



## Disbursement of EU Funds for Projects

### **Increasing the Educational Level of Members of Marginalized Romani Communities from the Standpoint of (De-) Segregation of Romani Children in Education**

(Qualitative Research Analysis)

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## Summary

The overrepresentation of Romani children in special schools for children with mental disabilities is seen as one of the most pressing problems in Slovakia's education system. The disbursement of European Union funds through operational programs could serve as an efficient instrument to support the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups and, at the same time, could have a positive impact on the disproportionate enrolment of Romani children in special education.

This analysis deals with the impact of the implementation of projects funded under the call "Programmes and Courses for Pupils from Marginalized Romani Communities", which was issued in February 2009 under the Operational Programme Education for 2007-2013 and led to funding through the Ministry of Education for 50 school-based projects with an average project budget of approximately EUR 168 000. The main objective of the analysis was to assess how the implementation of these projects influences the practice of transferring Romani children to special schools.

The results of the questionnaire survey carried out by the Roma Education Fund showed that the schools do not deal in any way in their project activities with the issue of the disproportionate enrolment of Romani children in special schools, do not monitor the numbers of children transferred to special education, do not pay specific attention to children transferred from special schools to standard schools and only to a limited extent prepare pupils at special schools for education at secondary schools. The follow-up analysis based on qualitative interviews with school directors was to clarify in a more complex manner why this is the case. Therefore, the qualitative research was aimed at specific activities performed within the projects in order to assess their impact on the education of Romani children.

The research has shown that the primary motivation of schools for the implementation of such projects was to improve the situation of Romani children in education through funding such activities for which there are not sufficient funds from the state budget. For this reason, project activities are dominantly aimed at the purchases of material/technical equipment and the performance of various educational and out-of-school activities focusing on Romani children. The research has pointed out that the activities focusing on Romani children often concentrate mainly on their practical skills, but to a lesser extent on the improvement of the formal educational process. More emphasis is laid upon skill-development subjects than on academic subjects and a lot of out-of-school activities are carried out within projects (for example field trips).

Funds are also used for teacher trainings and the creation of various educational materials. Within their projects, the schools rarely use alternative educational methods and tend to create new educational methods rather than use those already proven in practice. Various ethnic and gender stereotypes are often reproduced in project activities.

The implementation of projects is problematic due to the high administrative burden of the projects, which puts so much workload on the implementers of the project that it often complicates or even prevents the effective and adequate fulfillment of the set priorities.

Schools mostly implement projects without the broader involvement of other local stakeholders – self-governing bodies, the third sector or Romani non-governmental organizations. Therefore, these are often activities that begin and end within the school. Parents are typically only the passive 'spectators' of the implemented activities and are not practically involved in their preparation and implementation. However, in several cases



projects include cooperation with secondary schools in the region to prepare pupils for transition to these schools.

In terms of the influence of the implemented projects on potential and real desegregation, we have hardly found any positive impact. Although the project activities improve the educational achievements of pupils and their school attendance and contribute to a better atmosphere at schools, it is not possible to find a direct connection between the implementation of projects financed from European Union funds and the decrease in the number of pupils in special schools. The schools themselves do not even see any connection between the implemented activities and a possible decrease in the number of pupils in special education. Special schools in no way prepare pupils for transition to the standard education system and did not set it as their aim in the preparation of projects. This is mostly related to the fact that school directors viewed the process of transferring Romani children to special education as correct and they regard the current diagnosis of children as an adequate instrument to assess their intellectual abilities.

On the basis of the small qualitative survey it is not possible to fully generalize the effect of spending European Union funds on the reduction of the overrepresentation of Romani children in special education. What this qualitative research has contributed is particularly the finding that schools seek to improve possibilities and conditions for the education of Romani children, but they do not see a primary relation between the current possibilities of the education system and the overrepresentation of Romani children in special education. That is why the projects are not implemented with the aim of decreasing their numbers in special education and preventing their disproportionate enrolment in this parallel system of education.



## 1. Introduction

The overrepresentation of Romani children in special schools for children with mental disabilities is seen as one of the most pressing problems in Slovakia's education system. Even though Roma officially account for 2% and unofficially for approximately 7 to 8% of the population of Slovakia, the proportion of Romani children in special primary schools is approximately 60%.<sup>1</sup> In addition to domestic experts, multinational non-governmental organizations (Amnesty International, European Roma Rights Center, etc.) also point to this fact.

The disbursement of the European Union's funds by means of operational programs can be a highly efficient instrument to support the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups. The setting-up of individual measures in operational instruments affects the possibilities for implementing individual projects and determines the scope of eligible activities. For projects within the topic of "social inclusion", they should be set up and implemented in such a way that ensures that their impacts do not support any further segregation of (in this case) Roma.

