

Similarities and Lessons Learnt: A Comparative Analysis of Education Reforms in Slovakia and Hungary

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Abstract

Slovakia's education system is undergoing significant reforms. The changes launched in recent years, affecting all areas of education, have long been overdue in the country. The history of education policy in Hungary and Slovakia, both before and during the transition to democracy, shared many common features. The objectives at the time – decentralisation, pluralistic approach, the publication of new curricula and textbooks, and the guarantee of professional autonomy – were all pursued in a similar manner. Since 2010, the differences have become significantly more pronounced, while the problems have remained the same in many areas. In Hungary, the recent period has been marked by a wealth of educational reforms, while in Slovakia the current one is the most relevant. The effects and outcomes of the Hungarian reforms can offer numerous lessons, whether positive or cautionary. The current centralised Hungarian education system, the handling of segregation, and the structure of primary education now follow different paths, but it is disheartening that the two countries are still competing for the title of the most successful European country in compensating for social disadvantages.

Keywords: educational reform; desegregation; inclusive school; success or failure

Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL: Social Sciences – Education – State/Government and Education

DOI: 10.36007/eruedu.2026.2.018-031

Comparative Perspectives on the Slovak and Hungarian Education Systems

Slovakia became an independent country on 1 January 1993. Following the transition, the most important tasks for the education system were defined as dismantling the centralised system inherited from the socialist era, breaking with former ideologies, introducing new curricula and textbooks, and ensuring greater professional autonomy for teachers. The school system, which had become democratic and pluralistic, underwent some updating in the early 2000s, but in the country's history, less attention was paid to it than to other areas. Attempts at reform during the period up to 2020 tended to focus on quick fixes for quality education, while responses to serious problems began to develop around 2020. The result is a comprehensive reform to be introduced from 2026. Its main document, *Vzdelané*

Slovensko 2035 – Národný program rozvoja výchovy a vzdelávania (Educated Slovakia 2035 – National Programme for the Development of Education and Training), sets out a long-term development strategy for education and training. The aim is to create high-quality, inclusive and competitive education. The programme summarises the key issues characterising current Slovak education policy. It sets out priorities such as reducing inequalities, strengthening social mobility and supporting disadvantaged pupils. Within this framework, it focuses particularly on early childhood education through early entry into nursery school, addressing the shortage of teachers, and professional renewal. It envisages inclusive education and the reduction of segregation through institutional-level developments, pedagogical innovations, and systemic management reforms.

Hungary has been grappling with these very same issues for decades and has explored almost every theory offering a way out. Reforms followed reforms; successive governments arrived with firm educational policy visions, typically markedly different from those of their predecessors, which they then implemented. In 1985, when the socialist system was still in place, the right of parents to choose their child's school was enshrined in law, which is virtually the only aspect that has remained unchanged to this day. At the time of the regime change, in the spirit of decentralisation, local authorities were given the task of organising education; then, in 2010, a contrary process began: centralisation. The Klebelsberg Centre was established, and centralised control was introduced in full. The teacher certification system, the shortage of teachers, the reproduction of social disadvantages, the increasingly disappointing PISA results, the expansion of church-run schools, the declining level of education funding, and the catastrophic demographic indicators can all serve as lessons for those shaping Slovak education policy.

What factors have driven the current education reforms in Slovakia?

The Ministry, led by Tomáš Drucker, has launched the most significant reform initiative in the history of the Slovak education system. The reform package seeks to address the most fundamental challenges currently facing education. Its document, *Vzdelané Slovensko 2035 – Národný program rozvoja výchovy a vzdelávania* – aims to tackle curriculum reforms, segregation, the shortage of teachers, the integration of digitalisation, and the improvement of PISA results. As they put it, in Slovakia, identifying the problems and analysing the situation accurately works effectively; all that is missing is the solution.

How do they assess the current situation?

According to domestic and international analyses, the Slovak education system has been stagnating in the long term and continuously facing problems. To draw conclusions, it is essential to outline, in broad terms, which shortcomings the reform plans focus on.

