

SECURING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION FOR ROMANI YOUTH IN SLOVAKIA

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across Europe, schools closed and classrooms shifted online. For many students, it was a temporary inconvenience. But for a young Roma girl in her first year of primary school, it marked where her education simply stopped.

The Center for Civil and Human Rights (Poradňa), a human rights organisation based in eastern Slovakia, took up their case. They filed a case against the Slovak Ministry of Education, arguing that the government had failed to ensure equal access to education for Roma children during the pandemic. The case was one of the first in Slovakia to challenge this “digital divide” as a form of discrimination.

Story by Poradňa

“I like to go to school, and I like biology, and the teacher teaches me very well,” said the young girl in an interview. But during the pandemic, her school sent worksheets just once a week. With no internet access, no computer, and limited digital skills in her household, she was effectively cut off from learning.

Her grandmother, a Roma activist working with us, saw the injustice firsthand. *“The school was not interested in us,”* she said. *“I did not want her to forget what she had learned before. I found it to be discriminatory.”*

A LANDMARK RULING AND THEN SETBACK

In November 2023, the District Court ruled in the student’s favour. The judgment declared that the state had discriminated against her based on her social origin, property status, and Roma ethnicity. The court ordered the government to pay €3,000 in compensation and acknowledged that her rights to education and access to information had been violated.

The decision was hailed as a landmark victory. Slovak media covered the case extensively, with national and private TV channels broadcasting the story during prime-time news.

“[the case is] the first ever in Slovakia — and also in Europe — to address the so-called digital divide faced by disadvantaged groups.”
Poradňa’s lawyer, Vanda Durbáková

The Slovak authorities appealed the ruling, and unfortunately the Appeals Court over-ruled the previous decision, arguing that the government had acted reasonably under emergency conditions. The student’s grandmother expressed her disappointment but remained hopeful that justice would be secured: *“I believe that the higher courts will do us justice. The state did not do enough to ensure our Roma children could be properly educated.”*

We are now appealing the case through the higher courts, and if necessary, will take it up to the European Court of Human Rights.



Roma community in Eastern Slovakia – The girl’s grandmother, Veronika and her lawyer Vanda during the field monitoring, photo : Poradňa pre občianske a ľudské práva

A BROADER STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY

The case is emblematic of deeper, systemic issues. Roma communities in Slovakia face entrenched discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare, and education. Many live in segregated communities, and Roma children are often placed in separate schools or classrooms.

Digital exclusion has only widened these gaps. When public services move online, those without internet access or digital literacy are left behind.

Our work goes beyond litigation. Our team includes Roma women from these segregated communities who help build trust and inspire others to seek justice. *“Almost all cases of discrimination against Roma that have been decided by Slovak courts are cases brought by Poradňa. We work closely with Roma activists, organise regular meetings, and visit communities to talk about our work.”* Poradňa’s lawyer, Vanda Durbáková

This case began when one of these connections, her grandmother, a longtime collaborator with Poradňa, brought the issue forward.

THE ROLE OF DFF

DFF played a crucial role in supporting the case, including funding the ongoing appeals. Their financial backing made the litigation possible, and their broader network helped us connect with digital rights organisations across Central Europe. The case has sparked new collaboration with Czech NGOs and informed advocacy efforts at the UN and Council of Europe.

LOOKING AHEAD

Following the initial positive ruling, we met with the Slovak Minister of Education to discuss the broader implications of the digital divide. While the legal outcome now remains uncertain, the case has already shifted public discourse and placed the issue of digital exclusion on the national agenda.

For this student, and thousands of Roma children like her, the fight continues, not just for compensation, but for recognition, inclusion, and the right to learn.



Herľany, 23 May 2023 – Meeting of Roma activists, photographed by Ján Varchola for Poradňa



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