

Slovakia

Still separate, still unequal

Violations of the right to education of Romani children in Slovakia

“Why have they separated our children and white children? When a Roma sees a white child, they hate each other, they call each other names: gadzo, gypsy. When I was at school, there was no Roma or gypsy, all were friends.”

A Romani man, Letanovce, eastern Slovakia

Education – a human right

The right to education is an internationally recognized human right; education is also a key avenue to every aspect of life – health, employment, freedom of expression – as well as a way out of a cycle of poverty and marginalization. Romani children in Slovakia are being denied these rights and opportunities, because they face a barrier of segregation, especially in primary education.

In Slovakia, huge numbers of Romani children continue to be segregated in Roma-only schools, while many children are inappropriately placed in “special schools” for children with physical and mental disabilities or special educational needs. In both cases they receive a substandard education, and have very limited chances of continuing beyond compulsory education.

Once children are assigned to special schools, the door leading back to mainstream education for children of average or above-average ability remains shut. Roma children are being denied the opportunity to learn and to progress; in 2006, only three per cent of Roma children reached secondary school, while only eight per cent enrolled in secondary technical school.

Discrimination of Roma is widespread in Slovakia. School is one of the few places in Slovak society where Roma and non-Roma can establish a basis for friendship and mutual understanding. By segregating children, negative stereotypes and mutual suspicion are allowed to flourish.

The government of Slovakia, along with regional and international human rights bodies, has recognized the problem and extent of segregation and expressed concern. But so far the government has made only vague policy commitments to reverse the situation.

Amnesty International is launching a campaign for real change and is calling upon the government of Slovakia, supported by the international community including the European Union, to show leadership and direction in the reversal of racial discrimination in education, to stop the violations of the right to education of Romani children, and to eliminate segregated education of Roma in Slovakia.

Captions

In Jarovnice, children from the majority community on the first floor (left). © AI

The nursery school teaches Romani children in a separate classroom on the ground floor (right). © AI

Wrongly placed in special schools

“Children here are mentally retarded. There is a tendency to integrate Romani children in primary schools, but pupils with mental and social retardation stay the same. Children from a socially disadvantaged environment suffer from social and mental retardation.

Head teacher of a special school where 95 per cent of the pupils are Roma

Poverty and lack of opportunity at the beginning of their lives should not condemn children to a life of the same. Many Roma have the same aspirations as the majority population, and want to live as well as the communities around them. Increasingly they see education as the key to achieving those aspirations, and the struggle against racism and segregation is crucial to ensuring their full access to that education.

Yet Romani parents are pressured to segregation as normal, and even beneficial, for their children, sometimes through financial incentives to send their children to special schools or special classes.

Evaluations of this process revealed that up to 50 per cent of Romani children in special schools or classes had been placed there erroneously, including 10 per cent who could immediately integrate into mainstream schools and classes. Despite such disturbing findings, there is as yet no governmental commitment or plan to introduce accept widespread testing and monitoring of children placed in special schools.

Failed attempts at integration

“When I attended school, I was studying together with whites in the class. Then the 90s came and they moved the whites, created a school for them and left the Roma here... But it would be better that whites attend school together with Roma so that they have better relations... I have lots of friends in Jarovnice, Peklany, Rencišov... because I was together with whites. But for example, my son does not have white friends, only Roma.”

A Romani man, Jarovnice

Romani children attending mainstream schools may be assigned to Roma-only primary schools or Roma-only classes. Officials at all levels told Amnesty International how pressure from parents of non-Roma children, coupled with the lack of free transportation for Romani children to schools, contributes in practice to increase segregation in education.

At the local level, many head teachers are opposed to segregation, but feel unable to act to improve integration, as School Councils – school governing bodies made up of head teachers, teachers and parents – can recommend to the municipality or regional authorities responsible for the school that the head teacher be dismissed.

