Strategy of the Slovak republic for Roma integration of up to 2020

(critical summary by *Szilvia Németh, REF consultant***)**

I. Process and methodology of drafting the strategy

According to the introductory part of the document the Slovak Strategy is a result of collaboration between the Office for the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma communities, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), the Open Society Foundation (OSF), the Association of Cities and Municipalities of the Slovak Republic, and various non-governmental organizations. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic was actively participating in the creation of the document. There were also consultations with public administration officials, regional authorities, representatives of NGOs on a regional level, representatives of state administration and the respective ministries in Bratislava, as well as representatives of the Roma NGOs and organizations active on the national level, and even with academicians active in this field.

The exact methodology of formulating the document is not described in a detailed way, but Annex 1 lists all regional consultations and more than 200 local self-governments and NGOs invited for consultations in the development of the Strategy.

The strategy is considered as an open document that will be continuously amended and supplemented by Annexes detailing action plans, data and necessary information. Many areas lack data currently, which the partners – the World Bank and UNDP — shall make available in the upcoming months in the process of developing inclusion policies. It is "an umbrella document for the area of inclusion of all target groups inside the Roma population" (p.4.)

II. Structure of the Strategy

Strategy consists of 6 main parts and annexes:
A.   **Objective of the Slovak Republic in the integration of Roma communities**
B.   **Theoretical framework of the Strategy** (framing the strategy in the context of Europe 2020 and the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies 2020 and listing its main principles)
C.   **Strategy context** (describing the situation of Roma communities in Slovakia, depicting the goals of the Slovak Government initiatives, measurable indicators of change, introducing the legal framework and the status of the Roma in the Slovak republic, summarizing the strategies for Roma inclusion since 1945 and highlighting the cost of Roma exclusion)
D.   **Strategy policies** (introducing the dimensions and priority policies – education, employment, health, housing, financial inclusion, non-discrimination and targeting the majority population - covered by the strategy)
E.   **Implementing the Strategy** (defining the key partners in implementation, presenting the plan of activities, financial issues and its legislative implications)
F.   **Framework for monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy** (with expected results of governmental policies and indicators and procedures in monitoring and evaluation)

Annexes

III. Target group and main aims of the strategy

The strategy defines its **target group** as Roma as a national minority, Roma communities, and marginalized Roma communities but it does not reflect on the conceptual differences between these groups. It says that the "majority of measures and social interventions concentrate on marginalized Roma communities" (p.2) but it does not describes the characteristics of the so called Roma communities, compared to the marginalized ones.

The Strategy refers to these three groups as overlapping ones, and it quotes the acknowledgement of the Government of the Slovak Republic that various types of exclusion influence the life of all Roma as a national minority, Roma communities of all types, and the marginalized Roma communities.

The **main aims of the strategy** can be summarized as follows:

- The role of this Strategy is to serve as a background material for National Action Plans and to set tasks for developing measures, policies and legal norms at all levels of public administration in the Slovak Republic for the 2012 – 2020 period (p.3)
- It is important to orient the policies to address the majority population (as well). The goal is to frame the public debate in such a way that make policies accepted as mutually beneficial. (p.2)
- The main tasks of the Strategy are: to halt the segregation of Roma communities; to facilitate a significant positive turn in the social inclusion of Roma communities; to foster non-discrimination; and to change the attitude of the majority population toward the Roma minority. (p.3.)
- The goal of the Strategy is to target the removal of the (various) forms of social exclusion of Roma as such, Roma communities and marginalized Roma communities. (p.6.)
- By respecting the principles defined in the Strategy, the implemented policies should lead to greater complexity and interdependency of the respective activities. (p.18.)

According to the document the situation of the Roma population has been made even more complex by the frequent discontinuity in governmental policies related to an ever-changing government in Slovakia, so the stagnation of social inclusion of Roma communities could be attributed to a lack of political will on the national, regional and local levels. That is why:

"This Strategy anticipates all Ministries and other bodies of public administration, as well as the local and regional self-governments to rigidly apply its principles in the process of developing their public policies. Close cooperation and initiative of all central, regional and local authorities is crucial for addressing such a complicated and multi-departmental issue as is the inclusion of marginalized Roma communities. Special roles in creating conditions for the inclusion of marginalized Roma communities are reserved for the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic. Each of these Ministries should prepare their own legislation proposals in accordance with this Strategy, such proposals significantly contributing to addressing the current state of exclusion and discrimination of Roma communities, reversing the current negative trend." (p. 4.)

IV. Main terms of the Theoretical Framework and their conceptualization

The main term the Strategy's basic principle is built on is **social exclusion**. It conceptualizes it by using the definition of the Slovak Government according to which social exclusion is a process, which systematically disadvantages a certain group of individuals in a particular territory and deepens their marginalization. (p.6.) "Social exclusion is perceived as a systematic process of marginalization, isolation and weakening of social ties demonstrated both on the level of an individual and on the level of social groups." (p.6.)

