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## THE ROMA AND EDUCATION: SOLUTION FINDING IN BOHEMIAN AND SLOVAK CONDITIONS

ABSTRACT. Balvín Jaroslav, Vavreková Lenka, *The Roma and Education: Solution Finding in Bohemian and Slovak Conditions* [Romowie i edukacja: czeskie i słowackie rozwiązania]. *Studia Edukacyjne* nr 25, 2013, Poznań 2013, pp. 269-282. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISBN 978-83-232-2610-9. ISSN 1233-6688

The text focuses on analytical opinions of politicians about the education of Romany children and on comparing democratization in education with autocratism when trying to solve the so-called Romany problem. The idea of establishing boarding schools for Romany children is an example of a non-systemic and unilateral solution. According to certain European and domestic politicians, this method is a positive solution. However, the author and many specialists in Romology believe that this approach is discriminatory and assimilative as it is not compatible with the traditions of the Romany culture or the principles of humanist and democratic pedagogy. As an alternative to unilateral formations, let us mention the project of an all-day educational system that has been developing in Slovakia with the support of European funds at the Methodological Center in Prešov.

**Key words:** the Roma, education, boarding school, assimilation, inclusion, the politics of democracy, the politics of autocracy

### Preface

The ensuing text has been written in response to the efforts of the Slovak governments, where the then Deputy Prime Minister **Dušan Čaplovič** was the first politician officially authorized to conceptualize a policy concerning relations with ethnic minorities and today, as minister of education, he has not yet abandoned the idea of establishing boarding schools. The endeavor to establish boarding schools for Romany pupils as salvific solution of the problems existing in Romany communities.

As a very positive approach to this issue I consider the attitude of **Iveta Radičová** in one of her pre-election interviews, who became prime minister of the Slovak Republic in 2010,

in this situation, I consider boarding schools, as government proposes, completely inappropriate. I might even call it an absurd idea, the reason being that what we really need is to streamline these funds into completing the construction and reconstruction of schools, as it generates jobs, and into creating a network of compulsory preschool education...<sup>1</sup>

In the ensuing text, we would like to point the constant danger of autocratic and non-democratic management of education, as has been recently observed in Slovakia in connection with the efforts to establish boarding schools for Romany children. The text is our response to these intentions. We believe that it demonstrates clearly the one-sidedness of trying to solve complex and complicated problems. In this context, too, the above words of **Milena Hübschmannová** apply,

Each part of the matter as a whole has its function. Therefore, those who represent our society and are responsible for its proper functioning should contribute to harmonic development of all the spheres of the society.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Status Quo in the Education of Romany Pupils after 1989**

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 opened democratization opportunities in education, as well. At first, it seemed that the conditions were it used to be normal and even constructive to enroll 80 percent of Romany pupils in special schools.

Special schools were presented as the means of improving the education of Romany pupils. Regular grammar schools were not motivated to adjust their teaching methods in the education of Romany pupils in their particular situation. They relied on the methods used in special schools. The decision-making and professional aptitude of the persons who sent children to special schools was left up to specialists in pedagogic and psychological consulting services. Special pedagogy was developed as a sub-specialization of pedagogy and as part of the policy applied to teaching Romany pupils.

A perfect system. Practically flawless. It worked until 1998, when a fantastic cosmetic transformation took place in the Czech Republic:

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Iveta Radičová for RNL, 4/2010, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Romano Džaniben, 3/95, p. 15.

special schools became regular grammar schools, but nothing changed in the essence of the matter. In fact, the original proposal of the Romany deputy person, Horáková, to abolish special schools and thereby equalize the Roma people's access to education has thus attained a phantasmagoric result. A Czech saying goes, "The wolf had his fill and the goat remained whole" (To have one's cake and eat it). Paternalism – i.e., autocratic approach – that was much objected to, especially by the dissidents before the Velvet revolution, remained paternalism, and democracy in education was increasingly becoming autocratic. Solutions for Romany "problems" were left open-ended, despite the fact that members of the political establishment would every now and then demonstratively assess and forcefully administer heal-all methods. The problem is that rather than opening a democratic discussion, so that the voices of Roma themselves could be heard, they subscribed to the expert opinions and experts who were able to deliver anything an autocrat need to hear to justify autocratic decision-making. Hence, discussions were held without the participation of the stakeholders, therefore non-democratically.

