

# Trying to Include but Supporting Exclusion Instead? Constructing the Roma in Slovak Educational Policies

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# Trying to Include but Supporting Exclusion Instead? Constructing the Roma in Slovak Educational Policies

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Based on a social constructivist theoretical framework, this research study examines how the design of proinclusive educational policies and the general public construct the Roma students and parents in Slovakia. For this purpose, data from two selected educational policies and five focus groups conducted in five regions in Slovakia were analyzed. The findings demonstrate that the Roma are constructed negatively as irresponsible dependents and deviants not valuing education and incapable of making wise decisions about their lives. These findings can be considered relevant for policy formulation processes because proinclusive policies may sabotage their own goals if negative social constructions of a certain societal group are embedded in them.

## INTRODUCTION

In several European Union (EU) countries the Roma population suffers systemic discrimination and poverty rates that are more than ten times that of the majority population (Ringold, Orenstein, & Wilkens, 2005, p. xiv). Despite concentrated political effort, both at the inter- 25 national EU level and the level of individual member states, including the Decade of Roma Inclusion Initiative (2005–15), the gap between the Roma and non-Roma population in many aspects of social, political, and economic life is still wide if not wider over the past decade (FRA & UNDP, 2012).

The case of the Slovak Republic is not an exception (Brüggemann, 2012; World Bank, 2012). Enrollment of Roma children in kindergarten is significantly lower in comparison with children from the majority population. The attendance of Roma students in regular schools is also generally lower, which negatively influences their school performance and leads to early school dropout. Roma students are overrepresented in special schools and special classes of regular schools and as a consequence of this poor access to education, the Roma are less likely to complete upper secondary education.

Importantly, even the general public in Slovakia (three-quarters of a representative sample of 1,106 respondents) in the 2014 opinion poll identified the social inclusion of the Roma as the

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area in which the Slovak government had least succeeded (SITA, 2014). Public policies and interventions are perceived by the general public as failing in dealing with the behavior of the Roma. Regarding this, findings from a 2012 opinion poll (Macháček, 2013) show that 43% of respondents think that “problematic behavior” in the Roma population is unsuccessfully dealt with because the social system supports such behavior (meaning that they destroy and pollute surroundings, are criminals, violent, unbearably loud etc.), while 21% of respondents think that policemen and bureaucrats are afraid to intervene and 19% of respondents think that the problematic groups are unlikely to be severely punished (p. 76).

To name a few examples of proposed policy measures, several studies recommend supporting better access into preprimary education for Roma children since their current lower enrollment rate in preprimary education in comparison to non-Roma children probably contributes to the former’s cognitive, psychomotor, and social “unpreparedness” for primary school education and, as a consequence, their segregation into special schools or special classrooms within regular schools (Tomatová, 2004; World Bank, 2012). The studies also recommend a reduction of the number of children educated in special schools and special classrooms of mainstream schools (Friedman, Kriglerová, Kubánová, & Slosiarik, 2009; World Bank, 2012); support for further education of teachers in individualization and personalization of their teaching methods to all children (Klein & Sobinkovičová, 2013; UNESCO, 2009); actively encouraged involvement of Roma parents in the school life of their children (Kriglerová & Gažovičová, 2012; see also Slee, 2011); increased number of specialized pedagogical personnel such as psychologists, special education teachers, social pedagogues, or teaching assistants in mainstream education (White, 2012; World Bank, 2012); support for teaching Romani language or at least supporting its use as the language of instruction as a second language for Roma students who speak only Romani at home (Gažovičová, 2015). Several of these policy measures are part of the National Action Plan of the Slovak Republic regarding the Decade of Roma Inclusion Initiative.

In an attempt to better understand the impact of various public policies<sup>1</sup> trying to improve the situation of Roma students, in this article we turn to the concept of “social construction” of target populations. Schneider and Ingram (1993, p. 335) define the concept as “(1) the recognition of the shared characteristics that distinguish a target population as socially meaningful, and (2) the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics.” In this article the term “social construction” signifies prejudices or stereotypes about particular groups of people, which are produced and constantly reproduced in politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, and religion or in the process of any human interaction within particular social contexts (Burr, 2015). Thus, when a text (e.g., wording of a particular policy document or verbal statement of focus group participants) “constructs” a social group to be something, in this article it is meant that the text describes the social group as being or behaving a certain way or having certain common characteristics. In this way the term “to construct” conveys that these characteristics and ways of being or behaving are presented as something natural, essential, biologically determined, and unchangeable for all the members of this social group (Ingram & Schneider, 2005, p. 3). When these supposedly unchangeable innate

<sup>1</sup>In this article, the term “public policies” refers to state policies, as a public policy can be defined as an action or inaction of the government (Dye, 1987) or as an interaction between various governmental bodies and the surrounding environment (Eyestone, 1971).

characteristics of the social group are negative and engender antipathy, they stigmatize its members, causing them to experience discrimination (see, e.g., Goffman, 1986; New, 2012).