The document makes a distinction between the following **types of social exclusion**:

- **Economic exclusion** ultimately means exclusion from the standard of living and life opportunities typical for a society or a given group. The starting point could be for example the status of individuals on the labor market, the consumption level and the income level, assets, housing standard, etc.
- **Cultural exclusion** means denial of rights of individuals or groups to participate in the society's culture and sharing its cultural capital, education and culture.
- **Symbolic exclusion** occurs if social and cultural identities are to a certain extent symbolic. The group is constructed symbolically and also confirmed by symbols and membership in a group is symbolically confirmed or rejected. Symbolic exclusion is tied with stigmatizing individuals as well as groups that are perceived as different, deviant or alien. It could be identified e.g. by the extent of social distancing, existence of prejudice or stereotypes.
- **Spatial exclusion** is the concentration of excluded individuals and social groups within certain geographic boundaries. In the case of Roma communities the so-called segregated Roma districts could be identified (settlements, urban ghettos), and also a phenomenon of double marginalization.
- **Political exclusion** means denying civil, political and essential human rights.
- **Exclusion from mobility** in a physical space and social hierarchy.
- **Social exclusion** in a strict sense denies reaching certain social status or participation in certain social institutions.
- **Exclusion from safety net** and exposure to higher risks.
- **Psychological exclusion** related to a lack of emotional sources. Phenomenon accompanying such is the feeling of shame, shyness and individual failure, as well as an overall uncertainty and vulnerability.

The authors of the Strategy are convinced that social interventions, which fail to address social exclusion dynamically, do not help solve the problem of social exclusion comprehensively, thus – in the long-term – will prove unsuccessful. (p.7.)

In spite of the fact that the whole material – besides the concept of social exclusion - relies on other basic terms as well, as social inclusion, social integration, etc, does not provide any kind of clarification regarding them. Social inclusion is mentioned only ones, as a multidimensional concept: there is a need to perceive social inclusion in its multidimensionality, which is a necessary prerequisite for the success of any Roma population inclusion policy. (p.4.) (Discrimination is defined only in a footnote, p. 9.) There are some more sophisticated notions mentioned in the text but not discussed at all.

V. Strategy principles

1. Strategy is based on the need for a transition from the passive care of state and regional authorities to activating assistance.

2. The Strategy is based on efforts to minimize the impact of individual types of exclusion with regard to Roma communities, and develop a policy of integration. Integration, along with non-discrimination, constitutes the base rules for approaching the Roma population on all levels.
3. Strategy is based on the principle of creating real opportunities for activating an individual or the community, the result of which should be the reduction of differences between the Roma population and the majority society.
4. Reducing discrimination and improving the way human rights are respected is an organic part of the Strategy and its objectives. (p.9.)

The Strategy **conditions the success of public policies** on the inclusion of Roma communities with the acceptance of principles that must guide policymakers. The base strategic principles are:
- de-stigmatization,
- desegregation,
- de-ghettoizing. (p.10.)

The prerequisite to the success of the policy of inclusion and integration is the simultaneous consideration of **implementation principles**, which are mutually conditioning:

- Principle of solidarity
- Principle of legality
- Partnership principle
- Principle of comprehensiveness
- Principle of conceptuality, systematic approach and sustainability
- Principle of respecting regional and sub-ethnic features
- Principle of gender equality
- Principle of responsibility and predictability. (p. 11-13.)

VI. Objectives of policies of the Slovak government and measurable indicators of change

The Government of the Slovak republic believes that policies and interventions to improve the living conditions of Roma in Slovakia need to balance three objectives:
1. improving socio-economic status by expanding employment opportunities on the labor market;
2. building human capital through better education and healthcare;
3. strengthening social capital and community development through increased empowerment and participation of the Roma population in social and civic activities.

"The Government of the Slovak Republic will consider the process of Strategy implementation successful if the negative development in the monitored indicators in the priority areas of the Strategy compared to local and national average comes to a halt. The main indicators in this regard shall be the rate of unemployment, dependency on the state social policy, rate of education attained, average life expectancy, housing standard etc. Specific measurable indicators are defined within the framework of the respective measures implemented in such a way to truly mirror the monitored goals. Ideally there will come a time when services for marginalized Roma groups will be not required anymore" (p.18.)

VII. Priority policies of the Strategy

Education
Employment
Health
Housing
Financial Inclusion
Non-discrimination
Targeting majority population

Education

The topic of education is introduced as a first priority dimension of the Strategy. There is a detailed description of the present and past situation of the Roma pupils in the Slovak education system and in its institutions, supported by data quoted from different recent national and international researches. After the problem description the authors of the Strategy highlight that the Slovak system of education needs a comprehensive reform relying mainly on:

- a massive increase in the schooling of children of "marginalized Roma communities" (MRK) aged 3 years and over in pre-school facilities – a significant investment into pre-primary education of MRK children along with supporting early childhood care programs;
- developing and implementing desegregation standards in schooling (along with indicators and subsequent monitoring of segregation), which should respect the principle of social interaction of Roma and non-Roma children while maintaining the highest possible quality of education and achieving best results, with the exception of Roma national schools and locations with a majority representation of Roma population (but the condition of maintaining highest possible quality of education and achieving best results remains);
- developing specific models of school integration (inclusion) for a whole portfolio of situations and target groups, with an ambition to establish a general model of an inclusive school (to both the internal and external assessment of the quality of the school a so called "school inclusive index" would be added as one of the motivation tools for implementing programs of inclusive education). In creating an inclusive educational environment a priority must be placed on the specifics of students coming from the environment of marginalized Roma communities, physically handicapped persons, members of national minorities, foreigners and immigrants. (p.28.)

