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## Romani pupils in Slovakia. Trapped between Romani and Slovak languages

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# ZEP

Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung  
und Entwicklungspädagogik

Mit: Mitteilungen der DGfE-Kommission  
Vergleichende und Internationale  
Erziehungswissenschaft

1'15

## Sinti and Roma

- Warehouses and Window-Dressing: A Legal Perspective on Educational Segregation in Europe
- 'Roma Education' as a Lucrative Niche: Ideologies and Representations
- Romani pupils in Slovakia: Trapped between Romani and Slovak languages
- Reading Tales – an Informal Educational Practice for Social Change



1'15 ZEP

**E**ducation for All (EFA) is the widely known label of the global development consensus that has been established 15 years ago. Most countries in Europe have achieved EFA goals or are close to doing so and thus have seldom been a matter of concern. Looking beyond national averages, however, shows that certain populations are to a great extent excluded from quality education. A group especially vulnerable in this regard are Roma. Roma have lived in Europe for hundreds of years, are predominantly sedentary (contrary to popular perception) and in most countries a recognised national minority.

International surveys show a high degree of educational inequality when comparing Roma with majority populations. The provision of quality education for Roma has been defined as a key European policy priority since the launching of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005, with similar emphasis apparent in the 2011 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. Since then, a wide range of approaches at international, national, and local level has emerged to improve the Roma's situation of education. However, at each level there is considerable variation in actors' views about what might work and how education should be organized. The various approaches have met with varying degrees of success in addressing the Roma's disadvantage in the area of education.

*Helen O'Nions* examines cases of educational segregation that were brought to the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights and found to violate the right to education in combination with the principle of non-discrimination. O'Nions shows that the segregation of Romani children and youth is likely to be discriminatory even if specialised segregated provision is defended as being in the

interests of the pupils and tailored to their needs. Similarly, the justification of segregated education with reference to parental consent does not preclude discriminatory treatment. Looking at subsequent developments in relation to the cases under consideration, O'Nions draws the conclusion that the rulings of the Grand Chamber, while consistent in their rejection of segregation, have failed to secure compliance on the part of governments.

*Yaron Matras, Daniele Viktor Leggio* and *Mirela Steel* scrutinise local approaches to the education of Romani migrants from Romania in Manchester. Their case study reveals how NGOs position themselves as education service providers between local authorities and Romani migrants. The authors examine how actors under constant pressure to secure project funding present Roma as a population in need of educational support. To this end, the actors develop educational approaches that – according to observations by Matras et al. – are selectively taken from international discourses on identity, culture and belonging rather than based on local needs.

*Tina Gažovičová* examines language policies in education in Slovakia. Looking at Romani students, she finds that the existence of language rights has not led to the realization of adequate language support. Gažovičová discusses several institutional barriers that complicate the use of the Romani language in the school context. Moreover, schools in Slovakia are not prepared to effectively teach students for whom Slovak is a second language. In the absence of systemically integrated interdisciplinary language support, learners who are labelled as having an insufficient command of the language of school instruction are channelled into preparatory classes or special schools which ultimately compromise their school success.

*Laura Surdu* and *Furugh Switzer* examine an intervention that targets early reading. Focusing on the project “Your Story”, which supported Romani mothers in developing reading skills and in using storybooks as educational tools, Surdu and Switzer analyse the experiences of project beneficiaries in Hungary. In addition to highlighting positive outcomes of the project such as improved attitudes towards learning, kindergarten attendance and post-compulsory education, the authors identify a set of challenges to the endeavour such as the training of facilitators and the inclusion of mothers as well as fathers who have severe difficulties in reading.

The contributions raise important questions and offer links for further research. The judgements of the Grand Chamber examined by O'Nions provide a broad normative framework against which persistent educational segregation could be analysed. Matras et al.'s findings can be taken as a call for a closer look at unintended effects of the ‘economy of Roma education’ that is often characterised by service outsourcing and short-term project funding. Gažovičová's analysis begs the broader question of how policies of long-term, interdisciplinary language support in inclusive settings could be designed and implemented. Finally, Surdu and Switzer point to a need to gain knowledge about how to support the most marginalized segments of a marginalized population, and – we might add – to move from claiming ‘best practice’ to also speaking openly about weaknesses and problems of policy interventions.