This analysis deals with the impact of the implementation of projects funded under the call "Programmes and Courses for Pupils from Marginalized Romani Communities", which was issued in February 2009 under the Operational Programme Education for 2007-2013 and led to funding through the Ministry of Education for 50 school-based projects with an average project budget of approximately EUR 168 000. According to the framework of the general call for project proposals within the measure aimed at increasing the educational level of marginalized Romani communities, the aim of this type of measures is: *"to increase the educational level of the members of marginalized Romani communities through facilitating their access to formal education and through their further education."*<sup>2</sup>

Within this measure, the institution publishing the call for project proposals also defined further specific aims including *"supporting the social inclusion of the members of marginalized Romani communities through facilitating their access to formal education and obtaining skills necessary for the labor market"* and the further education of the members of marginalized Romani communities and people working in the field of their integration into society.

Activities to be implemented were to focus mainly on the following areas:

- Supporting the access of the members of marginalized Romani communities to education at all school levels.
- Supporting an individual approach and developing alternative teaching methods and instruments.
- Providing further education for the members of marginalized Romani communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Eben Friedman and Mihai Surdu (coordinators), Eben Friedman, Elena Gallová Kriglerová, Martina Kubánová, and Martin Slosiarik (authors), *School as Ghetto: Systemic Overrepresentation of Roma in Special Education in Slovakia* (Budapest: Roma Education Fund, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.asfeu.sk/operacny-program-vzdelavanie/opatrenie-31/>



- Providing further education for people and supporting cooperation among institutions working in the field of the integration of the members of marginalized Romani communities into society.<sup>3</sup>

In order to improve the situation of Romani children in education, it is important to monitor not only whether projects achieve formal improvement in educational achievements and improve access to education, but also whether schools use them to prevent the negative impacts of the current education system (improper diagnosis of children, unjustified transfer to special schools, physical segregation) or whether they support the elimination of such negative impacts on children (re-diagnosis and transfer back to standard schools or transition to secondary schools).

This research therefore focuses on several aspects concerning the disbursement of EU funds and observes schools' incentives to implement projects, the extent to which schools pay attention to the issues of segregation and desegregation, the impacts of project implementation on Romani children's education and educational achievements and how sustainable the project activities are in the long term for improving the situation in education.

## **2. Preparatory stage / Field mapping**

In the first step, all schools implementing projects within the measure entitled "Increasing the educational level of the members of marginalized Romani communities" were addressed. They received questionnaires with the following questions:

- the proportion of Romani pupils in the school, in total and specifically for zero, first and second grades,
- for standard primary schools, the number of special classes relative to the number of standard classes,
- whether the project monitors the number of pupils transferred to a special school or class,
- whether the project supports pupils transferred from a special school.

Responses from the schools that returned the completed questionnaires are summarized in the following tables. As the response rate for these questionnaire was very low (only 11 out of 50 schools responded to the REF's request), the answers cannot be completely generalized. Yet, the data provided indicate certain trends as the schools that responded to the REF's request were from various regions and had different numbers of Romani pupils.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

**Primary schools:**

Location	Proportion of Roma in total / first and zero grade / second grade	Number of standard classes / special classes	Project focus	
			Monitoring the number of pupils transferred to a special school or class	Supporting pupils transferred from a special school
Markušovce	79/90/84	31/3	NO	NO
Bystré	20/2.6/2.3	16/0	NO	NO
Šumiac	80/80/80	10/1	NO	NO
Pečovská Nová Ves	42/30/46	19/7	NO	YES
Jakubany	52/12/8	14/10	YES	YES
Kremnica (for pupils with hearing impairments)	48/43/63	5/8	NO	NO
Poniky	20/8.36/33.3	9/0	NO	NO
Prakovce	26/40/37	15/2	NO	NO
Slavošovce	60/84/60	18/0	NO	NO

**Special primary school:**

Location	Proportion of Roma (in %)	Project focus		
		Reassessment of intellectual abilities	Preparation for transfer to standard education	Preparation for standard secondary education
Zvolen/Sokolská	80/88/80	NO	NO	YES

As shown in the tables, the overwhelming majority of the schools in question do not focus on the fields of (de-)segregation in their projects. Only two primary schools run projects aimed at supporting pupils transferred from special education (and the questionnaire does not make clear whether this is done by means of some specific activities or methods or within standard activities aimed at all pupils from marginalized Romani communities). At the same time, according to the questionnaire there is only one primary school monitoring the number of pupils transferred to special education within the project. As the research has shown, the monitoring of these pupils has no practical impact upon the rate of their transfer. Based on these data, it is not possible to analyze in more detail the circumstances and reasons behind the fact that schools do not incorporate the (de-)segregation characteristics in their projects. There may be plenty of reasons and in order to discover them, it does not suffice to analyze the questionnaire responses only.



