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Impact of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Lockdown on Roma Pupils in Slovenia

The article analyses the impact of remote learning during the Covid-19 lockdown on Roma pupils in Slovenia. Roma are one of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in Slovenia. Most of them record poor inclusion and performance in education, which is why the suspension of regular school activities is likely to have much broader negative consequences for these pupils. Based on the outcomes of the study that included surveys among Roma assistants and teachers, the article analyses the technical conditions available to Roma pupils for remote learning during lockdown, the establishment of contact between teachers and Roma pupils in such period, and the collaboration of Roma pupils and their parents with schools. The article also provides a comparative perspective of the position of Roma and other pupils and draws attention to the possible long-term consequences of remote learning for Roma pupils.

Keywords: Roma, Covid-19, education, remote learning, Slovenia.

Vpliv izobraževanja na daljavo v obdobju karantene zaradi covid-19 na romske učence v Sloveniji

Članek analizira vpliv izobraževanja na daljavo v obdobju karantene zaradi covid-19 na romske učence v Sloveniji. Romi so ena najbolj marginaliziranih in ranljivih skupin prebivalstva v Sloveniji. Na področju izobraževanja večina beleži slabo vključenost in uspešnost. Zato ima lahko prekinitev rednih šolskih dejavnosti za te učence še precej širše negativne posledice. S pomočjo rezultatov raziskave, ki je vključevala ankete z romskimi pomočniki in učitelji, članek analizira tehnične pogoje, ki so jih imeli na voljo romski učenci za učenje na daljavo v času karantene, načine vzpostavljanja stikov med učitelji in romskimi učenci v tem obdobju ter sodelovanje romskih učencev in njihovih staršev s šolami. Članek mestoma izpostavlja primerjalno perspektivo položaja romskih in ostalih učencev ter opozarja na možne dolgoročne posledice izobraževanja na daljavo za Rome.

Ključne besede: Romi, covid-19, izobraževanje, izobraževanje na daljavo, Slovenija.

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1. Introduction

Being one of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in Slovenia and Europe alike, Roma encounter considerable difficulties in terms of education. Practice and research show lower inclusion and poorer performance of Roma children in the educational system (Save the Children 2001, 20; Clavería & Alonso 2003; Krek & Vogrinc, 2005; Stoica & Wamsiedel, 2012; 16; Baucal et al. 2005; Vonta et al. 2011; Jazbec et al. 2013; Peček et al. 2013). School attendance of Roma pupils is often irregular, the drop-out rate is extremely high, and few individuals continue schooling after completing compulsory education. The reasons for such are several and intertwining, one of them being the poor socio-economic status of many Roma families and the unfavourable living conditions in the environment in which they live. Research (Coleman et al. 1966; Baker et al. 2002; Peček et al. 2006; EREBUS International 2005; Selcuk 2005; OECD 2001, 2004, 2007, 2011) shows that pupils who come from socio-economically weaker families and live in less stimulating environments achieve poorer learning outcomes than others, are less involved in the educational process, and stop attending school earlier. Another important factor is the pre-school socialisation of Roma children, which usually takes place in a different cultural environment than the pre-school socialisation of other children (Smith, 1997). Also, a considerable share of Roma children is not included in formal forms of pre-school education. When entering school, Roma children often have poor command of the language of instruction or none at all, which is perceived in pedagogical circles as a key cause of Roma children's failure at school (Réger 1999; Tancer 1994, 75–76; Vonta et al. 2011, 76). Due to these and other factors, the school results of Roma children are often well below the average results of their non-Roma peers (e.g. Peček et al. 2013, 77), the share of Roma children enrolled in schools with a special programme is higher compared to the share of other children,¹ and Roma children are less likely to successfully complete primary school and even less likely to continue schooling at higher levels. The Slovenian school system envisages various forms of additional assistance by which teachers and Roma assistants help Roma children with school work and integration into the educational system,² but school work alone is not enough to substantially improve the situation.

Over the past few decades, a significant number of projects concerning work with Roma children outside school, especially in Roma settlements, has been implemented in Slovenia. Such activities complement school work and help to remove the perceived obstacles and deficits of Roma children in education. However, the problem is that these activities do not take place on a regular basis but are rather implemented for shorter periods of project funding. Both teachers and project operators as well as other stakeholders involved in the process of Roma education report that any major interruption of regular (school or project) activities with Roma children pushes this population backwards, sometimes almost

back to the starting position. One such interruption was lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools were closed and teaching and learning shifted to virtual learning environments.³

The purpose of the article is to explore the following questions: How did this shift affect Roma pupils, who often live in remote settlements, separate from the rest of the population, in homes without computers and internet access, some even without electricity? How did it affect the role of Roma parents, who were suddenly supposed to help educate their children at home, while they themselves have low level of education or no education at all and are often even (at least computer) illiterate? How did schools establish contact with Roma pupils and their families, with many of whom they had no (regular) contact even before the pandemic? Did Roma pupils participate in education at all or did their education stop during lockdown? Did Covid-19 lockdown increase inequalities between Roma and other (non-Roma) pupils in terms of education?

Further on in the article, the research methodology is described, followed by the presentation of results by individual thematic sections. In the first section, we will look at how well Roma children were provided with computers and other technical equipment they needed for remote learning during lockdown, and how well they knew how to use such. In the second section, we will check whether and in what way teachers were able to establish contact with Roma pupils and, if not, why not. In the third section, we will delve into the actual participation of Roma pupils in the lessons during lockdown, to which we will add a comparison with other children. The fourth section will address the involvement of Roma parents in the schooling of their children during lockdown. In the fifth section, we will discuss the possible consequences of remote learning for Roma pupils and the possible impact of such learning format on the increasing inequality between Roma and other pupils.