Due to the unequal access to and quality of pre-school education, differences are already apparent upon entry into primary school and continue to widen throughout the school years. The country achieves low results in PISA surveys, where approximately one-third of 15-year-old students fail to meet the basic literacy standard. Slovakia is among the OECD countries where socio-economic background

has the greatest impact on student outcomes, a finding confirmed also by results in digital literacy. At the same time, students with special educational needs are at significantly greater risk of early school leaving (PUŠD 2024). The current education system, which is not functioning effectively, fails to take into account the needs of the labour market, the country's innovation potential and its competitiveness.

As students get older, their satisfaction with school decreases. Half of the teachers in the Bratislava region stated that their work has no, or only a minimal, positive impact on their mental health. Numerous studies and surveys have recorded high levels of workplace stress and burnout among teachers, which negatively affects the quality of teaching and the school atmosphere. The perception of low education standards contributes significantly to the brain drain. The lack of interest in teaching professions (particularly in western Slovakia), as well as the rising average age of teachers and their retirement, are major factors contributing to this crisis, which has been ongoing for years and is gradually worsening. Education is not a social priority, as reflected in public expenditure that is low compared to the EU average and in the low level of social esteem in which it is held. Analyses – such as the annual reports of the State School Inspectorate, the research findings of *Todározum*, the surveys by the Slovak Higher Education Accreditation Agency (SAAVŠ) and the Centre for Educational Analyses – confirm these findings regarding the functioning of the system in the long run (Hall 2020). Slovakia thus finds itself in a paradoxical situation. Qualitative analyses of the problems are available, but the country has so far failed to find solutions, particularly in implementation.

One of the main reasons is that the education system is a complex and adaptive ecosystem in which partial changes are generally ineffective unless they are implemented within a broader context, with an emphasis on systems thinking. This strategy, therefore, focuses on the root causes of the system's long-term failure, not merely on its individual manifestations. The Slovak education system is influenced by several external factors that determine its opportunities and challenges. Education has long been declared a political priority, yet it has been neglected for many years. A key driver of the current reforms has been the Slovak Republic's Recovery and Resilience Plan, which reallocates financial resources, exerts political pressure to bring about change, and promises greater accountability in the long-term implementation of reforms and investments. Growing social diversity and migration are placing new demands on inclusion, whilst the segregation of the Roma population remains a serious problem.

The system is currently facing demographic pressure, which will have a particularly significant impact on the fragmented network of small schools. Due to the demographic decline expected after 2027 and high operating costs, the existing education system will not be able to sustain the current school network in the long run. In the coming years, Slovakia is expected to face a shortage of teachers (several thousand annually). The brain drain persists, and from a social perspective, it is also problematic that the system is unable to effectively address inequalities, which begin with the low participation of socially disadvantaged children in pre-school education. The pressure on the education system to adapt is exacerbated by the arrival of refugees and children from Ukraine, the radicalisation of young people,

and growing concerns regarding the mental health of pupils and teachers.

Since 2021, the education system has undergone a number of rapid and far-reaching legislative changes, including the new curriculum, the reforms promoting inclusion, as well as certain amendments to the Higher Education Act. Between 2024 and 2025, the most comprehensive legislative package of the past 20 years was adopted, affecting all levels of education. The risks posed by rapid change may lie in the capacity of the education system and the ability of its stakeholders to adapt to change, as well as the uncertain continuity of reforms spanning electoral cycles (Ministerstvo školstva 2018). Several critics have argued that the reforms are too ambitious, were initiated from above, and that all this calls their success into question.

What is the problem with top-down reforms?

In Hungary in 1985, during the final period of socialism, the top leadership of education policy was strongly pro-reform, whilst at the lower county levels, a rigid adherence to tradition still prevailed. Therefore, bypassing them, the law granted teachers significant freedom, which caught them completely unprepared. There was immense panic among them; they did not know what to do with the sudden freedom thrust upon them, and so this part of the reform failed. The danger of a top-down reform is that the law itself does not change anything. If those implementing it are caught unprepared, they are unable to make the most of the opportunity.

Regarding another criticism levelled at the reform, it sought to introduce too many changes at once without proper preparation. This is particularly true of education, where changes take time.