Roma in Europe are commonly constructed as deviants and criminals who produce excessive trash and noise, do not have proper hygiene habits, and are voluntarily dependent on social benefits (Castañeda, 2014, p. 92; Macháček, 2013, p. 71; Stăiculescu & Gherasim, 2013, p. 952; Walsh & Krieg, 2007, p. 182). Nonetheless, the fact that certain group characteristics are socially constructed does not imply an absence of differences between social groups (Ingram & Schneider, 2005, p. 3). It merely suggests that these differences are not stable, essential, or biologically determined, but rather changeable products of particular social and cultural development, and that differences among members within one social group are too vast to generalize some shared characteristics among all of them (Burr, 2015). In this sense it is also problematic to universally ascribe a specific “identity” to all members of a particular social group as they do not share any sameness or fixed self-understanding (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, pp. 6–9).

Public policies created in particular social contexts are usually informed by social constructions of target populations, reinforcing negative stereotypes and beliefs. Because the social constructions are widely accepted and unchallenged by the general public, politicians themselves often take them for granted. Even if the politicians had some awareness of the constructedness and harmfulness of certain ideas about particular target populations, they would have little intention to challenge these in order to be reelected. Schneider and Ingram (1993, p. 336) distinguish four types of target populations: (1) “advantaged”—politically strong and positively constructed (e.g., business, elderly, veterans); (2) “contenders”—politically strong but negatively constructed (e.g., the rich, big unions); (3) “dependents”—politically weak but positively constructed (e.g., children, mothers, disabled); (4) “deviants”—politically weak and negatively constructed (e.g., criminals, drug addicts). The interaction between the political power and positivity/negativity of the constructions usually determines the allocation of burdens and benefits to the different types of target populations. That is also to say that if the Roma are primarily constructed as “deviants,” alternatively as “dependents,” because public officials do not fear electoral retaliation from the group itself, they have a tendency to oversubscribe the burdens and undersubscribe the benefits for this target group in order to gain public approval and increase their chances for reelection (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, pp. 336–337). In other words, public policies do not usually challenge but rather exploit, anchor, legitimize, and perpetuate the negative social constructions of the particular social groups and, thus, do not commonly aim to enhance the social standing of one social group in relation to others (Ingram & Schneider, 2005, p. 5).

This article investigates how the sample of two educational policies constructs the Roma and how the general public constructs the Roma when discussing and proposing proinclusive public policies. The main research question is the extent to which the valid legislation and general public in Slovakia challenge or rather perpetuate the negative construction of the Roma even when intending to achieve their social inclusion. In this sense, the article’s main argument is that the public policies, which are explicitly aimed at bringing about the Roma’s social inclusion, have a limited capacity to achieve this goal if they are not entirely free from or challenge the negative social construction of the Roma. The article argues that the negative social construction inherent in public policy systemically sabotages achievement of Roma inclusion, even if the policy explicitly advocates this goal.

The article is divided into four main sections. In the first section, the methodology employed in this research study is briefly described. The second section reports on the most crucial educational policy initiatives aimed at the social inclusion of the Roma students in Slovakia over the last decade and then critically scrutinizes the sample of two educational policies in an attempt to uncover their social construction of the Roma. The third section of the article presents the findings about the social construction of the Roma as it emerged in the discussions on proinclusive educational policies in five focus groups conducted in Slovakia. In the last section, we reflect on potential reasons for the limited impact of the proinclusive policies on the Roma population.

## METHODOLOGY

This research study utilizes two main qualitative research methods: (1) document analysis (Bowen, 2009); and (2) focus groups (Hennink, 2013). The former was applied to critically scrutinize current public policy documents relevant for the education of the Roma students, or “socially disadvantaged students.” The main data source for the document analysis was the School Act No. 245/2008 (NR SR, 2008) and other closely related legal and policy documents.

In March 2015, five focus groups consisting of 8–10 participants each from a well-balanced sample according to key sociodemographic criteria such as age, sex, education, employment status, and rural/urban residence were conducted in Eastern (Prešov, Gelnica), Central (Banská Bystrica, Žilina) and Western (Pezinok) Slovakia.<sup>2</sup> The focus groups were semistructured and directed by two professional facilitators.<sup>3</sup> After a general introduction each participant received a piece of paper with a two-paragraph text describing one proinclusive public policy proposal and its rationale (e.g., preprimary education free for all; fewer students in special schools; better second-chance education mechanisms—many of which were also included in the National Action Plan of the Slovak Republic regarding the Decade of Roma Inclusion). This text defined the direction and main topic of the discussion for the next 10–15 minutes. After that, participants received another paper, and a similar procedure followed until six proinclusive public policy proposals had been discussed. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours and was video-recorded and transcribed.

To qualitatively analyze the selected public policy documents and focus group transcriptions, we used *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify all major themes. Taking into account the volume of written data transcribed from the focus groups, data analysis process for this segment of the research was more gradual. Through comparing various themes and ideas in the data, we first identified *descriptive codes* (information that described a case). These were simultaneously clustered into *topic codes* (passages allocated under broader topics). This led to developing more *analytical* and critical categories and topics (interpretation and

<sup>2</sup>The logistical organization of the focus groups was secured by a contracted private research agency, which has extensive experience in organizing focus groups in all regions of Slovakia.