2. Methodology

The research carried out between June and September 2020 included online surveys among primary school teachers and Roma assistants. The online survey among Roma assistants and the online survey among teachers working in schools with Roma assistants were carried out under the Together for Knowledge project run by the Centre for School and Outdoor Education.⁴ The online survey among teachers in schools without Roma assistants was conducted within the research programme of the Institute for Ethnic Studies.⁵

In all cases, the open source application IKA was used for online surveying. Roma assistants were addressed directly by e-mail, while teachers were addressed indirectly through the school principals, to whom we sent an e-mail requesting to forward to the teachers the invitation to participate and the link to the online survey.

The online survey for Roma assistants⁶ involved 23 Roma assistants working in 27 primary schools in different regions of Slovenia, namely 7 in Pomurje, 3 in Podravje, 1 in Central Slovenia, and 12 in Southeast Slovenia. The online survey for teachers in schools with Roma assistants involved 297 teachers from 25 primary schools:⁷ 37 % from Pomurje, 7 % from Podravje, 9 % from Central Slovenia, and 46 % from Southeast Slovenia. Among them, 43 % were class teachers, 42 % were subject teachers, and 15 % performed other technical and/or managerial work (principals, assistant principals, specialist teachers, counsellors, etc.). The online survey for teachers in schools without Roma assistants included 90 teachers from 18 primary schools: 20 % from Pomurje, 28 % from Podravje, 13 % from Central Slovenia, 15 % from Posavje, and 24 % from Southeast Slovenia. Among them, 33 % were class teachers, 38 % were subject teachers, and 29 % performed other technical and/or managerial work.

3. Technical Requirements for Remote Work and Learning of Roma Pupils

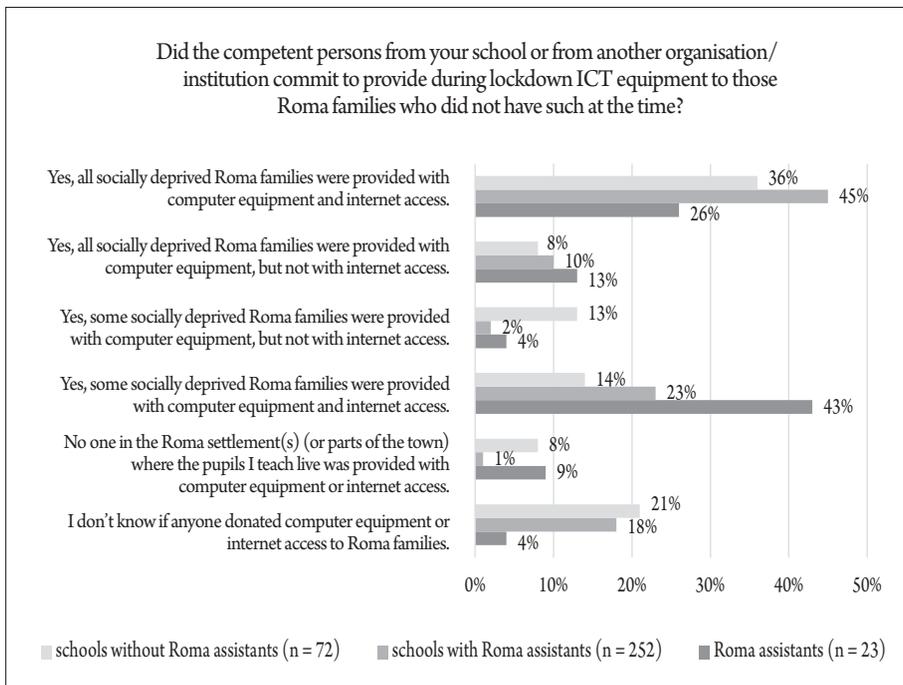
During lockdown, education moved from classrooms to an online environment. Specific prerequisites (including ICT⁸ equipment, internet access and computer skills) were needed for the successful implementation of such remote learning. As noted by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in a publication on OSCE States responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (OSCE ODIHR 2020, 144), some Roma pupils lacked the minimum requirements for remote learning (e.g. quiet room, computer access, and internet connections).

The purpose of the research was to explore how many Roma children in Slovenia had the ICT equipment needed to participate in remote learning at the beginning of lockdown. Answers to this question were sought from Roma assistants, who are most in contact with Roma pupils and often know their home situation better than teachers. The results show that the situation varied from settlement to settlement. In some urban areas, virtually all Roma children had computer equipment and internet access. In most cases elsewhere in Slovenia, however, the situation was quite different. For about a third of the schools where Roma assistants work, the latter estimate that 80–95 % of Roma pupils did not have adequate computer equipment and/or internet access at the beginning of lockdown. In other schools, this share ranged between 20 and 70 %. Some Roma families had at least mobile phones with more or less functioning internet access, but this was usually not sufficient for the smooth participation of Roma children in remote learning.

Given the poor socio-economic status of many Roma families, there were institutions, associations, companies or individuals in practically every community who helped provide computer and communication equipment for Roma families who were unable to do so on their own. In this way, after some time,

most (but not all) Roma families had the technical equipment necessary for the children to participate in remote learning (Chart 1). Although the partial report of the National Education Institute titled *Analysis of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Epidemic in Slovenia* states that during the epidemic the Ministry of Education and Sport, in cooperation with the Education Institute, provided “all pupils who did not have access to a computer” with computers and other equipment (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020, 10), Roma assistants report that even at the end of lockdown, in at least six Roma settlements there were Roma families without the necessary technical equipment and/or internet access.

