

“Roma access to adequate minimum income and social protection in Slovakia”

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Introduction

Despite living in one of the European developed country, many Roma experience genuine economic hardship and are denied equitable access to opportunities for a quality education, a healthy living environment, a decent paying job, and a meaningful life.

Based on data from the survey of living conditions in marginalized Roma communities from the EU SILC MRK 2018, the share of unemployed people from the MRC environment is 38%. Thus, despite the many disadvantages resulting from their unfavorable situation, these people are trying to integrate into the labor market. An obstacle to this effort is also the geographical location of MRCs, which are mostly located in less developed regions, with an overall higher unemployment rate. Very significant differences between people from the MRC and the general population can also be observed in terms of education and material and social deprivation. More than 3/4 of people from the MRC environment attended or have only completed primary school (including special schools) and did not continue their education. While approximately 74% of children aged 3 to 6 in the total population attend kindergarten, in the MRC it is only 24%. At the same time, pre-school education is considered to be a fundamental determinant of a child's further development and helps to successfully integrate into the education system.

While in the general population the median equivalent disposable income for a one-member household is € 7,462 / year, in the MRC environment it is only € 2,335. Almost 85% of MRC people live below the official poverty line. Within the general population, this share is 12.2% - almost seven times lower. About 17% of people from MRC live on less than € 3.8 per day. According to the obtained data, 47% of households from the MRC environment are in material need, compared to 4% of households within the general population. Only 36% of people in material need living in the MRC receive a housing allowance. Although people in material need can claim it, the conditions for obtaining it are difficult for people from MRC to meet. Two thirds of households in the MRC have difficulty reimbursing the current expenses necessary to ensure their day-to-day operation. In the general population, the share of such households is less than a third.¹

The most significant fact about poverty in Slovakia is how it is perceived by different groups and relativized. Even on a theoretical level, we encounter different views on poverty, explanations, and measurements. For the individualistic perspective, poverty results from personal weaknesses, failings, and inadequacies. Poverty is an individual problem, according to this perspective; it is a byproduct of the characteristics and behaviors of the poor. The

¹ GRAUZELOVÁ, T., MARKOVIČ, F.: Príjmy a životné podmienky v marginalizovaných rómskych komunitách: vybrané ukazovatele z prieskumu EÚ SILC MRK, 2018

structural perspective attributes poverty to an assortment of economic, political, cultural, and social forces outside the immediate control of the individual: a shortage of jobs that pay a living wage; a corporate profit-making strategy predicated on the reduction of labor costs; government policy that caters to the concerns of the wealthy while ignoring the interests of working-class families; a political and media rhetoric that variously disparages the poor, treats them as objects of charity, and renders them invisible; and the persistence of discrimination, residential segregation, and social isolation. Poverty is a social problem, according to this perspective; it is a byproduct of the distribution of power and the institutional features of society. The individualistic perspective explains poverty mainly by reference to the choices and behaviors of the poor. For the structural perspective, poor people are victims of the decisions and actions of political and economic elites.²

In our study we look at the problem from a structural perspective. We need to recognize that problems of poverty and inequality are inextricably bound to power laden economic and political institutions. These determine the allocation of resources and opportunities, who gets what and how much. Theories attributing poverty to the deficiencies of the poor neglect the big picture: the severity of the poverty problem ultimately depends on the availability of decent-paying jobs and the responsiveness of government to the needs of less-advantaged citizens. We will take a closer look at the minimum income and its definition in the legislation. We will also look at how beneficiaries evaluate this income in terms of its applicability to basic needs.

Our organization has in the past engaged in research focused on poverty and the connection to the labor market or minimum income. In a study from 2017, we pointed out the shortcomings of workfare programs and highlighted the importance of non-discrimination in all areas of life and especially in education. The system of support for the poor, including politics, deserves greater reform. In principle, it should provide a secure network for people in need, for example by increasing survival benefits, together with tools that develop and support the personal potential of the poor unemployed, both through retraining and education, and through the prospect of permanent work.³

Methodology

We chose qualitative methods to compile this study. We used semi-structured interviews to obtain information from respondents. These were then analyzed and added to the analysis anonymously, we state only gender and age of the respondents in their statements. Our respondents were three Romani men and three Romani women aged between 18 and 62. Geographically, we chose three marginalized Roma communities, one in the west of the country (Kopčany), the other in central Slovakia (Veľký Krtíš), and the third in eastern Slovakia (Čirč). Since the minimum income is determined by law for the whole country, we did not limit ourselves to one region, but we chose the respondents to cover the whole country. The study is supplemented by secondary data. We are using naming “roma marginalized communities” and with this typology we are speaking about poor Roma communities in the document.