### **The Child and the Parents**

In 2004, special schools were integrated in the elementary school system and rename to special and practical elementary schools. However, even in these schools, the number of Romany students remained at approximately 35 per cent.

Such was the situation in Bohemia. And in Slovakia? There, too, a heal-all means was rediscovered – namely, boarding schools. Suddenly, the role of teacher assistant, which used to function very well as a bridge between the school and Romany parents, became inadequate. The notion was that with the boarding schools in place, we would not need them at all! How else are we to understand the words of **Dušan Čaplovič**, current minister of education in Slovakia,

Assistants deliver decent work in the school and maybe even outside the school, but the environment is demotivating and assistants are unable to change it. Boarding schools can.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, even the deputy prime minister is acknowledges that,

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<sup>3</sup> R. Čonka, S.D. Hanzelová, *Čaplovič: Yes to Boarding Schools*, [in:] *Romano nevo l'il* [Čaplovič: Áno internátnym školám, [in:] *Romano nevo l'il*], Thematic Supplement – October 2009. Issue 926-929, 41-44<sup>th</sup> week, 1, October-31. October 2009, Year XIX, p. 1.

Boarding schools lack contact with the parents and the family. Therefore, enforcement of boarding schools is out of the question, it can only have the form of **endeavor to help children change the unfavorable lifestyle of their parent** by demonstrating to them that education is necessary, if one wants to get out of poverty, and helping them meet other people, so that they would a different way of living than their own lifestyle.<sup>4</sup>

In my opinion, this is a completely perverted pedagogy – it is more like andragogics, as it aims not to educate the child himself, but his parents, forcing them to change their lifestyle, instead! The child is hereby used as an instrument – is that supposed to be the purpose of boarding schools? What an interesting way of making use of political argumentation to promote establishment of boarding schools... You would only have to read **Miroslav Dědič's** *Květušín Poem* about the first Romany boarding home in Bohemia to learn the opinion of a normal teacher, who would always tell his pupils, “Change your lifestyle so as to live better than your parents, but never at the cost of rejecting completely their authority.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if you read the opinion of a Romany mother, **Sonia Pokutová** of Rudňany, you would understand that **“There is no better place for a child than with his mother.”**<sup>6</sup>

### **Democratism and Autocratism in the School Environment**

A democratic school is based on democratic principles. Democracy is a system that is ruled by people. In certain cases, however, people may be excluded from governing, because they are excluded from discussing issues that concern them. Autocracy is a cover-up for everything. That is what happened when the boarding school issue was first opened by the European Union's ambassador in Slovakia, **Eric von der Linden**, in May 2004. His words can be considered a typical example of autocratism in relations to one ethnic minority that ought to be involved in the search for solutions to problems that concern this minority. However, the reality is entirely different, as present-day society is not about democracy, it is about autocracy. Let's read the words carefully and, above all, contemplate about them,

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> M. Dědič, *Květušín Poem*, Praha 2006.

<sup>6</sup> D. Občasníková, *Opinion of a mother from the community: There is no better place for a child than with his mother*, [in:] *Romano nevo l'il*, Thematic Supplement – October 2009. Issue 926-929, 41-44<sup>th</sup> week, 1, October 31, 2009, Year XIX, p. 1.

It might sound simplistic, but I think that we should start – in quotation marks, of course – by **forcing Romany children to stay in some kind of a boarding school (IŠ) from Monday morning to Friday afternoon, where they would be constantly exposed to the system of values prevailing in our society.**<sup>7</sup>.

