

**CELSI Discussion Paper No.**



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This paper analyses the implementation of mainstream employment policies in Slovakia with respect to Roma. It highlights positive and negative practices in application, revealing diversity in on-the-ground implementation of different measures as well as institutional deficiencies in the provision of public employment services. By gathering experiences from the stakeholders involved in the implementation, as well as from Roma participants, the paper differs from top-down approaches to analysing employment policies prevailing to date and unveils the experiences, perceptions and practices of Roma themselves. It finds that the employment options available through the mainstream employment framework represent an important opportunity for many Roma in the deprived localities, especially under the economic deprivation aggravated by the recent economic crisis. Efforts should concentrate on up-scaling and targeting the mainstream framework, on fighting institutional discrimination, and on enhanced investment in education and training.

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## **Introduction**

The employment situation of Roma in Europe is dire and has worsened over time (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2012; Cekota and Trentini 2011). Roma suffer from complex disadvantages resulting in high risk of poverty and social exclusion (Ringold, Orenstein, and Wilkens 2005; Milcher 2006). Low education levels and the lack of skills, stigmatization of low-skilled workers, and discrimination have been proposed as some of the key reasons for the poor labour market outcomes (Kureková, Haita, and Beblavý 2013; Hyde 2006; O'Higgins and Ivanov 2006; O'Higgins 2010; Brožovičová et al. 2013; Kahanec 2014). In addition to these micro-level aspects, the structure of the economy, with weak demand for low-skilled workers and low levels of job creation specific to former transition economies constitute macro-structural features which make labour market integration of Roma a formidable task (Brožovičová et al. 2013; Lehmann and Kluve 2010; Ringold 2000). Although Roma social inclusion is a multi-layered issue necessitating a complex intervention cutting across a range of areas, increasing the share of formal employment of Roma can be a major vehicle of social integration. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) are thus a key policy intervention tool for policy makers to bring disadvantaged groups closer to the labour market (Lehmann and Kluve 2010; Betcherman, Dar, and Olivas 2004).

While evaluation studies of ALMPs exist, to date relatively little is known about the implementation of ALMPs with respect to Roma specifically, and about perceptions and experiences of Roma with mainstream employment policy framework. This paper aims to fill this gap by analysing how mainstream employment policies are implemented and perceived by Roma in Slovakia. The Slovak Roma are the most educated relative to those elsewhere in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, but face the worst labour market outcomes, which makes the Slovak case particularly interesting (Messing 2014; Kahanec 2014).<sup>1</sup> Moreover,

past quantitative evaluations of active labour market policy interventions in Slovakia have shown their positive effects on probabilities of exiting unemployment (Lubyova and van Ours 1999; van Ours 2004). More recent assessments of selected measures, however, seem to be much less optimistic (Bořík and Caban 2013; Harvan 2011; Mýtna Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013; Salner et al. 2013). The studies have pointed out significant weaknesses in the provision of labour market services and, in addition to very low investment in ALMPs relative to country's unemployment problems, critiqued that the structure of the expenditures disfavours Roma and other disadvantaged groups (World Bank 2012a; Mýtna Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013). The implementation of the ALMP framework therefore deserves further analysis to better understand and learn about implementation barriers and limitations of various employment policies with respect to Roma. This is also normatively important due to rising social tensions, stereotyping, scapegoating and the blame of joblessness and inactivity increasingly presented as the choice and fault of the Roma (Boyd 2014; BBC News 2013).

The approach of this paper is specific in a number of ways. First, it parts with the currently predominant top-down approaches and quantitative evaluations of employment policies, and instead studies dynamics and forms of policy implementation in the field. We carry out semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders – mayors, labour office staff, public officials and employers – in a particular local context in southern Slovakia. Second, due to a lack of micro-level data about the ethnic background of the unemployed, most studies typically have a general focus and are unable to inform about Roma, who tend to differ in important characteristics from general population, and face particular barriers (Kahanec 2014; Mýtna Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013). Empirical evidence in this paper therefore also builds on focus groups with Roma who have participated in the employment policies. This analytical approach helps to overcome sometimes oversimplified

and overly mechanistic approaches to studying Roma social inclusion (Grill 2012; van Baar 2012; Pantea 2013) and to give voice to experiences, perceptions and opinions of Roma about employment options and opportunities offered through mainstream employment policies.