Demographic situation and declining birth rates

Based on demographic indicators, Slovakia and Hungary face similar demographic challenges, particularly in terms of low fertility and an ageing population. At the same time, the population decline is faster in Hungary than in Slovakia. European countries that face ageing and declining populations are attempting to address these demographic challenges through various policy measures. In some places, the emphasis is on extending life expectancy and maintaining health. Others are trying to encourage parents to have more children through family-friendly measures that vary according to the number of children. Some countries believe that the situation can only be managed by accepting immigrants.

In Hungary, women of childbearing age have been targeted with various tax policy measures and housing loan subsidies. However, they failed to take a few important facts into account. Firstly, the number of women of childbearing age has fallen to such an extent that, given current trends, the success of this approach is now impossible, particularly as the total fertility rate has remained consistently low in recent decades. This figure has now stabilised at around 1.49, which is below the EU average and even lower than the figure for Slovakia. A key factor is the extent to which fertility falls below the replacement level. The greater the difference between the two, the more difficult it becomes to reverse the trend and ensure long-term population stability.

The current fertility rate, between 1.4 and 1.5, falls far short of the 2.0–2.1 rate required to ensure the reproduction of the current generation of parents. For the time being, we do not even reach the European Union's figure of 1.6, which is considered low. Taking into account the decline in the number of women of child-bearing age, the trend of population decline would not be reversed even if fertility were to increase domestically. At the same time, it would be important to increase it, even at a moderate pace, but continuously. Based on current projections, a value at least exceeding the European average (1.75) should be achieved in the short term. Reaching the replacement level is a completely unrealistic prospect (Kapitány – Spéder 2017).

Nor does the plan take into account the fact that the age at which women have their first child has risen significantly, which further undermines the plan's success (Spéder 2024). Slovakia faces similar problems in many respects. Although the population decline is somewhat slower, the low fertility rate (1.55), natural decline, and emigration are largely similar to those in Hungary.

	Slovakia	Hungary
Population	5.43 million	9.6 million
Population growth	slightly declining/stagnant	declining
Total fertility rate	1.55	1.49
Natural increase	negative	strongly negative

Table 1: Eurostat (2024). *Population on 1 January by age and sex (demo_pjan)*. European Commission.

Changes in the school-age population (2000–2035)	Slovakia	Hungary
2000	650,000	969,755
2005	600,000	887,785
2010	520,000	773,706
2015	480,000	748,486
2020	500,000	720,329
2025 (estimated figure)	510,000	712,394
2030 (estimated)	495,000	690,000
2035 (estimated)	480,000	660,000

Table 2: The table reflects the author's estimations based on Eurostat (2024) and national statistical data.

The decline in the school-age population in both Slovakia and Hungary is exerting structural pressure on the education system. The reduction in pupil numbers intensifies competition between institutions and influences school enrolment strategies, particularly in systems with free school choice. Demographic trends may thus indirectly contribute to the intensification of educational selection and institutional differentiation.

Currently, the approach in Hungary is based on a policy of postponement. The system is currently mitigating the problem by allowing smaller classes of as few as 14–16 pupils to be formed. In some schools, only two of the previous three parallel classes may remain. Fearing the political consequences, school closures are rarely implemented. Although the decline in the school-age population is less drastic in Slovakia, forecasts suggest that this scenario is inevitable there, too. If school closures do take place, the only advantage is that they can alleviate the increasingly severe shortage of teachers; at the same time, however, particularly in the case of small schools, their closure makes it more difficult to halt the further widening of social disparities.

Segregation

In Slovakia and Hungary, the school segregation of Roma pupils, as well as pupils from lower social strata, shows similar structural patterns; however, institutional and legal responses are prioritised differently. In both countries, there is a demonstrable concentration of ethnically homogeneous, low-prestige institutions, as well as a disproportionate application of the 'special educational needs' category among Roma children. Thus, segregation does not simply arise from residential segregation but is also reproduced through the selection mechanisms of the school system.