Therefore, what we focused on during our interviews with selected schools was not only the very aspect of desegregation, but also the overall process of the project, preparation, cooperation with various stakeholders as well as the activities that the schools carried out within their projects.

### 3. Qualitative research

#### 3.1 Qualitative research methodology

Out of those schools that responded to the questionnaire survey, we asked 9 schools to participate in the qualitative research. The schools were selected so as to map various regions of Slovakia. At the same time, we aimed to have at least two special primary schools in our sample. As there was only one special primary school that completed the questionnaire (Zvolen), we invited another school to participate in the research (Trebišov). Altogether, the qualitative research was carried out at 10 schools including two special primary schools and five primary schools with special classes. The research took place in April and May 2011.

All visits to the schools were based on a qualitative interview with school directors/deputy directors. All citations given below are taken from the interviews with the school directors/deputy director and have been anonymized. We also visited ongoing project activities at some schools.

#### Schools participating in the qualitative research:

Municipality	Region	Type of school	Project title
Kremnica	Banská Bystrica	Primary school for pupils with hearing impairments	Giving everyone a chance
Poniky	Banská Bystrica	Primary school + nursery school	Even school can be a place for the Romani spirit
Šumiac	Banská Bystrica	Primary school	Supporting the social inclusion of marginalized Romani communities – Education for everyone
Zvolen	Banská Bystrica	Special primary school	Supporting the social inclusion of marginalized Romani communities – Education for everyone
Krásnohorské podhradie	Košice	Primary school	Supporting the social inclusion of marginalized Romani communities – Education for everyone
Markušovce	Košice	Primary school + nursery school	Feeling ‘at home’ at school
Prakovce	Košice	Primary school + nursery school	The sun shines for all children!
Trebišov	Košice	Special primary school	Learning for ourselves



<b>Jakubany</b>	Prešov	Primary school + nursery school	Educating Romani pupils in a modern European school
<b>Pečovská Nová Ves</b>	Prešov	Primary school + nursery school	“PIERKO (FEATHER)” – a program to support the social inclusion of pupils from disadvantaged Romani communities

The following analysis presents our findings from these qualitative interviews.

### 3.2 Basic information about the situation at the schools in question

The schools where the interviews were held are typically located in villages or towns with significant Romani populations. This is reflected in the numbers of Romani pupils at these schools. In some villages these schools have more than half-share of Romani pupils. Some of the schools in the sample are even attended almost exclusively by Romani pupils.

The research also pointed to the tendency for the proportion of Romani children in these schools to increase, which can be, according to the respondents' statements, attributed to the different demographic characteristics of Romani and non-Romani populations as well as a so-called “white flight” effect, when non-Romani parents prefer schools not attended by Romani pupils.

*“When I started to work here as school director 13 years ago, we had 9 - 10% of Romani pupils here. Now it is 82 - 83%.”*

Special schools and special classes in standard primary schools are a specific case, as they are almost exclusively attended by Roma. This has been confirmed by findings from other surveys where the overrepresentation of Romani pupils in special education was reported.<sup>4</sup>

The social situation of pupils at schools matches the proportion of Romani/non-Romani pupils. At most schools, Romani children come from a socially disadvantaged environment or are in material need, having become beneficiaries of state subsidy programs (subsidies for school meals and school supplies). Where there are more than 50% of such pupils, the school receives subsidies for all of its pupils. The social situation of Romani children influences possibilities for their education to a great extent; therefore (as shown below), schools seek to use various measures in their projects to compensate for social disadvantage. This is the case

<sup>4</sup> Jana Tomatová, *Na vedľajšej koľaji: Je proces zaradovania rómskych detí do špeciálnych základných škôl znevýhodňujúcim činiteľom? [Sidetracked: Is the Process of Enrolling Romani Children in Special Schools a Disadvantaging Factor?]* (Bratislava: Slovak Governance Institute, 2004); Eben Friedman and Mihai Surdu (coordinators), Eben Friedman, Elena Gallová Kriglerová, Martina Kubánová, and Martin Slosiarik (authors), *School as Ghetto: Systemic Overrepresentation of Roma in Special Education in Slovakia* (Budapest: Roma Education Fund, 2009); Vlado Rafael (ed.), *Odpovede na otázky (de)segregácie rómskych žiakov vo vzdelávacom systéme na Slovensku [Answers to Questions on (de-)Segregation of Romani Students in the Slovak Education System]* (Bratislava: Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti – Open Society Foundation: 2011).





because the public funds used for subsidizing school supplies may not be a sufficient instrument to improve these children's access to quality education.

