



Current “Roma reforms” in education and preschool struggles in the Slovak Republic

NESET Expert Author:

Ondrej Kaščák, Faculty of Education, Trnava University, Slovakia.



Slovakia is one of a number of countries in which Roma children have low levels of schooling and the Roma population suffers from high unemployment. All the measures adopted thus far to solve the so-called ‘Roma issue’ are considered to have been ineffective, including those which were supposed to improve the education of the Roma population. Therefore, the government has recently (on 22 October 2012) unveiled a new bolder approach designed to comprehensively resolve the ‘Roma question’, rather characteristically entitled ‘The Right Way’ (Roma reform). The primary means of achieving this policy is a series of rigorous steps relating to education: compulsory preschooling for ‘high risk’ children beginning from the age of 3; the introduction of a full-day education system for these children (including during the school holidays); and compulsory apprenticeship training for those who do not successfully complete primary school.

There is one curious aspect to this proposal: the policy dealing with education was drawn up by the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Education was not involved to any great extent in either the formulation or the promotion of this government reform. Nor were the third sector or the wider educational profession involved in the drawing up of this policy. A series of objections were raised in the public debate that followed the publicising of this policy. In particular there are fears that there is a high risk that this attempt to provide a bold solution may result in the inappropriate identification of the target group. In trying to avoid ethnic labelling (although somewhat oddly not in the name), the policy refers to “children from high risk families”. These are to be identified using highly controversial diagnostic criteria (parents’ education, family debt levels, material possessions, parental criminality, and knowledge of the language of tuition). The lack of communication between the various governmental departments has resulted in a number of concerns over whether there is sufficient funding for the reforms and whether nursery schools have sufficient levels of trained staff. Introducing full-day child care is the main idea behind the policy, which reiterates that ‘children

belong in school' almost to the point of absurdity. The policy is available in Slovak on the Ministry of Interior's website:

http://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/mvsr/romsky_splnomocnenec/Romska_reforma_vzdelavani_e.pdf

This policy signals that preschool education is considered to be a very effective component of the education system in Slovakia. Indeed, in 2008 the law on education made preschool part of the education system. Since then, however, it has become evident that this formal measure is limited and far from sufficient. The State Education Programme for Nursery Schools, also adopted in 2008, has not proved able to provide continuity between preschool institutions and the school system as a whole. If there is no link between the legislation and specialist expertise then the anticipated results of preschool education are unlikely to be achieved. Some leading figures in the field of education initiated a review of the State Education Programme and the state has welcomed this move. The question remains, however, as to whether nursery school teachers are capable of repeatedly and flexibly responding to new curriculum changes introduced by the state. It is rather characteristic that in post-communist countries such changes are typically introduced at great speed.