Between 2023 and 2025, positive changes took place within the Slovak Ministry of Education, both in terms of the priorities set by the political leadership – such as the issue of segregated schools – and in the amount of funding allocated relative to GDP. The Slovak legal system guarantees equal access to employment, education, and social services. Discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, religion or social origin is prohibited by the law. Despite this legal protection, however, there is compelling evidence to suggest that systematic discrimination against certain ethnic groups occurs in relation to access to employment and housing (renting a flat). Furthermore, evidence suggests that children born into disadvantaged families have limited access to education. Due to their limited social skills – which they may not have acquired because of their disadvantaged background – these children are often placed in special educational groups (Country Report 2024).

Regional and ethnic demographic differences have a significant impact on the functioning of education systems in both countries, particularly on the structure of the school network, school enrolment processes, and the development of educational inequalities.

Conclusions about the proportion of the Roma population can only be drawn from estimates, as self-reported data show a significantly lower proportion than the actual figure. Discrepancies between estimates of the Roma population and data on their educational situation are well documented in the international literature (Fundamental Rights Report 2016), supporting the underestimation inherent in official statistics. Based on research, the proportion of Roma in the two countries is likely to be almost identical. Regionally, their numbers are higher in the eastern parts of both countries. In eastern Slovakia and eastern Hungary, there are already a significant number of settlements with entirely Roma populations.

	Slovakia	Hungary
Proportion of the Roma population (estimate)	~8–9 %	~7–9 %
Regional differences	significant (eastern regions)	significant (Northern and Eastern Hungary)

Table 3: (compiled by the author)

Consequently, the issue of segregated institutions poses a problem in both countries.

Segregation can take many forms; the key point is the concealment or avoidance of unwanted classmates. We speak of institutional segregation in the case of schools attended by a majority of Roma children or exclusively by Roma children. Addressing this is virtually impossible, as many communities are already ethnically segregated from the outset. In cases of physical segregation, separation can even occur within the school itself. This may take the form of a separate building or simply a separate classroom. In addition, there is hidden segregation, where education is formally integrated but pupils work in segregated groups (Havas – Liskó 2005).

In Slovakia, the issue of the segregation of Roma pupils has been a subject of debate for years. In Hungary, this problem is less of a priority these days. It came into focus here in the years following 2000, when numerous administrative measures were attempted to address the situation. This included the closure of segregated schools and the dispersal of entire classes or their pupils across other schools in the locality. The reorganisation of school catchment areas, and the reclassification of disadvantaged areas and streets to be served by inner-city schools. The results did not show the desired effect. Some schools went to great lengths to discourage Roma parents from enrolling their children there, even though they were assigned to that school by catchment area. They cited impossibly high requirements for the children, the insurmountable challenges of the English language, and the high costs to be borne by parents. Those children who were forcibly transferred from their former schools to a school that was alien and unwelcoming to them suffered greatly as a result. Most of them fled and chose instead to continue their studies at a suburban school. Where a school managed to achieve a significant change in the previous ratios, some parents moved their children to another school where they felt their academic progress would be more secure. Teachers, too, did not welcome the changes imposed upon them. They were unprepared for the situations they were consequently forced to face. The reputation and performance of their schools plummeted significantly, leading to difficulties in recruitment and the threat of closure.

At the same time, in Slovakia, desegregation has emerged in recent years as a more explicit policy objective, supported by methodological guidelines and legal interpretations. In Hungary, the discourse on inclusion and integration often coexists with differentiated, and in some cases, legitimised practices of segregation. A common challenge in both contexts is that formal integration alone does not guarantee equal participation: hidden segregation, organisational culture, and social

selection remain decisive factors. A comparison of the two countries, therefore, clearly illustrates that equal educational opportunities for Roma pupils are not solely a matter of legal regulation, but require a transformation of social structures and the deeper workings of the education system.

The document entitled *Lekcia z diskriminácie: Segregácia rómskych detí v základnom vzdelávaní v Slovenskej republike* (A Lesson in Discrimination: Segregation of Roma Children in Primary Education in the Slovak Republic) analyses the problem of the segregation of Roma pupils in the Slovak education system. It draws attention to various forms of segregation, all of which are already familiar in Hungary.