<sup>3</sup>The authors of the article did not facilitate the focus groups but designed the focus group schedule. In order to maximize the research quality and achieve the research aims, the authors thoroughly instructed the facilitators about the research intentions, watched the video-recording of each focus group immediately after it took place, and gave the facilitators detailed feedback on how they conducted it and how they could improve it in the following focus group meeting.

reflection on meaning) (Richards, 2009, pp. 99–104). This last phase of analytical and critical scrutiny was informed particularly by the social constructionist theory as defined by Schneider and Ingram (1993) and Ingram and Schneider (2005). In this sense the whole study adopts a cal framework, which views all knowledge and meanings as constructed and constantly reconstructed in the process of all forms of human interaction within particular social contexts (Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998).

## CONSTRUCTING THE ROMA STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS IN PUBLIC POLICIES

### Main Declaratory Public Policies on Social Inclusion of the Roma in Slovakia in 2004–2015

In 2004, 2008, and 2012, the Slovak government adopted three strategic concepts focusing on education of Roma students, joining the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–15) between adoption of the first and second concepts. As strategic policy documents, these represent a rather declaratory list of nonbinding goals, which might (but do not need to) become translated into obligatory policy measures or legislative changes. Hence, they are not legally binding for school stakeholders as such. The 2004 Concept (Government of SR, 2004) underlined the need for an integrated education of the Roma within the mainstream education system with complementary measures taken to eliminate social exclusion of some Roma communities. The terms “Roma children” and “children from a socially disadvantaged background” (SDB) are used as synonyms. It supports mainstreaming of measures newly introduced at that time, such as zero grades or teaching assistants, and suggests implementing transition programmes for pupils from special primary schools to mainstream schools (experimentally tested in EU preaccession Phare projects), allowing the special school graduates to enter mainstream vocational schools along with improvement of the diagnosing process of special educational needs (SEN) children. However, not all the measures proposed move toward integration, such as zero grades or opening branches of secondary schools close to settlements with a high concentration of Roma.

The 2008 Concept (Government of SR, 2008) focuses on the Roma, but explains the use of the term “children from an SDB”<sup>4</sup> due to the impossibility of collecting ethnic data, admitting that the overlap between the two is unclear. Adopting policies that explicitly target socially disadvantaged or low-income families and their children and assuming that they affect primarily Roma is a practice used by Slovak policy makers and is based on the following presumptions: (1) self-identification of Roma minority in surveys is low and collecting ethnic data would not be efficient, (2) such measures can be more acceptable to society because eligibility is based on general criteria regardless of ethnicity. This approach proves problematic in the case of measures where all Romani-speaking pupils would benefit, but only a portion of them qualifies

<sup>4</sup>The term was defined in the Schools Act 245/2008 (NR SR, 2008) as a broader definition of the background the child lives in, but in practice was applied only by means-testing until recently—in March 2016, the Research Institute for Child Psychology and Pathopsychology published a guidance for professionals in diagnostics and counseling of pupils concerning diagnosing children from a socially disadvantaged background based on a scale of eight criteria extending beyond the means-testing, prepared by the Ministry of Education in 2013. Discussion about legal ambiguities can be read, e.g., in (Farenzenová, Kubánová, & Salner, 2013, p. 25).

(e.g., funding teaching assistants at schools based on the number of children from an SDB). The measures proposed are very similar to the 2004 Concept, with a higher level of detail, stating, for example, even vocational education programs suitable for Roma boys, such as training to be a potter, mason, smith, or musical instrument maker, and for Roma girls, a hairdresser or massage therapist.

Following the initiatives of the European Commission, the Slovak government adopted another strategy in early 2012 (Government of SR, 2011). Unlike the former documents, this initiative offers a detailed action plan including clear goals with baseline and target indicators. While it speaks about Roma in general, some goals and indicators are defined for the Roma, others for children from an SDB or children from marginalized Roma communities to address various levels of access to data. Unlike previous strategic documents, the government adopted a detailed monitoring report of implementation of the strategy in 2012 and 2013 (Government of SR, 2014).

Regardless of the varying quality and approaches of strategic documents, their common weakness remains their declaratory character and, thus, very limited scale of being translated into legally binding policies and implemented. From a critical theory point of view, it is important to notice that the SDB category is often presented as substantially overlapping with identifying as or being identified as a Roma student. By acknowledging this link most of these strategic policy documents send out a message that most Roma children are “socially disadvantaged,” implying that they are extremely poor, lack adequate social and hygiene skills, and, thus, are improperly brought up, unlike “normal” children. In other words, they are constructed as socially “abnormal” (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010, p. 97; Fulcher, 1989, p. 9). As such, these policies do not frame Roma as potential scientists or lawyers; they present becoming potters, masons, or hairdressers as their most ambitious occupational achievement. In this way, the policies convey a very clear message concerning not only which social class the Roma currently occupy but also which they are expected and encouraged to occupy in the future.