### 3.3 Placement of children into classes, teacher assistants and zero grades

Several schools apply the principle of placing children into parallel classes according to their educational achievements. However, this means in practice that non-Romani children attend A classes and Romani children B classes, with the best Romani children placed into A classes as well. Some schools experience Romani parents' reluctance to have their children placed into A classes among a majority of non-Romani children.

*“Some purely Romani classes are good, too. But not because of being white or black, but because of their educational achievements. We have A classes attended by non-Romani pupils together with some five, six Romani pupils, the better ones, so they motivate each other in the class. And what about those underachievers? They are in a separate, B class, unfortunately those are Romani pupils. But I know that in a class with Romani pupils only, they can better motivate each other. When they are together with non-Roma, they are shy, lag behind, the teacher must pay attention to everyone. In this way, they are more confident and can progress better.”*

However, this is how the initial segregation of Romani pupils takes place. As school directors needed arguments in favor of the different placement of pupils, they used educational achievements as a legitimate criterion. In this respect, it is questionable whether achievement-based placement is the most efficient way to ensure quality education for Romani children.

Several schools make use of the position of teacher assistant, but these assistants are mostly non-Roma. One of the reasons is that it may not be possible to find a Romani assistant with sufficient qualifications in all municipalities in question. The schools seek to utilize teacher assistants in various ways, from supervising school attendance and helping with hygienic habits to assisting teachers in the teaching process.

The majority of schools have zero grades, which are mostly attended by Romani children. They are placed here on the basis of a school-readiness assessment at their entry to school. Although the interviews did not focus on the efficiency of zero grades, the school directors spontaneously expressed their satisfaction with zero grades as they make children better prepared for the commencement of compulsory school attendance.



## 3.4 The implementation of EU projects aimed at increasing the educational level of the members of marginalized Romani communities

The previous section sought to describe the overall situation of Romani children at the schools included in the research. The presented information indicates that the situation at these schools reflects the position of Romani children in the Slovak education system. By comparing the findings from this research given below with findings from other studies carried out in Slovakia,<sup>5</sup> we can judge that the situation at these schools does not significantly differ from most schools with a high proportion of Romani pupils.

What makes these schools different is an active approach to fundraising. Most of the schools in question implement several projects aimed at improving educational possibilities for their pupils (not only Romani pupils) and, with a few exceptions, they have experience in implementing EU-funded projects. Therefore, we have decided to also pay attention to incentives and experience concerning the implementation of projects aimed at Romani children.

### 3.4.1 Incentives and project preparation

In order to assess the inclusiveness of implemented projects and their impacts on the education of Romani children, it is important to know what the initial motivation of schools was and why they decided to implement this type of projects.

The primary motivation for most schools was to obtain funds to improve school equipment and to ensure its overall modernization. In many schools, state budget funds are not sufficient to implement all activities and to buy modern educational equipment. For some schools, the motivation was to follow up previously implemented projects (for example school reconstruction) and to provide better equipment for the educational process.

The purchase of school equipment is undoubtedly an important precondition for improving the education of Romani children (among others), but the school directors rarely expressed spontaneously that their primary motivation had been to ensure the social inclusion of Romani children.

*“The reason why our primary school decided to participate in the project was, I say it openly, to obtain modern teaching aids/equipment, which pupils can learn to use themselves so that the education process at the school will be of better quality and more modern. Another expectation was to improve the educational level of pupils (the target group).”*

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<sup>5</sup> Compare for example Jana Tomatová, *Na vedľajšej koľaji: Je proces zaradovania rómskych detí do špeciálnych základných škôl znevýhodňujúcim činiteľom? [Sidetracked: Is the Process of Enrolling Romani Children in Special Schools a Disadvantaging Factor?]* (Bratislava: Slovak Governance Institute, 2004); Eben Friedman and Mihai Surdu (coordinators), Eben Friedman, Elena Gallová Kriglerová, Martina Kubánová, and Martin Slosiarik (authors), *School as Ghetto: Systemic Overrepresentation of Roma in Special Education in Slovakia* (Budapest: Roma Education Fund, 2009); Vlado Rafael (ed.), *Odpovede na otázky (de-)segregácie rómskych žiakov vo vzdelávacom systéme na Slovensku [Answers to Questions on (de-)Segregation of Romani Students in the Slovak Education System]* (Bratislava: Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti – Open Society Foundation: 2011).



*“(The motivation was) to improve this level. Romani children usually have average or below-average school results. There are some with excellent grades, but only few. So we wanted to help these children.”*

The description of the incentives for implementing a project creates an impression that in several cases schools just made use of the share of their Romani pupils to obtain additional funds to improve their equipment and the educational process at school as a whole (teacher education, implementing new educational methods etc.). On the other hand, these funds undoubtedly improve Romani children’s access to higher quality education and cannot be perceived as insufficiently effective solely on the basis of such motivation of schools. To assess effectiveness, attention needs to be paid to specific activities and the manner of their implementation. This will be presented in a separate section of the analysis (3.4.2).