² ROYCE, E.: Poverty and Power. The problem of structural inequality. 2019, p. 37

³ LAJČÁKOVÁ, J. et al.: Riešenie nezamestnanosti Rómov. Od mýtu k praxi a späť. 2017

1. Minimum income system in the Slovak Republic

Minimum Income Schemes are defined as, income support schemes which provide a safety net for those of working age, whether in or out of work, and who have insufficient means of financial support, and who are not eligible for insurance based social benefits or whose entitlements to these have expired. They are last resort schemes, which are intended to ensure a minimum standard of living for the concerned individuals and their dependents.⁴

According to the law, the living wage has one level, but de facto it has two levels - the social minimum (living wage) and the existential minimum (material need).

1.1 Living minimum

The living minimum is an important institution in the social security system. Social security as a part of the social policy of the state represents a set of legal, financial and organizational tools, the aim of which is to prevent, mitigate and eliminate the consequences of recognized social events of citizens. The living minimum is a socially recognized minimum income limit of a natural person, below which a state of material need occurs.

The living minimum is a socially recognized minimum income limit of a natural person, below which a state of material need occurs. Two methods are used to determine the living minimum - relative and normative. The relative method is to derive the minimum income needed to ensure a minimum standard of living from the average income. The advantage of the method is that it can be used even in times of significant price and cost of living movements and the associated structural shifts in household consumption. It can also be used to respond more flexibly to the decline in the real value of net cash income of various groups of the population. Its disadvantage is that it does not provide information on the material content of consumables. Normative method - its basis is the construction of consumer baskets on the basis of minimum consumer standards valued by the lowest prices available on the market. It can be used to verify the material content of the amount determined by the relative method. Consumer baskets represent goods and services selected in accordance with the structure of consumption, which can be viewed in terms of minimal, rational, or optimal (specific). The selection of goods is made according to their weight in consumption, with regard to consumer habits, availability on the market, etc. From the point of view of what goods and services the basket will be filled with, it can be assembled at a minimum, rational, optimal level. It depends on the purpose. The minimum consumer basket is constructed on the basis of the necessary basic life needs of a person in individual phases of his life cycle. This minimum must respect the essential nutritional requirements of rational standards. It is a variant of consumption at the level of subsistence minimum. It does not consider durable goods. If this is done, it is changed to a variant representing the social minimum basket. Rational consumer basket - its construction is based on scientifically justified rational norms and norms expressing the needs of a person in his life cycle. These baskets are fuller and richer than minimal baskets. The optimal or specific consumer basket is constructed with regard to certain specific needs and habits of a person, the needs of various social groups, territorial communities, etc. They are therefore beyond normal needs. The value of the consumer basket changes depending on

⁴ RIEČANSKÁ, E: EMIN Context Report Slovakia. Developments in relation to Minimum Income Schemes, 2017

changes in the price of selected goods. When assembling e.g. the following principles must be respected: take into account consumption habits, use available norms and standards, take into account the availability of goods, respect the degree of development of the country.⁵

The living minimum amounts are always adjusted on 1 July of the current calendar year on the basis of the growth rate of net cash income per person or the growth rate of living costs of low-income households. These data are provided to the Ministry by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. As of 1 July 2020, the living wage amounts were established by the Measure of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic no. 174/2020. The living wage of a natural person or natural persons whose income is assessed is considered to be the amount or sum of the amounts:

- € 214.83 per month if it is a single natural person,
- € 149.87 per month, if it is another jointly assessed adult natural person,
- € 98.08 per month if it is a dependent child or a dependent child.⁶

The living minimum serves as the basis to which the state social policy applies some of its measures. This does not mean that everyone has to balance their income to this limit. Its significance is that it defines the field of maneuver in the search for the optimal degree of state participation in solving social problems so that on the one hand the basic relations of social and economic ties are not disrupted and on the other hand the necessary degree of social consensus is maintained. The primary function of the living wage is temporary protection against material and social need. The secondary function consists in the fact that in the subsystem of state social support it fulfills the function of the criterion for targeted provision of the so-called tested doses and in that it forms the basis for the calculation of most doses. At the same time, the living wage allows the introduction of a very simple valorisation mechanism, which guarantees that there will be no unwanted changes in the benefit structure.

