

PETER RADO

Social Selection in Education:
the Wider Context of the
Segregation of Roma Pupils
in Hungary

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**SOCIAL SELECTION IN EDUCATION:
THE WIDER CONTEXT OF THE SEGREGATION OF
ROMA PUPILS IN HUNGARY**

Péter Radó

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INTRODUCTION

The educational segregation of marginalized and visible ethnic pupil groups may occur for many different reasons: due to the high territorial concentration of such groups, because of demographic changes, as a result of active separation measures taken by authorities or schools or the selective enrollment policies of schools, the selective school choices of parents, or by a combination of these factors. Too often we engage in isolated discourses about social selection and ethnic segregation. This dual discourse suggests that the segregation of pupils with a minority affiliation occurs solely due to the behavioral patterns of the key actors in education, driven by stereotypes and biased views. Although in most instances such cognitive biases play an important role, this understanding may lead to simplification of the underlying reasons, and, as a consequence, to well-intentioned but ineffective policy interventions. Indeed, the repeated failure of educational policy interventions that aim at reversing the process of segregation is primarily caused by a poor understanding of the underlying reasons.

This paper¹ argues that to better understand ethnic segregation we need to understand the dynamics within local school networks. In other words, ethnic segregation should be considered within the wider context of social selection in education in order to properly assess the actual weight of the various factors behind such segregation. Due to the similarities among the education systems of Central-Eastern and South-Eastern European countries, an analysis of the case of the increasing segregation of Roma pupils in Hungary may also help lay the foundations for a more mainstream approach to Roma segregation elsewhere.

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING THE REASONS FOR SOCIAL SELECTION

In the research literature on social selection in education, the latter is typically connected to decentralization and privatization. Decentralization of the governance of education was the mainstream direction of change during previous decades, which has obviously not resulted in stronger social selection *per se*. In contrast, the negative impact of privatization on the intensity of selection is a rather well-documented effect; as will be seen, this has been a major contributor to the increase in selection and segregation in Hungary too. In the last decade there are three European countries in which occurred a rather significant process of school privatization: in the United Kingdom, with its growing share of specialized schools, religious schools and the “free schools” of City Academies (Patrikios-Curtice, 2014), in Sweden, with a growing number of schools owned by non-profit and for-profit organizations (Kornhall-Bender, 2019), and in Hungary, due to the rapid expansion of church schools (Radó, 2019).

1 The paper has been presented at the CIES 2019 conference: Education for Sustainability. San Francisco, April 14-16, 2019.

Disregarding the extent to which the various rationales for privatization in education are supported by empirical research-and-analysis-based evidence, justification of the former always takes the form of genuine-sounding public policy argumentation: public financing constraints, ideological convictions, a New Public Management (NPM) type of approach to efficiency, the diversification of educational choices, fostering innovation and adaptation, and implementing certain approaches to educational equity (Lubienski, 2001; Cullen et alia, 2005; OECD, 2012; Rizvi, 2016). What has made the Hungarian experience rather unique since 2010 – when the Orbán government came into power and initiated a major reshuffle of the education system – is the fact that none of the former rationales are applicable to this situation, nor applied in practice. As summarized in the following table, all of the individual elements involved in the systemic change implemented in Hungary since 2010 are utterly alien to any of the typical rationales for privatization in education (Ercse, 2018; Radó, 2019). Therefore, understanding the underlying reasons for social selection in Hungary must involve a more in-depth analysis of the various contributory factors. The dynamics created by these factors are way more complex than the actual goals that the government has intended to meet.

Table 1. Rationales for privatization in education, and the direction of systemic change in Hungary since 2010.

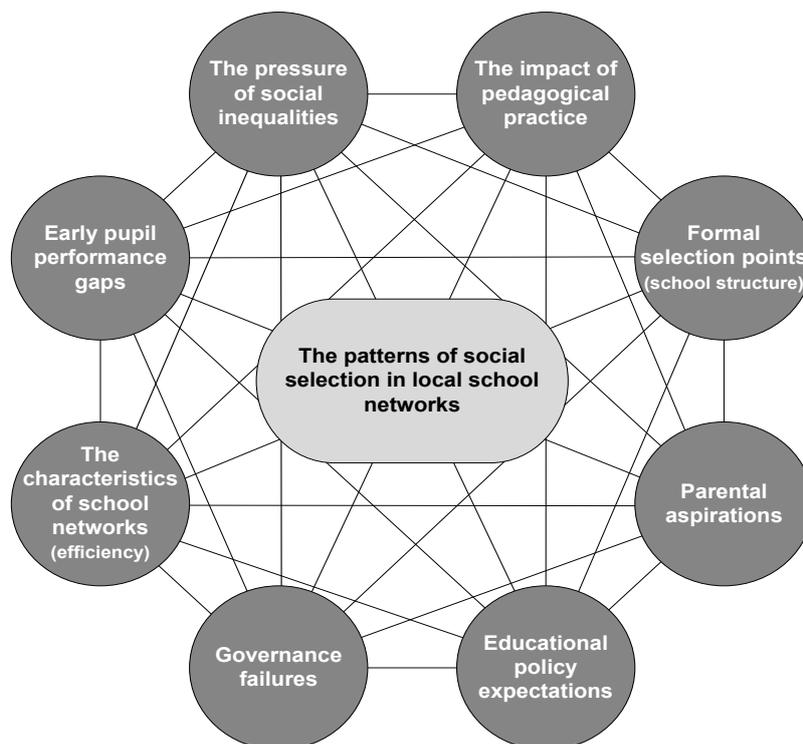
Typical rationales for privatization in education	Education system reshuffle in Hungary
Reducing reliance on government funding, relieving state budgets by channeling in more private funds.	Soft budgetary constraints (elimination of public control over public spending), abundance of EU funds, free textbooks for all.
Ideological considerations: governments grow too “big”, ensuring minimal government influence over life of citizens.	Increasing control over the life of citizens by an autocratic government, “nationalization” of schools.
The “neoliberal” NPM agenda: ensuring greater efficiency and effectiveness by strengthening accountability for clients.	Highly dysfunctional centralized administrative control, anti-market policies, exclusion of market services from education.
Diversification of educational offerings in order to respond to increasing, and increasingly diverse, learning needs.	Standardization of inputs and processes by use of centrally issued syllabi (called “curriculum”) and designated government-published textbooks, leaving no possibility for selection.
Adjustment crisis in education: privatization in order to generate greater innovation that will help adapt education to 21st-century challenges.	Complete lack of future-oriented thinking, return to the educational philosophies and goals of the 1960s and 1970s, nationalistic and conservative indoctrination.
Fostering equity by opening up access to good education for disadvantaged pupils (vouchers).	Cold-blooded approach to lessening inequality, intentional selection and segregation.

