

9. CONCLUSIONS: KEY PROCESSES SHAPING HUNGARIAN STUDENT NUMBERS IN SLOVAKIA



Our statistical analysis highlighted the socio-demographic processes that determine enrollment trends in Hungarian-medium public education in Slovakia. Below, we draw conclusions about the major phenomena and processes.

Student numbers continue to be driven primarily by demographic processes within the Hungarian native-speaking population. These include a declining child population as well as assimilation dynamics that cause the number of children born to Hungarian

mothers to diverge from the ethno-linguistic composition recorded among school-age cohorts. Of the three educational levels examined, these demographic processes are reflected most clearly in primary-school enrollment. In the case of kindergartens, change in the enrollment figures is linked to shifts in the administrative and legal framework (for example, the introduction of one compulsory year of preschool), which has increased the number of children in kindergarten. Changes in secondary-school enrollment are also shaped by the educational framework (compulsory

schooling until age 16), but at this level deeper problems already emerge (e.g., dropout and switching the language of instruction). As a result, Hungarian-medium secondary-school enrollment has declined at a faster rate than the size of the corresponding Hungarian age cohort.

Beyond demographic trends, changes in enrollment are strongly influenced by spatial factors as well. Two processes are particularly important. First, internal migration is reshaping the territorial distribution of

the Hungarian population within Slovakia, and this is especially visible in kindergarten and school enrollment patterns – most clearly reflecting the growing attractiveness of major cities and their metropolitan areas. Partly related to this, the broader revaluation of urban kindergartens and schools is observable not only in major cities but in small and medium-sized towns as well. Together, these two factors are concentrating students increasingly “upward” in the settlement hierarchy.

The second spatial process is (ethnic) spatial consolidation: an increasing share of Hungarian students are concentrated in the relatively compact Hungarian ethnic majority (“block”) areas, in connection with the more rapid decline of dispersed Hungarian communities outside the blocks.

The role of territoriality is also visible in other dimensions. The figures show a pronounced difference between the western and eastern parts of the Hungarian settlement area. In the west, the patterns discussed can largely be interpreted through the block–diaspora (and urban–rural) distinctions. In the east, however, the figures are often less coherent. This latter phenomenon is largely driven by the Hungarian native-speaking Roma population, whose share within the Hungarian school contingent is increasing. It is fairly clear that in southeastern Slovakia the Hungarian school network

would not be sustainable without Roma students. At the same time, many examples indicate that the growing presence of Roma students catalyzes significant segregation processes, both between institutions and between localities, as well as within individual institutions. Education policy is, of course, aware of these challenges,⁷⁴ but the effectiveness of policy responses will fundamentally shape not only the near-term future of Hungarian public education, but (more broadly) the future of the Hungarian community in Slovakia.

Finally, it is important to note the emergence and growing number of children registered as non-Hungarian in Hungarian-medium educational institutions, primarily at the kindergarten level. In general, however, this does not mean that children who do not speak Hungarian are entering the system in large numbers. Rather, it reflects the different ethnic (self-)identification and schooling strategies of ethnically mixed families. The other side of the coin is the large number of ethnic Hungarian children who attend Slovak-medium education, which points to two main factors. First, many parents view Slovak schooling as a pathway to better opportunities and as a more effective means of acquiring Slovak, indicating the higher prestige of the Slovak language (and ethnicity) and, in broader terms, the issues of ethnic inequality. Second, segregation frequently leads to switching the language of

instruction, a dynamic that takes on mass dimensions particularly in southeastern Slovakia.

The education of ethnic Hungarian children in the majority language goes beyond the immediate schooling decision. In addition to endangering the sustainability and competitiveness of the Hungarian institutional system, it also functions as a kind of ethno-demographic feedback mechanism, since Hungarian-language schooling plays a significant role in Hungarian ethnic self-identification. Slovak-medium schooling, through the majority culture, social networks and language of instruction, acts as a catalyst of assimilation. In this way, school choice feeds back into ethno-demographic processes that negatively affect the minority Hungarian community.

As we have already suggested, schooling and school choice do not take place in an ethnically neutral environment. Ethnic inequalities institutionalized and sustained by nation-state asymmetries mean that Hungarians occupy less favorable positions than Slovaks in most areas of life. This is reflected in the input side of educational processes such as demographic indicators, asymmetries in choosing and switching the language of instruction as well as in the output side, namely the educational attainment indicators that remain less favorable than those of the majority population.

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THE CHANGING FACE OF HUNGARIAN MINORITY EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA



an Atlas of Student Enrollment, Demography and Social Trends

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