1.2 Material need

Material need is a situation where the income of household members does not reach the living wage and household members are unaware or unable to secure income or increase income by exercising, exercising property rights or other property rights and exercising claims.⁷ Assistance in material need is benefit in material need, protective allowance, activation contribution, dependent child allowance, housing allowance. The amount of assistance in material need is determined as the difference between the amount of entitlements and the income of the household member and is provided in one amount. Assistance in material need shall not be granted if the amount of the claims is less than 1 EUR. The basic living conditions are one hot meal a day, the necessary clothing and shelter. Assistance in material need and a special contribution are provided by labor, social affairs and family offices and are financed from the state budget. A one-off benefit in material need is provided by municipal and city authorities and is financed from the budget of towns and municipalities. Income of household

⁵ Masarykova univerzita: Životné minimum jeho konštrukcia. Realizácia práva na životné minimum. Available at: <https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2007/SPP506/um/ZMINIMUM.pdf>

⁶ Measure of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic on the adjustment of subsistence minimum amounts no. 174/2020

⁷ §2, Act. nr. 417/2013 of an assistance in material need and on amendment of certain laws

members is taken into account when assessing material need and providing assistance in material need. Material need is determined by assessing the income, assets and the possibility of asserting the claims of household members. Income shall be assessed in the calendar month in which the application for assistance in material need was submitted and continuously throughout the period of entitlement to and provision of assistance in material need.

The amount of the benefit in material need is:

- 67.80 EUR per month for individuals,
- 129.00 EUR per month in the case of an individual with a child or with a maximum of four children,
- 117.80 EUR per month in the case of a couple without children,
- 176.40 EUR per month in the case of a couple with a child or a maximum of four children,
- 188.40 EUR per month for individuals with more than four children,
- 237.70 EUR per month for a couple with more than four children.

The poverty line in Slovakia starts from 373 Eur for individuals, and 780 Eur for a couple with one child under age 14.

It is very important to highlight what happened in 2013. In 2013, the parliament approved an amendment to the Act on Assistance in Material Need, which the Ex-Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, Peter Pollák, presented as one of the basic pillars of the so-called Roma reform. The new law on assistance in material need expanded, among other things, the so-called the principle of merit even for the basic amount of assistance in material need. The basic benefit really only serves for the survival of a person whose income is lower than the socially recognized minimum income limit, after which a person finds himself in material need. The representative of the Roma community repeatedly justifies the essence of the principle of merit through the phrase "there are no cakes without work".⁸ In practice, this means that if a poor person receives an offer to "work" a basic benefit of help in material need and refuses it, he loses 67.80 EUR. The law provides for exceptions when people in material need do not have to fulfill this obligation - for example, in the case of a dependent child, disabled person, old-age pension recipient, person with severe disability, person who increases his / her qualifications through full-time study, single parent, person they participate in activation work for an activation surcharge, a parent with a child under three years of age or a single parent with a child under six years of age.

Statistics from the Center for Labor, Social Affairs and the Family of Slovak republic from April 2021 show that 120 762 persons received benefits in material need.⁹ Most recipients of benefits in material need are from the districts: Revúca, Rimavská Sobota, Gelnica, Rožňava, Kežmarok, Sabinov, Trebišov, Vranov nad Topľou, Spišská Nová Ves, Medzilaborce. Not surprisingly, these districts are among the highest unemployment rates and some of them are among the least developed.

⁸ LAJČÁKOVÁ, J: Parlament prijal nový zákon o pomoci v hmotnej núdzi. Odborné a právne argumenty proti populizmu nestačili. Menšinová politika na Slovensku (3) 2013, available at: <http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/32013-sk.pdf>, s. 1 – 5.

⁹ See more: https://www.upsvr.gov.sk/statistiky/socialne-veci-statistiky/2021/2020-socialne-davky.html?page_id=1060272. Statistics for June are not available for submission of this work (30.6.2021)

The most dominant topic in the discourse on the Act on Assistance in Material Need was meritocracy. Assistance in material need, which is necessary to ensure basic living conditions, is a right enshrined in Art. 39 (3) of the Constitution of the SR. Financial assistance in material need is not understood as a certain compensation for exclusion from access to the type and quality of education that would enable entry into the labor market. Nor is it perceived as an expression of a certain social solidarity, the equalization of unequal life chances or conditional assistance. The structural causes of unemployment and long-term unemployment are not taken into account.

2. Barriers to accessing the minimum income system

Since the law on assistance in material need applies equally to everyone in Slovakia, we looked at the barriers from the perspective of the beneficiaries.

2.1 First contact

The system of registration of job seekers and subsequent registration for the needs of payment of benefits in material need is accessible to everyone and the Roma do not have extra barriers to access. In the event of any obstacles, field social workers or community workers help them. In practice, it exists in such a way that the Roma help each other and share information about what they are legally entitled to and also help each other with various administrative tasks. One of our respondents reported to the office only recently and confirmed to us that he had received initial information from his family members, so he knew what he was entitled to and what would be paid to him.

