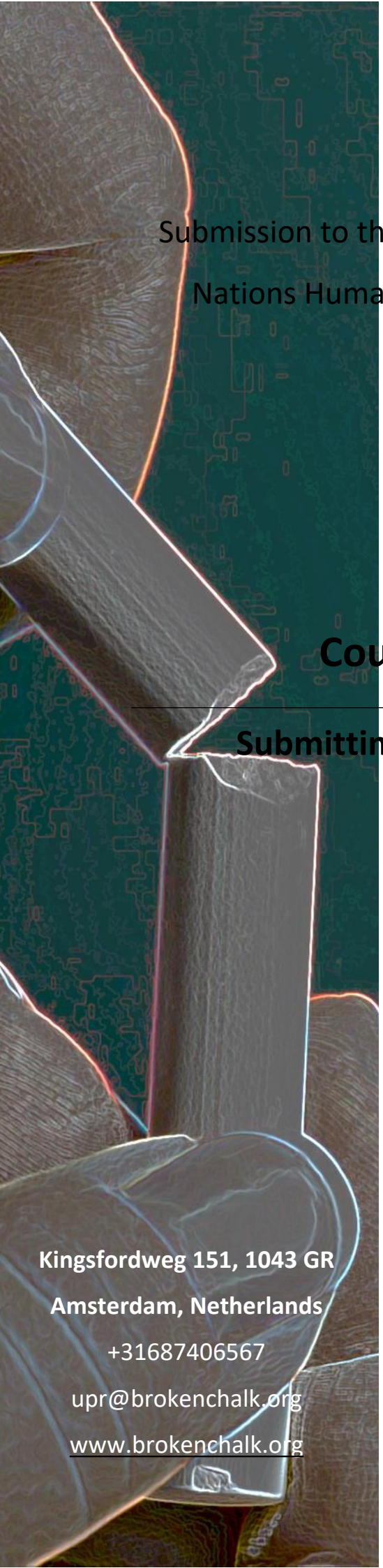

BROKEN CHALK

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 46th Session

Right to Education

Country Review: Slovakia

Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK

October 2023

By Müge Çınar

Kingsfordweg 151, 1043 GR

Amsterdam, Netherlands

+31687406567

upr@brokenchalk.org

www.brokenchalk.org

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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I. Introduction

1. Public schools provide primary and secondary education free of charge. Higher education is also accessible for full-time students, ensuring they do not exceed the standard length of study. Private and church schools may charge for education provided.[i]
2. The state budget allocates funds to schools according to the number of pupils, personnel and economic demands.[ii]
3. Compulsory school attendance lasts ten years between the ages of 6 and 16.[iii]
4. The Slovak language is the language of instruction at most schools.[iv]
5. Decentralisation in the Slovak Republic is based on a dual system of i) self-government by local authorities (regions and municipalities) and ii) "deconcentrated" state administration that refers to the transfer of responsibilities to local units of the central government.[v]
6. As of 2016, Slovakia's education funding stood at 3.9% of the national GDP, ranking 109th worldwide. In 2019, London think-tank The Legatum Institute ranked Slovakia's education system 48th out of 167 countries evaluated, and 2019 data from The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted an upward trend in education spending ($15.87 per student). However, the OECD also identified a decline in Slovakian students' math, reading, and science scores.[vi]
7. Higher education institutions are independent institutions that manage the course and focus of education, research, development, economy, and their internal organisation. Law defines the extent of the self-governing scope of higher education institutions.[vii]
8. In the Slovak Republic, 39% of 25-34-year-olds had a tertiary qualification in 2021 compared to 47% on average across OECD countries. In the Slovak Republic, the share of women among general upper secondary graduates is 59% (OECD average 55%). Men make up 55% of all vocational upper secondary graduates, the same as the OECD average.[viii]
9. Although education in Slovakia is relatively well-organised and of high quality, the system has some issues. These issues are demonstrated by a survey, for instance,

conducted by researchers at Bratislava's Comenius University, which revealed that around 50% of the respondents would rather receive their higher education abroad than at home.[ix]

10. Broken Chalk (BC) appreciates all achievements and advancements of the Slovakian educational system and urges the Slovakian government to address issues in its education to guarantee its citizens their human right to education.