The point of departure for this paper is a trivial observation: highly selective education systems provide great latitude for ethnic separation. Selection in education – i.e. the tracking of pupils on the basis of their family background that results in homogeneous bodies of pupils in schools – is a complex phenomenon generated by the combined effects of various characteristics of educational systems. When considering the possible reasons for social selection in education, the impact of the following factors should be assessed:

1. The strength of the various societal inequalities that put pressure on institutions and actors in education.
2. The strength of pressure for separation generated by the prevailing pedagogical practice and the individual and institutional interests stemming from this pressure.
3. The degree of educational performance gaps that emerge at very early stages of education.
4. The characteristics of the school structure, the number and location of formal selection points.
5. The characteristics of school networks, especially the average size of schools and the amount of redundant school capacity.
6. Parental aspirations and choices.
7. The characteristics of the governance of school systems, various governance failures.
8. Overt and hidden external policy expectations.

These factors alone do not necessarily generate social selection. However, if combined, they create a local and/or institutional space within which the rational choices (i.e. decisions on the basis of real or perceived interests) of various actors result in the separation of pupils of different backgrounds. Therefore, further analysis that helps with understanding the mechanism of social selection should focus on the interplay among these key factors. Also, the focus on local educational spaces calls for a certain level of caution with generalization: such spaces may differ from country to country, and from settlement to settlement.

Figure 1. An analytical framework for analyzing social selection in education



Obviously, the potential of educational policy in mitigating possible issues in relation to these eight underlying factors is not the same. For example, reducing broader social inequalities might be the result of a much broader package of coordinated government measures including social policy, labor policy, health policy, housing and others. Similarly, influencing parental aspirations might be a legitimate educational policy goal, but it is basically beyond any government control. The remaining six factors also differ in terms of potential space for policy intervention. The reduction of formal selection points, altering educational policy expectations, mending certain governance failures or school network rationalization might be matters for an “education reform” initiated and partly implemented by a single government. However, changing the prevailing pedagogical practice of schools or the reduction of early performance gaps can be the result of sustained development efforts only, for which “education reforms” can only initiate by creating the necessary institutional conditions.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIAL SELECTION IN HUNGARY

The pressure of inequalities. Schools do not operate in a social vacuum; rather, they are constructed by their social environments. The personnel of schools and the pupils who attend schools on a daily basis reflect the inequalities of their surroundings. However, schools are not expected to simply reproduce the inequalities of their environments; on the contrary, they are expected to mitigate, or even eliminate them. Therefore, inequalities along various societal dimensions (such as status, ethnicity, religion, culture or gender) impose pressure on schools. The bigger the social inequalities are, the bigger the real and perceived pressure on the work of schools. As a consequence, societies with weaker social inequalities or more balanced interethnic relations may operate more equitable education systems. However, if we compare income distribution indicators with indicators of the equity of learning outcomes, or with the indicators of educational selectivity, it turns out that these social gaps do not have a deterministic effect on schools. For example, while income inequalities are smaller than the European average in Slovakia, Czechia, Slovenia, Austria and Hungary, equity in education in all these countries is very weak – both in terms of learning outcomes and selection. In contrast, in Estonia, in spite of the higher than average income inequality, educational equity is much stronger than in the large majority of European countries. These data suggest that the reasons for drastic educational selectivity in Hungary are related more to the characteristics of schools than to their social environments.

In addition to this factor, it is important to keep in mind that the problem of the pressure imposed on schools by various societal inequalities may not be simplified to issues with income inequality. The decomposition of the economic, social and cultural (ESCS) index of the OECD PISA surveys indicates that in several Central-Eastern European education systems – in contrast to those in most Western European countries – the effect of socio-cultural status on variation in pupil performance is equally as big as that of socio-economic status.² In other words, to a large extent educational exclusion in this part of Europe is based on cultural exclusion.

2 Due to the statistical uncertainties caused by the change of methodology in calculating the ESCS index in the 2018 PISA survey this paper uses the 2015 PISA results.

Table 2. Degree of income inequality (Gini coefficient), capacity of education to compensate for disadvantages (ESCS effect), and selectivity of education (between-school variation) in selected European countries in 2015. (EUROSTAT, PISA 2015)

	Gini coefficient	ESCS effect (science, point difference)	Selection (% of total variation explained by between-school variation)
Slovakia	0,24	41	47,0
Czechia	0,25	52	43,8
Finland	0,25	40	8,0
Slovenia	0,25	43	48,0
Austria	0,27	45	45,9
Netherlands	0,28	47	65,2
Hungary	0,28	47	56,6
Germany	0,30	42	47,5
Poland	0,31	40	12,9
Italy	0,32	30	40,2
Estonia	0,35	32	16,6
Romania	0,37	34	26,7
EU average	0,31	–	–
OECD average	–	38	30,1

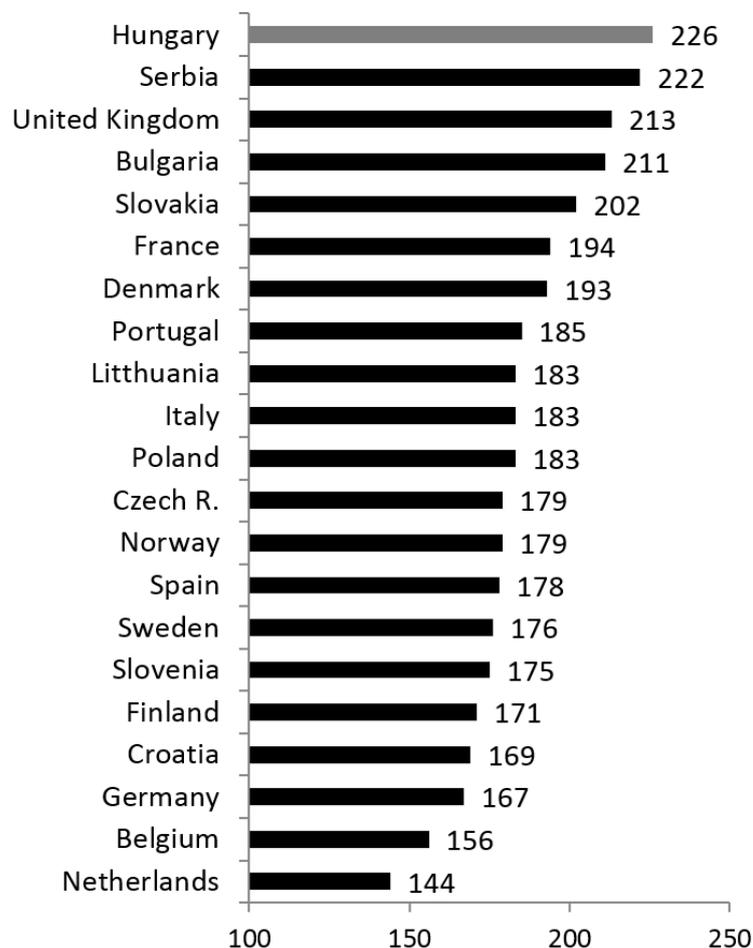
Sources: EUROSTAT, OECD PISA 2015.