*An interesting and informative read*  
*Christian Brüggemann & Eben Friedmann*

Berlin/Skopje, March 2015

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**Titelbild:** © Bogumila Delimata, <http://jawdikh.pl/en/bogumila-delimata.html>. Bogumila Delimata is a Bergitka Roma dancer and painter. She lives in Poland and Spain.

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Tina Gažovičová

## Romani pupils in Slovakia: Trapped between Romani and Slovak languages

### Abstract

According to estimates, Roma make up to 19 % of pupils in primary and lower secondary education in Slovakia and about two thirds of them speak Romani language at home. Despite this fact, the vast majority of schools do not include Romani in their curriculum. Drawing on theories about the symbolic power of language the paper focuses on the use of the Romani language in the school context as well as on approaches aimed at teaching Slovak as a second language. Its main goal is to examine the application of language policy and minority rights in practice.

The paper concludes that as far as the Roma minority is concerned, the de jure existence of minority language rights is not a sufficient condition to ensure the exercise of these rights. The research further revealed that despite the declared emphasis on minority pupils' adequate command of the Slovak language, the practical measures aimed at improving their fluency in Slovak are unsatisfactory. As a result, many Romani pupils risk failing to master any language on the level that would allow them to succeed in school.

**Keywords:** *language policies in education, minority rights, Romani language, Slovakia, Slovak as second language*

### Zusammenfassung

Schätzungen zufolge gehören bis zu 19 % der Schüler/-innen in der Slowakei zur Roma-Minderheit, ca. zwei Drittel von ihnen sprechen Romanes. Jedoch ist – von wenigen Ausnahmen abgesehen – Romanes nicht Teil des schulischen Curriculums. Ausgehend von Theorien über die symbolische Macht von Sprache analysiert der Beitrag einerseits die Verwendung von Romanes in der Schule und andererseits die Ansätze des Unterrichts von Slowakisch als Zweitsprache. Ziel ist es zu prüfen, inwiefern proklamierte Sprachenpolitik und Minderheitenrechte praktisch umgesetzt werden.

Der Beitrag kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass die reine Existenz von Minderheitenrechten keine hinreichende Bedingung für die Umsetzung dieser Rechte ist. Darüber hinaus sind bisherige Maßnahmen zur Förderung der Slowakisch-Kenntnisse von Roma-Schüler/inne/n als unbefriedigend einzuschätzen. Dies hat zur Folge, dass viele Schüler/-innen keine der beiden Sprachen ausreichend beherrschen.

**Schlüsselworte:** *Sprachenpolitik, Minderheitenrechte, Romanes, Slowakei, Slowakisch als Zweitsprache*

### Analytical and methodological framework

Although the geopolitical arrangement of the modern world is dominated by national states, the concept of monolingual and mono-national states is rather recent in human history. It evolved after the French revolution and rose hand in hand with European nationalism (see, for example, May 2006; Anderson 1983). Even though most democratic nation states have undergone a process of nationalisation and homogenisation it is extremely difficult if not impossible to find a monolingual state. In other words, inhabitants of most existing states speak multiple native languages. A question thus arises: what should be the attitude of government policies toward minority languages and members of language minorities?

Any attempt to answer this question should bear in mind that language is not merely a communication tool. The symbolic status people attribute to language contributes to the emergence of social disparities between them (Bourdieu 1991; Spolsky 2004). "In the process of state formation [...] the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language. [...] this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 45). The tools to influence and to govern the "linguistic market" are called language policies (Ricento 2006).

The so-called western democracies seem to agree that concepts such as equality and individual freedom are at the heart of any democratic society. The question of how to fulfil them in practice, however, remains controversial on the academic as well as the political level. The rights of ethno-cultural minorities have become an important part of political philosophy in the past decades (see, for example, Laden/Owen 2007; Kymlicka/Patten 2003). Diversity within a state's population, including language diversity, therefore constitutes a practical challenge to actualizing these concepts. Education is one of the principal concerns in this respect. Equitable education in particular is indispensable to supporting equality and social mobility of individuals.

Experts argue passionately over these issues. Some emphasize the aspect of linguistic human rights, arguing that everyone should have the right to education in his/her own first language (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). This line of argument is corroborated by psychological research, which shows it is the easiest for a child to learn in his/her first language (Tucker

2003). Other scholars believe that the best way to achieve equality is education in the majority language. According to Pogge (2003) who focused on language acquisition of Hispanics in the US, it is only possible to promote social mobility with sufficient knowledge of the English language and it is therefore important for Hispanic students to attend English-medium schools.