The objective of this paper is not to conduct a rigorous evaluation of ALMP measures, but to present how mainstream employment policies are implemented and perceived by Roma in the given economic and social context. I find that the employment options available to Roma through the ALMP framework represent an important employment option for many Roma in deprived localities, especially under economic deprivation aggravated by the recent economic crisis. At the same time, the paper highlights positive and negative practices in implementation, points out systemic problems in implementation, and opens up avenues for further research and policy recalibration. While the findings are specific to the particular location where the research was conducted, they can be informative for any country fighting Roma exclusion. Methodology-wise, this analysis shows that a case study field component can help us to understand local contextual realities of complex policy interventions and their interactions with non-policy factors (Woolcock 2013).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section II presents methodology and brief description of the areas where research was organized. In Section III describe mainstream employment policies framework is described. Section IV presents experiences of Roma with employment. Section V reviews implementation practices, perceptions and critiques of employment policies and Section VI evaluates institutional support available to Roma and discrimination. The last section summarizes and concludes.

## **Methodology and the area background**

The field work underlying this paper was conducted in March 2013 in a district located in the southern part of Banská Bystrica region, selecting three sites: the district main city (C1) and

two smaller villages (V1 and V2). The location was chosen with the aim of concentrating on a district with an above average share of Roma, not the most economically deprived, and with a mixed economic basis (industry, agriculture).<sup>2</sup> The rural settlements within the district were chosen randomly. In early 2013, the unemployment rate of the district stood at 28.6 per cent and was the third highest in the Banská Bystrica region, and was about double the national unemployment rate. Wages in the district are very low due to oversupply of labour.<sup>3</sup> High unemployment rate in the area is projected into poverty and dependence on social assistance.

Key features of the localities are described in Table 1. These localities have a significant number of Roma residing in them. According to the 2004 Atlas of Roma Communities,<sup>4</sup> approximately every fifth person in V1, every sixth in V2 and every tenth in C1 is Roma. This compares to about 6-7 per cent of Roma population estimated to live in Slovakia (Boyd 2014). The share of persons receiving social benefits is higher in the villages where nearly each tenth inhabitant is a recipient of income support.

The area has a strong tradition in mining and industrial production, especially in the field of glass processing and glass production. In late 2011, the main glass production firm was closed down, laying off about 400 workers, which hit the region hard. Due to the availability of land and forestry, the region is considered agricultural, but our interviews revealed that agri-business has been struggling considerably and has also shed much labour over the past few years. The public sector is the main employer in the area (schools, public administration). A few small businesses operate in service sector (hairdressers, cosmeticians, retail) and there are a few agricultural cooperatives and wood processing companies characterized by seasonal peaks in demand for labour.

The localities we visited were characterized by multi-ethnic and multi-lingual economic, political and socio-cultural bases, as the district borders on two larger districts with a significant share of Hungarian-speaking minority. Inter-ethnic relations appeared peaceful

and the interactions between majority population and Roma population were generally described as good by both communities, especially in C1. The area was also characterized by a vivid social fabric of civic sector organizations with many varied initiatives in the town and surrounding villages. In V1 three Roma were elected to the municipal council.

(Table 1 about here)

### *Focus groups and interviews*

Semi-structured interviews (nineteen in total) were conducted with local labour office staff, mayors, public officials in the Roma Plenipotentiary Office, local employers from diverse sectors (retail, glass production, agriculture), and NGO representatives. Two focus groups in the city (male and female) and one focus group in each village were organized (four in total) with Roma who had participated in mainstream employment policies. The focus groups in C1 and in V2 were organized with the assistance of field social workers, while in V1 we asked a Roma municipal parliament member to organize the meeting for us. Focus group participants were selected and invited by these focus group assistants based on a general instruction to gather a diverse group of participants in terms of age, gender, and previous employment experiences. The number of participants ranged from four to seven. Focus groups lasted between one and one and a half hours, and were very rich and interactive. The participants also openly appreciated that they were involved in the research and could express their opinions and their difficulties. All focus groups with the exception of V2 were recorded. A detailed description of the focus groups, their participants and key questions is available upon request.



## **Mainstream employment policies framework**

Like other OECD countries, Slovakia offers a range of standard active labour market policies and cash support in case of unemployment. These are considered mainstream and constitute a range of tools that aim to support different aspects of labour market integration, job creation, job maintenance, and skill development. The key legislation that defines the labour market policies framework is the Act on Employment Services no. 5/2004. The Act defines the category of ‘disadvantaged’ jobseekers that are specifically targeted by selected measures and are considered hard-to-place clients that need more attention of public employment services staff. Ethnicity does not represent a criterion which would qualify an unemployed worker for specialized treatment, but many Roma and vulnerable groups fall into the disadvantaged category due to their long absence from the labour market (long-term unemployment).