Pedagogical practice. Most Hungarian pedagogical experts agree that the prevailing teaching methods in most schools in the country are rather traditional and based on a teaching style that is widely referred to as “frontal teaching”; that is, content driven, typically based on one-way communication, focused on the teaching of whole classrooms instead on individual pupils, and bases pedagogical assessment on a unitary single set of criteria. In other words, the methodological repertoire of the majority of teachers is undifferentiated and not adjusted to the very diverse developmental needs and learning styles of individual pupils. The reason why this feature of teaching is important is the fact that it allows for successful teaching only in homogeneous classrooms. The methodological unpreparedness of teachers to handle diversity in the classroom is complemented with their rather elitist cultural expectations towards pupils. As in other Eastern-European countries, most Hungarian teachers transform the cultural codes of the intellectual middle-class (to which they belong) into relevant school knowledge. In many cases, these expectations automatically result in cultural exclusion in the case of lower-status pupils. These two decisive characteristics of teaching (i.e. a lack of differentiation, and elitist expectations) create a specific set of interests: teachers are interested in forming – preferably high-status – homogeneous classrooms. Since schools are operated by teachers, their interests are translated

into formal or informal school policies that generate very strong pressure for selection. When there is latitude for keeping the aggregate status of a school high by means of selective enrolment policies, disadvantaged pupils become “trapped” in other schools through spontaneous processes. Where this latitude does not exist, the pressure for selection results in the separation of pupils within schools. This occurs through the organization of special classes for “talented” pupils, or “ability groups”. Although through the 2011 act on public education the Orbán government eliminated the institutional and professional autonomy of schools (including the diversity of school programs), the new legislation did not impose any constraints on selective school policies or within-school selection. As a consequence, the selection pressure generated by a lack of preparation for adapting to diversity in classrooms still prevails.

Early performance gaps. Obviously, the learning outcome gaps along different family backgrounds that emerge in the initial phase of schooling foster selective secondary education enrolment, even if the actual process of selection is fair (Gurzó-Horn, 2015). As far as Hungary is concerned, selection is far from fair, but this fact simply further magnifies the impact of early performance differences. Therefore, the question that must be addressed is the extent to which different education systems are able to prevent early performance gaps from evolving. As the results of the 2015 IEA TIMSS survey indicate, in European comparison early performance gaps among pupils are the largest in Hungary.

Figure 2. Point score differences between the average performance of the 10 and 90 percentiles of pupils in mathematics in grade 4 in participating European countries (2015)



We know that early performance gaps among pupils are largely (although to a different extent in different countries) determined by the background of pupils. Also, statistical analysis of PISA results proves that there is very strong correlation between the level of inclusion and the proportion of poorly performing pupils (Villar, 2017). Due to the weak professional preparedness of schools to reduce the impact of social disadvantages on learning, there is a linear regression association between family background and learning outcomes. It is less obvious, however, that the impact of individual status differences basically takes effect through the aggregate status of schools; i.e., through the average individual family index of pupils attending the school. By creating socially homogeneous pupil compositions in schools, the tracking of pupils further widens performance gaps between pupils with different family statuses. According to PISA survey results, the difference between the direct effect of pupils' status and the effect of school status is large in Hungary. The only other European country where the high overall impact of family background is explained much more by school status differences than by individual student status differences is the Netherlands.

Table 3. Impact of family background and school status on the science performance of pupils in selected European countries (PISA 2015)

Country	Expected performance gap caused by one unit difference of family status of pupils	Expected performance gap between two pupils with one unit difference between their family status index when status of their schools is identical	Expected performance gap between two pupils with identical family status index if there is one unit difference in the status of their schools
Estonia	32	20	46
Denmark	34	26	36
Norway	37	34	23
OECD average	38	19	69
Finland	40	35	35
Poland	40	31	39
Slovakia	41	13	82
Germany	42	15	101
Austria	45	16	97
Hungary	47	6	96
Netherlands	47	9	154
Czechia	52	21	98

Source: OECD PISA 2015

Although probably to a smaller extent, this strong indirect effect of school status prevails at lower levels of education, too. Therefore, the performance gaps that emerge during the first four years of schooling in Hungary and elsewhere are caused by the interplay between the poor capacity of schools to compensate for disadvantages, and early selection. Thus, early selection generates the dynamics of a negative spiral that results in even greater social selection at later stages of education.