Chart 1: Shares of Roma families equipped with ICT by schools or other institutions during lockdown

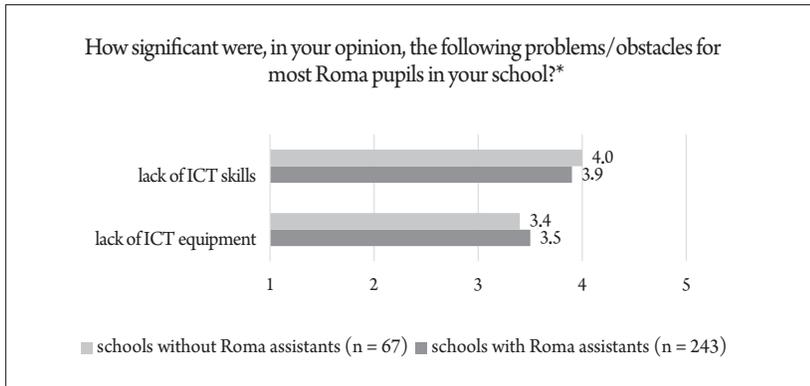


Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants, among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants, and among Roma assistants.

Even if families had been given the necessary equipment, this did not solve all the problems related to participation in remote learning. Many Roma pupils and their parents were not skilled in using the equipment provided. On average, teachers described the lack of ICT skills among Roma pupils as a big problem (Chart 2). In fact, also the Advocate of the Principle of Equality draws attention to the inaccessibility of the necessary ICT equipment and the lack of ICT skills among Slovenian children. In his recommendation from August 2020, he

mentions the above problems in the context of the finding that not all pupils in Slovenia – especially not those from vulnerable groups, such as Roma – had equal opportunities to obtain education during the period of remote learning (Advocate of the Principle of Equality 2020, 1–3).

Chart 2: ICT related problems/obstacles for Roma pupils



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

*1 = no problem at all, 2 = small problem, 3 = medium problem, 4 = big problem, 5 = very big problem.

Also under some open-ended questions, teachers repeatedly highlighted in surveys the lack of skills for using computers and various online communication tools among Roma pupils:

They lack ICT skills – they have extremely powerful smartphones, but they don't know how to use them as learning tools.

Pupils don't know how (don't want) to use a computer or a tablet. Most of their communication takes place on smartphones.

The level of digital literacy is very low.

Pupils didn't know how to sign in to online classrooms, they didn't know how to send emails.

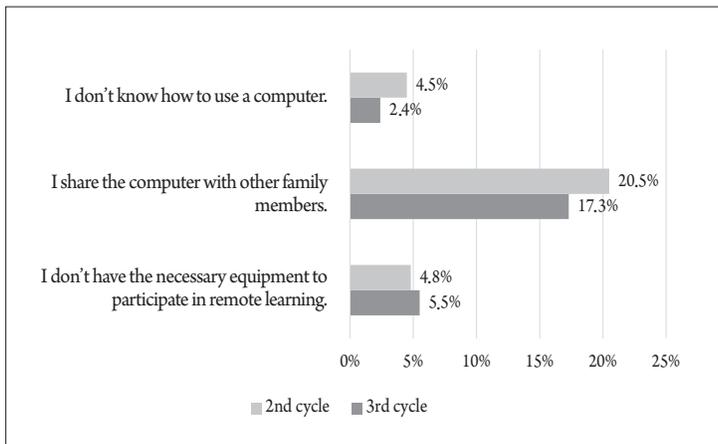
They were given tablets but didn't know how to use them. No one in the family knew how to help them.

The lack of appropriate ICT equipment and the lack of skills for ICT use were identified as a problem also among the wider population of pupils in Slovenia, not only among Roma. In the Analysis of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Epidemic in Slovenia carried out by the National Education Institute on a broad

sample of Slovenian pupils, students, teachers and principals during the period of remote learning,⁹ pupils of the 2nd and 3rd educational cycle reported to have also encountered the following difficulties during remote learning (Chart 3):

- I don't have the necessary equipment to participate in remote learning (computer, headphones, printer, internet connection, etc.);
- I share the computer with other family members, so I can rarely use it;
- I don't know how to use a computer (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020, 57).

Chart 3: Problems encountered by pupils of the 2nd and 3rd educational cycle during remote learning*



Source: Rupnik Vec et al. (2020, 57).

* The numbers for these replies are as follows (2nd and 3rd cycle, respectively): a) I don't know how to use a computer: 392 and 169; b) I share the computer with other family members: 1,799 and 1,218; c) I don't have the necessary equipment to participate in remote learning: 423 and 386 (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020, 57).

In our online survey, in addition to the lack of ICT equipment and lack of ICT skills, teachers highlighted some other technical obstacles that made it difficult or impossible for Roma pupils to participate in remote learning, such as the fact that some Roma families did not have electricity, many Roma children did not have adequate room for work or study, and some did not have the necessary school supplies.

Living conditions: they don't have electricity, they all stay together in one room where they can't study and work for school. Their parents can't help them, as they are mostly illiterate (although quite a few pupils practice home schooling!?).

The problem with one of my pupils was that there were several children who used only one phone. They also didn't have school supplies (we even had to send them coloured pencils by post).

4. Establishing Contacts with Roma Pupils

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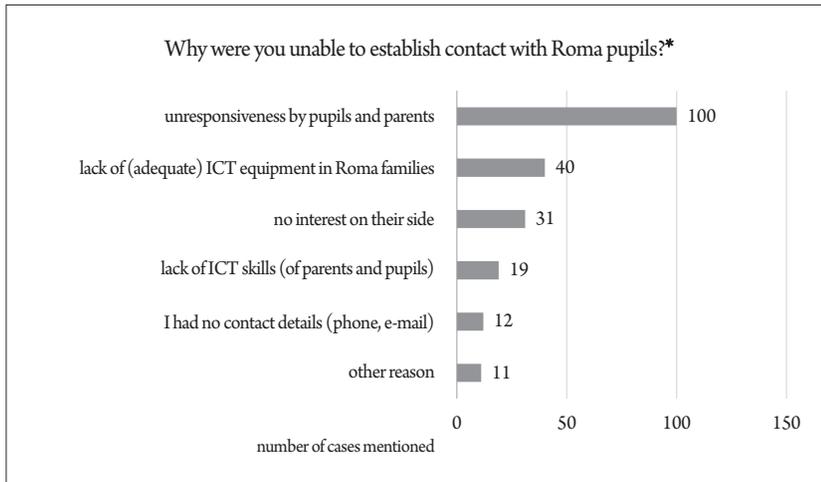
In the publication *Education in the Republic of Slovenia in Circumstances Related to Covid-19*, the authors state that “in conducting remote learning [...] it is necessary to make sure that we reach all or as many pupils and students as possible” (Kustec et al. 2020, 14). According to teachers in our survey, this was not the case during lockdown – as many as 53 %¹⁰ of teachers could not establish contact with all their pupils. Most teachers spoke of just one or two pupils, but some reported much higher numbers, up to 30 (in one case as many as 40) pupils. Among the latter, Roma pupils prevailed. As many as 90 % of teachers who were unable to make contact with all their pupils responded that also (or mostly) Roma pupils were out of reach.