Expenditures on active labour market policies (ALMPs) in Slovakia are among the lowest among the EU countries (World Bank 2012a). In 2010, they amounted only to 0.23 per cent of GDP as compared to a 0.54 per cent EU27 average in 2009. Slovakia differs significantly from other advanced economies with regard to the structure of ALMP expenditures (Table 2). Very little is spent on training measures, while a higher share of GDP compared to many other countries is allocated to self-employment incentives (a lump-sum amount given to unemployed who start own micro-business) (World Bank 2012a). Due to the high youth unemployment rate and regional differences in labour markets, graduate practice and contribution to commuting to work are other two measures with more significant number of participants (Table 2). Importantly, spending that is biased towards the support of self-employment and against training measures disadvantages the Roma minority and other vulnerable groups who are mostly handicapped by a lack of skills, and therefore are unable to benefit from measures that target unemployed with fewer or no disadvantages (Duell and Kureková 2013).

In practice, the key measure available to Roma is small municipal works (SMWs) which provide social assistance recipients an opportunity to earn additional income.<sup>5</sup> This measure has been viewed particularly controversially by domestic as well as international audiences. The key setbacks highlighted are the lack of up-skilling or training, substitution, and displacement as well as dehumanizing and stigmatizing effects (Lajčáková 2013; van Baar 2012; Mýtna Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013; Kumanová and Škobla 2012; Harvan 2011). During the field work, small municipal works and other public employment creation measures were most frequently encountered by the Roma involved in the focus groups. However, we investigated their experiences with a broad range of ALMPs, including education and training, and self-employment support. Before presenting experiences of Roma with ALMP implementation, we describe their past employment trajectories and employers' attitudes to Roma employment.

(Table 2 about here)

## **Experiences of Roma with employment**

Roma unemployment and inactivity is often stereotyped. In this section, we therefore present the past and current experiences of Roma with employment as gathered through focus groups. This helps us to highlight diverse strategies that Roma take and – contrary to public perceptions – their active approach to dealing with life situation. None of the Roma we met at the time of the focus group organization had any formal employment (with the exception of women employed as field social workers in C1), as the current work opportunities have become limited due to the economic crisis and changes to the labour code effective since January 2013. In effect, the main work activity available to Roma in the formal sphere is

opportunities available through the mainstream employment policy framework. Many Roma have been involved in SMWs or other forms of public employment programs, which we will discuss in detail in the next section. However, all had employment experiences in the past. This work experience was characterized by unstable and precarious employment. Job fluctuation was high, caused both by unstable contracts, but also low salaries. Roma who started employment often stopped after few weeks as net income difference between benefits and low-wage employment is not motivating. Low wages in many cases did not provide sufficient incentives to commute, due to high transportation costs and poor infrastructure connections, which make commuting costly and difficult.

Before the employment situation declined, Roma also travelled or migrated for work abroad. Females typically commuted to nearby towns or cities to do mainly low-skilled or unskilled work. Men had worked abroad, mainly in the Czech Republic but also in Germany or Italy, also doing low-skilled manual work (Grill 2012; Kahanec and Mýtina Kureková 2014). This demonstrates that Roma actively seek work opportunities abroad, one of the reasons being that they face less discrimination elsewhere, as has been confirmed also in other contexts (Grill 2012; Grill 2011; Vlase and Voicu 2013; Pantea 2013). In many cases Roma males accepted work far away from their families, if it brought at least some hope of improvement of their economic and social situation. Self-employment efforts were limited due to the lack of capital or fear of financial implications in case of a failure to fulfil conditions when receiving self-employment contributions from public funds. Roma also took up seasonal opportunities for work, which has been possible on the basis of ‘work agreements’.<sup>6</sup> Until the labour code reform in effect since January 2013, the availability of employment on the basis of a ‘work agreement’ provided a legal way for earning additional income simultaneous with the receipt of social assistance.