This paper introduces a new way of assessing equality with respect to language policies in education (LPE), focusing on the question of whether existing language policies actively support functional bilingualism of minority pupils. Pupils who speak a different language at home than in school always become bilingual. Functional bilingualism means that the person is able to use both languages as circumstances require. Baker mentions various language targets (e.g. family, neighbours, teachers, etc.) as well as various language contexts (domains) (e.g. shopping, work, printed media, etc.) (Baker 2011, p. 5). It is understood as the opposite of “failed bilingualism”, which is also called “semilingualism”.

The term “semilingualism” was first used in the debate on the education of children of immigrants in Scandinavian countries. It is used to describe the failure to master any language on the level that would allow them to succeed in school. “Such a person is considered to possess a small vocabulary and incorrect grammar, consciously thinks about language production, is tilted and uncreative with both languages, and finds it difficult to think and express emotions in either language” (Baker/Jones 1998, p. 14). In academic research, the term is regarded as highly controversial (see, for example, Skutnabb-Kangas 1981, Martin-Jones/Romaine 1986). Danish professor Tove Skutnabb-Kangas argued it was impossible to regard semilingualism as either a scientific or a linguistic concept, although she admits it does describe a real phenomenon (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981, p. 249). While agreeing with criticism on the scientific value of the concept as it is impossible to objectively measure semilingualism, in my opinion the term does reflect an important social phenomenon and should be taken into account by academics as well as policy makers.

This paper builds on the author’s dissertation thesis (Gažovičová 2014) as well as on a research project conducted by the Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture (Gallová-Kriglerová/Gažovičová 2012). In addition to available academic literature and legal documents, it draws from in-depth interviews collected at eleven elementary schools in different regions of Slovakia, including one school where the Romani language is being taught. The paper focuses on LPE in Slovakia in relation to two languages: the official state language (Slovak) and a minority language (Romani). It poses two principal research questions: (1) What are the practical possibilities of Romani pupils to receive institutional support in Romani language acquisition? (2) To what degree is the right of the Roma to learn the state language fulfilled? Based on the answers to both questions a conclusion can be made on whether Slovak language policies in education do in practice support the functional bilingualism of Romani pupils.

### **The Romani minority in Slovakia**

The Romani minority enjoys the status of a national minority in Slovakia. In the most recent official census of 2011, only two

percent of Slovak inhabitants declared themselves as Roma nationals<sup>1</sup> (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2011); however, expert estimates are much higher. According to the most recent nationwide research conducted in 2013, there are 402,000 Roma living in the country, constituting about seven point five percent of the Slovakia’s total population. Of those who live concentrated, about 40 % do not have access to public water mains, about 70 % do not use public sewage and about two percent do not use electricity in their homes (Atlas of Romani communities 2013).

The Roma population seems to have a different age structure than the majority. This is due to a higher average fertility rate and a lower average life expectancy compared to the Slovak majority. Based on UNDP research carried out in 2011 in areas with above-average Roma populations, about 23 % of Slovak Roma are aged seven to 15 years and therefore eligible for compulsory education<sup>2</sup> (Brüggemann 2012, p. 101). If these numbers would apply to the whole Roma population, over 90,000 Slovak Roma should be enrolled in the country’s compulsory education system, thus constituting around 19 % of all pupils in primary and lower secondary education.<sup>3</sup> These estimates are much higher than usually recognized in official documents. A strategic document from the Ministry of Education on the education of Romani pupils published in 2008 stated the share of Romani pupils in elementary schools around eight percent (Ministry of Education 2008, p. 4). The share of Romani pupils is the highest in special schools. Based on a research conducted in 2008, approximately 60 % of children in special primary schools are Roma (Friedman et al. 2009).

Like in other European countries, the average Rom in Slovakia lives in much poorer conditions than the average Slovak. About half of the Romani minority live scattered among the majority. The other half live concentrated in city ghettos or segregated settlements. Of those who live concentrated, about 40 % do not have access to public water mains, over 50 % do not use public sewage and nearly ten percent do not use electricity in their homes (Atlas of Romani communities 2013).