We asked the teachers who were unable to establish contact with (individual) Roma pupils why contact could not be established. In the survey, we included an open-ended question to which they were free to answer as they wished. We categorised their answers into six groups, as shown by Chart 4. All teachers said that failure to establish communication had to do with the Roma community. None of them had any doubt as to whether they, on their part, had done everything possible to make contact. The most common reason given by teachers for not establishing contact was the unresponsiveness of Roma parents and pupils. The vast majority of teachers pointed out that Roma parents did not answer the phone, did not answer e-mails, and many did not even respond to communication by post. 12 teachers reported that they did not have (accurate) contact details of Roma families (neither phone numbers nor e-mails). Other teachers also mentioned that Roma parents' phone numbers were often out of reach: “The phone numbers they gave us in class were not available because both Roma pupils and their parents often change their phone numbers.” Another frequent reason for not establishing contact was the lack of adequate ICT equipment among Roma families. Some teachers said that even after receiving a computer or a tablet, some Roma families could not use them because they did not have adequate electricity or a strong enough internet connection. Some teachers associated the unresponsiveness of Roma parents and pupils with the lack of skills to use a computer and the internet, some with illiteracy or lack of education of the parents (did not know how to read instructions or did not understand them), while most teachers attributed the unresponsiveness of Roma parents and children to their lack of interest in education and school work.

About three quarters of the teachers who established contact with Roma pupils reported that their way of communicating with Roma pupils differed from the way they communicated with other pupils. They communicated with Roma pupils (and their parents) much more frequently by phone. They called them or texted them several times. In this way, they encouraged them to learn and do their homework as, according to some teachers, Roma pupils needed more encouragement to do at least part of what the teachers expected of them. They also

often communicated with them via Facebook and Messenger. Many teachers prepared special printed materials for Roma pupils, which were sent to them by post or handed over to Roma assistants, social workers, specialist teachers, or employees of various organisations helping Roma in Roma settlements, who passed them on to Roma pupils (and later back to teachers). Some teachers also personally visited Roma pupils in their homes to deliver materials and instructions for work.

Chart 4: Reasons for failure to establish contact between teachers and Roma pupils



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

* Showing aggregate replies of teachers from primary schools with Roma assistants and primary schools without Roma assistants; n = 169.

The role of Roma assistants proved to be very important during lockdown. They represented an important link between Roma pupils and the school. About half (49 %) of teachers reported that their school turned to a Roma assistant more often than before to help establish and maintain contact with Roma pupils during lockdown. Roma assistants' perception was similar: 78 % of them estimated that schools sought their help in establishing contact and communicating with Roma pupils more often than before lockdown. Quite a few teachers wrote that without Roma assistants, many Roma pupils would not have been reached during lockdown at all, or that without the support and encouragement of Roma assistants, many Roma pupils would probably not have participated in remote learning at all. Others felt that, without Roma assistants, the school would have had to make much greater effort to establish contact with Roma pupils and Roma pupils would not have done as many assignments and participated in lessons equally, and consequently their grades would have been worse.

5. Roma Pupils' Participation in Remote Learning during Lockdown

One of the aims of the surveys was to explore Roma pupils' responsiveness and participation in remote learning during lockdown, also in comparison with other pupils. Teachers were therefore asked to rate selected statements related to the above, separately for Roma pupils and other pupils.

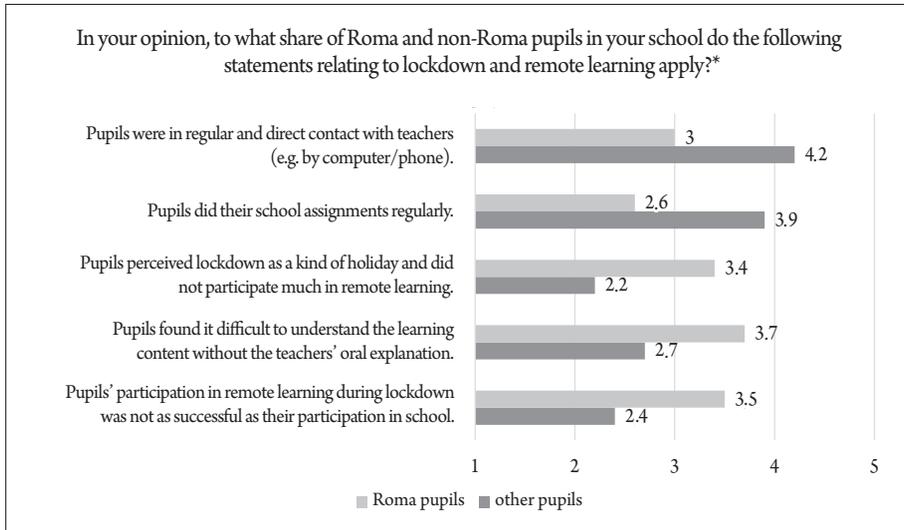
A comparison between the replies of teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and teachers in primary school without Roma assistants generally presents a very similar picture for both types of schools (Charts 5 and 6). The main difference is that the range between the average values of the replies relating to individual statements for Roma and for other pupils is greater in primary schools without Roma assistants. In the latter group, Roma pupils seem to be slightly more disadvantaged compared to other pupils than in primary schools with Roma assistants. This might be attributed to the smaller sample of teachers of primary schools without Roma assistants; likewise, the slightly better situation of Roma pupils in primary schools with Roma assistants might be due to the efforts that Roma assistants make to help them.