Work locally or abroad was often found and organized through temporary work agencies, while far fewer opportunities seem to have been provided by labour office staff. Roma gained information about labour market opportunities through channels outside the labour office, typically informal networks or advertisements of employment agencies. In cases where employment was gained through an employment agency, instances of maltreatment were quite widespread; examples included lower wages than agreed, worse working conditions, or a lack of payment for the work carried out. Roma and different stakeholders have confirmed the existence of semi-legal or illegal employment, but it is difficult to quantify the scope and conditions.

### ***Employers' perceptions***

Roma employment has been common in the area in the past. This recollection came up in most of the interviews with employers and other stakeholders. During socialism, Roma were employed in various sectors, mostly in manual but also more skilled work, for example in the glass production sector. While most sectors shed their Roma workforce among the first during the restructuring phase in the 1990s (e.g. agriculture, brick production, etc.), a few Roma still remain employed in businesses in the glass production sector. Employers' experiences with employing Roma in the past or currently have been good, and they praised them for their hard-working attitude. The most successful exporter of glass products today continues to employ Roma, who represent about one sixth of the firm's workforce. None are employed in the agriculture sector, which has become more technological, and has experienced a major decline in labour. None of the retail chains hired Roma. The reasons could be mixed, ranging from secondary level qualification requirement to internal unofficial policies of not hiring Roma. Roma were not among the temporary staff the chains would use during the peak periods.

### *Social assistance and disincentives to work*

There is a widespread opinion among the general public and some experts that the level of social benefits provides disincentives for accepting work. Wages in the district are very low due to oversupply of labour. For example, even in the retail chain which employed only people with secondary education, wages stood at roughly 400 euro gross (the minimum wage is €337.70). A combined effect of low wages and social assistance support providing disincentives for working was confirmed by the experiences of Roma, but more so for larger families (Siebertova et al. 2013; World Bank 2012b). It was linked to very low wage levels and additional costs attached to commuting to work, as well as to additional benefits linked to social assistance for children (free meals at school, subsidy to cover school travel expenses). For this reason, some Roma found receiving social assistance and earn activation benefits or combine social assistance with ‘work agreement’ work preferable to taking up low-paid employment. There were also indications that selection into some types of ALMP measures was guided by the implications it would have on the total family income. For example, anti-flood works (a type of public works measures implemented in 2011-2012) were staffed typically by single men with no family obligations whose net income was not lowered by taking on a half year of employment for the municipality.

### **Experiences with implementation of ALMP measures**

The localities visited have been using a wide range of ALMP tools and other programs available for working with marginalized Roma communities (Table 1, Table 2). Small municipal works are the most widely used ALMP measure, and are implemented in all three localities with quite a high number of ‘activated’ workers. In the past all three localities have also employed people on the basis of anti-flood measures, in which the Roma also

participated. In addition to these employment measures, I also map experiences of Roma with self-employment incentives and opportunities for education and training.

### ***Small municipal works and other employment creation measures***

According to the local-level data, small municipal works were the most widely used ALMP measure in the localities. Participation in SMWs is tied to the receipt of social assistance whereby beneficiaries can increase basic benefit level by €63.07, if they work 10-20 hours per week in activities organized by municipalities.<sup>7</sup> The labour office director and mayors confirmed that the demand for activation among social assistance recipients, many of whom are Roma due to the high poverty levels, is high and that there are generally more interested persons than places available (Duell and Kureková 2013; Mýtna Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013). Participation in SMWs was indeed widespread among the Roma who participated in the focus groups. The profiles of activated Roma were diverse, and varied in age, gender and previous work experiences.

The activities done by activation workers (the term used for people on SMWs) were generally unskilled and mundane, with little skill upgrading element, and involved mainly street cleaning and maintenance, upkeep of green areas and lawn-mowing. In all three municipalities we found elements of institutional discrimination by the means of selection of non-Roma into ‘cleaner’ or more interesting activities (work in schools) and Roma into more mundane activities (snow shovelling). More sophisticated activities were not widespread, but existed. First, in C1 we found that activation workers were integrated in the municipal enterprise and participated in tasks done by the regular employees, which would be more sophisticated. For example, a municipal enterprise produced bricks for very cheap price, which were then used to pave the streets in the town with the help of activation workers. This provided a more meaningful use of workforce. Second, in C1 we found a more productive use of activation works stimulated by the presence of Roma field social workers. They suggested

placing Roma women participating in activation works in tutoring activities in the local school, kindergarten and retirement home, and also argued for a fair distribution of places in the anti-flood measures between Roma and non-Roma.