Compared to the majority but also to other national minorities, the Roma have significantly lower educational outcomes. In 2011, about 60 % of Roma surveyed by the UNDP research project indicated lower secondary education to be their highest education level. About 18 % did not complete lower secondary education (compared to about two percent non-Roma living in close proximity) and only about 20 % of the respondents indicated having completed upper-secondary and thus post-compulsory secondary education (compared to about 82 % non-Roma living in close proximity) (Brüggemann 2012, p. 104).

About 80 % of Slovak Roma are believed to speak the Romani language as first or second home language (Bakker/Rooker 2001, p. 10). According to UNDP data about two thirds of Slovak Roma speak Romani as first home language, 18 % speak Slovak and 14 % speak Hungarian as first home language. More than 90 % of Roma live in households that frequently use more than one language at home (Brüggemann 2012, p. 53–54).

Given such frequent occurrence of bilingualism in Romani households, it is important to pay attention to the level at which Romani children learn the each language. In case they

have difficulties in learning both languages, this might lead to the phenomenon described above as semilingualism. Failed bilingualism of Romani children is relevant as well in regard of the high special schooling rate of Romani children. Research has shown that in special schools for mentally disabled children, there is a significantly higher rate of Romani pupils speaking Romani at home than those speaking at home Slovak or Hungarian (Friedman et al. 2009; Brüggemann/Škobla 2012).

Currently, there are numerous dialects of the Romani language around the world. Matras (2005) describes a division of four main branches: (a) vlx; (b) central; (c) Balkan and (d) northern branch. Based on this division, the dialects spoken by the Roma in Slovakia belong to the central branch. Cina (2002) distinguishes three main dialects used in Slovakia. The most common one, which is spoken by about 85 % of Roma in Slovakia, is called "Slovak dialect" of Romani. It is further divided into an East Slovak dialect, Central Slovak dialect and West Slovak dialect. About five to ten percent speak the Vlx dialect and Roma living in southern Slovakia speak a dialect which incorporated many Hungarian words (Cina 2002).

Romani was not codified until a few decades ago and was only used as a spoken language. The fact that the Roma continue to be an ethnic group without a patron state makes it very difficult to standardise the language. There are no central institutions that would be internationally responsible for the codification of a single literary version of Romani. Consequently, different countries have codified different versions of Romani. In Slovakia, there is a standardized version used since the 1970s when an important Romani grammar book was written by Milena Hübschmannová (Cina 2002). For codification, the East Slovak dialect of Romani has been used, as it is the most commonly spoken dialect of Romani in Slovakia. The process of codification of the Romani language in Slovakia was officially completed in 2008.

### **Language policies in education with respect to the Romani minority**

#### **Legal framework for Slovakia's language policies in education (LPE)**

In Slovakia, LPE focus on two principal areas: first, protecting the right to use minority languages; second, promoting the state Slovak language. The protection of minority languages is guaranteed by the Slovak constitution as well as by the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Slovak constitution declares: "Citizens belonging to national minorities or ethnic groups in the Slovak Republic shall be guaranteed their universal development, particularly the rights to promote their culture together with other members of the minority or group, to disseminate and receive information in their mother tongues, to associate in national minority associations, to establish and maintain educational and cultural institutions" (Constitution of the Slovak Republic, Chapter two, Article four, Paragraph 34, (1)). Based on this article, individual minorities have the right to establish schools with education in their respective languages. However, it is not government's obligation to provide all children with education in their first language. In other words, it is the minority's freedom to establish public schools. Such schools have the same rights and obligations as Slovak schools and cannot be discriminated against.

In contrast, migrants, who lack the status of traditional national minorities, can establish schools in their own language only as private schools.<sup>4</sup>

There are two ways of incorporating a minority language into a school's curriculum in Slovakia. One way is for the minority language to be used as the language of instruction for all subjects. In such schools, Slovak language is taught only as one compulsory subject. This possibility is used mainly by the Hungarian minority. About ten percent of public primary schools have Hungarian as their language of instruction. A second option is for the minority language to be taught only as an additional subject. This possibility is mainly used by small national minorities such as the Ruthenians.<sup>5</sup>

Slovak legislation also places a great emphasis on the Slovak language. According to the constitution, Slovak is the only official state language. The Schooling Act states that every child who lives in Slovakia has the right to learn the state language (Law No. 245/2008, §12, (3)). In practice, this right translates into the obligation to attend Slovak language classes throughout one's compulsory school education.