„Before I went to the office, my parents told me what I would need and also told me how much I would receive. I finished school and couldn't find a job, so I had to register with the office. But I went there saying that I didn't need any information from the officials, as my mother and father told me everything.“ (Roma man, 19 years old)

“I remember that when I first remained unemployed and went to office, I received very little information. The clerk didn't talk to me for a long time, she gave me the forms and told me to write it down. I went home and worried about it alone at home. Then I went back and told her that I didn't list some things because I didn't know. So she helped me with that, but I didn't feel she was willing.” (Roma woman, 45 years old)

“I went straight to the community center to help me with the forms, because I knew I wouldn't do it myself and the clerk just handed them to me and sent me home to return the next day with the documents listed. The community center helped me list it. That was 10 years ago, today the younger ones are more adept at it and can cope. A lot of things are done over the computer, it wasn't for us. And at that office, they don't think that not everyone has a computer and the Internet.” (Roma man, 59 years old)

With a well-developed network of community centers and field social work, incomprehensibility at the first contact at the offices is also minimized. Community workers and field social workers provide more detailed information and do so in a language understood by residents of marginalized Roma communities.

Social benefits can also be paid by postal order, it is not a condition to have a bank account. If someone does not understand well, usually a community center or field social worker helps them to overcome these initial barriers. However, it is usually the case that the Roma know very well what social benefits they are entitled to, also due to the fact that field social work has existed in excluded communities for several years.

Illiteracy occurs very little in the Slovak Republic, and if such a case is found, either the social worker or the family helps to fill in the necessary documents.

The basic social benefit is not linked to permanent residence, so that even a person who does not have a permanent residence at a certain address can claim a benefit in material need. It must meet the conditions set by law.

The problem occurs for those who do not have a valid ID and their identity cannot be verified. But we have not yet encountered such cases in our practice.

Anti-Gypsyism exists at the first contact, but we do not have data on this. Our respondents did not comment on this, even though we asked about it. The reason may also be that they do not want to comment on embarrassing experiences.

2.2 Merit to get a basic benefit in material need

As we wrote above, the introduction of the obligation to work a basic minimum benefit in material need was presented as a measure to force recipients to activate and acquire work habits. The aforementioned research¹⁰ says that such activity can not activate the beneficiaries as the lawmakers thought, because it rather keeps the beneficiaries trapped in material need. The most common articulated reason was actually reasoning in the spirit of political rhetoric. The obligation to receive a benefit in material need was a way of showing the poor that "nothing is free." As if they were fulfilling society's expectations that those on the margins should contribute to keeping others "alive". For many, the prevailing feeling was that Roma perceived benefits as a right, free money, something they had to receive. There was no perception from the discussion that benefits are part of solidarity in a society that ensures everyone the opportunity to live in dignity.¹¹

One of our respondents stated: *„Some of them still envy the poor 64.70 Euros. It's ridiculous. I would like to work, but no one wants to hire me on a full-time contract, so I do it black. But I can only be insured if I am registered as unemployed. So I also have to work those 32 hours, otherwise I would be excluded from the unemployment register and I would have to pay for health insurance myself. And what would I do that for? I have been unemployed for 1.5 years,*

¹⁰ See note nr. 3

¹¹ LAJČÁKOVÁ, J. et al.: Riešenie nezamestnanosti Rómov. Od mýtu k praxi a späť. 2017

before that I worked, so I also contributed to the social system and I am entitled to have the state take care of me.” (Roma man, 45 years old)

Merit forgets the fact that not everyone is unemployed of their own free will, and also forgets the fact that many of the unemployed worked before they lost their jobs. And so they also contributed to the social system. They are entitled to unemployment benefit only if they have worked for at least 24 months on a regular basis – employment contract, not other type of contracts. And then they receive such support from the state for only half a year.

Also the fact that people in material need perform work in the municipality, for which the municipality would otherwise have to pay a minimum wage. And they will receive a state-guaranteed minimum aid for this, but they will do the work for which they should receive a minimum wage.

“Do you know how embarrassing it is to have to sweep the streets to get a benefit in material need? It's a really lousy amount and I clean the streets or do other work for which they would otherwise have to pay a minimum wage.” (Roma man, 19 years old)

Respondents also told us that they were aware of cases where people waived benefits in material need because they did not accept work in the village because it was degrading for them and preferred to find occasional work, mostly without an employment contract.

2.3 Housing allowance

The housing allowance is intended to cover part of the costs associated with housing. Housing allowance is:

- 55.80 EUR per month in the case of a household with one member of the household,
- 89.20 EUR per month in the case of a household with several members of the household or in the case of renting an apartment by several tenants.