The incentives of schools before the start of projects are reflected in the form of project preparation. This is where individual schools differed from one another. Some of them involved in project preparation almost all teachers and school employees, who identified problems and areas requiring the focus of project activities on the basis of their own teaching experience. Other schools relied almost completely on services provided by various companies writing so-called „turnkey“ projects. In these cases, cooperation and project implementation were highly complicated because the project did not sufficiently reflect the actual needs of these schools and their pupils. Several of the schools saw cooperation with these companies as highly problematic:

*“They spoiled whatever they could, it is practically irreparable, because it was approved that way. We are struggling with it in an unthinkable way. I am fighting for survival so that we can complete the project, because many teachers are so frustrated...”*

Only rarely did schools explicitly state that they conducted an analysis of their pupils’ educational needs and prepared a project on that basis. The identification of Romani pupils’ needs provided by teachers (or people preparing the project) often replicated various prejudices and stereotypes about Roma as well as gender stereotypes (activities focusing predominantly on manual skills, traditional Romani crafts, dancing and singing, supposedly different needs of boys and girls).



## 3.4.2 Activities implemented during projects

The best way to document the incentives of schools and actual aims of projects is to observe specific activities that the schools carried out during the implementation of their projects or continue to carry out up to now. They can be typologically divided into several areas:

### a) Improving the educational process by means of school equipment

School equipment and various teaching aids purchases were a significant, if not dominant part of project implementation. As part of projects, schools bought interactive whiteboards, computers, other electronic equipment (printers, cameras, equipment for computer labs...), materials and equipment for practical activities (sewing machines, potter's wheel, clay, cloth...), for artistic activities (dancers' costumes, musical instruments...), appliances for household chores (kitchen equipment including a kitchen stove and pots, other household appliances such as a washing machine, iron, mixer, refrigerator...) and sports equipment (for example balls, ping-pong tables, racquets...). In one case, equipment for a driving field (traffic lights, bicycles...) was bought.

Equipment purchases are not a separate activity, but they indicate how the primary project activities were directed. During the interviews, the school directors often mentioned activities related to improving children's practical skills and various out-of-school activities rather than improving the educational process.

*“Not traditional teaching, but to let them learn something in a different, modern way... our school is old, it has been here for 70 years, so the equipment is also old, obsolete, often broken, so we would renew it.”*

### b) Trainings for teachers

Nearly all project proposals included trainings for teachers in order for them to obtain various teaching skills. In many cases, these trainings were aimed at the ability to work with newly purchased teaching aids (for example interactive whiteboards, computers, Internet) or the development of communication, pro-social and other skills that teachers should have. The projects are also partially aimed at training teachers to work with marginalized Romani communities; however, such trainings mostly focus on developing pupils' practical skills, not their formal education, which reflects the above mentioned stereotypes about the “needs” of Romani pupils. A separate educational method is e-learning, which is incorporated in almost all projects.

During the interviews, the school directors spontaneously mentioned these activities only marginally; some of them did not mention them at all. Several school directors also criticized the ineffectiveness of these courses, because these services were provided by external companies. Therefore, it can be assumed that teachers and other employees attend various trainings, courses and measures aimed at improving their pedagogical skills, but we cannot assess to what extent their completion is efficient for improving the education of Romani children and whether they were not to serve only the purpose of formally fulfilling the planned activities.



## **c) Creating pedagogical materials and educational manuals**

The situation concerning pedagogical materials is similar to that mentioned in connection with teacher trainings. In the description of activities and the specification of aims for most projects, the creation of various manuals and educational materials is also proposed in order to improve the education process for (Romani) children. At the same time, the creation of materials is not usually based on the utilization of existing and practice-proven alternative educational materials.

These educational materials consist of accompanying materials for developing teaching skills as well as innovative educational forms that should make it easier for teachers to modernize the education of pupils.

The school directors tended to understand educational materials as e-learning outputs and teaching and educational plans individually prepared by every teacher in the course of working with children, not as the creation of educational manuals.

## **d) Developing pupils' practical skills**

This type of activities accounts for a significant part of the implemented projects and was found at virtually all schools in the research sample. The activities include spare-time practical activities aimed at the development of manual skills and talents for arts or sports (for example dance, music, woodworking, pottery, household chores, ball games) and computer skills. When spontaneously describing the activities, the school directors most often mentioned the development of these skills of Romani children. These activities are performed in the form of separate after-school clubs, trainings or supporting such activities during standard lessons.