About half of Roma pupils from both groups of primary schools were in regular contact with teachers during lockdown. The share of other pupils was much higher, as the vast majority thereof (the average value is 4.2 for both groups of schools) were in regular and direct contact with teachers. It is also interesting to note that nearly half (average value 2.6) of Roma pupils from primary schools with Roma assistants were in contact with the school only through Roma assistants.¹¹ The situation is somewhat worse for both Roma and other pupils when it comes to regular school assignments. According to the respondents, the average share of Roma pupils in both groups of primary schools is somewhere between small and a half, while the majority of other pupils (the average is 3.9 in both groups of primary schools) performed their school assignments regularly.

According to teachers from both groups of schools, more than half of Roma pupils perceived lockdown as a kind of holiday and did not participate much in remote learning. Given the above statement that the vast majority of other pupils were in regular and direct contact with teachers, it is not surprising that only a small share of other children felt remote learning as a holiday.

It turned out that most Roma pupils found it difficult to understand the learning content without the teachers' oral explanation. In such regard, the share of other pupils was also relatively high – just under half. Similarly, the teachers estimated that for the vast majority of Roma pupils their participation in remote learning was not as successful as their participation in school. With non-Roma pupils this was the case for less than half of them.

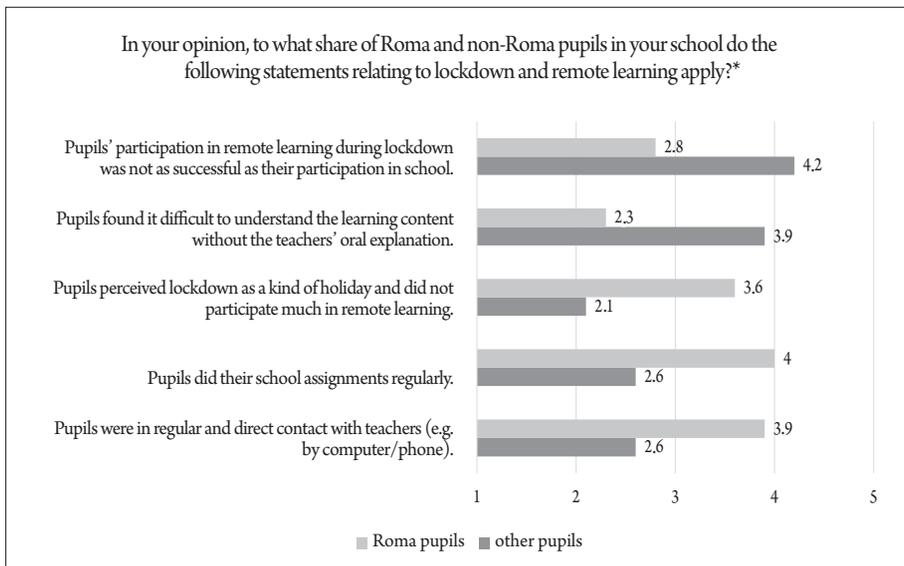
Chart 5: Responsiveness and participation of pupils of primary schools with Roma assistants in remote learning during lockdown



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants.

*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 233.

Chart 6: Responsiveness and participation of pupils of primary schools without Roma assistants in remote learning during lockdown



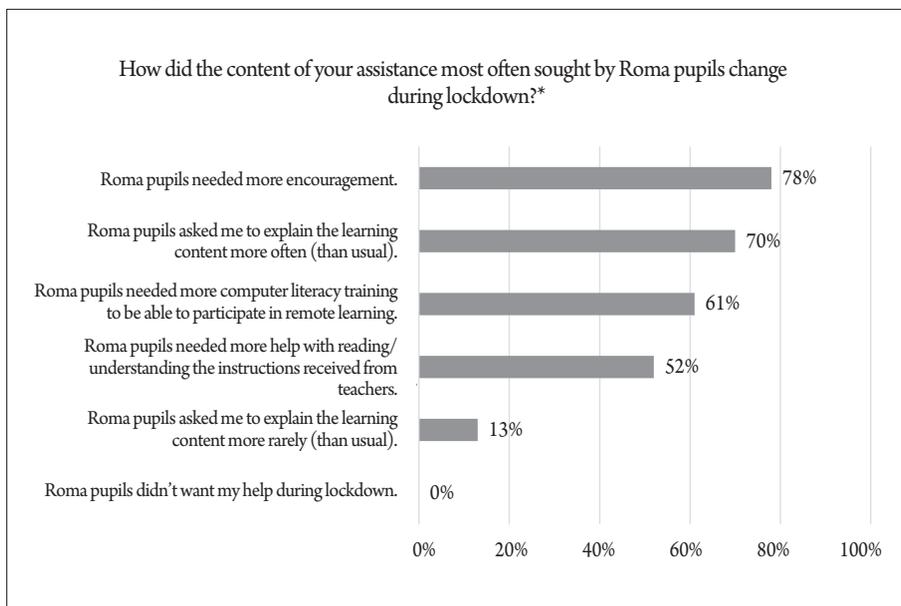
Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 63.

Lower participation, greater unresponsiveness and irregular contact with teachers, as well as difficulties in understanding the learning content among Roma pupils may also be the result of less favourable factors or circumstances, more specifically problems and obstacles that Roma pupils encounter more often than their non-Roma peers. Among such circumstances, the article has already highlighted the lack of ICT equipment and the lack of ICT skills.