Experts have repeatedly drawn attention to the practice of referring Roma children to special educational institutions in Hungary as well. Tightening the diagnostic system and placing greater emphasis on expert opinions has alleviated the situation somewhat, but has not provided a solution. Even today, a higher proportion of Roma pupils attend these institutions. If expert opinions are provided, church schools refuse to admit them, and only their local state school receive them.

Slovakia envisages tackling segregation by reviewing school catchment areas and introducing diagnostic standards. The new draft law stipulates that every state school must have a defined catchment area from which it is obliged to admit pupils. These catchment areas must not overlap. The ministry also wishes to include non-state schools in this system, and is therefore promising them that their funding will not be reduced if they become 'public service providers' and thus part of the school catchment areas (Chovanculiak 30 Sept 2025a)

The school catchment area system is a fundamental tool for ensuring access to education in both Slovakia and Hungary; at the same time, the possibility of free school choice significantly influences enrolment processes in both countries. The Slovak education development strategy emphasises that the catchment area system must serve equal access, whilst the combined effect of free school choice and residential segregation may increase social selection between schools (Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu SR 2023). Similar phenomena can be observed in Hungary, where the possibility of enrolling in schools outside one's catchment area may contribute to the intensification of social and ethnic differences between institutions. Therefore, the experiences of the two countries highlight that the balance between the catchment area system and free school choice is key to establishing an inclusive and balanced school enrolment structure.

From the perspective of social reproduction, free school choice can act as a mechanism that, by mobilising families' differing cultural and social capital, contributes to the internal differentiation of the education system. Parents with greater resources and higher levels of education are more likely to choose institutions that offer a more favourable educational and social environment for their children, whilst disadvantaged families often remain in their local schools. The interaction between the catchment area system and free school choice may thus contribute to the reproduction of educational inequalities in both countries, reinforcing the importance of inclusive education policies and desegregation measures. In Slovakia, parents have the right to choose a school outside their catchment area if the institution in

question has the capacity to admit them. The strategy highlights that, whilst this freedom increases parental autonomy, it may also reinforce selection between schools (Berényi 2016).

According to the proposals, the primary aim of school catchment areas is to ensure that every child has access to local primary education. The catchment area system is thus an important tool for upholding the right to education. As the Slovak education system is less fragmented than Hungary's – the proportion of church and foundation schools is much smaller – there are greater opportunities to direct pupils into catchment areas and to take desegregation considerations into account. However, the decline in pupil numbers and the need to fill the growing number of vacant places in schools require the continuous management of the catchment area system, which can trigger numerous conflicts with parents (Ravasz 2026).

The Issue of Teacher Shortages

The teaching profession is not attractive in either of these countries. It lacks social prestige; it has become feminised and aged, and is not a career choice for young people entering university, particularly not for the more capable ones. The departure of the age group nearing retirement from the system, and the difficulties in replacing them, lead to serious structural problems. Teachers currently in the profession must be given the opportunity to create the system in which they wish to work. This would require a high degree of autonomy and well-trained professionals (Hall 2020).

In the short term, simply adjusting salaries is not expected to improve the quality of education. In Hungary, the stated aim is to reach 80% of the average graduate salary, which is humiliating for teachers and difficult to present as a significant boost to the profession's prestige. It is sufficient to keep those already in the profession in their posts and to lure back a few who have left. However, no systemic change can be expected simply because teachers' salaries are rising. Only through a truly substantial pay rise, an agreement spanning political parties and governments, guaranteed continuous pay rises for the teaching profession, and the raising of the social prestige of the teaching profession – coupled with consistent communication of these measures – would there be hope for a long-term solution to the situation. In Central and Eastern Europe, there is typically a lack of willingness among the parties competing in the political arena to establish a common direction. Taking turns, they effectively abolish or alter almost every previous initiative. This uncertain political climate complicates the situation. How could a long-term strategy be possible under such circumstances?

Assuming that change could be achieved after all, the outcome would require at least one, but more likely two, generational changes. If the teaching profession were to offer attractive living conditions for young people, then, albeit with some cautious hesitation, a greater number would apply for higher education in this field. It would then be possible to select from among them. We would have to wait a few more years for them to graduate, but if conditions remain encouraging, they are

likely to find employment in education upon leaving university. A stable and predictable remuneration and pay rise system must be introduced and enshrined in law for staff working in education and training, ensuring predictable and regular increases in income, thereby placing teachers on a competitive footing with other employees holding higher education qualifications.