It is a textbook example of autocratism in politics as well as education, forceful assimilation by politicians and restriction of the rights of children to choose their values, as well as the rights of their parents to bringing their children in the family. The ambassador's use of quotations marks certainly did not spare him from immediate criticism on international level and total prohibition of making statements on the subject.

Namely, if such an approach were to be approved and implemented, it would constitute reinstatement of autocratic assimilation measures of the absolutist type, as for example during the reign of **Maria Theresia**. Their targets were defenseless children who were forcefully taken from their parents by soldiers (in today's democratic and civilized country, this duty would be carried out by social workers!), according to the opinion of deputy chairperson of the Slovak National Party, **A. Belousovová**. They should thereupon turn the over to boarding schools (during the era of Maria Theresia, farmland owners were supposed to take care of this...). The saddest part of this situation is the fact that politicians of the Belousovová type merely tie onto the words Deputy Prime Minister Dušan Čaplovič, who after all had expressed his view very openly and exactly in his thematically identical supplement *Romano nevo lil*<sup>8</sup> Logically, a declaration of the chairman of another parliamentary party, Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), **Vladimír Mečiar**, followed,

Children should be placed in boarding schools operated by the state with all the due care possible. Proper regimen and work habits should facilitate their full integration into civil life after reaching 18 years of age.<sup>9</sup>

**Jožo T. Schön**, A Romany journalist reacts wittingly to these tendencies that testify to the government's autocratism and its control and managing mechanisms, as well as the issue of formatting individuals' value systems, with uncompromising humor and with emphasis on the liberty rights of the Roma as fully equal citizens of Slovakia, in his article

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<sup>7</sup> In: S. Hanzelová, *We Know Boarding schools of Five Years Ago*, [in:] *Romano nevo lil*, Thematic Supplement – October 2009. Issue 926-929, 41-44<sup>th</sup> week, 1, October 31, 2009, Year XIX, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> R. Čonka, S.D. Hanzelová, *Čaplovič*, p. 1-3.

<sup>9</sup> S. Hanzelová, *We Know Boarding schools*, p. 2.

“*The State’s Children*“. In it, Jožo Schön underlines the responsibility of the state, i.e., liability that the state does not like to acknowledge, because,

If the state admitted to having made a mistake, it would have to indemnify the half-illiterate former students of special schools today. Instead, the state comes up with a new experiment. The state wants take children from their parents, impede parents’ access to their children, and keep the children in boarding schools for at least ten years. In this context, the first deputy chairperson of the Slovak National Party, Anna Belousovová, even speak of the necessity to isolate up to 90 per cent of Romany children from their parents. A sensible man must be petrified by the very idea of locking up children in boarding schools. After all, it is not so long ago that their parents and grandparents had to submit to the dictate of the former as well as current system. The results of those systems’ efforts hurt both the majority and minority to this day. The boarding school project has monstrous dimensions, as it seems to be targeting all children from Romany settlements, so that it might hurt whole generations. The Roma need not be kept under a lock. They need freedom and behavioral models – like all of Slovakia’s population.<sup>10</sup>

## Democratism, Autocratism, History

I firmly believe that the words of the Romany journalist, now deceased, regrettably, denunciate the effort to establish boarding school as a new heal-all endeavor. His words unveil the truth and identify it unambiguously as a new fatal mistake. It is yet another step in the wrong direction, as assimilation during Maria Theresia’s had been. Why does not the current government learn from history? We no longer have an absolutist system like during Maria Theresia’s era – yet it is autocratic enough. Will future students in ten years have to read in their textbooks about serious mistakes about to happen today, yet presented by today’s autocracy as a top achievement of humanist pedagogy? Children who would be “integrated” into boarding schools would simply get used to it, according to Dušan Čaplovič. That is what the present minister of education had to say to counter time-tested pedagogic facts which claim that transition from home environment to the school is the strongest and frequently the most shocking experience for a child. If this were to happen to a Romany child detached from his parents, that is how he would feel. Although politicians should not be asked about the appropriate age of children for enrollment