Based on said laws it seems that the Slovak legislation has outlined the goal to support bilingualism of national minorities' members. Such principle is as well promoted by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The remainder of this paper strives to answer the question whether this aim is practically fulfilled with respect to the Romani minority.

#### **Romani language within Slovakia's education system**

The communist regime pursued strong assimilation policies toward the Roma. These policies have seen significant changes since 1989. The Roma were granted the status of official national minority and Romani was officially recognized as a minority language. Since then, several educational institutions and media have been established to promote Romani culture and language. Already in the years 1992–1994, the Ministry of Education developed and approved curricula of the Romani language and literature for primary and secondary education. This project enabled the teaching of Romani at schools. However it has not been put into practice as teachers and study materials were lacking. In 2003–2009, the Ministry of Education prepared the project of Experimental verification of the effectiveness of the curriculum of Roma language and literature at primary school and secondary school level. As a part of this project several study materials for teaching Romani have been written. The most important has been the new spelling rules, as this has been a precondition for the official codification of the Romani language in Slovakia in 2008 (Hero 2012, p. 43).

For the time being, Romani language is not used as the language of instruction at any school in Slovakia. Romani has been incorporated into schools' curricula only as the subject called "Romani language and literature". Currently there are only two primary and five secondary schools which offer this subject. All of these schools are privately owned and have been founded by non-governmental organisations.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the marginalisation of the Romani language continues due to a long list of mutually interlinked reasons that can be roughly divided into two main categories. One has to do with institutional reasons and unfavourable conditions for teach-



ing Romani while the other is related to the low symbolic status the Romani language and identity enjoy within Slovak society.

### **Institutional barriers to teaching Romani**

The written form of Romani is relatively young as Romani existed for centuries only as an oral language (Hübschmannova 1979). As a result, most Roma in Slovakia speak various local dialects of Romani, as opposed to its codified form. While most languages around the world have a number of dialects, the learning of a literary form results from institutionalization in the form of state-administered education and media. This is not the case of the Romani language. As a result, many Romani children do not sufficiently understand codified Romani. Some experts are therefore sceptical about teaching Romani in schools. They argue that the official form of Romani is another foreign language to Romani children (e.g. Šikrová 2004).

Another problem is the development of Romani language and the creation of new vocabulary. Currently there is no institution that would act as the ultimate linguistic authority with respect to Romani (see e.g. Cina 2012). Besides, there is a shortage of Romani teachers. For the time being, no university in Slovakia offers a Romani language study program. Due to the low numbers of Romani university students in Slovakia, it seems difficult to find a sufficient number of candidates. In 2010, the Institute of Romani Studies at the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra received accreditation to open an independent degree programme in Romani language and culture, but the programme was never launched. After two consecutive years in which there were not enough applications from potential students in Slovakia to open a class, the Institute decided not to renew the accreditation for this study program from the 2013–2014 academic year (Samko 2012, p. 17). Currently, a number of universities teach Romani as a subject.<sup>7</sup>

### **Low symbolic status of the Romani language**

The Slovak society does not value the knowledge of the Romani language much. Most teachers in our research stressed the importance of knowing Slovak, but only few appreciated also the first language of the Romani children. This belief shapes school policies and teachers' behaviour. Although there is no regulation that would ban using Romani in schools, several teachers and teacher assistants have reported a fear to communicate in Romani with children. As one Romani teacher assistant has stated: "I never openly speak Romani in class. Because it is not a language that should be used in class."

Even when a school does not officially teach Romani, it is helpful for children if at least some of their teachers speak their first language. As our research has revealed, at some schools the knowledge of Romani becomes a source of conflict between Roma and non-Roma teachers. One teacher mentioned: "I had a [Roma] assistant and I was not satisfied. [...] They spoke Romani and I couldn't understand. She often had an advantage over me. And I really had a problem with it." This shows that the knowledge of Romani is often not seen as valuable, but rather as undesirable competition. In this particular school, which is attended solely by Romani pupils, the Romani teacher's assistant had been replaced by a non-Roma.

The poverty in which many Roma live is often wrongly identi-

fied with Romani culture. Drál (2009) pointed out that laziness was perceived as a congenital characteristic of the Roma and this belief was intertwined into government's social policy. Similarly, speaking Romani instead of Slovak is perceived as a sign of the Romani community's backwardness. "Overcoming" the Romani language is thus viewed as a precondition of individuals' social mobility (Gažovičová 2012).