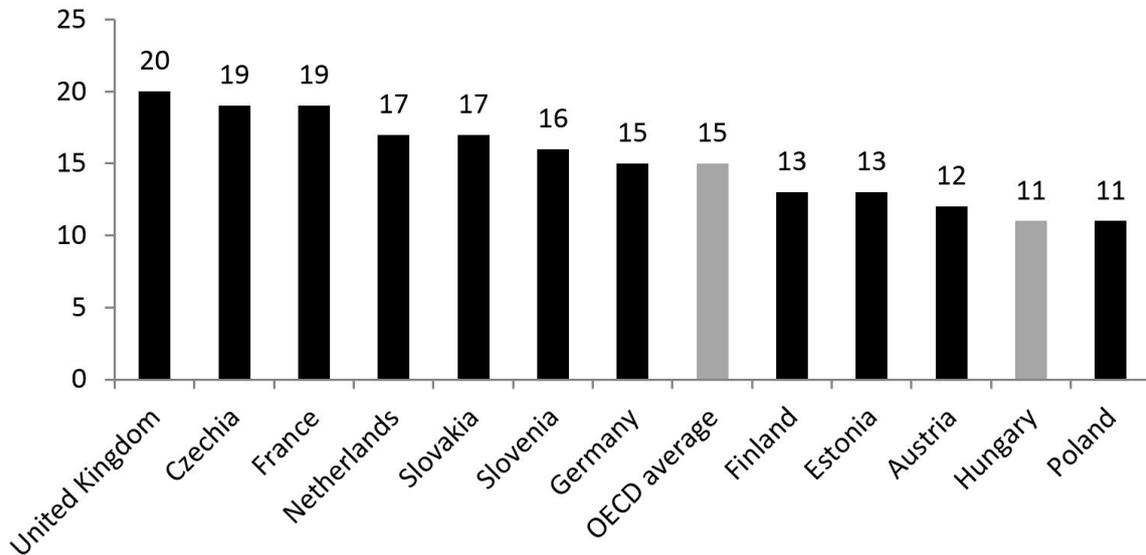
School structure. In connection with social selection in education, the actual school structure of an education system matters for two reasons; (1) the number and location of formal selection points throughout the learning career of pupils provides a smaller or bigger space for tracking pupils with different backgrounds to different schools, and (2) the length of the initial phase of education affects the latitude that is available for dealing with the quality and equity problems that cause the failure of vulnerable pupil groups. Although the second aspect might be overrated, the education systems of Scandinavian countries prove that the unity of primary (ISCED 1) and lower-secondary (ISCED 2) education has a positive effect on equity. As described in the latest school structure overview of Eurydice (the educational information network of the European Union), the unity of primary and lower-secondary education is not universal in Europe; 8-, 9- or 10-grade schools operate only in Northern, Central-Eastern and South-East-European regions (Eurydice 2014). What is important to note is the fact that in the most selective Central-European education systems (in Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary) the unity of the two first phases of schooling is only a façade. In each country, 6-8 grade secondary schools “cream off” the best performing (typically middle-class background) pupils as early as at the end of the 5-7 grades. Since the Hungarian education system is very selective even at the point of entry to schooling, there are four formal selection points in the pre-higher education system that provides significant space for tracking on the basis of social status in both directions: “upwards”, to the schools of the well-educated elites, and “downwards”, to the “depositories” for poorly performing low-status pupils.

School networks. It appears that the actual gap between school capacity and the number of enrolled pupils is one of the most important factors in social selection that is very often left out of consideration. Putting it simply, the bigger the gap, the stronger the interests are for selective enrolment and the bigger the space for selective parental choice. This relationship is more decisive than the above-mentioned effects of fragmented school structures.

Thus, the space for selection is largely determined by the dynamics between the change in available school capacity (the number of schools) and demographic change. In Hungary – as in all other Central-Eastern European countries – the number of school-aged children is perpetually declining; between 1990 and 2016 the number of pupils in primary education dropped by 36.4 percent. In the first part of the 1990s, however, instead of adjusting to the declining number of pupils, the number of schools in primary education increased, creating a large school capacity surplus. Later in the same decade, due to the financial incentives that were built into the funding of schools, local self-governments reduced the number of parallel classes, mitigating the serious efficiency problems. However, because of the high political cost of school closures, the number of schools remained overly high, preserving the large space for social selection. The surviving fragmentation of school networks is reflected in the average pupil-teacher ratio in Hungary that remains significantly below the average of other European countries. (See: Figure 3.) Due to the accelerated expansion of the school network of churches that was actively supported by the government from 2012 and that partly occurred by the establishment of new schools by the traditional Christian churches, efficiency problems grew even larger in the publicly owned school

network. In this sector pupil-teacher ratio has further decreased from 10,9 in 2011 to 9,7 in 2018. This decline happened in a period of time, when the underlying curricular framework and the regulation of mandatory teaching hours was the same, therefore, its sole reason was the further fragmentation of the entire school network. (Radó, 2019)

Figure 3. Pupil-teacher ratio in primary education in selected European countries (2014)



Source: OECD Education at a Glance 2017.

It is important to also note that the large number of small schools not only opens wide the door to selective school choice, but also increases the quality gap between schools; beyond the unequal distribution of pupils with different backgrounds among different schools, selection also distributes all of the preconditions of a high quality education unevenly (Kertesi-Kézdi, 2009). Since higher-status parents tend to choose schools that are perceived to be better, the capacity gap – similarly to early performance gaps - generates a selection spiral. A widely shared view is that free parental school choice is one of the most important underlying reasons for social selection in education. However, in 14 out of the 33 OECD member countries parents are given the right of enrolling their children in any of the public schools without any restrictions. The number of countries where there is no free choice of school at all is only eight, among which there are five European countries: Finland, France, Germany, Greece and Norway. (Musset, 2012) The fact, that there is no visible relationship between free school choice and the strength of social selection in education suggests that the former per se does not explain the latter.

Parental choices. The progress of pupils in the education system is not determined exclusively by the “supply” provided by the school system; the “demand side” (that is, the aspirations of parents) is equally important. Research by Judit Lannert revealed that the two significant factors behind parental choices are the educational attainment of parents, and the achievement of pupils. In contrast, parental income, settlement type, and regional differences play a much smaller role; the latter factors only transmit the indirect impact of educational attainment (Lannert, 2004). The educational attainment of parents was shown to have an effect on pupils’ long-term ambitions, while short-term decisions were determined more by the achievement of pupils. Therefore, family background had a great impact on parental choices, partly directly and partly indirectly through the impact of family background on the performance of pupils.

As far as the aspirations of Hungarian parents are concerned, their main priority is status preservation, meaning that higher-status parents consider only those learning pathways for their children that lead to the highest possible educational attainment. As a consequence, the most influential social groups exert pressure on national and local educational policy decision-making in order to ensure that their offspring benefit from an offer of “the royal road” to the best Hungarian or foreign universities. In the elementary phase, this means choosing the “best” primary schools, while at the secondary level it involves enrolling pupils in “elite schools” (typically eight- or six-grade general secondary schools). It is important to note that this choice of “good schools” is not based on a comparison of sophisticated added value performance indicators, but rather based on subjective perceptions for which the typical references are the social/ethnic composition of enrolled pupils, the quality of school facilities and equipment, and the location of the school. At the entry point to secondary education, the main selection criterion for high-status parents is the success with admission to higher education assured by the school. In theory, parents with lower educational attainments may also consider these options. However, in their case, whether they are satisfied with the minimum attainment that ensures the preservation of their status or wish to invest in higher attainment that ensures the intergenerational mobility of their child is a matter of cost-benefit analysis. Overall, the behavior of parents that is determined by their aspirations maintains a high demand for the network of “elite schools” that strengthens the selectivity of the Hungarian education system. As a consequence, social selection does not occur through the active separation of disadvantaged pupils, but by the selective school choices of high-status parents that eventually increase the concentration of low-status pupils in certain schools.

Governance failures. Obviously, all the factors briefly described above can have an effect on the degree of social selection in Hungary because of various governance failures. The most important of these are related to the characteristics of management, planning, financing and quality evaluation. In the period between 1991 and 2012, financial incentives built into the financial allocation system created a vested interest for owners of schools (typically local self-governments) to ensure some equilibrium between school capacity and the number of pupils. However, since these incentives were rather weak, they mostly failed to generate appropriate local school network rationalization programs.