<sup>10</sup> J.T. Schön, *The State’s Children*, [in:] *Romano nevo lil* Thematic Supplement – October 2009. Issue 926-929, 41-44<sup>th</sup> week, 1, October-31. October 2009, Year XIX, p. 3.

in a boarding school, according to Dušan Čaplovič, as it should be subjected to a discussion by specialists, nevertheless this politician answers anyway, *a priori*, before any discussion, as follows,

From the pedagogic perspective, the child, acquires the first habits, discipline, sense of responsibility, and persistence, while attending primary school. At that age, however, the child is also most vulnerable and most likely to be influenced by negative factors. This is therefore the prerequisite to applying the boarding school method from the child's very first contact with a school, i.e., from six years of age onward. **Of course, at beginning, adaptation to a new environment and regimen is a significant encroachment into the inner autonomy of each pupil, but the child can get used to it.**<sup>11!!!</sup>

Is this not an exemplary case of autocracy? It might be a good idea to let specialists judge it, but... A politician says: the sixth year of life it most suitable for putting Romany children into boarding schools – because they get used to it...

I can envision social workers searching for six-year-olds in Romany communities. Bygone history has hunting for innocent children of a certain age on record... Nowadays, we live in modern time. After all, there is money coming from the European Union, so let's spend it. Let the authorities and the state do the decision-making. Even those concerned say NO. Discussion of Romany specialists in the thematic supplement *Romano nevo lil* indicates clearly that if politicians cannot be persuaded by means of a discussion, nor do they want to learn a lesson from the Council of Experts of the Ministry of Education under the management of **František Godla**<sup>12</sup> then we obviously have to reach for the fairy tale of the Romany writer **Elena Lacková** entitled "The Heroic Sap and Beautiful Ilona". May someone read it to autocrats as a goodnight story. The tale describes how to prevent the empress from taking Romany children from their parents – in their own interest, needless to add – so that they would get used to our civilized world and absorb our proper values...

And what did the good Romany witch Šilali say to beautiful Ilona and heroic Sap? Her legacy should ring not only in the ears of all Romas, but also those who should respect the following golden rule of morality: **DO NO DO UNTO OTHERS WHAT YOU DO NOT WANT TO HAVE DONE UNTO YOURSELF!** This golden rule expresses true democratism, not autocratism. The *phuri daj* legacy is still valid today, if assimilation

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<sup>11</sup> D. Čaplovič, *Ano internátnym školám* [in:] R. Čonka, S.D. Hanzelová, Čaplovič, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> F. Godla, *Education in Boarding Schools. Yes? No? The Council of Experts advocates depolitization of the theme*, [in:] *Romano nevo lil*, Thematic Supplement – October 2009. Issue 926-929, 41-44<sup>th</sup> week, 1, October 31, 2009, Year XIX, p. 1.

measures in the form of boarding schools were to be imposed. It is equally important as a form of advice – not merely for specialists, but above all for politicians.

**Take our children from the farmland owners and give them back to their mothers. If our children are raised by their mothers, our people will survive. It has been a long time since my star flared up. The time has come for it to stop burning. I give you my soul, Ilona. It will continue to live in you. You will carry on my yearning for freedom, my desire to save the Roma people. Just like you, too, Sap. You will see that the Roma will find their place on the earth!**<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Until 1993, the Czech and Slovak republic were one country – Czechoslovakia. This enabled collaboration of Slovak and Czech specialists. After the separation of both republics, the direction of researchers in sciences and practical application of their results began to differ. An interesting situation evolved, where research in education began to differ according to the object of their research. In Slovakia, the marginalized groups are children from poor Romany settlements; in Bohemia, Romany children from city ghettos. Personally, I believe that the situation has activated specialists and teachers who work in these particular areas. Exchange of experience and collaboration was constructive. Europe has brought new dimensions and even greater opportunities for comparison, but also new problems and consequently new solutions. The latest one – a unilateral one, in our opinion – is the political management's proposal to establish boarding schools pro Romany pupils from poverty-stricken families. We consider proposals of this kind biased and wrong, as they would merely repeat mistakes committed in the past in relations with Romany communities and lacking a systemic approach to solving the problem of including the Roma in the society. We have already expressed our opinion on this matter herein above. Let's now add some Romany artists' statements about the values that a Romany family passes onto Romany children, despite their poverty and perhaps even poor adjustability!