Housing allowance is paid if a member of the household is the owner or co-owner of the dwelling, the owner or co-owner of a family house using the household for housing, the tenant of the dwelling, the tenant of the family house or tenant of a living room in a permanent housing facility used by the household. The housing allowance is paid if the household or a member of the household in the flat pays the costs of housing-related services and real estate tax, or if he has arrears associated with the payment of costs for housing-related services, submits a repayment agreement and a certificate of proper payment calendar, in the family house pays real estate tax and fees for municipal waste.¹²

However, this allowance does not belong to persons living in houses that have not been approved and are therefore built on land illegally. This is a big problem, as it mainly concerns the Roma who live in segregated areas. In these segregated areas, they live in illegal dwellings without a title deed. So Roma who live in segregated communities do not receive this benefit. The change in the law is not planned in the near future, and therefore it will continue to be the case that Roma living in shacks and houses that are not approved and do not have a title deed will not receive this housing allowance. They can have an identity card because they are

¹² §14, Act. nr. 417/2013 of an assistance in material need and on amendment of certain laws

listed as citizens of the municipality without a specific address. For example, if someone lives in Skalica, instead of the street address as a permanent residence, the City of Skalica is listed in the ID. They do not need a bank account to pay social benefits, which are also paid by post.

We asked our respondents how they view the fact that they are not entitled to housing allowance. Their responses were very similar and they agreed that they had not decided to live in illegal dwellings themselves, but were pushed into this housing situation by circumstances, whether they were evicted or did not have enough money to buy a legal house.

One of the respondents on the topic stated: *"I did not even ask if we would be entitled to a housing allowance, because I know that others who live in our locality and are recipients of material need are not entitled to this allowance. You know, it's not fair, because they (author's note: legislators) know how the Roma got into illegal housing and didn't do anything about it all the time. They could at least change this and we would be able to pay for electricity, water and waste."* (Roma man, 59 years)

2.4 Stigmatization and myths

One of the biggest problems with Roma social assistance is stigma and hatred of the Roma, even though there are studies¹³ that show that the Roma are not the largest group in the country receiving social assistance and a much larger group is made up of individuals, not Roma families, as myths and stereotypes are presented.

One of the conclusions of INESS research states: *"Despite the stereotypes, we dispel the myth that the Roma are a problem of Slovakia's public finances. The total annual fiscal costs of the "Roma" districts do not reach even half a month of the Social Insurance Institute's expenditure on old-age pensions, while the resources paid to large families are even more marginal, reaching only a fraction of this amount."*¹⁴

For several years now, a hoax has been circulating on the Internet and social networks about how much a Romani family receives compared to a non-Romani single mother. This hoax has been refuted by many and includes the Police of the Slovak Republic on its fcb page Hoaxes and Scams - Police of the Slovak Republic. And despite the publication of the opinion of the Center for Labor, Social Affairs and the Family, hate comments against the Roma appeared under the article.¹⁵

This narrative is very often used by extremist groups to arouse hatred for the Roma. They are deceiving simple people who have no way of verifying that they are being claimed are lying and are thus trying to gain support and power, whether political or public. This narrative towards the Roma is also becoming one of the most important topics before the elections, because those who debate it know very well that coexistence between the majority and the Roma in the neighborhood of excluded localities is always tense and there are rather negative

¹³ See more: www.cvek.sk, www.iness.sk, www.nadaciamilanasimecku.sk, www.governance.sk or Roma Myth : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJd-YowPwGY>

¹⁴ DINGA, J., ĎURANA, R., CHOVCULIAK, R.. Rómovia a sociálne dávky. Sú Rómovia problémom verejných financií Slovenska?. 2016

¹⁵ See more: <https://www.facebook.com/hoaxPZ/posts/375911249903415/>

moods towards the Roma. In the pre-election leaflets and programs of several political parties, we find "quick solutions" against "abuse of the social system by the Roma" and this is how politicians try to address voters. However, as we mentioned above, the Roma receive only 3% of the total expenditure from the Social Insurance Agency. But this information does not reach voters and they remain ignorant and lying about the abuse of the social system.

And then it happens that the majority in the neighborhood of the Roma community has a really very tense relationship, because it feels injustice on the part of the state and it feels that the Roma are receiving generous benefits. Subsequent conflicts are then the result of failure to resolve such situations and the failure to raise awareness of government spending truthfully.

Our respondents also have extensive experience with the hatred of the majority towards their people, because they were at the post office to receive social benefits. The young woman told us: *"You have to have a reasonable distance at the post office when you go to the window. And when I went to the window, a foreign lady followed me and stood right behind me and wanted to know how much I take the social benefit. She was there for retirement, so I told her to resign, it was a private matter and she had nothing to watch, and she told me she wanted to see how I was going to take that big social benefit, so I showed her less than 65 "That this is all the state has sent me. It was really ridiculous to see her face when she found out she had run into lies." (Roma woman, 26 years old)*