With regard to using innovative teaching methods, this characteristic is connected with the use of information and communication technologies in the educational process (computers, interactive whiteboards...). There are only some schools where pedagogues also have practical experience in the application of alternative methods in the education process (for example Montessori Pedagogy or Integrated Thematic Instruction).

Among non-traditional activities there is for example the creation and implementation of Road Traffic Studies as a new school subject.

Activities for boys and girls differed in several cases, especially in connection with practical activities related to vocational programs or household chores (for example cooking and sewing for girls and woodworking and blacksmithing for boys). Gender stereotypes were apparent especially in giving preference to sports activities for boys and activities related to household chores, parenthood and motherhood for girls. Despite the respondents stated that they did not differentiate between boys and girls in their projects, we can judge that, in general, schools as well as projects show a huge deficit in the field of gender-sensitive education resulting from the lack of understanding and information about gender equality as a cross-cutting issue.

## **e) Tutoring**

Schools differed in whether their activities included tutoring building upon or going beyond the standard curriculum. The schools performing these activities did so in the afternoon hours. The tutoring of Romani pupils in elementary general subjects was mostly provided by the teachers that teach these children during normal lessons and are aware of their weaknesses.



They seek to help the children improve in these problematic areas as part of tutoring. Doing homework is also part of tutoring.

At one school, the tutoring program went beyond the standard curriculum. In that case, it included English language teaching for ninth-graders who had been learning a different foreign language before. The goal was to facilitate their transition to a secondary school where English is taught.

The same school provides an after-school club for the best pupils from higher grades, which is aimed at the Romani language and content not commonly included in the curriculum.

## f) Excursions and trips

Trips are an important activity within projects. The school directors involved in the research argued in favor of these activities stating that Romani children could not otherwise participate in any out-of-school activities due to lack of finances. Excursions and trips are connected in various ways with the development of the communication and practical skills of Romani children and with experience-based forms of education. Their destinations are diverse, for example a botanical or zoological garden, nearby larger cities (Prešov, Košice, Martin, Bratislava,...), 3D cinema, the High Tatras etc. Some trips serve as incentives and participation in them is conditional, for example upon participation in tutoring or good behavior.

*“Those who do not attend tutoring sessions cannot go for a trip. They always look forward to it very much. It is often the only possibility for them to see larger cities.”*

## g) Supporting transition to secondary school

Several schools' projects incorporated activities aimed at supporting pupils in the transition to secondary schools. It mostly includes the involvement of students from higher grades in the above mentioned activities such as practical activities and tutoring.

One of the primary schools in question took an original approach to supporting Romani children in their transition to secondary schools, where its project included the writing of an expert study about the success of students at nearby secondary schools and labor market prospects for their school-leavers. An external research institution was hired to write the study. The goal was to provide, based on this analysis, better guidance for Romani pupils and their parents in their search for secondary education opportunities.

Another primary school also took an interesting approach to this issue by establishing special technical school classes for those who completed special education at the primary school. The school director's philosophy is that *“every municipality must educate its ‘own’ Roma on its own, until they obtain their vocational certificate.”* The project was used to finance teaching aids for practical classes, which were used by pupils in special classes and in the special technical school.



## Summary of project activities

As shown by the description of performed activities, the projects in the schools in question are not primarily aimed at the (de-)segregation of Romani pupils. In this respect, it is also questionable whether they will make such pupils more successful in the educational process, as the key activities at many schools are those aimed at the development of pupils' practical skills, trips and excursions. This is also apparent for example in connection with providing assistance in the transition to secondary schools, which school directors often mentioned as one of the important aims of their projects. However, such assistance is again provided only in the form of supporting practical skills, not education in standard academic subjects.

*Especially for that reason [support in transition to secondary school] we have included pottery. And also handicraft, including embroidery and making glued patterns. It is also preparation for secondary technical schools. We also take part in competitions and have better results than secondary technical schools specializing in pottery.*

Without doubt, all these activities are beneficial for Romani children and help them get more actively involved in education. What is questionable in this respect is the effectiveness of funds spent with regard to the social inclusion of Romani children and the aims specified when submitting individual project applications. A separate section (section 5) will deal with the impact upon reducing the extent of Romani children's transfer to special education or their reintegration into standard education.

### **3.4.3 Cooperation among various stakeholders in project implementation**

Projects aimed at social inclusion and increasing the educational level of Romani children from a marginalized environment should ideally involve other stakeholders – families, communities, the non-profit sector – thus opening the school to the broader community.