In addition to the above, teachers from both groups of primary schools pointed to the following problems and obstacles which they considered to be a medium or big problem for Roma pupils in remote learning: low learning motivation, unstimulating home environment, and lack of understanding of the learning content due to lack of knowledge of individual subjects. The lack of possibility of socialising and cooperating with classmates and the lack of understanding instructions and learning content due to the lack of knowledge of the Slovenian language were also perceived as small to medium problems. Besides the mentioned factors, teachers further reported low-educated or even illiterate parents and (consequently) the lack of their help, support and motivation for their children in remote learning, which is closely related to parents' unresponsiveness to teachers' communication. Considering all the above problems and obstacles, teachers from both groups of schools believe that the position of Roma pupils in the Southeast is less favourable compared to Roma pupils in Northeast Slovenia.

Chart 7: Changes in the content of assistance provided by Roma assistants during lockdown



Source: aggregate data from the survey among Roma assistants.

* Multiple answers possible; n = 23.

As mentioned above, nearly half of Roma children in primary schools with Roma assistants maintained contact with the school only through Roma assistants. When asked how the content of their assistance that Roma pupils most often sought during lockdown changed, Roma assistants most often replied that Roma children needed more encouragement for work (Chart 7). As many as three-quarters of circled this answer, which is certainly a reflection of the lack of encouragement and support in the home environment in the changed circumstances of education. Only a slightly smaller share of Roma assistants answered that Roma pupils turned to them more often than before lockdown to help them understand the learning content. Due to aforementioned problems with the lack of ICT skills of Roma pupils, many assistants (61 %) answered that these pupils needed more computer literacy training to be able to participate in remote learning. A good half of the assistants also agreed that the Roma pupils needed more help with the instructions received from teachers.

6. Collaboration of Roma Parents

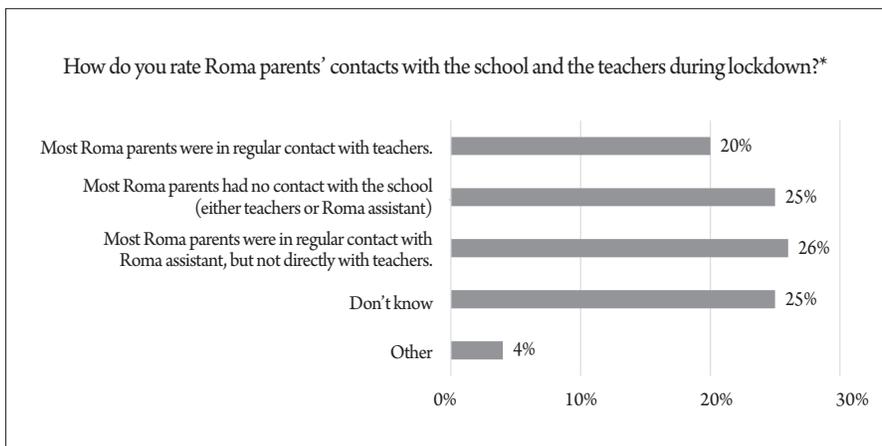
The role of parents in the education of children is already significant in normal circumstances when children actually go to school, and gains further importance in remote learning. The school provides, in principle, equal conditions for all pupils, while remote learning is likely to increase the inequalities between them due to the unequal circumstances in which pupils live. Roma pupils in Slovenia often come from an environment that is quite unstimulating when it comes to education.¹² They mostly live in what are known as Roma settlements which, according to Zupančič (2015, 75), are “the reason for both personal and collective (local community, neighbourhood) marginalisation and exclusion”, while living in these environments “is considered one of the main reasons for failure to integrate into the educational system”. The material standing of Roma families living in such settlements is usually extremely poor, and the lack of encouragement from the environment further contributes to the low level of education and high unemployment of members of the Roma community.

Such a home environment cannot equally replace the school environment, nor can it offer pupils equal opportunities for remote learning compared to other pupils living in a more supportive home environment. Research shows that longer absences from school (either during the summer holidays or in the case of home schooling) have more negative effects on pupils from socio-economically weaker families (Di Pietro et al. 2020, 12–19; Raudenbush & Eschmann 2015). The role of parents is crucial here, as they are usually the ones who provide children with both tangible (digital equipment, adequate room, nutrition) and intangible (assistance in learning and understanding the learning content, emotional support and encouragement) learning conditions.

This part of the article will focus on the role of parents in providing intangible conditions for home schooling, especially in terms of encouragement to study, organisation of school work, interpretation of instructions and learning content, assistance in solving tasks and communicating with teachers. A survey conducted among parents of primary school children by the Association of Parents' Councils of Slovenia (Meden 2020, 16–17) shows that parents of children in the first few grades spent an average of 3–4 hours a day on remote learning, while parents of ninth-graders spent 2 hours a day. This time was spent on providing materials from e-mails, printing materials, explaining instructions, checking the correctness of home assignments, checking what was learned, helping to find information and helping to deliver the assignments to teachers. In doing so, parents encountered many problems, among which they most often pointed out the difficulties in communicating with the school or teachers in terms of clarity of instructions or clarity of communication in general. They reported that communication was too one-way, merely written, vague (Meden 2020, 17). We can assume that these problems were even greater for Roma parents, who often had neither access to ICT nor the skills to use it, and some of them were even illiterate. In addition, a significant share of Roma parents had not been used to cooperating with the school and the teachers even before lockdown.

In the survey among teachers in schools with Roma assistants, a quarter of the 233 respondents estimated that during lockdown most Roma parents were not in contact with the school. A quarter of teachers answered that Roma parents were mostly in regular contact with the Roma assistant, but not with the teachers. Only a fifth of teachers said that Roma parents were in regular contact with teachers (Chart 8).