On the basis of new legislation enacted in 2011, the Orbán government fully reshuffled the education system, leaving no part of the sub-system of educational governance untouched. As of January 2013 all public educational institutions – with the exception of kindergartens - were taken over from the self-governments to be maintained by the newly established Klebelsberg School Maintaining Authority (KLIK). Although the facilities of the schools, with restrictions, remained in the hands of self-governments, this move was widely referred to as the “nationalization of schools”. State-owned schools were terminated as separate legal entities and merged into the organization of KLIK. Ever since, schools have been directly micro-managed by the 58 deconcentrated administrative departments of KLIK, called school district directorates. All school directors are appointed by the minister responsible for education himself. School district directors have taken over all employment related decision-making competencies from school directors, and all teachers are employees of KLIK, not of their schools. The organizational and professional autonomy of schools was terminated, or its scope reduced to a symbolic extent. The government introduced centrally issued single curricula (in fact, syllabi) for all schools, and a nationalized, single textbook system, leaving only a small and marginal space for the textbooks of private publishers.

The shift to a centralized administrative management system has had major consequences in terms of financing. Parallel to the withdrawal of a significant proportion of public budget funding from education, the government returned to a direct input financing regime in which different categories of schools owned by different actors (state, churches, other private owners) are funded on the basis of different conditions. (At the time being, six different public financing regimes are used in pre-high education in parallel, without ensuring a minimum of transparency.) With all these changes the Hungarian government basically disarmed itself; under such a centralized administrative management system all previous mid-term and long-term planning activities ceased to exist and none of the actors in educational management have the instruments with which to make any major changes to local school networks.

The complete reorganization of the system of governance had an immediate and negative effect on the quality of primary and secondary education in Hungary that is reflected in the very rapid and dramatic decline in all relevant educational outcome indicators. As a consequence, from the middle of the decade higher-status parents started to parachute their children into private schools from the fast deteriorating state-owned schools. The government contributed to the establishment of new escape routes for higher status pupils by actively supporting the rapid expansion of the school networks of the major Christian churches. (Between 2010 and 2016 the proportion of pupils attending church-owned primary schools grew from 7.4 percent to 17.4 percent.) This inevitably resulted in the greater concentration of low-status pupils in state-owned schools, making the already extremely selective school system even more selective (Ercse-Radó, 2019).

Policy expectations. Beyond various regulations and officially approved strategies, governments typically transmit their educational policy expectations through three major channels: by government-initiated and funded education development programs, through the institutionalized channels of stakeholder consultations, and by public communication. After 2010, the Hungarian government suspended almost all EU-funded school development programs and reallocated the available funds to newly established mechanisms, such as the development of centrally issued curricula and textbooks and the administrative professional control of teachers. In addition to this, and in line with the gradual building of an autocratic regime, all institutionalized stakeholder consultation mechanisms were eliminated.

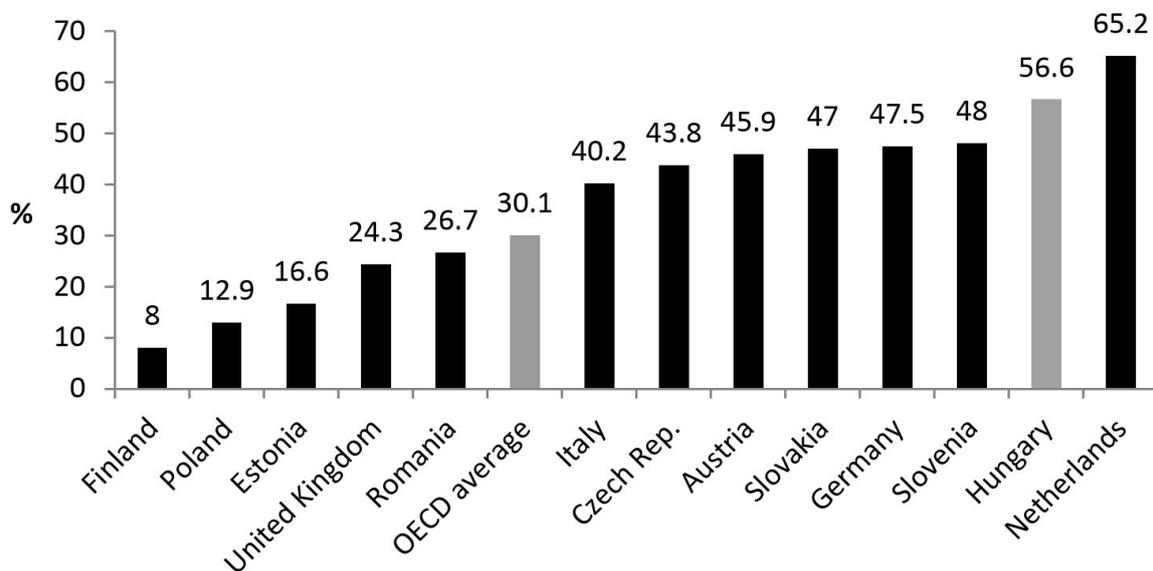
As far as the public communication of overt and hidden policy expectations is concerned, in the period 2002-2010 it can be characterized as the cautious promotion of integration in education. However, since these expectations were rarely matched with resolute policy initiatives that were strong enough to overwrite the local interest grids created by the interplay of the above-listed factors, they did not alter the behavior of local and institutional actors in education. After 2010, the communication of the government changed. In all cases of social selection and segregation, leading government officials approved the negative changes by absolving local actors of responsibility for selective measures.

INTERACTING EFFECTS AND THE DEGREE OF SOCIAL SELECTION IN HUNGARY

To summarize the overview of the various factors, it can be said that social selection in the Hungarian education system is primarily generated as the combined effect of strong pressure for separation from schools, early performance gaps between pupils of various backgrounds, and the very fragmented school network. This social selection is magnified by parental aspirations, by the existence of too many formal selection points, and by various governance failures. Recently, these factors have been supplemented by the communication of the government that promotes selection and by the government-aided rapid expansion of the highly selective private school network of churches. Although this summary is based on an assessment of the relative weight of various factors, it is important to keep in mind that strength of these factors in generating social selection might be very different from settlement to settlement.

As the following data that allow for international comparison prove, Hungary operates one of the most selective education systems in Europe. The rather traditional indicator of social selection applied by the OECD PISA surveys is based on an analysis of the variation in learning outcomes: the proportion of total variation explained by between-school differences. For example, according to the science assessment data of the 2015 PISA survey, selection in Hungary is even stronger than in three out of the four European countries (Austria, Germany, Lithuania and the Netherlands) that stream pupils into parallel school tracks as early as the age of 10 or 11.