It will take further decades for all these measures to bring about a noticeable change across the entire education system. This slow pace of change generates constant criticism; the lack of spectacular successes undermines teachers' position and reputation, and jeopardises the consistent continuation of the reforms.

A long-term communication campaign would be necessary to enhance social prestige and build a positive image of those working in education and training. Flexible and motivating career entry opportunities must be created for practitioners and those intending to enter the education sector.

Breaking out of this situation in the eastern part of Central Europe seems a considerable challenge today. It is certainly important to launch reforms, but there is only a chance of change if the process can operate consistently over decades.

The recovery and resilience plan provides financial resources for these changes. It promises the long-term implementation of reforms and investments, as well as a stable and predictable remuneration and pay rise system for employees working in education and training, ensuring predictable and regular increases in income. At the same time, there is a risk that certain processes introduced and the funding will not be sustainable from the state budget after 2026.

Another critical aspect of the draft is that it requires continuous feedback from schools, which significantly increases the administrative burden on teachers and school management. The aim is to introduce regular monitoring to track employee well-being and satisfaction, so that workplace conflicts or other negative issues can be identified and, where necessary, addressed. The role of state school supervision must be strengthened through supportive and developmental supervisory activities. Instead of a spot-check approach, the focus should be on collecting and evaluating evidence of progress.

A systematic collection and analysis of examples of good practice from successful schools and regions should be introduced and developed; these can serve as inspiration and models for the entire education system and encourage those achieving proven results to share their knowledge. Methodological support must be provided to schools in this area, and mandatory regular reporting on the number and quality of projects implemented must be introduced as part of the school's self-evaluation. All this is a sound concept, but its effectiveness is questionable, whilst its administrative burden is clear.

A far more important finding is that schools' autonomy and responsibility for the qualitative transformation of the work of teachers and specialists must be strengthened.

The introduction of early nursery school entry

The participation of Roma children in Slovakia in pre-school education is low (Ravasz 2026). One of the most important elements of the reform is thus making pre-school education compulsory at a younger age. The aim is to better prepare children for school, address social disadvantages and lack of language skills, as well as reduce educational inequalities.

Currently, nursery school is compulsory in Slovakia from the age of five. As earlier nursery school attendance is gradually introduced, nursery education will become compulsory for three-year-olds by 2028. By comparison, in Hungary, compulsory nursery school attendance from the age of three was introduced by Act CXC of 2011 on national public education and became universal from 2015.

Under that law, a child must start nursery in the year in which they reach the age of three by 31 August. Attendance is compulsory for at least four hours a day. However, at the parents' request and with permission, an exemption may be granted until the child is four or five years old; as a result, the system is currently characterised by a high kindergarten attendance rate of 90%. Its primary aim is to reduce social disparities, particularly the early development of Roma children. Various administrative measures have been used to enforce compulsory nursery attendance. If the nursery reports a child's regular absence, the child welfare service and family support worker are brought into the process. In more serious cases, family allowance may also be suspended. For the families targeted, this is the most effective argument, as for many it is their sole source of income, or, despite the low amount, it is crucial for their day-to-day subsistence. The criticisms related to it were similar to those currently being voiced in Slovakia.

One of the most common criticisms is that there are not enough nursery places to achieve the goals of the reform. Many municipalities lack sufficient capacity. Eastern Slovakia, poorer rural areas, and villages with Roma populations are particularly affected. According to experts, thousands of new places are needed. Most nurseries are run by local authorities. If the state does not provide sufficient funding, the costs of infrastructure improvements will exceed the means of smaller villages, particularly in poorer regions.

The ministry itself acknowledges that Slovakia needs around 1,000 new nursery teachers. The problem is that this shortage is concentrated in certain areas, which makes it difficult to resolve. Moreover, even if the capacity issue were to be resolved over time, this would not automatically mean that the problem of disadvantaged children attending nursery would be solved (Chovanculiak 2025). Consequently, the ministry may impose new, general obligations on the remaining 120,000 families, which would make life more difficult for the majority of the population, whilst failing to resolve the problem of disadvantaged children attending school (Chovanculiak 24 May 2025).