Chart 8: Roma parents' contacts with the school/teachers during lockdown



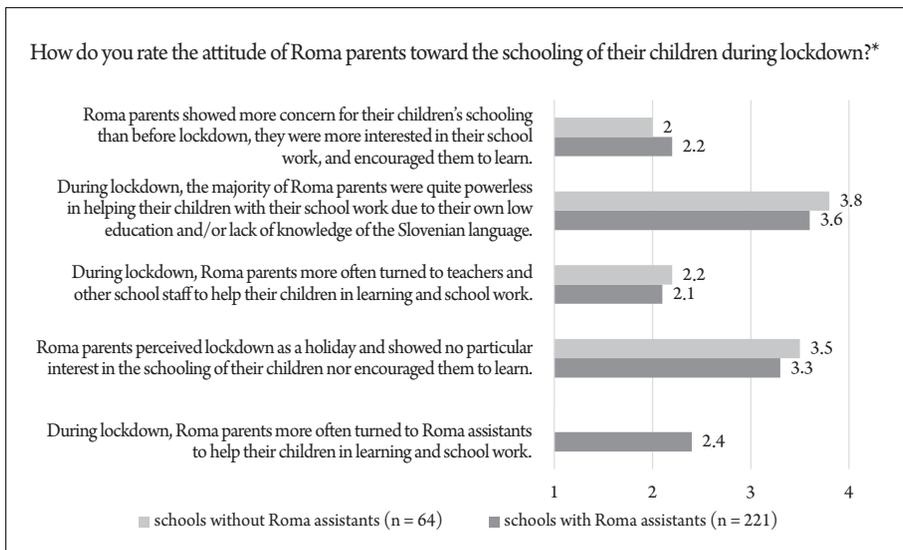
Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants.

*n = 233.

Teachers who chose the answer Other added that Roma parents were only occasionally in contact with teachers, Roma assistants or specialist teachers, or that only a part of Roma parents, but not the majority, were in contact with the school.

The teachers were asked if they had noticed any changes in the collaboration of Roma parents with the school during lockdown compared to the period before lockdown. The largest share (43 %) of teachers in schools with Roma assistants reported that collaboration remained the same as before lockdown. Just over a tenth noticed an improvement, and about a fifth noticed a deterioration. In such regard, another question arises, namely what was the collaboration of Roma parents before lockdown. This question was not posed to the teachers, but some of them nevertheless wrote that there was no collaboration before or during lockdown. The responses of teachers in schools without Roma assistants were very similar.

Chart 9: Roma parents' attitude toward the schooling of their children during lockdown



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

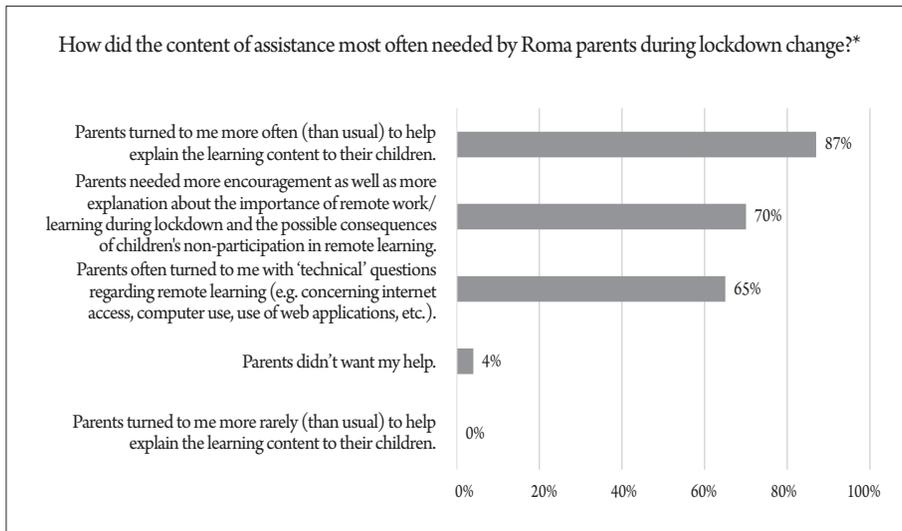
*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all.

The survey also included some statements in relation to which teachers were asked to assess the share of Roma parents for whom these statements apply (Chart 9). The prevailing opinion among teachers was that the majority of Roma parents were quite powerless in helping their children with their school work during lockdown due to their own low education and/or lack of knowledge of the Slovenian language. They also estimated that most Roma parents experienced

lockdown more as a holiday and not as serious work, they were not interested in their children's school assignments, and did not encourage them to learn. Only a small share of Roma parents showed, according to teacher's estimates, more concern for their children's schooling than before lockdown, they were more interested in their school work, and encouraged them to learn. A similarly small share of Roma parents more often turned to teachers or other school professionals to help their children learn and do school assignments. The share of Roma parents who more often turned to Roma assistants for help was slightly higher.

Roma assistants, too, perceived that parents turned to them for help and information more often during lockdown (Chart 10). The majority (87 %) of Roma assistants reported more frequent requests from Roma parents for help in explaining the learning content that their children had to process. Many (70 %) Roma assistants reported that during lockdown Roma parents needed more encouragement as well as more explanation about the importance of remote work/learning and the possible consequences of children's non-participation in remote learning. A significant share (65 %) of Roma assistants also received purely technical questions from Roma parents regarding remote learning (e.g. concerning internet access, computer use, use of web applications, etc.).

Chart 10: Changes in the content of assistance provided by Roma assistants to Roma parents



Source: aggregate data from the survey among Roma assistants.

* Multiple answers possible; n = 23.