II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

11. On 19 January, Slovakia was revised by UPR WG 32 and received the outcomes. The country received a total of 195 recommendations and backed with 176 recommendations for the adoption of the UPR outcome at Human Rights Council 41 In July 2019. It is indicated that there is a 21% increase in the recommendation compared to the 2nd cycle. 17% of the recommendation belongs to education quality, one of the 5 Sustainable Development Goals (SGDS).[x] In the 3rd cycle of UPR between 2017 and 2021, Slovakia received a total recommendation of 206. This number is higher than the second cycle, which had 160 recommendations. In the 3rd cycle, Slovakia received 25 recommendations on the right to education and six on human rights education and training issues. In comparison, the rights of the children received more than them with 45 recommendations.[xi]

12. According to the summary of the stakeholder's submission in 2018, the CoE-Commissioner urged authorities to address the ongoing segregation of Roma children and children with disabilities in education more comprehensively. Noting that little substantive progress had been made in this area since his visit in 2015, the CoE-Commissioner emphasised that actions to combat school segregation could not be ad hoc and transitory.[xii]

13. According to the Letter by the High Commissioner to the Foreign Minister, the three recommendations are**:** (i) Ensuring equal access to quality and inclusive education for every child, including disabled and Roma children. (ii) Improve the involvement of teaching human rights education in primary and secondary school. (iii) Introducing sexual and reproductive health and rights in the school curricula and education

system.[xiii]

14. The Slovak Republic (SR) has seen numerous advances in human rights since 2014, following the second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). On 15 January 2014, the Government approved the National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Violence, and the National Coordination Centre for Resolving Issues of Violence Against Children was established as a separate organisational entity within the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the SR (MLSAF SR). The Government adopted an update to the National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Violence on October 11, 2017. The 2015 amendment to the Act on Upbringing and Education (Schools Act) states that pupils with exceptional upbringing and educational needs that result from their growing up in socially disadvantaged backgrounds are not to be enrolled in special education classes but must instead be enrolled in mainstream classes.[xiv]

15. According to the amendment to the Act on Financing Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, and School Facilities, which goes into effect from 1 September 2018 to 31 December 2018, pupils who, for the allowance for improving upbringing and education for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, members of households where a household member receives benefits in material need, and their legal guardians, can demonstrate this to a school director. On February 22, 2017, the government established new, revised action plans for the SR Strategy for Roma Integration until 2020 for the 2016-2018 period in the domains of education, employment, health, and housing, as well as a new action plan for financial inclusion. The sum of public funds allocated for these action plans in 2017 is EUR 136,171,438.42.[xv]

16. Education of PF members in the sphere of human rights and the elimination of extremist expressions about the Roma national minority are among the primary priorities of the MI SR for 2018, as well as the action plan for non-discrimination adopted by the Government in 2017. The OPGSRRC works with the Council of Europe's Directorate General for Roma Issues and the OSCE's ODIHR.[xvi]

III. Problem of Inequality

17. The Roma community is one of the most significant minorities in Europe. Slovakia has the continent's largest Roma population. Roma people are mainly a subject of discrimination in Europe and Slovakia.

18. On 19 April 2023, The European Commission declared a decision to the Court of Justice of the European Union that Slovakia failed to solve the issue of segregation of Roma children in education.[xvii]

19. In Slovakia, Roma children are often discriminated against and segregated. Slovakia tends to send Rome children to special schools for children with mild mental disabilities or segregate them in separate classes or schools.[xviii]

20. While 99% of Slovak children aged between 6 and 15 attend compulsory school, only 65% of Roma children of the same age attend a school. [xix] Regarding the Roma survey 2021, there has been a 5% increase in school attendance among Roma children since 2016.[xx]

21. The infringement policy started in 2015, and the European Commission reasoned opinion in 2019. Since then, Slovakia has implemented several legislative reforms, strategies, and action plans to promote Roma inclusion in education.[xxi]

22. However, after carefully reviewing those steps and observing the current situation, the Commission found that the reforms implemented thus far are inadequate.[xxii]

23. More than half of Roma children in compulsory schools aged 6-15 (52%) are segregated in Europe. However, segregation is most common in Slovakia (65 %). It is more likely in Slovakia to impose discriminative and poor quality of education, which is a human rights violation in education.[xxiii]

24. The interviewee, a Slovak student studying abroad, indicated that Roma children and children with disabilities often lack the necessary assistance. He has ADHD, for example, but I didn't get much assistance for his learning disability. The situation is a bit facilitated with extra time on exams and the teacher giving you leniency, but the system, in general, is not as friendly to people who do not fit the norm.[xxiv]

25. He also said that Roma people have their language and are not integrated into Slovak-based education. Society tends to discriminate against them. The government doesn't put enough effort and resources into teaching them the Slovak language.[xxv]