Several alternatives have been proposed to address the shortage of nursery teachers. Adjusting salaries is inevitable, but the effect is the same as in schools. Another plan has already been implemented in Hungary. In certain cases, teachers can be employed with lower qualification requirements. The consequence is a de-

cline in the standard of nursery education. Even so, replacing the many teachers approaching retirement and those who will soon retire cannot be resolved in the short term, which could lead to overcrowded groups and a deterioration in the quality of nursery care.

The draft also contains some elements that serve more as a supplement to the strategic vision. One such very positive element is the strengthening of arts education, which emphasises the need to support the sustainable funding of arts education and leisure centres, and to ensure that primary arts schools are accessible to all children. Supporting education in primary arts schools is crucial for developing children's creativity, cultural awareness and emotional intelligence. In our country, the expansion of primary arts schools is currently stagnating, or even in decline. Yet it could be the most effective tool for developing a wide range of skills.

An important part of the reform is the systematic development and support of digital transformation, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of investments in digital infrastructure. Access to digital resources, methodological materials and appropriate technological equipment must be ensured for all teachers. The digital transformation of education can be supported in every school by appointing a digital coordinator.

Funding

Several critical analyses address the issue of the long-term financing of the reforms. Unlike Hungary, Slovakia has access to significant EU funding. It is a realistic prospect that, with the start of the new multiannual EU financial framework (MFK 2028–2034), the development of new operational programmes, and a strategic review of investments funded by EU funds, digitalisation, inclusive education and skills development may be fruitful.

There is also the possibility of joining the new European Digital Education Action Plan (2028–2035). This would enable the development of a modern, multi-annual, predictable and transparent education funding model, with investment plans that ensure a gradual increase in public spending on education to the EU average, thereby facilitating long-term strategic planning. The aim is for public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP to reach 4.2%–5.5%. In the long term, Slovakia has lagged behind the EU average in education funding, as well as the countries that joined the EU in 2004, although the proportion of expenditure on education has increased in recent years. Nevertheless, it does not reach a level sufficient to provide a significant increase in teachers' salaries, enhance the attractiveness of the teaching profession, and address the investment shortfall in regional and higher education infrastructure. A further challenge is the mismatch between the supply of education and the needs of the labour market.

Summary

Slovakia's education reform marks a significant step towards an inclusive, modern education system. However, some elements remain uncertain or will take much longer than expected to implement. A key criticism is that too many changes are being introduced at once, leaving kindergartens and schools insufficient time to prepare. The more targets schools are given, the less likely they are to meet them. Prioritisation is essential when dealing with complex issues such as education. If we try to change everything, we will in fact change nothing.

The largest curriculum reform in schools is currently underway, placing new, high demands on schools and teachers (Chovanculiak 30 Sept 2025b). Among these demands are those whose resolution exceeds their capabilities. Preventing the reproduction of social inequalities is far more complex than the education system is capable of. It can do its part within its own sphere, but neither a review of school catchment areas nor of the expert system is likely to yield significant success.

Addressing the issue of segregated schools, too, can only be achieved through sustained, consistent work. The shortage of teachers can only be resolved in the long term, whilst pay reforms are essential and are likely to be well received by teachers; however, increasing their administrative burdens could easily prove counterproductive. With sufficient attention, there is also scope to improve PISA results. Compulsory early years education could help overcome social disadvantages, but questions remain about how this would be implemented, the provision of adequate infrastructure, and the availability of qualified staff. It is also impossible to halt the decline in pupil numbers given current trends, which could lead to school mergers and closures, and this does not help to eliminate regional disparities.

Overall, Slovakia has made a major commitment by launching its comprehensive school reform, set to begin in 2026. All this requires extraordinary commitment and attention from every participant, be they a minister, politician, education specialist, school leader, teacher or every single education staff member. We are confident that children attending school in Slovakia now and in the future will receive a fairer, better education. Once the reform has been implemented, we look forward to learning from its lessons, which we can apply here too.

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