The municipalities raised implementation problems connected to the organization of SMWs which related to the lack of funding to buy the tools needed for conducting the activities but also to pay for the costs of SMW organizers. In spite of high expert controversy about the measure, the evaluation of small municipal works by stakeholders has been rather positive, but not uncritical. The labour office director saw the measure as mutually beneficial: 'I think it helps the municipality and also the citizens.' She considered activation works as a way in which the municipality can help people in poor conditions to get some extra income and to retain working habits. This view was confirmed by the mayors:

A hundred people have income that is indispensable for them. Two hundred could be possible, but it wouldn't be effective, and the motivational effect would diminish... This institute helps me to help these people. (Mayor, V2)

When prompted to comment on the possible crowding out effect of activation workers, the mayor in V2 confirmed that the number of employees in a municipal enterprise which had been naturally lowered (retirement reasons), will not be increased as he can replace them with activation workers: 'So they [activation workers] help me to save finances'. (Mayor, V2) At the same time, the mayor acknowledges that a majority of the participants could be employed and also wished that activation workers could progress to a regular form of employment.

Maybe from those 106 that I have, I can say that some 30 are only able to hold this broom, but the rest of them are fairly employable. If I had a firm, I could maybe pay them a higher amount than these 60-70 EUR. (Mayor, V2)

Given the very limited working opportunities and harsh living conditions, the opinions of Roma about the possibility to do SMWs were generally positive. They treasured this opportunity to gain an additional source of income, which was helpful especially for women, who due to child rearing were less mobile.

It helps; I cannot be involved as I am a member of the municipal council. My wife is working, and 63 EUR is also something, for us it is good. Mostly women work here on activation works. (Focus Group, V1)

The municipality employs many people locally. They are not complaining, there is at least something. (Focus Group, V1)

The general population also viewed activation works positively:

At least the city has been cleaned, the snow will also be removed. ... Roma have the chance to demonstrate that, yes, they want, they try. (Manager, retail sector)

However, some Roma also saw the fact that given the amount of time they spend in SMWs, they could also get employed:

Well they could also employ me, as I work for them 4 days a week, 4 hours a day.  
(Focus group, V2)



Another negative feature identified was related to the fact that the general public had started to rely on activation workers to the extent that they have stopped doing activities which they should, such as cleaning the pavements premises near their homes or shovelling the snow. ‘They are waiting for the activation workers.’ (Assistant field social worker, C1)

At the same time, the stakeholders as well as Roma insisted that ‘publicly beneficial works’ which existed prior to SMWs were a better form, because they were based on an employment contract with benefits ensuing from it – social security and more employment stability.

Maybe the form could be different; I had the chance to know and experience the public works and it was a better form. As it was on work contract, those people had an even better feeling about that. Even if it was not a large amount of money they received. But also because the incomes from this employment were counted towards their pensions. Now they don’t have anything from this. ... There are hundreds of people... (Labour office director)

We were at least ordinarily employed... this meant employment for 8 hours and a solid income. (Focus group, V1)

In response to the economic crisis and the heavy floods which hit Slovakia around a similar time (2009-2010), the government implemented ‘anti-flood measures’ as a new ALMP tool in 2011. Like activation works, it was implemented by municipalities, but the participants were given a six-months employment contract establishing full-time employment. Anti-flood works were positively evaluated by all stakeholders, as well as Roma, who valued additional

benefits such as meal vouchers. The activities had more added value (cleaning fishponds, assisting in road construction, regulating river banks, etc.), which has been recognized by everyone involved. 'If there were jobs like this, that would be satisfactory.' (Focus group, V1)

Perhaps the most direct criticism of activation works was made by a representative of regional Roma Plenipotentiary Office: 'So the activation works are there to give the people some extra money for an activity that doesn't have any sense and value at all.' Based on the staff experience, municipalities are not able to use activation works meaningfully. They usually give Roma brooms and ask them to tidy up, while mayors do not recognize that the range of activities could be much enhanced (e.g. civil patrols, afternoon/morning activities in schools). We found C1 relatively progressive in this respect, however, which reveals large differences in how mainstream employment policies are implemented on the ground.