Another myth is that the Roma earn on child allowances. These are paid for each child up to the age of 25, but if the child is dependent, for example, that he or she is still studying. In December 2019, 31% of all child allowances went to these districts, while 29% of the total population lives here. This means that even though these are districts with a significant representation of Roma, a significant part of child allowances does not go here. The reason may be that Roma parents receive shorter allowances for their children, as most children do not go to university and, on the contrary, compensate for the children of the majority of the population, who go to university more often.¹⁶

Our respondent stated: *"I have 5 children and I have never received more than the law stipulates and definitely not more just because I am a Roma. If I were to make money on child allowances, we would have to receive at least EUR 300 for every child, which is nonsense, of course. And if it were true, it would get everyone, not just Roma, it probably knows all." (Roma woman, 45 years old)*

Another of our respondents mentioned stereotypes about how Roma take benefits and buy alcohol and have fun when it is time to pay social benefits: *"I have not yet seen the Roma in our community take benefits and go to drink them right away. they do it somewhere, but not in our country, and I'm quite upset that it's said as if all the Roma were doing it. " (Roma man, 59 years old)*

Another myth related to the Roma and social benefits is the claim that the Roma do not want to work and that their miserable lives suit them. This statement is also a stereotype and does

¹⁶ See more <https://ekonomialudskourecou.sk/zarabaju-romovia-na-socialnom-systeme/>

not reflect the reality in many Roma communities. Our respondents told us that they did not choose to be poor, that they did not have opportunities and opportunities to break out of poverty. They have difficult access to the labor market, children often go to segregated schools and, even if they want to go somewhere else, they face discrimination because they do not want to rent flats in the majority areas. The absence of social relations outside the Roma community is often the reason why Roma are difficult to employ and are given a chance not to be dependent on social benefits.

"I would rather run away from this country and go live somewhere else where they will not look at me like a dusty dog only because I am not working. It was not my decision to be unemployed." (Roma man, 19 years old)

Social benefits in Slovakia have no color. They are intended for anyone who meets the conditions under the law. The Roma do not receive more than the conspirators and hoaxers spread, they receive exactly as much as the majority.

"See what to do when no one wants to give us a job? I'm old, but not old enough to receive a retirement pension. And I also have some health problems, but I would go to work, but if there is nowhere, then what should I do? We live here in a region where not even the majority has a job, but even so, they will only talk about us Roma that we do not want to work. At the same time, the majority is at home and takes social benefits. And we shout it in their eyes? No, because we know what it's like to live so poorly." (Roma man, 59 years old)

3. Solutions, possibilities, and opportunities

Finding solutions and ways to alleviate poverty is a matter for the state and public policies. Last year, the Government of the Slovak Republic approved the updated National Framework Strategy for the Support of Social Inclusion and the Fight against Poverty.¹⁷ Also, the newly adopted Strategy for Roma Inclusion and Participation until 2030 contains an important area called Employment, the global goal of which is to improve the employability and increase the employment of marginalized Roma communities by creating opportunities leading to their employment.¹⁸

"In Slovakia, currently 16.3% of families are below the poverty line, which represents 872,000 people. As a result of the pandemic, another 20,000 to 50,000 people may be in this category. In our case, poverty is determined from the income limit of 373 EUR per month for a one-member household. In the case of a household with 2 adults and 2 children up to 14 years of age, the limit is set at 780 EUR per month," said Lenka Buchláková, economic analyst at FinGO.sk.¹⁹

¹⁷ Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic no. 736 of 25 November 2020

¹⁸ Strategy for Roma inclusion and participation 2030

¹⁹ See more: Pod hranicou chudoby je na Slovensku takmer 900 tisíc ľudí. Available at: <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/565966-chudoba-je-stale-jednym-z-najzavaznejších-socialných-problemov-na-celom-svete/>

National Framework Strategy for the Support of Social Inclusion and the Fight against Poverty²⁰ contain a statement, that despite the positive development before the pandemic period, the long-term problem of the Slovak Republic is above all the high rate of long-term unemployment. Long-term unemployment is closely linked to the qualifications of the unemployed. Early intervention towards the youngest generations, education and formal care for pre-school children bring strong positive effects on further education and human capital building with a positive impact towards adulthood. This is a way to avoid the intergenerational reproduction of disadvantages. In order to address it, it is necessary to take measures to support integration into the labor market so that they respond as much as possible to the needs of people excluded from the labor market, increase their chances of employment and integration into society.

With reference to the Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024, the employment of vulnerable groups, the development of the social economy and the creation of social enterprises, employment of the long-term unemployed through remuneration of supported employment agencies will be supported in the following period, diversity of jobs in activation work in order to increase their added value in order to support the development of qualified skills, increase motivation in assistance in material need, improve employment opportunities for people with severe disabilities. Reducing regional disparities remains in need.