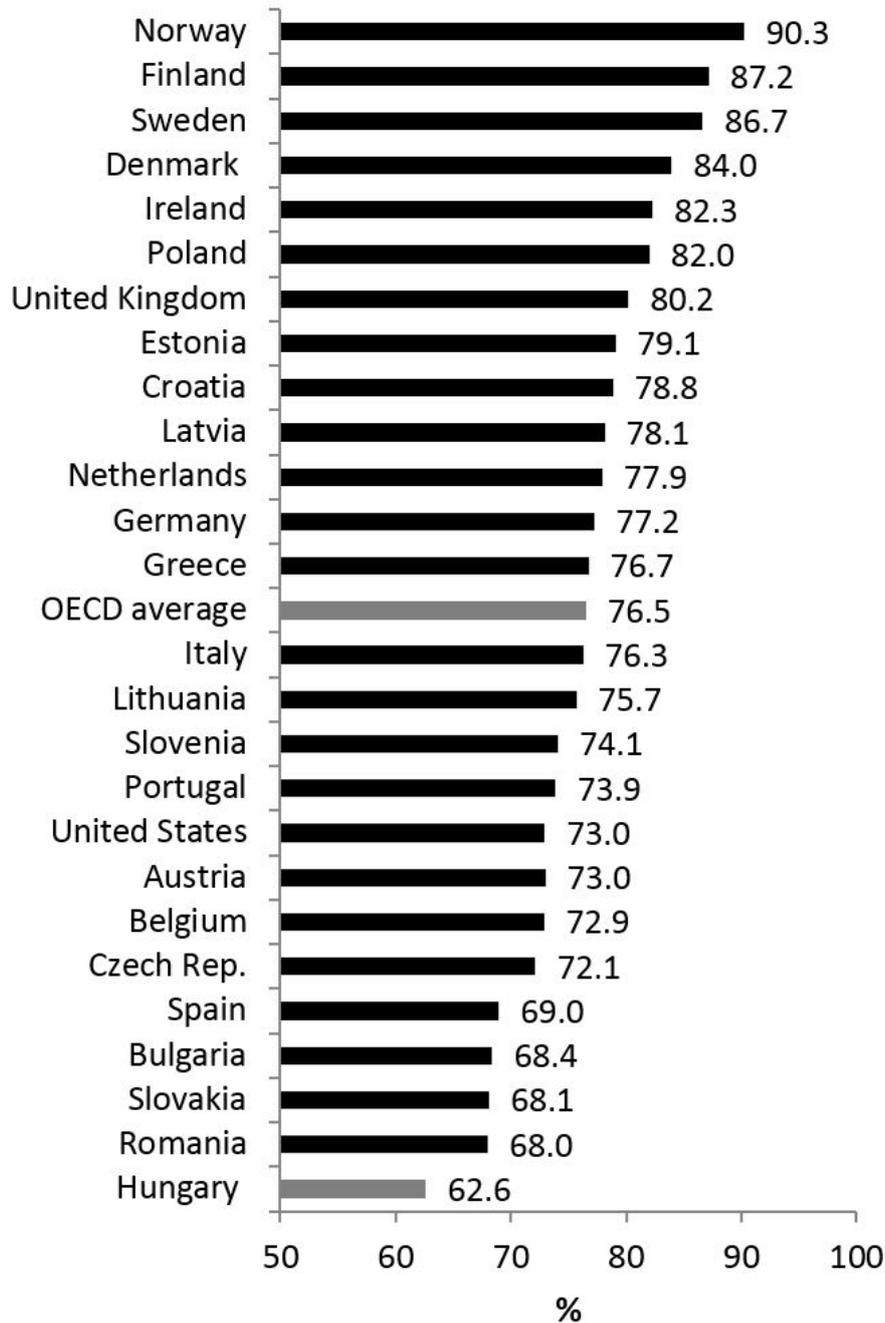
Figure 4. Between-school variation as a proportion of total variation in science performance in selected European countries (PISA 2015)



Source: OECD PISA 2015.

A recently introduced and more sensitive PISA indicator is the socio-economic inclusion index that is based on the relationship between within- and between-school variation in learning outcomes. The value of this index for Hungary is the lowest among all developed countries, signaling higher comparative selectivity than the traditional indicator that is described above suggests.

Figure 5. PISA index of socio-economic inclusion in European countries and the United States (2015)



Source: OECD PISA 2015.

This extraordinary degree of selection has a much greater effect of the performance of low-status pupils than on the performance of their higher status peers. Analysis of the results of the PISA survey proves that there is strong association between socio-economic inclusion and the proportion of low performers (OECD, 2016). This association is best explained by the already mentioned intensifying effect of aggregate school status on the strength of the impact of family background. As a consequence,

the negative impact on quality of the reshuffle of the education system implemented by the Orbán government since 2011 has increased the proportion of failing students to a dramatic extent: between the PISA surveys of 2009 and 2015 the proportion of the former increased from 17.6 percent to 27.5 percent in reading literacy, from 22.3 percent to 27.9 percent in mathematics, and from 14.1 percent to 26 percent in science.

THE ETHNIC DIMENSION OF SELECTION: THE SEGREGATION OF ROMA PUPILS

Segregation is separation on the basis of ethnicity. The term “separation” alludes to active intervention aimed at organizing the education of Roma and non-Roma pupils in a separated way. However, to a certain extent this description is misleading in the present case; in most cases segregation occurs in Hungary due to the intentional separation of higher status pupils that does not necessarily involve active discriminatory action. Therefore, I use “segregation” as a sociological and educational term to refer to the discriminatory effects of the sometimes spontaneous but not necessarily intentionally discriminatory behavior of local educational actors. Having said that, it is important to emphasize the fact that the seemingly ethnically neutral selective practices of teachers, school directors, non-Roma parents, or any others, are often based on cognitive biases, such as stereotypes, prejudices, or even on overt racism. This short explanation of the term is necessary, because the major pattern of the segregation of Roma pupils in Hungary is identical to the major pattern of overall social selection: to a large extent Roma pupils are not concentrated in certain schools because of their ethnic affiliation, but because of their very low social status.

