception of Bratislava region and helped more than 43,600 pupils, out of whom more than 22,000 were from socially disadvantaging background. Methodical-pedagogical centre produced an evaluation report according to which all activities positively influenced particular areas of the project: they recorded an increased interest in individual contact with teacher from the side of Romani parents, teachers reported

⁷ CVEK, Qualitative evaluation study on the implementation of the project „Progress“ in Slovakia, 2015



increased quality of childcare from the side of family, parents are more interested in school results of their child, educational results were improved.⁸

On 29 January 2016 Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic launched a call for proposals for financial support **for construction of preschool facilities in municipalities with presence of marginalized Romani communities**, which is financially covered by the European Regional Development Fund. Declared objective of the call is to promote access for quality education including education and care in early years and the call is targeted at municipalities with presence of marginalized Romani communities (according to Atlas 2013). In the time of writing of this report evaluation of proposals was not finished, so we do not have information about number of involved municipalities. Professionals in the field know the situation of pre-primary education of Romani children and that their access to this type of education is minimum in the current settings. Missing preschool education complicates start of many Romani children at the beginnings of primary school (lack of readiness, language barriers, habits, etc.).

Kindergartens in Slovakia lack capacities. For every municipality it should be a priority to join the program of building or reconstructing kindergartens, so that Romani children too can use this type of education together with non-Romani children. Even though the call is not linked to creating employment (teaching or assisting) and thus does not build kindergartens 'completely', by building the premises municipalities will get on the right track. Also, kindergartens should not be built in the environment of settlements, in isolation. This system would only deepen segregation and social exclusion.⁹

Persisting challenges

Project implemented in the previous programming period to support education of marginalized communities often lack some basic principles even if originally they are well-intended. In our area we still see discriminatory attitudes of teachers towards Romani children. Romani children still face rejection from the side of their peers and non-Romani classmates. Still we see the practice of excluding Romani children and segregating them into special schools or classes. Problems persist mainly in those educational facilities, which reject recognition of specific needs of Romani children. Paradoxically the practice also confirms that project funding is also another problem. Project with successful implementation soon ends because of lack of funding or other barriers in its continuity and sustainability. It seems that creating inclusive school environments is a long-term and difficult process. This is described in the report from a research implemented by the OSF Bratislava.¹⁰ While during recent years all state documents, initiatives and project at declarative level commit themselves to inclusion policies, at schools the reality is not going toward the positive trends. It is then even absurd, when Slovak government responds to European Commission's criticism for segregation of Romani children into special schools by saying that there is higher occurrence of mental disability among Roma because there is higher occurrence of incest.¹¹

It is crucial that approaches of representatives of authorities are closely monitored and continuously influenced in a positive way. With extremism and populism promoting 'easy' solutions on the rise, it is crucial that everyone from top government officials to people living in the neighbourhood of Roma

⁸ Závěrečná evaluační správa NP, <http://web.eduk.sk/?q=node/93>, 2015

⁹ CVEK, *Inkluzívne školy – vzdelávajme sa a žijeme spolu v demokratickej spoločnosti*, <<http://cvek.sk/inkluzivne-skoly-vzdelavajme-sa-a-zijeme-spolu-v-demokratickej-spolocnosti/>>

¹⁰ OSF, *Vzdelávacie cesty rómskych žiakov zo sociálne znevýhodneného prostredia*, <http://www.noveskolstvo.sk/upload/pdf/vzdelavacie_cesty.pdf>

¹¹ Romea.cz, *Slovak Gov't says high number of Roma in "special schools" is due to incest*, <<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/slovak-gov-t-says-high-number-of-roma-in-special-schools-is-due-to-incest>>



settlements believes that success is possible. This may be our last chance before populists take over, before funders leave the region and before Roma fall into despair of no return.