In relation to increasing employment, it is necessary to take a more targeted approach to eliminating disparities between regions and preventing, as far as possible, the widening of economic and social disparities between them. The strategy also states that, in the context of employment growth, it is also important to support the improvement of employment services, in particular the effectiveness of active labor market measures instruments and their relevance in relation to labor market needs. The jobs created do not sufficiently cover the most disadvantaged jobseekers, which has socio-economic consequences for themselves as well as for members of their households. In this context, where macroeconomic policies play a key role, social inclusion policies have a specific mission. Their aim is to facilitate entry into the labor market and to support those who, for various serious reasons, are unable to find employment. The challenges therefore include continuing to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of active labor market measures instruments, together with strengthening their targeting of the most vulnerable categories of the unemployed.

The social economy instruments already mentioned, as well as incentive measures to accept and maintain low-paid employment as part of the assistance provided in material need, continue to be important tools for supporting employment growth. It is important to regularly assess the setting of this assistance, so that its individual instruments are set in a sufficiently differentiated and motivating way, while guaranteeing an adequate protective principle of this assistance.

²⁰ NÁRODNÁ RÁMCOVÁ STRATÉGIA PODPORY SOCIÁLNEHO ZAČLENENIA A BOJA PROTI CHUDOBE (aktualizácia), Available at: https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/slovensky/rodina-socialna-pomoc/chudoba/narodna-ramcova-stratogia-podpory-socialneho-zaclenenia-boja-proti-chudobe_aktualizacia.pdf

Promoting the employment of young people also remains a priority. Unemployment of young people is mainly caused by the mismatch between supply and demand on the part of employers, as well as the frequent absence of adequate experience and the related difficulties in finding employment. Targeted instruments of active labor market measures aimed at young people have been reflected in a gradual increase in the employment rate and a reduction in the unemployment rate of people aged 15-24. Young people are not among the groups most at risk of poverty or social exclusion due to their prolonged stay in their parents' households and the postponement of independence, including a time lag towards starting a family.

Women and men experience poverty and social exclusion in relatively different ways. Women are at greater risk of poverty, especially single mothers and older women. The pay gap, together with other disadvantages of women in the labor market, in particular a higher share of women outside economic activity, more and longer career breaks, lower pay for their work leads to a higher risk of poverty for women and subsequent feminisation of poverty in old age.

The Strategy also addresses marginalized Roma communities, which are a long-term challenge that requires a focused and integrated approach to the situation of marginalized Roma communities. Many problems were further highlighted by the ongoing coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need to adopt specific solutions to help this target group. The key challenge is the full integration of members of marginalized Roma communities into the life of society, which will concern both access to the labor market and health care, adequate housing and inclusive education.

The issue of inclusive education is crucial in this respect, as the Slovak Republic is characterized by one of the strongest correlations between school results and the socio-economic background among OECD countries. This means that with the deteriorating socio-economic situation in the family, the performance of pupils decreases, which indicates the limited ability of compulsory school attendance to balance the chances between different socio-economic categories. The issue of providing further education for people with low educational attainment is also key in this context. Promoting access to housing for vulnerable groups is one of the key challenges facing social inclusion and anti-poverty policies. An important challenge is to take measures to prevent the risk of eviction, homelessness, improve access to adequate, affordable housing, including social housing, and promote access to social protection linked to loss of housing.

The aim is to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion due to the loss of or loss of housing, by improving the scope and effectiveness of measures, better targeted and individualized support for this extremely disadvantaged target group by targeted development of field social work and synergies with other activating instruments. assistance and support, to support crisis intervention social services. A suitable tool for helping the most deprived is also the possibility of providing direct material assistance, which suitably complements the individual systemic instruments of social assistance.

The key measures of social inclusion and anti-poverty policies are formulated in the following areas:

- Promoting the integration of the long-term unemployed
- Support for increasing the targeted and individualized provision of public employment services and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of active labor market measures
- Promoting the employment of young people
- Promoting work-life balance
- Promoting access to quality services
- Support for the integration of marginalized Roma communities
- Support for increasing addressability in the system of social transfers
- Support for the solution of food and material deprivation (provision of food, food and material assistance for the most deprived persons)

In the area of support for the integration of marginalized Roma communities is in the Strategy written, that that the third major area of activity will be interventions to develop the facilities of marginalized Roma communities. Existing analyzes (eg UNDP 2006 and 2012) have shown an alarming state of technical equipment, infrastructure and housing conditions. It is necessary to invest financial resources in the establishment of engineering networks, strengthening access to drinking and service water, in the completion or construction of access roads as well as in setting up a municipal waste collection system.