### ***Entrepreneurship and start up incentives***

Contribution towards establishing small business (self-entrepreneurship) has been allocated a significant amount of resources from the ALMP budget. Focus groups revealed that Roma are aware of the existence of this measure, and one older man had had a self-entrepreneurship license in the past. He did not accept the contribution as it would have required him to pay social security contributions for two years, and his income was not stable enough to be able to do so. The fear of not being able to pay the social security contributions attached to the measure as a condition discouraged younger Roma from using this opportunity. At the same time, they lack capital of their own to start businesses without government support. The field social workers shared their experiences that labour office staff discourage Roma from using this measure. In addition, no capacity building to increase self-entrepreneurship skills is provided by labour offices.

### *Opportunities for education and training*

An important theme which came up during the interviews was the opportunity for further education and training. Most Roma have only primary education, though we met a few who had a vocational license or had taken part in courses organized by the labour office in the past. The labour office recognized further education and training as a general need for the workforce in the district, and pointed out the limited opportunities to offer re-certification courses to skilled people. There are people who had worked as welders, glass processing workers or similar, whose licenses have expired and they cannot afford to renew them. More emphasis on practical education and training, and also recognition of skills based on previous work experience could improve the chances of Roma and other long-term unemployed. A vocational secondary school in the district has been involved in providing more practical courses to Roma youth who have faced difficulties in finishing compulsory education. The school director, however, identified obstacles in the fact that social assistance would be taken away if an adult Roma enrolled in full-time education. In order to participate in training and education courses organized as part of ALMPs, a secondary-level qualification is required, and this presents an obstacle to many Roma who have not completed formal secondary education.

The attitudes of Roma towards further education were conflicting. On the one hand there were some, mostly women, who were currently enrolled in a secondary-level study certificate (*maturita*) or a university degree, motivated by the hope that such education would qualify them for openings which might be available to Roma in public sector and require a formal degree.

I realized that without education I cannot find a job. (...) Sometimes you just aren't in the mood for that, I have 5 children, I am divorced and often I am

really not in the mood to go back to the school. I have worries and sorrows enough at home. But like this as we have the chance to talk [referring to the Roma women NGO gatherings], we really share all our problems, thus one has really a greater strength and willingness to start from the beginning. (Female focus group, C1)

On the other hand, we also identified elements of short-termism among younger male Roma who in the pre-crisis period preferred to exit education in favour of job income, and while regretful, they were not motivated enough to finish a primary or secondary qualification.<sup>8</sup> They justified their passivity by pointing out that even more educated Roma with vocational or secondary school certificate had difficulties finding jobs. This dis-incentivized younger Roma (or their parents) from investing in education.

## **Lack of institutional support and discrimination**

### *Labour office assistance*

The labour office was not identified as an institution that might support Roma, but rather as a formal body to which they are obliged to prove job search activity on a regular basis. While their experiences with the labour office were neutral, it was not an institution which they considered helpful in their job search. Roma described encounters with the labour office staff as very formal:

It has no meaning to go there, they only give you a stamp, and so what? And if you don't go one day, they strike you off the registry. (Focus group, V1)

Labour office staff do not work actively with the clients.<sup>9</sup> Job offers are available in printed form on a notice board or a table. Jobseekers therefore rely on other means to find out about existing vacancies, such as online portals, advertisements or private recruitment agencies. Networks of friends who had migrated for work were also used in the past to learn about employment opportunities abroad. Only seldom were Roma invited to labour office-organized recruitment. Several had gone through a training course organized by the labour office (flower design, basket making, etc.); however, they did not find these courses very useful in improving their chances on the labour market.

With regards to job search there wasn't any help. Once they offered me a basket-maker course, so I had to take it, otherwise they would have crossed me off the registry of jobseekers. It had no meaning. I would have needed to set up a business, but it was not feasible to sell these products. (Focus group, V1)

Rather than labour office staff, it was typically field social workers who advised Roma on various aspects of job hunting, and assisted them in writing or updating CVs, filling out job applications and communicating with potential employers via email. They have been important in mediating some of the upfront disadvantages. At times they would accompany Roma to public institutions to assist them in interaction with public officials, including labour office.

These people are often not respected. Therefore we go with them, and then they treat them completely differently, be it the labour office, be it the court. (Assistant of the field social worker, C1)

## *Discrimination*

Discrimination in the labour market entry is widespread. When calling to apply for vacancies, applicants are openly asked about their ethnicity and told that Roma are not accepted. Applicants with Roma sounding surnames are not invited for interview or typically told that position is taken when a potential employer, through direct contact, realises the ethnicity of the jobseeker. This discrimination challenge affects Roma in their daily interactions:

The feeling is such an anxiety then, there are many fears, blocks. (Focus group, V2)

They subjectively perceived their status as more equal when working abroad.