26. Furthermore, Roma people are dealing with inequality. It is tough for them to get into jobs and regular school. Racism plays a huge role. Many people don't want their children to sit with Roma children at school.[xxvi]

27. Nearly half of the Roma settlements are located on the outskirts of a village or town, 34% inside a village or city and 18% outside of a village.[xxvii]

28. More than half of all students in the lowest social quartile are low performers in Slovakia (51.9% vs. 36.4% in the EU). The indicator of isolation of disadvantaged students from high achievers, at 0.76, is among the highest in the EU, indicating that low-income kids are unlikely to be in the same school as high-achieving students, which may impact their performance. Socioeconomic segregation in schools puts social cohesiveness at risk and can amplify inequities by putting disadvantaged kids at risk of falling behind.[xxviii]

29. At about 20% of primary school students, the proportion of students with special educational needs is among the highest in Europe. 5.9% of these students are educated in particular courses or schools (EU 1.6%). In certain districts in eastern Slovakia with a high Roma population, the proportion of primary school students enrolled in special schools for children with intellectual disabilities surpasses 10%.[xxix]

30. In primary and secondary school, the attendance rates are the same for girls and boys. Girls share the most significant rate from tertiary school, with 62.1%. In addition, the country's female tertiary and doctoral graduates are high.[xxx]

31. Gender equality in attending education is achieved in the country. Femail attendance to higher education is slightly higher in the country.

IV. Dissatisfaction of the Students

32. Nearly 17% of students from Slovakia are enrolled in a university in another country, whereas the average rate in OECD is less than 3%. This makes Slovakia the second

highest regarding choosing to study university abroad.[xxxi]

33. In 2020, a study made by the Slovak Sociological Institute found that nearly 40% of students return to Slovakia after two years by the end of their studies. More than that, the ratio to produce becomes 50-50.[xxxii]

34. The Bratislava-based Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) survey found that more than 60% of university graduates are considering leaving the country. There are four factors behind why young people of Slovakia think leaving the country.[xxxiii]

35. In addition to socioeconomic issues such as living standards and job opportunities, respondents cite "dysfunctional state and public institutions" (corruption and shortcomings in the social and healthcare systems), educational system weaknesses, and "socio-cultural backwardness" (conservatism, nepotism, xenophobia) as crucial factors explaining human capital flight.[xxxiv]

36. The interviewee, a Slovak student studying abroad, indicated that communication in education is not open enough to improve teaching in Slovakia. There is a lot of respect and obedience towards authority, like teachers. Therefore, students don't ask questions because they fear being wrong.[xxxv]

37. Many assignments where he studies are open to students' interpretation, and we can be creative and do what we believe is right. In Slovakia, we have to follow exact and rigid instructions for almost all schoolwork.[xxxvi]

38. The main reason why youngsters want to study and be employed abroad is the poor economic conditions. The poorer eastern Slovakia has a 13% - up to 20% unemployment rate among youth, and this region provides the most young Slovak immigrants.[xxxvii]

39. Slovakia has the third-lowest GDP per capita in the EU, with 30% lower than the average. As a Eurozone country since 2009, Slovakia's prices are only 10% lower than the average, but it is still expensive compared to its economy for young people. Most young people study and live abroad to achieve better economic standards.[xxxviii]

40. The interviewee indicated that the cost of living in Slovakia is the same as in other European countries, but the salaries are often too low to cover the expenses. Slovakia also has a lot of political corruption, and young people mostly don't have much faith in the nation's future. People are looking for better living standards, and other European

Countries are more attractive for studying and settling down. So young people prefer studying and living abroad.[xxxix]

41. There is a difference in economic situation between the regions. I am from the western part of Slovakia, the capital, to be specific. It is wealthier than other parts. In the West, there are more job opportunities, the salaries are higher, and, of course, more wealth allows for better education, too, so people from the East move to the capital for better conditions.[xl]

42. Moreover, he says that populism is widespread in Slovak politics, so people tend to distrust the government and, by extension, various institutions. This created a sense of instability and mistrust in young people for their future.[xli]

V. Weak Performance of the Students

43. The Slovak education system is relatively complex, with many stakeholders and young people. The student population in 2021 is 856,288 persons, including kindergartens and universities. Half of this number were primary school students.[xlii]

44. Compared to other European Countries, education ranked among the lowest countries in terms of surveys and from various complex data. By many measures, the Slovak education system performed the weakest among Central and Eastern European countries.[xliii]