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<sup>13</sup> E. Lacková, *Romane paramisa-Romany tales*, Renarrated into Czech by Jaroslav Balvín, Prague 1999, p. 97.

Ladislav Hlaváč  
**Romaňi blaka – The Gypsy Window**

<p><i>Andro suno o čhon  Pre mande vičinel:  „Av, dikh, romaňi blaka!“  „Oda nane blaka,  oda hiňi blacha!“  „pre chevori dikh:  e daj le čhavenca  pro virkos sovel,  o dad paš o bov.“  O čhon pro mande vičinel:  „Av, dikh, romaňi blaka!“  „Oda nane blaka, e šiba nane,  ča o papiris žiroha Pmakhlo!“  „Kaj o vudud te predžal,  so mek kames?“  Pro kašt e momeli labol,  O čhave šuke phuvune chan,  O cikno mek kolin pijel.  O dad paš o bov bešel,  Andre jag dikhel.  O čhon pro mande vičinel:  „Av, dikh, romaňi blaka!“</i></p>	<p><i>O Roma khatar o skamind bešen,  Giľaven, pijen, khelen,  Oda jon o boňa keren.  O čhon pro mande vičinel:  „Ake, dikh, romaňi blaka!“  Pro šukar stolkos  Bešel kalo raj,  O kale bala sar angrušta  Pašal o parno gada,  E mašľa leske pasinel.  O čhon pro mande vičinel:  „Ake, dikh, romaňi blaka!“  E kaľi raňi bare balenca,  Kale jakhenca  Anel zumin andro čikuno čaro,  Pro skamind thovel.  Pre fala kedvešna obrazi hin:  Bugova, lavuta, graj,  O parne firhangı učharen  Phagľi blaka.  O čhon pro mande vičinel:  „Av, dikh, romaňi Blaka!“</i></p>
<p><i>Ma vičin man,  Khere som...“</i></p>	
<p><i>The moon is calling me  in my dream:  “Look, a gypsy window!”  „That? It’s nothing a piece of  scrap with a hole in it!”  “Look through the hole:  Mother’s sleeping on a cot,  Children around her,  Father is attending the stove.“  The moon is calling me:  “Look a gypsy window!”  “You mean the piece of  Greasy paper instead of glass?”  “So what? The light comes in any-  way.  “What more do you want?“ “Noth-  ing.”</i></p>	<p><i>The Roma sitting around the ta-  ble,  Singing, playing, having fun  Celebrating baptism.  On a nice chair  Sits a dark-skinned man,  Rings of black hair  On his white shirt,  A pretty tie as decoration.  After a while a black lady  With black eyes  Pours soup to diner at the table.  Delightful painting on the wall,  Fiddle, contrabass, horse.  TA white drapery covers  The broken window.</i></p>

*On a piece of wood is a candle,  
Children eating dry potatoes,  
Mother is nursing the youngest  
one,  
Father sits at the stove, looking  
into the fire.  
The moon is calling me:  
“Look a gypsy window!”*

*The moon is calling me  
In my dream:  
“Look a gypsy window!”  
“Where are you calling me?  
I’m in my home...”*

*Ladislav Hlaváč. In Milena Hübschmannová. Šaj pes dovakeras Můžeme se domluvit. Olomouc, 1993, pp. 30-31.*

If this should not suffice as an argument, let’s quote a poem by Tery Fabiánová, one of the first Romany writers in Czechoslovakia.