So **global goal of transformation** is defined as the follows:
"Improve access to quality education including education and care provided in the early childhood, but also elementary, secondary and university education with special emphasis on removing possible segregation at schools; prevent premature termination of school attendance and ensure a smooth transition from school to employment. Implement policies that will bridge gaps in the educational level of Roma and the rest of the population". (p.29.)

Roma Education Fund agrees with the goals described above but - based on its Country Assessment for Slovakia[1] - it would like to draw attention to some of the significant weaknesses of the current

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[1] http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/ref_ca_2011_sk_english_screen.pdf

system of education in Slovakia, which have not been mentioned in the Strategy before. From the standpoint of quality education for Roma these weaknesses are the following:

- Limited access of Roma to preschool education as a result of fees associated with attendance, lack of information, insufficient space, and resistance on the part of preschool authorities.
- Continued systemic overrepresentation of Roma in special education.
- Administrative destabilization of the position of teacher assistant.
- Inattention to Roma in general education and teacher training curricula as an integral part of the history and culture of Slovakia.

That is why REF highlights the following priorities:
- Preventing wrongful enrolment of Romani children in special education through measures including but not necessarily limited to the provision to parents of comprehensive information on the consequences of special education for their children's further education and employment, integrated preschool education, and after-school support in the early years of primary education.
- Promoting the sustainable transfer to standard education of Romani children wrongfully placed in special schools and classes, especially through support for local pilot projects with the potential for scaling up on the regional and national levels.
- Improving Roma's transition rates from primary to secondary education and from secondary to higher education.
- Providing technical assistance for relevant projects financed by the Slovak government with EU Structural Funds.

VIII.   General recommendations (REF)

In order to promote the access to quality education and long-term participation for Roma in the current system of education in Slovakia the following fields of intervention should be focused on:

Early childhood education:

- Increase the participation of Roma children in pre-school education, as there is limited access of Roma to pre-school education in many municipalities as a result of fees associated with attendance.
- Approach in-service training of early childhood pedagogues with a more integrated view, including language issues in diversity and multicultural training.

Curricular standards

- Introduce information about Roma history and culture into the main school curriculum, to positively portray the contribution of this ethnic group to the national heritage.
- Give attention to Roma in general education and teacher training curricula as an integral part of the history and culture of Slovakia.

Special education

- Undertake a comprehensive study of the number of Roma children enrolled in special schools for children with intellectual disabilities.

- An assessment of the uses of EU Structural Funds for the education of Roma as they can be expected to affect the overrepresentation of Roma in special education in Slovakia.
- Try to avoid systemic overrepresentation of Roma in special education.
- Promoting the sustainable transfer to standard education of Romani children wrongfully placed in special schools and classes – especially in lower grades -, especially through support for local pilot projects with potential for scaling up on regional and national levels
- Preventing wrongful enrolment of Romani children in special education through measures including but not necessarily limited to provision to parents of comprehensive information on the consequences of special education for children's further education and employment, integrated pre-school education and after-school support in the early years of primary education.

Education in segregated settings

- Adopt the necessary legal or administrative measures to prevent all forms of' segregation with the explicit aim and appropriate means of implementing desegregation through the distribution of Roma pupils from segregated Roma communities into ethnically mixed classes and schools and develop programmes targeting "white flight" of non-Roma.
- Provide quality education for Roma in segregated settlements where only one school is available.
- Promote active involvement of Roma parents into school-activities.

Language barriers

- Develop measures to address language barriers faced by Romanes-speaking Roma.
- Commission a comprehensive survey evaluating Roma children's proficiency in Slovak upon entering school, to determine the scope of the language barrier as an obstacle to education.

Human resources at school

- Administrative stabilization of the position of pedagogical assistants
- Develop a systematic, transparent and ongoing financing scheme to ensure that schools are not deterred from hiring Roma teaching assistants due to the cost.

Extracurricular activities

- Develop a system of extracurricular after-schools in order to indirectly increase the school-achievement of Roma and socialy disadvantaged children.
- Provide integrated settings with services – Children's Houses for parents with children of 0-3 years of age, in order to support their preparation for participation in pre-school education.

Transition

- Improving Roma's transition rates from primary to secondary education and from secondary to higher education.
- Support the Roma participation in labour-market oriented vocational training and introduce measures preventing early school leaving.