45. Slovakia has the lowest number of attendance to preschool education in the EU. 78.2% of children age four or more engage in preschool in Slovakia. Preschool has significance in improving school performance at the later stages of schools.[xliv]

46. Compared to the OECD countries, Slovakia was among the lowest concerning literacy and scientific knowledge in PISA testing in 2018. However, in mathematics, Slovakia was closer to the average. Girls outperformed boys in reading, maths, and science scores.[xlv]

47. Socio-economic status makes an 18% difference in reading performance in the Slovak Republic (OECD average). The difference between socioeconomically advantaged students and disadvantaged ones is 106 points.[xlvi]

48. Pisa resting results could be found from 2003 for Slovakia. From 2003 to 2009, the testing results were stable. However, since 2009, the results of three indicators of the testing, including reading, maths, and science, have decreased significantly.[xlvii]

49. According to the interview, education is based on memorising. Students don't learn adequately, but in the end, they pass the standard tests by memorising. That's very different compared to many Western countries. There is also little to no focus on developing critical thinking and creativity.[xlviii]

VI. **Recommendations**

50. Broken Chalk appreciates Slovakia's efforts in working for inclusive education and encourages the country to keep up with good practices.

51. Broken Chalk recommends Slovakia provide the necessary Slovak language training to the Roma children.

52. Broken Chalk recommends launching comprehensive community-wide awareness-raising initiatives and programmes emphasising the critical relevance of education, with a focus on Roma children's enrolment. These efforts should break down any existing stereotypes or impediments to Roma children's access to school by highlighting the transforming influence of education on individual lives and social growth. Community leaders, educators, parents, and other stakeholders should work together to create an environment favourable to learning and supportive of all student's educational endeavours equally, ensuring that minorities have equal access to and benefit from the educational system.

53. The Roma children who can't access education should be noticed. Broken Chalk recommends introducing grassroots policies in remote areas that face limitations in terms of access. By doing so, it becomes possible to work directly with social leaders and bring about education tailored to the specific needs and demands of the population. This approach will help promote a higher quality of education that considers the new generations' economic and social requirements in various social spectrums, distinct from those of urban areas.

54. Ongoing efforts and innovations are required to tackle and alleviate any socio-cultural, economic, or logistical difficulties that disproportionately hinder Roma children's educational involvement and attainment.

55. Broken Chalk recommends Slovakia create awareness among Slovak people to diminish discrimination at a societal level. By doing this, the cultural differences between school children may be seen more positively.

56. Broken Chalk recommends that policies and programs be established nationwide to support students with special needs better. These policies should provide individually planned and systematically monitored teaching procedures, as well as equipment and materials specifically adapted to cater to the unique requirements of the students.

57. Schools in rural areas require more financial support to give children equal opportunities for education and jobs. The budget education policy that allocates the number of children should be reformed. Broken Chalk suggests Slovakia reach rural areas with its educational budget to achieve a better quality of education in schools with fewer students.

58. Broken Chalk recommends Slovakia find out the main reason behind the brain drain. Slovakia should change its educational system significantly to stop the brain drain.

59. Broken Chalk recommends educational institutions reform to create a more accessible environment for students to express themselves and their needs. Traditions of the teaching methods and curriculums should be transitioned to meet contemporary standards.

60. Broken Chalk recommends that the economic disparities between regions should be diminished for students to have more satisfaction in learning opportunities.

61. The Bratislava region is rich in education and job market compared to others. The gap in educational quality and job opportunities for the young should decrease from area to area.

62. More educational funds should be allocated to Eastern Slovakia to support young people's educational and economic expectations to create greater hope and satisfaction from living standards.

63. The university students should be given better living standards and trust in government institutions by diminishing corruption.

64. The free and critical thinking should be adopted in learning methods to improve students' performance.

65. Broken Chalk recommends developing and deploying an innovative, flexible programme with learning opportunities. Collaboration with multiple partners is critical to this programme, combining resources, insights, and skills to create meaningful and successful educational experiences. These collaborations allow for a holistic and synergistic approach to education, incorporating new methodologies, local circumstances, and values to build resilient, sustainable, and culturally sensitive learning environments.

66. The measures should be taken to eliminate socio-economic status that creates differences in learning and performance among students.

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BROKEN CHALK

Kingsfordweg 151, 1043 GR
Amsterdam, Netherlands
+31685639758 | info@brokenchalk.org | www.brokenchalk.org
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