However, at the schools in question, this only takes place to a rather limited extent within the projects. It is almost exclusively teachers or teacher assistants (only at some schools) that are involved in the performance of individual activities. The school mainly acts inwards, on its pupils, without developing cooperation with other potential stakeholders. Parents are mostly invited as the audience for performances. Their involvement in the educational process is very limited, with schools stating the lack of parents' interest as the reason behind it. Not established has been long-term cooperation with community centers and civic associations which could be built upon when implementing projects financed from Structural Funds. Especially in some smaller villages, it may be related to the fact that such organizations are only located in more distant cities. There was some reported cooperation with secondary schools within municipalities or in their vicinity.



## **4. (De-)segregation of Romani pupils**

### **4.1 The impact of projects on the education of Romani pupils**

The effect of the implementation of this type of projects on the potential desegregation of Romani pupils can be observed directly, by asking questions about transfers to special education or by monitoring the physical separation of pupils at school, or indirectly, by analyzing impacts on Romani pupils. Therefore, our research was focused on the assessment of project activities and the changes that the school directors can observe in the case of Romani children participating in the projects.

As the individual activities primarily focused on the development of practical skills, the school directors also perceived project results in similar fashion. Some reported that Romani pupils improved their educational achievements, school attendance (also motivated by trips and excursions), hygienic habits and attitude towards school. Other schools were unable to assess the project activities at this stage, but reported being satisfied with the progress of the project, which, in their opinion, had a positive influence upon the situation of Romani children. However, the school directors did not spontaneously mention the inclusion or desegregation of Romani pupils as a positive project outcome.

### **4.2 Segregation based on project characteristics**

A contradictory opinion appeared in the course of the research, which is related to the fact that project activities are to be primarily aimed at Romani children, thus creating secondary separation between Romani and non-Romani children. Most of the school directors perceived this as a negative side effect of a well-directed project. The school directors find it difficult to assign only Romani children for individual activities; in some cases it is not even possible because non-Romani children are also interested in after-school clubs or out-of-school activities. According to the school directors, this also creates a social tension among parents resulting from “giving preference” to Romani children over non-Romani children. All children can use teaching aids and materials together, but some activities are for Romani children only. The school directors are of the opinion that it would be more beneficial for the social inclusion of Romani children if they could participate in individual activities together with non-Romani children.

### **4.3 Inclusion in project activities**

A positive, inclusive outcome of projects is the common participation of pupils from special classes and those from standard classes in most activities carried out in a project. Needless to say, this only applies to standard primary schools with special classes; project activities in special schools are only aimed at students at the particular school. In the case of special classes, children attend after-school clubs, field trips and various out-of-school activities together with other (Romani) pupils. This may not necessarily contribute to improving their educational results or chances for their transfer back to a standard class; however, in terms of psychology, it may have a positive influence on the atmosphere at school and the de-stigmatization of pupils from special classes.





## 4.4 Transfers to the special education system

The main research question was how EU-funded projects influenced the possibilities of desegregation for Romani pupils, the reduction of transfers to special education and the possibilities to continue their studies in secondary schools.

The absolute majority of respondents (school directors) in our research stated that project activities did not pursue the goal of nor were aimed at lowering the number of children in special education, which they explained by diagnosis-based transfer to special education as the final verdict on placement. The school directors did not see any connection between their projects and the decrease in the number of children in special schools. Transfer to special education (classes or special schools) is done practically in the same manner as at other schools where no such projects are implemented. Like in other surveys, the school directors consider the placement of children in special classes (schools) to be legitimate and based on their mental disability. Based on the statements voiced by several school directors, it can be concluded that during the preparation and implementation of projects they did not take into consideration at all that improvements in the education of Romani children could lead to a lower rate of their placement in special education in the future. This was one of the reasons why this analysis dealt in more detail with schools' incentives to participate in a project, the manner of project implementation and what type of activities is the most dominant. These facts indicate how schools presently perceive the education of Romani children and what they consider to be important aspects in improving their education.

There was only one case when a project coordinator mentioned that the project could potentially lead to a lower share of children transferred to special schools, but the project was only in its initial stage and its outcomes could not yet be measured. But she personally did not believe that such a thing would happen.

Not once did we find a school where project activities would be directly connected with the transfer of pupils from special education to mainstream education. Even if there was such a development in the recent past (only in a small number of cases), it was a process that had nothing to do with the implementation of a project. Likewise, schools do not monitor, observe or assess the share of pupils transferred to special education within their projects. In the school directors' opinion, the reason why they do not perform such activities is mainly connected with the fact that the project focused on different aims and it was not its ambition to influence the situation concerning transfers to special education (or transfers from special schools back to standard schools).

The project activities as described above apparently do not have any influence on the very process of placement, i.e., on the diagnosis of children. Diagnosis is carried out separately and in the same manner as before project implementation. As several of the school directors stated, diagnosis is performed according to established regulations and re-diagnosis takes place regularly when necessary. Transfers to standard classes on the basis of re-diagnosis were very rare at the selected schools – whether it was related to project activities or not.