### The Current Legally Binding Policies Targeting Students from a “Socially Disadvantaged Background”

Several policy measures explicitly target children from an SDB:

1. Primary and special primary schools receive contributions based on the number of students whose parents receive social benefits. In 2015, the amount of a contribution was EUR 106 per student for one school year, and schools with more than 100 such students must use at least half of the sum for a teaching assistant for these students. Schools can also use these funds to pay for teaching aids, student excursions, teaching staff in specialized classrooms, and prevention of lice infestations.
2. Subsidies exist for school catering and teaching aids for children from an SDB in kindergartens, primary, and special primary schools. Funds are claimed mostly by the school founders or schools themselves; in 2015 it was EUR 1 per school meal and EUR 33.20 per student per year for teaching aids. If a school has more than 50% of students eligible for subsidies, then each student at that school becomes eligible for them and the school receives the subsidy for all students automatically.

3. Children from an SDB can be taught in small “specialized classes” in mainstream schools, which enables them to catch up with their peers. The funding scheme makes this option highly unfavorable and it is rarely used (in 2014, only 129 pupils were enrolled in such classes).
4. Children from an SDB can be taught in preparatory classes (“zero grades” in regular primary schools and “preparatory grades” in special schools). Legally, the zero grades at regular primary schools are designed for pupils who are 6 years old but did not succeed at school readiness testing and are from an SDB. Because of demand from parents, in practice, primary schools also accept pupils who do not comply with means testing but declare the SDB in writing based on broader criteria.
5. Social benefits are linked to school attendance. If parents receive social benefits, they can get an additional benefit of EUR 17.20 monthly per child in 2015 in compulsory schooling if the student has sound attendance. If a student has problematic attendance,<sup>5</sup> the parent does not receive the additional benefit in cash, but the municipality provides supplies for the child for the respective sum. This additional benefit differs from the child allowances of EUR 23.52 monthly per child in 2015, applicable for each child during his studies up to a maximum of 25 years of age. However, a similar link to school attendance is also applied in the case of child allowances.

Although each of these policy measures could be critically scrutinized, for the purposes of this article only the last two will be further discussed. The rationale for this choice is that these two policy measures convey the most negative construction of the target population of students from an SDB or Roma students (as the above-mentioned strategic declaratory policy documents make it clear, there is an overlap between the Roma and students from an SDB).

As explained above, there are two types of social benefits linked to the school attendance of the children described above: the universal child allowances for children during their studies up to the age of 25 and the additional benefit for sound school attendance for families receiving social welfare benefits.<sup>6</sup> While the nature of child allowances is a universal support for families with children, the additional social benefits for sound school attendance for low income families is causing tension. In 2012, a group of MPs suggested abolishing this additional benefit, arguing that “compulsory education is obligatory by the Constitution and providing financial benefits for fulfilment of this obligation is unreasonable and discriminatory towards other parents, whose children fulfil the compulsory attendance as well” (TASR, 2012).

The problem in this policy does not lie in the discrimination of the majority population, but in the negative message about students from an SDB that this policy conveys. To be more

<sup>5</sup>If a child is absent for more than 15 hours in a month without reasonable explanation, the school reports this to the municipality and to the Social Affairs Office, which stops paying the respective benefits in cash, and usually the municipality is asked to provide supplies for the child for the respective sum.

<sup>6</sup>During the 2004–2008 period, there was an incentive scholarship system for children from a socially disadvantaged background, linked to their average grades at school. At first it was applied at all schools at ISCED levels 1 and 2 except for special primary schools for children with mental disabilities (where Roma children are overrepresented). After criticism by NGOs that the system discriminates against Roma, application was extended even to these schools, and eligibility for scholarships became easier at special primary schools with reduced curricula than in regular schools, causing wrong incentives for special schools and parents in tracking children to special education. Teachers also complained that they experience pressure from parents and pupils to grade children so they are eligible for scholarships.



precise, this policy can be interpreted as intending to “bribe” Roma parents to ensure their children attend school, implying that none of them would be willing to do so otherwise. This constructs Roma parents as not valuing education or as being incapable of making wise decisions about the education of their children, thus, they have to be “bribed” into a “normal” behaviour. The use of financial stimulus can be interpreted here not only as the Roma live in extreme poverty, that is why they need it, but also that they value merely the money and nothing else would persuade them to behave differently. For instance, the policy does not target the anti-gypsyist treatment of the Roma students from other non-Roma students or teaching staff (Fremlova & Ureche, 2011, p. 24; World Bank, 2012, p. 81) but puts the blame on the Roma parents as irresponsible and only able to be financially motivated to behave “responsibly.”

The Schools Act (NR SR, 2008) and other recent official documents (e.g., MŠVVaŠ SR, 2015) emphasize that an SDB itself does not constitute a basis for tracking the child to a class/school for SEN children. Regardless of the generally high share of special education and overrepresentation of the Roma in special schools and classes, there are explicit policy measures within the mainstream education targeting children from an SDB that are based on their education in separate classes: the zero grades and the specialised classes.

The idea behind both of these measures is to provide the children from an SDB with tailor-made teaching approaches in separate classes of smaller sizes, so they can “catch up” with their peers in terms of desirable skills and competences. While specialized classes are almost nonexistent because of low funding (such a class receives less funds in total than a common mainstream class), the zero grades are funded double the per-student funds, and this makes it feasible for schools to open these smaller classes. The share of pupils in zero grades was 6.4% of the total number of pupils in grade 1 in 2014 (ÚIPŠ, 2014).