This segregation by social selection pattern is well illustrated by the example of the changes within the local school network of Encs (a small town in the north-east of Hungary with seven thousand inhabitants) between 2010 and 2016 (Ercse, 2019). In 2010, the town had two self-government-owned primary schools with a slightly lower aggregate social status than the national average. In the two schools, the proportion of Roma and/or disadvantaged pupils was almost identical. By 2016, two changes had occurred in Encs. A four-grade, already government-owned upper-secondary general school got permission to expand their educational offering to include grades 7 and 8; due to this, the school started to cream off the higher status pupils from the final two years of the two (already also “nationalized”) primary schools. More importantly, a private primary school was established in the town by the Catholic Church by bringing in teachers and higher status, non-Roma pupils from the two publicly owned primary schools. As a consequence, the status index of both government-owned schools has dropped to a dramatic extent. One of the public primary schools became an “apartheid school” that now teaches exclusively Roma pupils, while the proportion of Roma pupils in the other public school has also almost doubled. This case alone – while obviously more extreme than the processes observed at the systemic scale – clearly demonstrates the functioning of almost all the above-listed factors that contribute to social selection in Hungary and elsewhere in the Central-Eastern European region.

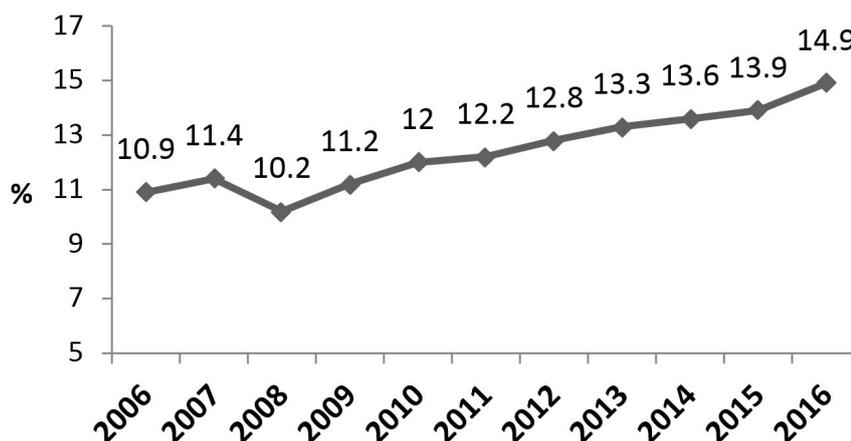
Table 4. Transformation of the primary school network of Encs, Hungary, between 2010 and 2016.

2010				2016			
Schools	School status	Disadvantaged pupils (%)	Roma pupils (%)	Schools	School status	Disadvantaged pupils (%)	Roma pupils (%)
Self-government owned primary school (1)	-0,05	7,3	23	Government-owned primary school (1)	-2,02	100	100
Self-government owned primary school (2)	-0,23	7,7	26	Government-owned primary school (2)	-1,60	33,3	47
				Government-owned 6 grade general upper-secondary school	-0,21	7,4	ND
				Catholic church-owned primary school	-0,02	4,9	2

Source: Database of the National Assessment of Competences; calculations by Kriszta Ercse

The most important indicator of the degree of segregation of Roma pupils is the proportion of ghetto schools (schools in which more than 50 percent of pupils are Roma). According to data calculated on the basis of the institutional background survey of the National Assessment of Competences, the proportion of ghetto primary schools – with the exception of a temporary break in 2008 – has continually increased since 2006.

Figure 6. Proportion of Roma ghetto primary schools in Hungary (2006-2016)



Source: Database of the National Assessment of Competences; calculations by István Nahalka

Increasing ethnic separation is partly caused by spontaneous demographic change. The proportion of the school-aged population within the Roma community in Hungary is approximately double the national average. Thus, the estimated proportion of Roma pupils in pre-higher education grew from 11.6 percent in 2005 to 14.5 percent in 2014 (Kállai, Papp and Vízi, 2017). Although the proportion of

Roma pupils in education stagnated after 2012, this did not prevent growth in the proportion of ghetto schools. The geographical distribution of the Roma population in Hungary is uneven; their proportion in certain regions of the country are higher than average. This is the reason why about half of all ghetto schools are located in North-East Hungary. The territorial concentration of the Roma population is increasing the number of ghetto schools primarily in villages, not in cities. According to the results of an analysis by Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi (2014), residential segregation is not directly associated with educational segregation because, due to free parental school choice, the mobility of pupils among school districts reduces the role played by residence (school districts in Hungary are in fact the catchment areas of schools. These are not mandatorily enforced, but in the case of over-application schools are obliged to award an advantage to pupils from within their designated catchment areas). In addition, the cost of pupil mobility is rather low in bigger settlements. Therefore, the extent of segregation that is not explained by demographic reasons is caused by the outcome of social selection – that is, by the streaming of higher status pupils into “better” schools. This determines the prevailing patterns of Roma segregation in education, too: In cities it occurs between schools, in villages – due to the higher costs of commuting to a smaller extent – due to the enrolment of non-Roma pupils in the schools of other settlements. (The latter phenomenon often being referred to as “white flight”.)

The phenomenon that between-school segregation is much stronger in Hungary than within-school segregation is not independent of the fact that during previous decades the deterioration in efficiency caused by a decline in the number of pupils was typically mitigated by local self-governments by reducing the number of parallel classes, not by the closure or amalgamation of schools. This led to a large offer of small schools, but reduced the latitude for the within-school separation of pupils with different social and/or ethnic backgrounds. This situation especially applies to the many small schools in small rural settlements that operate only one class per grade. The strong relationship between the efficiency of the school network and the degree of Roma segregation is proved by examples from other countries in the region too. For example, a centrally administered major school network rationalization program in Bulgaria in 2006 that involved the closure of hundreds of very small rural schools in mountainous regions resulted in a reduction in the segregation of Roma pupils.

According to some empirical research results, the change in the proportion of ghetto schools is a characteristic of outstanding importance. For example, research by Gábor Havas and Ilona Liskó revealed that when the proportion of Roma pupils in a primary school exceeds 50 percent, the streaming of non-Roma pupils to other schools speeds up to a large extent (Havas-Liskó, 2005). Thus, schools that become ghetto schools enter an irreversible spiral of segregation.