### **Slovak as second language for Romani pupils**

As there are no schools in Slovakia that use Romani as the language of instruction, all Romani children are educated in a different language, which is usually Slovak and occasionally Hungarian. Many Romani pupils enter school without sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction. As has been pointed out, Slovak law places emphasis on the right of all pupils to master the Slovak language. In this respect, two basic systemic flaws can be identified: one relates to the shortcomings in methodology and teacher training; the other concerns the scope of teaching and support to pupils.

The didactics of teaching Slovak as a second language are not sufficiently developed. There is no comprehensive methodological support for pupils who attend schools with Slovak as the language of instruction but struggle with language barriers. This means they learn from the same textbooks, using the same didactics as children who use Slovak as their first language. Moreover students of pedagogy do not learn how to teach Slovak as a foreign language. As a result, children whose first language is different from the language of instruction have no support in overcoming the language barrier. This problem concerns not only Romani pupils, but also members of other national minorities or immigrant communities (Gažovičová 2011).

Besides, Slovak legislation fails to distinguish pupils' nationality or first language as relevant categories in policy making. As a result, there are very few measures in the field of language support. In the past years, several educational policy measures have been adopted to support children from marginalised Romani communities. These measures target pupils based on families' social situation leading many Romani pupils to be categorized as "children from a socially disadvantaged environment" (Article 2 of Schooling Act). The country's education system is currently enforcing two measures that officially target these children and the language barrier is one of the problems to be addressed.

Firstly, there are preparatory classes ("zero grades") for children who have reached the age of compulsory schooling but according to psychological tests are not mature enough to handle the first grade curriculum. The main target group of preparatory classes in Slovakia are children from marginalized Romani communities. Our findings reveal that the language barrier appears to be one of the most frequently cited reasons for placing Romani children in preparatory classes (see also Klein et al. 2012). As one teacher from eastern Slovakia has stated in our research: „I have the impression I am slowing down some children instead of helping them. Because the only reason why they are not in the first grade is that they do not know the language. Otherwise, they are very clever. If they knew the language, they would have the best grades. This applies to about half of my pupils." There is no centrally prescri-

bed curriculum for preparatory classes. According to regulations, the curriculum as well as the methods of education should be adapted to the needs of the children. This formulation allows teachers to place emphasis on teaching Slovak as a foreign language, but there are no state-issued textbooks or other methodical support such as teacher training for this purpose.

Secondly, Slovakia's educational system has introduced the position of teacher assistants. The program began as an experimental project of Romani teacher assistants designed to help Romani pupils. In 2002, the position of teacher assistants was legally enacted. Unfortunately, the emphasis on Romani teacher assistants got lost along the way as Slovak laws are not allowed to favour particular ethnic groups. Although there are currently no data available on Romani teacher assistants, several research projects report that only a small proportion of teacher assistants who are supposed to help Romani children are of Romani origin and/or speak Romani<sup>8</sup> (e.g. Gallová-Kríglerová/Gažovičová 2012; Huttová et al. 2012; Petrasová et al. 2012).

Since neither preparatory classes nor teacher assistants defined overcoming the language barrier as their main objective, they have produced rather limited results in this regard. Consequently, children with insufficient knowledge of Slovak are forced to learn the language simultaneously with other subjects. Children's ability to cope with such a difficult situation depends on many factors including age, contact with the language outside of school and individual capabilities. Most children find this task too difficult and gradually fall behind in other compulsory subjects while struggling with Slovak.

### **Conclusion – the risk of semilingualism**

This paper has presented the view that language policies in education (LPE) should support children from linguistic minorities to develop high level of language skills in both languages. Focusing on the case of Romani pupils in the Slovak Republic, the paper has examined the question of whether the principle of supporting equality in language policies has been fulfilled in practice.

From the viewpoint of legislation, LPE in Slovakia should support functional bilingualism of Romani pupils. The Romani minority has the right to be educated in its first language. Besides, the state language Slovak is a compulsory part of schools' curriculum. Based on our research, however, the conclusion can be made that both principles are not being successfully put into practice. There are no schools with Romani as the language of instruction. There are very few schools where Romani is part of the official curriculum. Therefore the vast majority of Romani children do not have any formal contact with their first language in school.