Primary schools may consider zero grades as useful, due to a low share of the Roma attending preschools and the high share of repetition of grade 1.<sup>7</sup> However, the explicit targeting of zero grades only for children from SDB who were not able to pass the school readiness tests indicates that policy makers consider non-SDB children who did not pass the same tests as different in nature. They consider them prepared to enter grade 1 directly after a one-year postponement of compulsory schooling they can spend in preschool or at home.

Although the policy of establishing zero grades might have stemmed out of the statistical “reality” that children from an SDB do not usually attend a preprimary education and, thus, do not acquire the set of cognitive, psychomotor, and social skills and competences crucial for successful participation in primary education, the negative construction this policy might convey about the children from an SDB should be considered. To be more precise, the policy that if the non-SDB student does not pass the school readiness test he or she should still be educated in the mainstream educational setting, but if the same happens for the children from an SDB, they should be segregated into a specialized setting exclusively for children so categorized, constructs the latter as somewhat inferior to the non-SDB students. This policy of segregating the students from an SDB is predominantly justified by the need for a specialized and individualized teaching approach and by the argument that students from an SDB would slow the learning pace and disrupt the non-SDB students in the classroom. In other words, the

<sup>7</sup>In the Grade 1 cohort, 6.05% repeated this grade in 2014. Repetition rates in other grades are below 3% (ÚIPŠ, 2014).

children from an SDB are constructed as so different that they are not educable with the “normal” students.

### THE GENERAL PUBLIC CONSTRUCTING THE ROMA IN PROPOSING INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

In the focus group discussions on proinclusive educational policies the Roma were constructed in four main ways, specifically as (1) a minority consisting of two different internal groups, “unadaptable” and “adaptable”; (2) social deviants; (3) people incapable of making wise decisions about their own lives and taking care of themselves; and (4) a minority whose members’ lives must be more regulated by the state so they can be successfully integrated. As will become apparent below, these four categories are not mutually exclusive but tend to overlap.

#### Two Categories of the Roma: “Adaptable” and “Unadaptable”

Participants in the focus groups tended to distinguish between two categories of the Roma, specifically “adaptable” and “unadaptable,” by saying that: “There are Vlach Gypsies, who wander, fluctuate, speculate, do business and there are Gypsies, who got adapted, they want to work, but do not have any job” (participant from Žilina).<sup>8</sup> The “adaptable” Roma were further considered as already integrated and getting along with the majority very well, thus not perceived as “problematic.” To be more precise, the “adaptable” Roma were portrayed as people who make an effort to have or find a job and take care of their children, sending them to school and caring about their hygiene and behavior. When portraying “adaptable” Roma, participants often referred to their own experience with them by claiming that: “It is very individual, because what I can see is mainly young families, they are very young. They have children at the age of 15 or 16, but some of them really make an effort. Both parents and children have very decent clothes and greet politely. I really argue that 90% of them are decent, but 10% are corrupting it” (participant from Banská Bystrica) or: “There are many Gypsies, the Roma, in our neighborhood. They also have 10–12 children, do not work, and take care of their children rather poorly. They do not work at all and are dependent on social allowances to survive somehow. They also steal and so on. But there are also others. They are good, have a nicely equipped and clean [household], they take care of it and work. But it is a different family” (participant from Žilina).

Regarding the “adaptable” Roma as a target group of public policies, this group was seen as one that either: (1) does not need state support as it is already well integrated; or (2) deserves state support, mainly because the “adaptable” Roma, despite being decent, educated, and willing to become integrated, may face discrimination (mostly in the labor market or in access to preschool education). In this respect, a participant from Prešov said: “And then, there are the Roma who completed vocational school, they maybe even passed the secondary school leaving exam, but they will not get a job as a mason or anything like that because they are Roma. [...]”

<sup>8</sup>Translations of the quotes were slightly modified to be understandable and grammatically correct while preserving the meaning. Original quotes (in Slovak) are available upon request from the authors.

Simply, some of them do not have the opportunity to get employed” (participant from Prešov). Another participant answered the facilitator’s question about whether the access to preschool education is fair and equal for both Roma and non-Roma children as follows: “I think that there is a problem that, if there are five white children and one Roma child, the teacher will favor the white one, because she [the teacher] thinks that the white one will be less problematic than the Roma child. So it may be problematic” (participant from Žilina).

In contrast, the “unadaptable” Roma are perceived as those who do not deserve any state assistance since they do not want to become integrated and are inclined to misuse any state assistance. When discussing school attendance, participants perceived Roma parents as unreliable by claiming that “they do not take care of and are not interested in their children,” “they have different values [than education]” (participants from Žilina) or “first of all there should be a will and effort” (participant from Banská Bystrica). The last quote refers to the participant’s perception that Roma parents should cooperate with school and be more interested in the education of their children. Moreover, “unadaptable” Roma were generally depicted as noisy and ill-mannered with poor hygiene habits and social skills. The “unadaptable” Roma were seen as criminals and deviants with a very poor will to accept the rules and standards of the majority society.