Table 5. Proportion of pupils attending schools in districts other than their own in comparison to the proportion of Roma pupils in their original district school in settlements with multiple schools (2005)

Proportion of Roma pupils in school (%)	Proportion of pupils enrolled in another district (%)
75–100	29,8
50–75	62,6
25–50	12,6
0–25	13,1

Source: Havas-Liskó, 2005

Table 6. Proportion of pupils commuting to schools in another settlement in comparison to the proportion of Roma pupils in the school of their own village (2005)

Proportion of Roma pupils in the school (%)	Proportion of pupils commuting to another settlement (%)
80 or more	31,5
50–80	11,2
40–50	4,2
25–40	6,7
10–25	4,5
less than 10	6

Source: Havas-Liskó, 2005

Another important issue in relation to the segregation of Roma pupils is the effect of their poor academic performance (as discussed already) as a major contributor to selection at later stages of education. We know from an analysis of Attila Z. Papp that the very weak performance of Roma pupils is associated with their very low family status, not with their ethnic affiliation (Papp, 2011). In theory, this would call for a rather “color-blind” approach to the matter. However, the separation of Roma students evidently also has an ethnic dimension beyond the ethnically neutral reasons for social selection. Analysis of the results of the 2006 National Assessment of Competences survey revealed that the segregation index calculated on the basis of ethnicity is higher than that calculated on the basis of disadvantaged status (Kertesi-Kézdi, 2009). (Disadvantaged pupil status is an official qualification that establishes eligibility for certain social allowances in Hungary.) This suggests that the already discussed behavior of non-Roma parents’ striving to ensure a good education for their children is often counterbalanced by prejudice against Roma pupils. In fact, the rather positive “pull effect” and the negative “push effect” cannot be dissociated. Parents judge the quality of schooling on the basis of incomplete information; in many cases, a high concentration of Roma pupils is perceived to be a sign of poor quality.

Although the main driver of the segregation of Roma pupils in Hungary is based on strong social selection at a systemic scale, there are certain segregation channels that are based on the active exclusion of the former from mainstream education. A rather traditional type of this kind of segregation – widely applied in most Central-Eastern and South-East European countries – is the channeling of Roma pupils into special schools or classes. Due to the rather successful SEN integration policy in Hungary during the previous decade, the latitude for this type of segregation has been reduced. However, more recently a new channel for segregation was created by the Hungarian government through the establishment of so-called “Bridge classes”. In theory, these programs are second-chance opportunities provided for pupils who drop out of education before the end of mandatory school attendance age. In fact, in many cases Bridge classes function merely as repositories for Roma pupils until the end of their time of mandatory schooling, without providing them with meaningful educational opportunities.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY DILEMMAS

During previous decades, there were only eight years in Hungary (between 2002 and 2010) when government educational policies attempted to serve real anti-discrimination goals. Until 2005, these policies operated mainly with soft instruments aimed at improving the capacity of schools to provide a good education for disadvantaged and/or Roma pupils: namely, development programs and connected financial incentives. Due to the failure of these programs, the government supplemented its policy toolkit with more “hard” instruments such as new regulations for determining catchment areas that ensure a more even distribution of disadvantaged pupils among schools. However, even these interventions have failed to influence the behavior of actors in education by altering the already described local grids of interest. Thus, social selection has remained extremely strong and – apart from a short break – the segregation of Roma pupils has continued to grow.

To understand the reasons for the failure of educational policies applied prior to the 2010 takeover of the Orbán government to override the inertia of local grids of interest, we need to make a distinction between *mainstream equity policies* and *supplementary targeted policies*. Mainstream equity policies target the whole school system in order to strengthen the capacity of schools to compensate for the negative impact of various societal disadvantages on learning, and in order to reduce social selection. In contrast, supplementary targeted policies address the specific problems of different minority groups in schools that only that the pupils affiliated to these minorities attend, or by targeting pupils with a minority affiliation themselves. Typical policy models of this kind include preferential and/or developmental affirmative action, the provision of various language and cultural programs for national minorities, application of the whole toolkit of anti-discrimination measures and developments, as well as various desegregation-related interventions. An evaluation of such government policies in Hungary and in other countries of the region reveals that applying supplementary targeted policies alone is not able to make an education system more equitable. Although most Central- and South-East European countries have allocated significant resources to promoting supplementary targeted policies for several decades, due to the lack of effective interventions in the mainstream system these investments have proved to be very much ineffective. The conclusion that can be drawn from this failure is that there is a need to dominantly apply policy interventions that have the potential to overcome the inertia of social selection through selective school policies and parental choices in the mainstream system.

A dilemma often debated in connection with these mainstream interventions is whether selection should be reduced using “demand side” or “supply side” measures. The former might operate by terminating the free parental choice of schools with the introduction of mandatory catchment areas for each school. “Supply side” intervention could operate by introducing school network rationalization programs, prohibiting entry selection in primary education, reducing the share of private schools, and restoring the unity of the structure of schools in order to reduce the number of formal selection points.

During the last three decades three typical arguments have been used in the Hungarian educational policy discourse in favor of introducing measures that restrict free parental choice. The first is based on the observation that “supply side” interventions have not worked so far, therefore a realignment of policies is needed. Although this argument is true, it would be convincing only if there were no alternatives to the rather mild measures applied by consecutive governments until now. The second argument is that selection and segregation can be fully attributed to free parental choice of schools. As we saw, however, this claim is a simplification because the mechanism of social selection is a much more

complex matter than that. The third argument is an ethical one: disadvantaged and/or Roma families are not able to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the free parental choice regime. Again, this is true; this is exactly the reason why the mechanism of social selection works. However, the lack of the capacity of certain parental groups to take advantage of opportunities does not necessarily imply the need to eliminate these opportunities for all.

At first sight, on the basis of these arguments there appears to be a policy trade-off between the elimination of the violation of the rights of Roma by segregation and the violation of the rights of parents in general by imposing restrictions on the free choice of schools. In fact, this trade-off exists only if there are no alternatives to “demand side” coercion. In addition to this, since to a large extent social selection is caused by various governance failures, shifting the responsibility to parents would not be fair. An additional important counter-argument against the elimination of free choice of schools is the well-documented fact that such regulations are very easy to evade. As social selection is very much connected to the segregation of Roma pupils, the rationalization of the school network is a precondition for the elimination of segregation, especially because Roma pupils are very much concentrated in small schools.

In spite of all the convincing arguments in favor of “supply side” interventions, serious obstacles have prevented all Hungarian governments from implementing such initiatives so far. The first is the fact that for many decades the small schools in small settlements have been the “sacred cows” of politics. Non-educational considerations such as a desire to preserve the population retention capacity of villages reduce the palatability of such policies to the public, even if the educational arguments are convincing. This may increase the political costs of the reduction of the number of schools in order to reduce the latitude for selection and segregation. The other problem is the likely unintended side-effects of the closure of segregated small schools (i.e. the “rigid integration” of disadvantaged and/or Roma pupils): namely, the replacement of between-school separation with various forms of within-school separation. This suggests that school network rationalization should be embedded in much more complex educational policy packages that aim at reducing the hidden mechanisms of selection pressure. This relates to a level of complexity that Hungarian governments have failed to engage with so far.

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