**Tera Fabiánová**  
**Kamás bi... I wish I could...**

*Kamás bi te džal khere  
Ke miri daj,  
Kamás bi, kaj te elas  
Lačo ňilaj.  
Bešás bi pre phuv, dikhavas bi,  
Sar miro dad le phraleha valki keren.  
Miri daj andro kher bokela pekel,  
Khosel o vasta andre leketa,  
Avri dikhel perdal e blaka,  
So kerel o dad...*

*I wish I could go home  
To see my mother,  
I wish for a nice, pleasant summer.  
I’ll sit down on the ground and watch,  
My father and brother mixing the earth  
To make unburnt bricks.  
Mother is baking sweet buns,  
Then she wipes her hand in the apron,  
She goes to the window and looks outside,  
To see what my father is doing.*

Tera Fabianová, Kamás bi... . In Hübschmannová, 1998, pp. 197-198.

**Jan Rusenko**  
**When the Roma Still Lived on the Sun**

When the Roma still lived on the Sun, their mother Earth cried and begged father Sun to send her children she would take care of lovingly. Father Sun called them and told them: "Dear children, don't ask me anything now and don't be angry with me, even if life on the Earth will be hard for you. You will never return to me, but remember that I'll always love you, because I'm your father. The gift you get from me – feelings and songs – will open the way for you to other people, and I'll never stop loving your mother, even though I have to marry another woman." That's why the songs the Roma sing about their fathers and mothers are so sad, and why they raise their arms towards the Sun, weeping.

Father married another woman. They called her Parňi Gadži. She was beautiful, but vain and wicked. She kept reproaching father Sun constantly, saying that he has black and ugly children with our mothers, and wanted him to forget about them, saying "Look at our children are – so beautiful, so white." Father's heart nearly burst to pieces from grief, on hearing these words. He said, "How could I forget them, they are my children and I love them as much as our children!" The Roma felt sorry for their father and their black mother Earth cried with them.

Since father Sun didn't do what Parňi Gadži asked him to do, she left him. He stayed along with them, but the children wanted their mother, and they kept weeping and looking for. Father Sun didn't know what to do, he was desperate and helpless! Father, don't suffer any longer! Send them over to us. We'll take care of them, the children called, for they are our brothers and sisters and our mother will accept them as her own." Father Sun obeyed and sent the children of Parňi Gadži down to the Earth, where they lived together. The Roma loved them, but the children were vain after their mother and began to divide the Earth amongst themselves, but the Roma didn't take anything – why should they, if the whole Earth is their mother?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J. Rusenko, *When the Roma were Still Living on the Sun*, [in:] *We Go a Long Way* ed. E. Manuš, Praha 1998, p. 170.

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## Romowie i edukacja: czeskie i słowackie rozwiązania

### Streszczenie

Tekst skupia się na analizach opinii polityków na temat edukacji dzieci romskich i tzw. problemu romskiego. Pomysł utworzenia szkół z internatem dla dzieci romskich jest przykładem rozwiązania jednostronnego. Według niektórych polityków europejskich, ta metoda jest rodzajem pozytywnego rozwiązania problemu romskiego. Jednakże, autorzy i wielu specjalistów uważają, że takie podejście stanowi przejaw dyskryminacji, ponieważ nie jest to zgodne z tradycją kultury romskiej oraz zasadami pedagogiki humanistycznej i demokratycznej. Jako alternatywę tego projektu autorzy przedstawiają całodniowy system edukacyjny, który rozwija się na Słowacji, przy wsparciu funduszy europejskich, w Centrum Metodycznym w Preszowie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Romowie, edukacja, szkoły z internatem, asymilacja, integracja społeczna, polityka demokracji