### The Roma as Social Deviants

Importantly, the main focus in the discussions on the Roma was about the “unadaptable” ones. This kind of “unadaptability” includes a set of negative characteristics that may be categorized into: (1) unwillingness to complete education and find or keep a job, or in other words to accept the rules, responsibilities, and expectations of the majority; (2) a lack of hygiene habits and social skills; (3) a tendency to be aggressive and criminal, which was also often related to alcoholism or drug addiction.

Firstly, the Roma from the “unadaptable” category were described as unwilling to become integrated and adopt the values and rules of the majority population or to become “assimilated.” The participants argued that the Roma do not respect the values of the majority, such as the value of education or being employed. This argument is closely related to the widespread stereotype that Roma want to be unemployed and dependent on social allowances because the amount of social allowances (specifically for the Roma) is so high that it motivates them not to complete an education and find a job. For instance, a participant from Gelnica asked: “Why are so many Roma unemployed? There is a question: are they voluntarily unemployed? Is this system suitable for them? Maybe yes. Besides that, I agree with everything that is written there [in the handout participants received from facilitators] that one of the barriers is that they lack education. Why do they lack education? They voluntarily give up on education” (participant from Gelnica).

Second, the Roma, and particularly Roma children, were portrayed as uncivilized and ill-mannered in terms of their poor hygiene habits and social skills. Participants of the focus groups emphasized Roma children’s lack of skills and manners right after entering primary school by claiming that “some of them almost do not know what a toothbrush is for” (participant from Pezinok), “communication with them is very poor,” “they do not understand many common words or basic things in life” (participant from Prešov), “he [the Roma pupil] does not know

how to wash himself, what soap is for, what is a toilet for” (participant from Žilina). According to the participants, the fact that Roma children are “uncivilized” is a result of poor parenting and a lack of role models. In this respect, participants argued that “if they [Roma children] do not have role models in their family, they cannot learn it,” meaning to learn to attend school regularly (participant from Žilina). Additionally, the Roma children, constructed as misbehaving and dirty, allegedly threaten not only their own future prospects in education but also their non-Roma classmates, who tend to imitate them and learn their bad manners. Therefore, participants generally agreed with the necessity, even an obligation, to make Roma children complete kindergartens, which was perceived as a suitable policy tool to master habits and learn good manners from early childhood.

Third, the Roma were depicted as prone to criminal activities, violence, and aggression. The tendency of the Roma to steal and cheat was mentioned in the focus group discussions, even in the case of little children, who are allegedly being taught to steal by their parents or by not seeing good role models. One participant from Žilina said, “I often can see teenage [Roma] boys, 12- or 13-year-olds, going from Nová Žilina. They are a group of four, five or six, and when they see a white boy, they attack him, slap him, and steal his money” (participant from Žilina).

Not surprisingly, participants perceive the incivility of the Roma as a part of their nature and “mentality,” which goes along with the common portrayal of the Roma and their culture as artistic, unrestrained, wild, and temperamental. When speaking about the Roma, participants depicted the Roma as “children of the wind” (participant from Žilina) or that “they live for today, do not look at tomorrow” (participant from Pezinok), “their mentality is that they live for this moment, they do not plan anything” (participant from Gelnica). On the other hand, the incivility of the Roma was explained not solely as a consequence of their “mentality,” or as something they were born with, but also as a consequence of their generally poor parenting skills. In this respect, participants claimed that “they are raised in an absolutely different way; they have a different mentality, different behavior” (participant from Banská Bystrica).

### The Roma as Incapable of Making Wise Decisions about Their Lives

The Roma were portrayed by participants not only as unwilling to become integrated but as incapable of doing so. Specifically, they were seen as people who are not able to make wise decisions about their lives and to provide their children with a supportive background so they can succeed in school and later in life. More specifically, the focus group participants claimed that Roma parents cannot provide their children with the proper preschool education necessary for their successful start in primary school, cannot help them with homework, and cannot discipline them and teach them how to be polite and responsible. Participants claimed that “they [Roma children] are really unprepared [for entering primary school] and misbehaving, because nobody unfortunately gives [skills] to them” (participant in Prešov) or “Roma children have it [kindergarten] for free, including meals, everything, but they [Roma parents] do not enroll them in schools [meaning also kindergarten]” (participant from Banská Bystrica). Both comments by focus group participants convey that Roma parents are both incapable of providing and unwilling to provide their children with a proper upbringing. Roma children experiencing a lack of role models caused by the combination of incapability and unwillingness of Roma parents was a key theme in the discussions about the role of Roma families in tackling gaps in education

between Roma and non-Roma children. According to participants, as a result of a lack of role models, the Roma cannot see that they can live in a different way and adapt their habits to the majority's expectations and standards and become "assimilated."

### The State Needs to Have More Control over the Lives of Roma Communities

Due to the fact that the Roma were constructed in the focus group discussions as (1) not willing to become integrated and (2) incapable of making wise decisions about their lives and taking care of themselves, the prevalent opinion in the focus group discussions was that authoritarian means must be used to make the Roma become integrated. Regarding this, participants suggested that the state should play a stronger role in the lives of Roma families, mainly in terms of ensuring that the Roma children complete at least preschool and primary education. To achieve this goal, participants claimed that coercive tools should be applied: "The state enables them to complete education, but if they are not obliged to send their kid to the school, they will not do that. The system must be changed" (participant from Gelnica). One of the most common coercive tools to ensure higher school attendance by Roma students mentioned in the discussions were sanctions related to cutting or even withdrawing social allowances by saying that "family allowances are perhaps the only motivation to simply force [Roma] parents to send their children to the school" or "pressure needs to be put on parents by means of family allowances" (participants from Žilina).