## 4.5 Transfers to the standard education system

Children in special schools and classes are not specifically prepared for their transfer to the standard education system as part of project activities. As the project activities are directed more towards practical skills (especially in special schools or special classes included in the research) and not towards improvements in formal education, only to a limited extent can they facilitate such improvements in the education level of these children so as to allow their return to the standard education system. The respondents in our research – like in other completed surveys – are not inclined towards the idea of the reintegration of children that were once transferred. Therefore, they do not pay attention to this issue and did not incorporate it in projects financed from EU funds.

A separate topic is the preparation of Romani pupils to continue their studies in secondary schools. The school directors perceive many project activities (those aimed at changing educational methods, as well as various in-school and out-of-school activities focusing on the development of skills) as an important foundation for transition to secondary schools and therefore focus on them. Here, however, it should be repeated that the most that schools expect from Romani children in terms of their further education possibilities is vocational/technical schools, which is why their preparation concentrates on the above mentioned practical skills.

On the other hand, it can be viewed positively that schools consider realistic possibilities for the further education of Romani children taking into account the given region and employment prospects. Some organize field trips to visit the largest potential employers in the region. As mentioned above, there is one school where the school director plans to perform an analysis of market needs in the region and adapt future project activities accordingly. These activities mostly apply to Romani children in the standard education system.

In the case of special schools and classes, children automatically go on studying at nearby special technical schools and practical schools. Schools do not prepare their pupils in any way for transition to standard secondary schools, either within projects or outside of them.

In general, it can be stated that, for the schools analyzed in our research, projects financed from EU funds dominantly bring positive results in terms of school equipment, overall modernization and (mostly) better access to various in-school and out-of-school activities. Directors talked about activities aimed at formal education (standard academic subjects, not skill-development subjects) only at some schools, usually those where the projects were properly prepared in terms of both content and formal characteristics and various alternative educational forms, well placed into realistic and appropriate context, were also used. Many of the performed activities are undoubtedly beneficial for Romani children; what is rather questionable is their impact on their overall success in education and their social inclusion. Most of the projects cannot be definitively evaluated at this stage, but even now it can be stated that the schools do not implement their projects with a clear intention to reduce the proportion of Romani children in special education and, as a result, the performed activities are not clearly aimed at desegregation. Rather, these are activities that the schools would like to do with children, but they do not have sufficient funding for them from the state budget.



Ethnic and gender stereotypes are reproduced in many activities, particularly in after-school clubs and out-of-school activities.

## 5. Problems faced by schools in the implementation of projects

In general, the schools are satisfied with the progress of their projects. At several schools, these projects were a follow-up to previously implemented projects, especially for the purpose of financing the reconstruction of school buildings. Fundamental objections were presented in connection with the administrative burden of the financial closure of the project. These include for example the lack of information and high bureaucratic burden related to filling in cumulative work reports, long delays in public procurement, the impossibility of making even logical and necessary changes to projects which do not affect the project budget, repeatedly rejected and non-refunded payments to schools resulting in debts, even leading to criminal prosecution in one case.

These complications are encountered in all schools, but especially special schools, which have different financial management, as they are state budgetary organizations under a respective Regional School Office.

*“I can say that if had anticipated one fifth of the problems we have to face, I would not have gotten involved in the project. I am sorry that I have made such a mistake at the end of my pedagogical career. ... - I have received a court order, they have taken me to court, it was after they assured me that the money was on its way, we followed the schedule, the activity was carried out in the second week of February, I had been informed before that we would receive the money, but of course not in writing, the agency is reluctant to do so (... February, March, April, May, and in May they took me to court). What should I do about it now? I do not understand how I should go on. I cannot pay it from the school budget as it would be against the financing rules set by the Regional School Office, and I have no reason to pay it with my own money, and even if I did, it cannot be properly recorded in our bookkeeping.”*

*“So many problems and so absurd, for example in the activity ‘Around Slovakia on bikes’ they refused to accept bicycles as eligible costs, but we had to perform the activity...”*

Even though what the schools entering the projects initially worried about was the lack of pupils’ interest, this did not prove a problem in any school and pupils like to participate in the activities. This is also the case with tutoring, while those schools that do not provide tutoring as part of their projects reported that the main reason for not including it was that they were worried that pupils would not be interested.

Another recurring problem is the necessity to select only Romani children for activities. As mentioned above, there were some schools where especially non-Romani parents were very unhappy about this situation and it was more conducive to the breakup of the community of parents and children than to supporting social inclusion.

Several schools also found it difficult to persuade the Municipal Authority to allocate funds for the necessary co-financing of the project.



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