Abroad they treat you in a different way. There is no discrimination. Agreements are kept. (Focus group, V1)

I also worked in the Czech Republic, they didn't make any difference based on the colour of your skin. You wouldn't receive an inferior job there. If you are interested and clever, they see that you can get trained and work for them. (Female focus group, C1)

We also found indications of in-work discrimination, such as lower pay given to Roma workers. Institutional discrimination – though perhaps more latent – also appears widespread. Roma face it in their interactions with labour offices or mayors. Examples include instances when activation work activities are allocated based on ethnicity, as the quote below reveals:

I am trying – for instance for the laundry – to select a decent person, so that she is not the kind of a dirty gypsy woman, I tell you that openly. I'd rather take a whiter one. I am satisfied with decent gypsies. Here the Gypsies are not like those in East-Slovakia. The old settlers are good people, but their children and the newcomers are a problem. I was told that earlier the Gypsies had to go on Saturdays and sweep the streets for free. Now, nobody wants to do anything.

(Municipal enterprise director, V2)

## **Conclusion**

Roma in the Central European countries face social exclusion of which a key driver is marginalization in local labour markets. While some consensus exists on key factors contributing to this problem, relatively little is known about how the key interventions have improved (or not) the current situation. This paper has taken a closer look at the on-the-ground implementation of mainstream employment policies in the south-central region of Slovakia to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the battery of policies is implemented with respect to Roma in the given economic and social context. It highlights positive and negative practices in application, revealing diversity in on-the-ground implementation of different measures, as well as institutional deficiencies in the provision of public employment services. Through the focus on gathering experiences from the stakeholders involved in implementation, as well as Roma participants, the paper diverges from to date prevailing top-down approaches to analysing employment policies, and thus unveils the experiences, perceptions and practices of Roma residing in deprived localities.

The research reveals that many Roma approach their labour market situation actively, in sharp contrast to prevailing perceptions of the general public and politicians. In the pre-crisis period Roma took up employment, some of longer duration, others short and

interrupted, and typically under very precarious conditions. This nevertheless implies that when the general macroeconomic climate is better, the means of labour market inclusion (though perhaps only on the periphery) grow. Beyond the macro-economic factors, the opportunities provided to Roma through the mainstream employment policy framework at the micro-level in itself appear to be important, in spite of significant shortcomings which their implementation currently entails. This is evidenced by the fact that the existing mainstream employment framework represents a key employment option opportunity for many Roma residing in deprived localities, and its importance has risen during the economic crisis. In the public sector outside the ALMP framework, further targeted employment opportunities for Roma are created through the positions of field social workers and teacher's assistants. While the educational requirements for these positions are a barrier for Roma, who are typically less educated, we also found that it has generated incentives for them (mostly women) to upgrade their education with a view to increasing their chances of getting these employment positions. Importantly, Roma seemed generally well informed about the most common measures that are available in the context of mainstream employment policies.

The main policy measure available to Roma is small municipal works. While they view these rather positively, mainly because activation represents the only available source of additional legal income, they prefer forms of engagement closer to or providing actual employment (former public works, anti-flood works). At the same time, we identified disincentives to work typically among breadwinners with more children. This highlights contextual realities of complex policy interventions and their interactions with non-policy factors. For example, contributions provided to children when commuting to school or other children-related benefits represent important in-kind benefits that parents would lose by taking on formal legal employment. Moreover, commuting to work further away is a major obstacle for many low-skilled individuals due to travel costs and poor transport connections.



Some Roma therefore refuse jobs to which they would need to commute because the net income would be very low. Migration for work abroad, seasonal employment and illegal employment (construction, forestry) are nevertheless important survival strategies for many.

Institutional support on the part of labour offices has been rather poor. In general, a more strategic vision and engagement on the part of labour offices is completely missing. The most direct assistance to Roma appears to be provided by field social workers who – in localities where they are set up – supplement labour offices in important aspects of job search assistance, including legal advice, sending applications, and advocacy and mediation with various institutions. Discrimination both in labour market entry and on-the-job is widespread. Public institutions also sometimes make decisions that reflect ethnic selection. Institutional and overt discrimination at the point of job entry are specific areas where public intervention can help Roma and other vulnerable groups to compete on a more level playing field with the majority population.