A dominant theme in the discussions was that the state should "remedy" the Roma, in terms of teaching them good manners and coercing them to get an education and find employment. Participants argued that the majority knows better what is best for the Roma communities, and, therefore, the state should take more action on behalf of the Roma and in their interests: "I know that it is about assimilation of the Roma in our society, so they start to behave just like we behave" (participant from Pezinok). In this respect, participants called for a stricter and more consistent state policy approach toward the Roma as they currently consider the state to be powerless and ineffective in the Roma integration processes. It is also apparent that a paternalistic approach toward the Roma was palpable in the discussions. Instead of calling for empowering the Roma and encouraging them to seek their own solutions for combating the social exclusion they face, the participants often implied that the non-Roma majority should define problems and propose solutions because the Roma are incapable of doing it on their own.

## DISCUSSION

Through a scrutiny of public policy documents relevant to the education of the Roma students and the analysis of focus groups involving the general public in discussing various proinclusive policies, we have uncovered a number of themes that constitute the social construction of the Roma in Slovakia. The findings from these two data sources demonstrate that there is an overlap between the social construction of the Roma population presented in the policy documents and in the focus groups representing the general public. Both the policies and focus group participants perceive the Roma as irresponsible parents, not valuing education and incapable of making wise decisions about their lives or their children's lives. They are constructed as lacking

the basic social and hygiene skills and thus as an asocial and disruptive element in schools or society at large (see also Balibar, 2009, p. ix; Matras, Viktor, & Steel, 2015, p. 11; New, 2012, p. 55).

Particularly, the findings from the focus groups exposed an important thematic discrepancy in how the Roma were perceived and described by participants. Not only did focus group participants subdivide the Roma minority group “into those who are deserving and those who are not” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 336), they oscillated between two different paradigmatic understandings of the Roma minority as determined either by “nature” or by “nurture” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Burr, 2015; Fuss, 2013). On the one hand, research participants hinted at the “nurture” understanding when expressing their belief in the possibility of social change and that various public policies may secure or improve social inclusion of the Roma in education. This way they implied that the social conditions, status, identity, and the way the Roma live and participate in society are fluid, changeable, and dependent on the social and political context. On the other hand, other research participants (or the same ones but in different parts of the group discussion) presented the belief that the Roma as a social group are by “nature” unchangeable, essentially and biologically determined to behave in certain ways. In this sense, these participants did not believe that any successful inclusion of the Roma in society is possible. They merely proposed keeping the unfavorable situation with the “unchangeable” Roma under control, so they do not disturb the majority with their criminal activity.

As a consequence of such perception, the Roma as a target group of public policies are not considered self-reliant partners who could competently participate in seeking solutions for improving their socioeconomic status on their own. They are rather perceived as a dependent and powerless group that needs direction and authoritarian means to be protected from the harm caused by their decisions. In other words, the prevalent argument was that punishment and obligation were the only method to integrate the Roma in terms of meeting the majority population’s standards of behavior.

Following the theoretical premises of critical theory (Parker, 2012; Ryoo & McLaren, 2010; Tomlinson, 1987), this essentialist standpoint about a particular social group—e.g., ethnic minority, people with disabilities, women—can be interpreted as a conscious strategy to preserve the power of the privileged social group over the oppressed. “Clearly, wealthy white people benefit from racist exploitation and the oppression that sustains it” (Spector, 2014, p. 125). In other words, holding an essentialist position and claiming that the Roma are lazy, unintelligent, and irresponsible deviants “by nature” can be interpreted as a purposeful strategy to systematically disable them from accessing the power and privilege of the white majority. Nonetheless, if being authentically convinced about the truthfulness of this stereotype and thus not having hidden exploitative intentions, it might be problematic to interpret it as a purposeful strategy but rather as behavior that has the unintended effect of protecting and preserving one’s own privileges and access to power. The collected data did not allow us to discern respondents’ motivations and intentions.

When accepting the possibility of social change toward greater equality between the Roma and non-Roma population, the question remains unanswered as to whether public policies specifically targeting the Roma may assist in achieving this goal. Although this article does not set out to prove any causal relations, it aims to support the argument of Ingram and Schneider (2005) that the negative social construction of the targeted population by public

policy inhibits achieving the goal that the policy was designed to achieve. “Policy teaches lessons about the type of groups people belong to, what they deserve from the government, and what is expected from them. [...] Citizens encounter and internalize the messages not only through observations of politics and media coverage but also through their direct, personal experiences with public policy” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, pp. 340–341). Thus, if the message of public policies targeting the Roma is that they are powerless, needy, and not deserving of the government’s help, as a result they internalize the self-image of being alone and disempowered individual players against the government’s corrupt powerful machinery. This social construction of the Roma can be interpreted as actively manipulating them to feel demotivated to participate in the democratic processes, and, thus, impacts their democratic participation with the goal of improving their social status (Ingram & Schneider, 2005, p. 20).