At the national level, the government of Slovakia has recently taken steps to improve the situation, including the introduction of preparatory classes, called “zero grade” in Slovakia, for children who have not attended pre-schooling, most of whom are Roma, the employment of Roma-speaking teaching assistants in primary schools, and training for teaching staff working with Romani pupils.

But these provisions remain entirely optional, and many municipalities charged with the responsibility for preschool and primary education have failed to implement them. In addition, the government has failed to address systemic legal and policy failings which allow separate and unequal education of Romani children to continue. The criteria by which children are judged unfit for mainstream school and diverted to special schools are unclear, the oversight of these placements is inadequate, and there is little will to re-integrate children erroneously placed in special schools.

Amnesty International is concerned that the government of Slovakia has yet to adequately address the issue of segregated education for Roma. While the government has made a vague commitment towards desegregation in broad policy terms, it has yet to draw up a concrete plan for the integration of Romani children into mainstream education.

International human rights standards on discrimination

Non-discrimination is a fundamental principle in all international treaties which guarantee the right to education. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Slovakia is a party, says that state parties must ensure that the rights in the Covenant can be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status.

According to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, “States Parties particularly condemn racial segregation... and undertake to prevent, prohibit and eradicate all practices of this nature in territories under their jurisdiction.” It also requires states parties not only to prohibit discrimination, but to take steps to progressively eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms, including in respect of “the right to education and training”. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has also specified that states parties should “prevent and avoid as much as possible the segregation of Roma students...” and has recommended that states parties take measures “to support the inclusion in the school system of all children of Roma origin and to act to reduce dropout rates, in particular among Roma girls, and, for these purposes, to cooperate actively with Roma parents, associations and local communities”.

The Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, to which Slovakia is a party, prohibits any discrimination against those who belong to a national minority. States parties to the Convention, including Slovakia, are required to "adopt, where necessary, adequate measures in order to promote, in all areas of economic, social, political and cultural life, full and effective equality between persons belonging to a national minority and those belonging to the majority".

Urgent action needed

Urge the government of Slovakia to:

- Immediately make and widely publicize a clear and unequivocal political commitment to eradicate segregated education for Roma. This commitment should be the guiding principle in all education policies impacting on Romani people;
- Consult with representatives of the Romani community on the implementation of this commitment and take concrete, targeted and effective steps to implement it;
- Develop, within a reasonable number of years, a comprehensive plan of action to ensure the full integration of Romani children in mainstream education together with children from majority and other minority communities;
- Amend the existing School Act to ensure that special measures to advance the education of Romani children are made compulsory and new measures are introduced to explicitly tackle segregated education of Roma.

Targets for letter-writing

Dušan Caplovic
Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights and Minorities
Sekcia ľudských práv a menšín
Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky
Nám. slobody 1
813 70 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
Fax: +421 2 52 491 647
Email: urad@vlada.gov.sk
Salutation: Dear Deputy Prime Minister

Ján Mikolaj
Minister of Education
Ministerstvo školstva
Stromová 1
813 30 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
Fax: +421 2 54 773 986
Email: kancmin@minedu.sk
Salutation: Dear Minister
Anina Botošová

Plenipotentiary of the Slovak government for Roma Communities
Úrad splnomocnenkyne vlády SR pre rómske komunity
Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky
Nám. slobody 1
813 70 Bratislava 1
Slovak Republic
Fax: +421 2 57 295 816
Email: anina.botosova@vlada.gov.sk
Salutation: Dear Plenipotentiary

Who is Amnesty International?

Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories, who campaign for human rights. Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.

We research, campaign, advocate and mobilize to end all abuses of human rights – civil, political, social, cultural and economic. From freedom of expression and association to physical and mental integrity, from protection from discrimination to the right to shelter – these rights are indivisible.

Amnesty International is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion. Our work is largely financed by contributions from our membership and donations.

AI Index: EUR 72/003/2007 November 2007

Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House,
1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom

AI Index: EUR 72/003/2007
November 2007

Front image: Children at the Romani settlement must pay for the municipal bus journey to and from school in the village of Letanovce
© Amnesty International