Moreover, although the valid Slovak law emphasises the right of all pupils to master Slovak, the system of teaching the language to students for whom Slovak is not the first language is still experiencing teething troubles. One of the main reasons is that the valid school legislation fails to define the category 'pupils with inadequate command of the state language' as the target group for policy. Besides, even though the Slovak language is a compulsory subject for all pupils, the actual methodology of teaching it is unsatisfactory.

Based on the research implications for educational policies and practice can be formulated. Slovakia should regard pupils with insufficient knowledge of the Slovak language as a specific target group and instruments to speed up their language acquisition should be put into practice. Such instruments could include some form of tutoring Slovak as a second language. Moreover, teacher preparation programs that focus on teaching Slovak as a second language are necessary. Such programs should be part of curricula at university studies for future Slovak language teachers. Also programs for practicing teachers are needed and could be offered by state institutions as well as by non-governmental initiatives. In addition text books for pupils to learn Slovak as a second language should be available.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the Romani language, more schools should incorporate Romani as a subject. This would help the pupils to master their first language at a higher level. Besides teachers and teachers' assistants who speak Romani would help to create a bridge between Slovak and Romani languages as well as Slovak and Romani communities.

The result of successful educational policies should be a knowledge of both languages that enables their effective use in different language contexts. For Slovak, this includes the ability to communicate with majority populations effectively, to allow for friendships and business relations without experiencing language barriers, to be able to succeed in school, even though instruction is in Slovak as well as not being at risk of tracking into special schools due to a limited command of Slovak. For Romani, it would be useful to have such knowledge of the Romani language to be able to understand, speak and write codified Romani and to translate between Romani and Slovak.

All pupils regardless of their ethnic origin are affected by the schooling system and suffer from its deficiencies. However, Romani pupils find it particularly difficult to compensate for these deficiencies, mostly due to their poor socio-economic situation and the high level of segregation. For many Romani children, insufficient mastery of Slovak as the language of instruction is a barrier they are not able to overcome. This has long-lasting consequences such as their employment prospects as well as relations with non-Roma Slovak citizens.

The paper's practical findings justify the conclusion that currently pursued LPE are failing to support minority pupils' functional bilingualism; on the contrary, many of these pupils are threatened by semilingualism. This applies particularly to children from marginalized Romani communities. Given their poor socio-economic situation and their parents' low education status, mastering a regular school curriculum is an insurmountable task for many of them. As long as they remain trapped in between two languages, it will stay this way. Without adequate support the language barrier becomes one of the factors that currently constitute the vicious circle of poverty for most Roma living in Slovakia.

### **Notes**

- 1 The census question does not enable multiple national identities as an answer.
- 2 Compulsory education starts at the beginning of the school year following the date on which the child reaches six years of age and is considered as mature for school education. Compulsory education lasts ten years and not more than the end of the school year in which the child reaches 16 years of age. (Schooling Act, § 19).

- 3 In 2011 around 478 000 pupils have been enrolled in Slovak primary and lower secondary education (this number includes elementary schools (primary and lower secondary education), special elementary schools and relevant classes of some gymnasium and conservatory schools). (The Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education 2011).
- 4 This is according to the Schooling Act (Law No. 245/2008), § 146 (7). Currently, there are no private schools for migrant communities established upon this law.
- 5 Ruthenians constitute about 0,6 % of the population of Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2011).
- 6 These schools are: the private elementary school and the private gymnasium of Zefyrín Jiménez Malla in Kremnica established by the non-governmental organization eMKLUB Kremnica; the private elementary school and the private gymnasium on Galaktická street in Košice established by the non-governmental foundation Nadácia „dobrá rómska víla Kesaj“, the private pedagogic and social academy in Košice and the private conservatory of music and drama in Košice, both established by the non-governmental cultural organization of Roma citizens in the Košice region („Kultúrne združenie občanov rómskej národnosti Košického kraja, n.o.) and the private secondary vocational school in Kežmarok established by the non-governmental Carpe diem (The Government Council of the Slovak Republic for Human Rights... 2013, p. 81).
- 7 These universities are: the Department of Romani Studies at the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra; the Department of Romani Studies at the St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Sciences in Bratislava and its regional school in Banská Bystrica and the Department of Romani Studies at the Prešov University in Prešov (The Government Council of the Slovak Republic for Human Rights... 2013, p. 81).
- 8 There are very few Romani speaking non-Roma.
- 9 Currently such textbooks are available only for pupils at schools with Hungarian as language of instruction.

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