The ongoing academic debate provides support for the main argument of this article that the public policies originally designed to support the Roma inclusion may lead to hostility against the Roma and their exclusion. For instance, Marushiakova and Popov (2015) liken the situation to the Catch-22 theory when claiming that “[t]here is a vicious cycle of problems which need to be solved; the solution requires a special policy for inclusion, however, this policy stigmatizes the Roma and sets them even more apart from the rest of society” (p. 19). Matras et al. (2015) present that “constructing Roma as a problem population,” romanticizing and at the same time pathologizing the “Roma culture” in educational policies through creating a whole career sector specializing in educational inclusion of Roma students may lead to sustaining and deepening their social exclusion (pp. 11, 16). In a similar line of argument New (2012) uses the concept of “stigma” instead of negative “social construction” of Roma (as used in this article) when he argues that “stigmatizing” Roma students as incompetent, unpromising, and uncivilized, and, thus, intrinsically inferior affects their motivation to learn and succeed in their education in Slovakia (pp. 47–48, 55–56).

This leads us to a more general dilemma as to whether public policies may still target some populations (but create a positive social construction of them) or whether public policies should not target any specific social groups but always address the entire state population. In an academic environment, predominantly within an American context, this dilemma can be translated into an academic debate between the “racialized” (or racially/ethnically targeted) versus “color-blind” (or race-neutral) public policies (e.g., Choi, 2008; Dipti, 2010; Rosenthal & Levi, 2010; Wells, 2014). Regarding the policies that target particular ethnic groups, in line with the argument of Ingram and Schneider (2005) these policies may sustain and solidify the negative social construction of these groups and as a result impede their impact. Simpson (2004) argues that even presenting official “racial” statistics may reinforce racial thinking, thus not only identifying existing differences but entrenching divisions. “[R]acial categories are invented to represent a proxy for people’s cultural behaviour, but are then claimed to reflect unmeasured underlying ‘real’ characteristics of all members of the group. The categories are ‘reified’, they become more solid and meaningful than is reasonable to assume” (p. 663). Hence, even if the public policy attempted to construct the Roma positively, it would still be aimed at addressing the existing statistical inequalities between the Roma and non-Roma population, which might itself “solidify” and make “real” these differences.

In contrast, the critics of color-blind or race-neutral policies argue that these public policies “interact with school systems and residential patterns in which race is a central factor in deciding where students go to school, what resources and curricula they have access to, whether they are understood and appreciated by teachers and classmates, and how they are categorized across

academic programs” (Wells, 2014, p. 38). In other words, whether or not we want to see it, there are everyday patterns and mechanisms of race segregation and discrimination in society, which exist regardless of antidiscriminatory legislation. Turning a blind eye on these when introducing color-blind or race-neutral policies may not only replicate but even exacerbate racial inequality. For example, while legislation might proclaim equal conditions for everyone to enroll in preprimary education, Roma people might experience much greater barriers to doing so (e.g., insolvency, distance to kindergarten, fear of anti-gypsyist treatment by other pupils and staff, unawareness of the importance of preprimary education). If these barriers are not specifically addressed, the difference in the preprimary education enrollment rate between Roma and non-Roma will continue. Critical race theorists perceive the color-blind approach as tantamount to racism while arguing that it serves to maintain racial inequality and justifies the culture of power and White privilege (Choi, 2008, p. 54).

In this respect, Surdu and Kovats (2015) claim that the more we deal with the Roma in quantitative and qualitative scientific research (produced by policy experts, academics, and scientists), activism (through local or statewide nongovernmental organizations and/or international organizations), and Roma-targeted policies, the more we politicize Roma identity and create a self-sustaining cycle “where Roma knowledge identifies Roma problems requiring a policy response, which produces more Roma knowledge, more needs and more policy responses” (p. 5). In this line of thought, Surdu and Kovats (2015) argue that presenting Roma as essentially different and designing and investing in Roma-targeted policies has increased and continues to create exclusion and hostility toward them from fellow citizens (p. 5).

This dilemma appears unresolvable. On the one hand, public policies targeting a particular ethnic social group construct and solidify its image as different from the majority, which systematically undermines efforts to equalize the ethnic minority and majority. On the other hand, if public policies do not target the particular social group, they merely sustain its unequal status quo since the specific barriers to inclusion that the social group may face are likely to remain unaddressed. Nonetheless, this should not leave us unable to do anything about existing social inequalities.

## CONCLUSION

Designing public policies, which aim to and have a potential to reduce inequalities between the Roma and non-Roma population, is more complex than it might appear at first sight. This article aimed to pinpoint some of the intricacies of this task—particularly with regards to the issue of how the public policies can target the Roma population, what social constructions they create about the Roma, and how this may impact achieving the goal of their inclusion in education and society. In doing so, the article did not intend to reject ethnically targeted public policies as such in favor of ethnically neutral policies. It merely aimed to point out that both approaches might have ambivalent consequences and that neither is right or wrong.

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