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Slovakia: Racist stereotyping should not determine education policy - International NGOs criticize Slovak Government

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), Amnesty International and the Open Society Foundation Bratislava (OSF) call on the Slovak government to refute the use of the “incest-argument” to justify segregated education for Romani children in Slovakia.

In April, the European Commission started infringement proceedings against Slovakia for discrimination against Romani children in schools contrary to EU anti-discrimination law. In the communication that preceded this decision, as widely reported in the media, the Slovak government justified the disproportionate number of Romani children in schools and classes designed for children with mental disabilities on the basis that there is a higher prevalence of genetically determined disorders amongst the Slovak Roma due to having the highest coefficient of inbreeding in Europe.

ERRC, Amnesty International and OSF consider that the government’s arguments, presenting Roma as a group characterized by leading such “socially-pathological” lifestyles, are racist and discriminatory. Such statements should have no place in an official communication. Notably, the country could ultimately be held accountable for discrimination against Roma at the European Court of Justice. The use of the “incest-argument” to justify segregated education for Romani children in Slovakia suggests that the government is failing to take seriously the grave charges made against it by the Commission”.

In 2013, the Slovak Public Defender of Rights highlighted that Roma represented over 88 per cent of pupils of special classes and schools for pupils with mild mental disabilities that she had surveyed.¹ The misdiagnosis of mental disabilities amongst Romani children resulting in segregated education is a serious discriminatory measure propped up by the Slovak government allowing lower quality education for Romani children. Children attending segregated schools have significant difficulties in advancing to higher education and gaining a decent job.

¹ Public Defender of Rights, *Report on executing the right to education of members of Roma national minority with special education needs*, July 2013, available at: <http://www.vop.gov.sk/files/Sprava%20VOP-Vzdelavanie%20Romov.pdf>.

Higher occurrence of incest within Roma communities is a historic stereotype and using it as an excuse for educational segregation is not just a typical racist argument but signals a complete failure to genuinely address the key issue of discrimination. It effectively seeks to provide fuel for further racism against this already vulnerable minority.

ERRC, Amnesty International and OSF Bratislava call on the Slovak government to ensure its laws, policies and practices are in line with EU anti-discrimination laws. On 8 June, the organizations requested the opportunity to meet jointly with the Slovak Minister of Education to discuss the envisaged response and engagement of the Slovak government with the European Commission to address the concerns raised in the infringement proceedings.

Background

Infringement proceedings provide the Commission with an effective legal tool to ensure compliance with EU law. If the Commission believes a Member State is in breach of EU law and considers the measures taken by the Member States to address the Commission's concerns as insufficient, the Commission may bring the matter to the Court of Justice. If the Court finds a Member State has failed to fulfil an obligation under the Treaties, it will require the state to take the necessary measures to rectify this.

The decision to launch infringement proceedings against the Slovak Republic was announced on 29th of April 2015. Roma children in many European countries suffer from segregated education and their unjustified channelling into special forms of education.

Amnesty International, European Roma Rights Centre and the Open Society Foundation have monitored the situation of Romani children in the Slovak Republic for many years, including after the first ever national court decision in a case of discrimination of Romani children in education in Slovakia – the case of Šarišské Michaľany. For recent documents on discrimination in schools please see:

- [ERRC submission to UN HCR \(2013\)](#)
- [ERRC submission to the European Commission \(2013\)](#)
- [Amnesty International: Slovak authorities in breach of obligations to Romani school children \(2013\)](#)
- [Amnesty International: Slovakia's 'container schools' worsen segregation of Roma children from society \(2015\)](#)

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