While it is beyond objectives and the scope of this work to propose full-fledged policy advice, this research highlights an urgent need for the recalibration of the existing ALMP framework in Slovakia. From a policy perspective, efforts should concentrate on up-scaling the mainstream employment framework while better targeting those most distanced from the labour market, on fighting institutional discrimination, and on enhanced investment in education and training.

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<sup>1</sup> Sixty-two per cent of Slovak Roma attain ISCED 2, and an additional nineteen per cent attain ISCED 3 educational level. Employment is only about fifteen per cent and unemployment rate is as high as seventy per cent (UNDP/World Bank/EC Regional Survey 2011 in (Messing 2014).

<sup>2</sup> This responded to findings that outcomes of employment policies vary significantly based on region's labour market performance and that local labour market conditions mediate strongly intervention effects and also strategies of communities living in them (Pantea 2013; Lehmann and Kluve 2010). We therefore chose an area with at least some economic activity.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, even in the retail chain which employed only people with secondary education, the wages stood at roughly 400 euro gross (minimum wage is €337.70).

<sup>4</sup> The Atlas of Roma communities maps residence density and living conditions of Roma in Slovakia. It is the most comprehensive source about Roma population in Slovakia ([http://www.minv.sk/?regiony\\_atlas](http://www.minv.sk/?regiony_atlas)). Mayors estimated the current share to be about 12% in C1 and as much as a third of the inhabitants in V1.

<sup>5</sup> Small municipal works are also called ‘activation works’. For details about implementation of the measure and its impact on Roma labour market inclusion see (Mýtina Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Work agreement (Dohoda a vykonaní práce) – is a form of employment where employer asks the employee for task-based work for a specific and limited amount of time per month/year. The number of hours per year is regulated. Until the end of 2012, there were no social security contributions paid on this income up to a certain level of income per month and this income was also disregarded in the calculation of eligibility for benefit in material need. The labour code amendment effective since January 2013 made social security contributions mandatory, making this form of employment less attractive.

<sup>7</sup> Small municipal works can be organized on the basis of labour office contract or on the basis of municipality contract. The first type brings to municipalities additional funding for tools and for covering costs of organizers of activation works, the second type has no contribution for municipalities. For more see (Mýtina Kureková, Salner, and Farenzenová 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Schooling is compulsory up to 16 years of age in Slovakia. Roma males which we met at this age achieved different levels of education, but most of them only lower primary (i.e. elementary school) due to repeated school years.

<sup>9</sup> This has been found to be the case generally for any type of unemployed, as labour office staff are overburdened and do not have the capacity for placement and counselling work (Duell and Kureková 2013).

Table 1. Description of localities

	<b>Number of inhabitants (12/2011)</b>	<b>Roma inhabitants</b>	<b>Roma as a percentage of total inhabitants (%)</b>	<b>Number of social assistance recipients (12/2012) *</b>	<b>Number of activation workers</b>	<b>Number of participants on anti-flood measures (2011)</b>	<b>Political representation of Roma in municipality</b>	<b>Field social workers</b>
<b>V1</b>	983	193	20,8	93 (9.4%)	N/A	20 (More than 50% Roma)	Yes (Three Roma in municipal council)	None currently
<b>V2</b>	3026	461	14,8	270 (8.9%)	106	10	No, but local Roma Council as an advisory body	Yes, (But working as mayor's secretary)
<b>C1</b>	5794	600	9,8	385 (6.6%)	98 (70% are Roma)	10 (6 Roma, 4 non-Roma)	No, but the mayor pledged to cooperate with local Roma leader	Yes (Out of 5, two are Roma)

Source: Atlas of Roma Communities, 2004 and field work. Notes: (\*) - share on total population in parentheses

Table 2. Structure of spending per measure (2012)

Measure	Number of clients supported	Total sum in mil. euro	Average sum per workplace or client
§ 46 – Education and training - jobseekers	1,785	0.68	383
§ 47 – Education and training - employed	0	0.00	0
§ 49 – Contribution to self-employment	8,690	29.40	3,382
§ 51 – Graduate practice	16,442	17.00	1,032
§ 52 – Small Municipal Works	18,844	3.53	187
§ 53 – Contribution to commuting for work	16,136	4.90	305
<b>Total on all measures</b>	<b>94,043</b>	<b>136.1</b>	<b>1,447</b>

*Source:* Central Labour Office. *Note:* “§” assign the legal definition of a measure in the Act on Employment Services.

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