In the area of housing, conditions will be created for the development of the system of transitional housing and the emergence of integrated forms of housing that develop the participation of the population, their responsibility and the pursuit of standard housing. In line with good practice and experience with micro-loan programs implemented by non-governmental organizations, the introduction of financial support for self-help construction will be supported in the programming period. However, nowhere in the text is it mentioned that in the current setting of the system, the most important players in the field of integration are the municipalities. If they decide not to participate in integration programs, there will be no change in the quality of life of marginalized Roma.

Also, the text does not mention anywhere that it is important to combat stereotypes and prejudices. Antigypsyism is most often present in excluded localities, or rather in their vicinity. It is crucial for the state to acknowledge that there is antigypsyism and to spread the idea of combating it from the top down to the specific localities.

We very much appreciate that poverty is tackled as a societal problem and is therefore not limited to tackling Roma poverty. It is very important that poverty is not ethnized, but, on the contrary, that the instruments that will be adopted to eradicate or alleviate poverty are targeted at all groups at risk of poverty. Because poverty is only one and it is necessary to have comprehensive measures that do not part with the specifics of different ethnic groups.

The new Strategy on Roma Inclusion and Participation until 2030 gives a unique space for such a change to take place, as the fight against antigypsyism is one of the main areas. It is now up to the ministries to react to the action plans and activities, because through them they can declare their real efforts to change the position of marginalized Roma communities.

According to a study by the Central European Institute for Labor Research (CELSI), most of the almost half a million Roma minority in Slovakia live in poverty and face social exclusion. Almost half (48%) of Roma and Roma over the age of 16 are unemployed according to sample surveys, and only one in five reports employment or trade as their main economic activity. The Roma population suffers from a high risk of poverty and social exclusion - according to the CELSI study, the at-risk-of-poverty rate of Roma in Slovakia reached 87% compared to 13% in the general population. Poverty combined with demographic trends (multiple families with a higher number of dependent household members), poverty associated with low-skilled or low-paid jobs exacerbates the high unemployment rate.

The strategy for Roma inclusion and participation also contains the following sub-objectives:
Sub-objective 1: To ensure equal opportunities for MRC, increase the necessary skills and gain practical experience in the transition from education to the labor market.

Sub-objective 2: Increase the efficiency, quality of provision and expand the availability of public and non-public employment services and active labor market measures for marginalized communities.

Sub-objective 3: To create conditions for the support of marginalized communities employment with employers, with an emphasis on employers in the field of social economy.

Sub-objective 4: Reduce discrimination in the labor market and other manifestations of anti-Roma racism.

Conclusion

Our findings show that doses in material need are not sufficient. They also do not cover basic needs. Likewise, the stereotypes and prejudices associated with the setting of the law on material need are not observed. Human dignity is not considered an important part of the social system at all, and great emphasis is placed on merit. However, this approach does not reflect reality. The reality is that the basic benefit in material need does not even cover the basic human needs. In connection with prejudice and antigypsyism, Roma from excluded localities thus become well below the poverty line, and the existing anti-poverty strategy does not reflect best practices. The space for the real realization of the promises of changing the lives of Roma in excluded communities is right now and lies in the recently approved Strategy for Roma integration and participation until 2030. Ministries now have the opportunity to define measures and activities in the strategy action plans and subsequently implement them. What is very important, however, is the fact that the fight against poverty is blind to antigypsyism and also blind to the fact that local governments are key players in the integration of marginalized Roma communities. This is precisely the area that individual ministries should pay the most attention to, as well as working more precisely with examples of good practice.

Poverty is a disease of the system and needs to be seen as such. If poverty is only addressed as a failure of individuals, the right tools will not be adopted to eradicate poverty from the system. Poverty is currently becoming a structural problem and needs to be addressed anyway. It is very important to break away from merit and rather to move closer to the fact that being poor is the result of systemic failure, discrimination and inequality. If we look at poverty in excluded Roma communities and look at the numbers of the poor, it is clear that

these are not individual failures but systemic failures, and that it is therefore necessary to approach poverty in terms of changing structural settings and not to focus on individuals.

Recommendations

European level

- when creating strategic plans, pay attention to all aspects that are associated with the Roma, such as prejudice, stereotypes, antigypsyism, discrimination
- create a better monitoring tool to control the use of EU funds in individual states in the fight against poverty and Roma inclusion
- create the conditions for Member States to include in the development of national programs the members of the communities concerned by the national program
- replace the meritocratic criteria with a rights-based approach

National level

- strategic documents must be prepared realistically and must include all aspects that concern the Roma: stereotypes, prejudices, antigypsyism
- better coordination between ministries and local authorities, as local governments are key players in implementing measures and activities
- in developing any measures, it is also necessary to cooperate with the target group to which the measure relates
- replace the meritocratic criteria with a rights-based approach
- Increase the amount to cover basic needs to at least the level of the poverty line in the country; redo the reference budgets methodology to make it compatible with a life in dignity

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