Roma assistants also reported that Roma parents turned to them with questions related to the coronavirus and the possibilities of protecting themselves from infection. They were concerned about how to protect children when they would

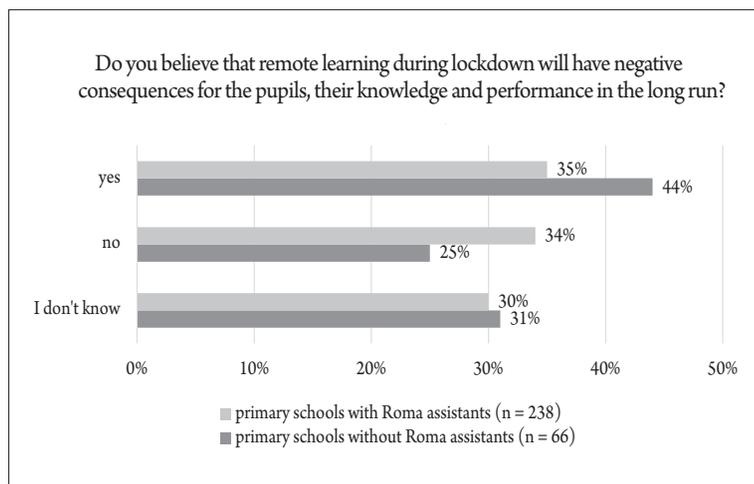
return to school, as well as how assessment would take place and how children would finish school.

7. Consequences of Remote Learning during Lockdown for Roma Pupils

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights expressed concern that extended school closures and potentially new waves of the pandemic are likely to widen and deepen the educational gap for Roma pupils, resulting in even higher dropout rates and loss in employment opportunities over the long term (OSCE ODIHR 2020, 144). Similar expectations about the deepening of the educational gap for Roma children are reported also by the teachers who participated in our online surveys.

Due to the changed schooling conditions during the pandemic, the respondents expressed concern for all pupils in general, not just Roma. As teachers' responses show, most of them believe that remote learning during lockdown will have negative consequences for the pupils, their knowledge and school performance in the long run (Chart 11). In primary schools with Roma assistants, the share of teachers who believe that such a way of schooling will have negative consequences is almost equal to the share of those who believe that there will be no negative consequences. Among the teachers from primary schools without Roma assistants, the share of those who believe that remote learning will have negative consequences for pupils is notably larger.

Chart 11: Possible negative consequences of remote learning during lockdown for pupils' knowledge and performance



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

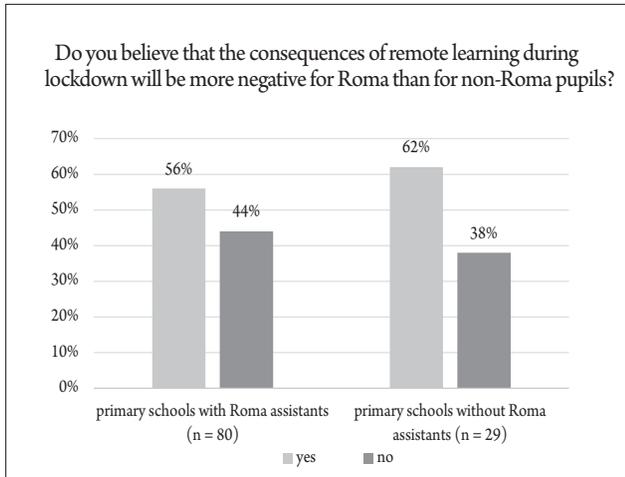
Considering the arguments on which teachers based their replies, they can be divided into two groups – the first one comprises those who expect negative consequences, and the second one those who do not expect negative consequences. The two groups reported the following arguments:

- 1) remote learning will have long-term negative consequences for the pupils
 - a) unconsolidated and poor knowledge of the pupils: the most common answers by teachers from primary schools with Roma assistants and primary schools without Roma assistants were that during remote learning pupils did not consolidate and repeat the learning content. Some added that pupils also did not work independently enough, had too many distractions and more opportunities to cheat when learning at home. Mention was also made of reduced pupils' motivation for school assignments;
 - b) remote learning is not the same as learning in class: a slightly smaller share of teachers than under the previous answer thought that the impact on pupils would be negative because remote learning cannot replace learning in class. The main reasons for such are that teachers cannot check the knowledge of all pupils on an ongoing basis, that pupils need more help in interpreting or understanding the materials, that non-verbal communication, consolidation and repetition of learning content in class cannot be replaced, as well as peer socialisation.
- 2) remote learning will not have long-term negative consequences for the pupils
 - a) delays due to remote learning can be made up for: many teachers felt that lockdown or remote learning did not last that long and that learning content covered during this period could be repeated and consolidated at the beginning of the new school year. Some of them added, however, that negative consequences were expected if such remote learning were to be repeated in the future;
 - b) negative consequences will be felt only by some pupils: a slightly less common response was that only those pupils who did not do their assignments regularly would feel the negative consequences in the long run. Teachers said that the frequency of work and the (non)motivation of pupils largely depended on the supervision and support of their parents.

Over a half of the teachers from both groups of schools believe that the consequences of remote learning during lockdown will be more negative for Roma pupils than for other pupils (Chart 12).

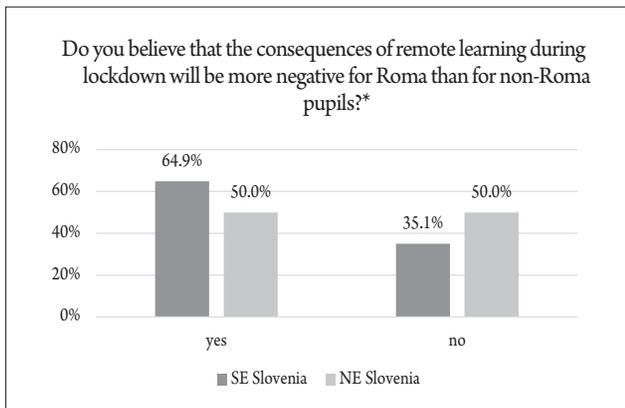
There are some differences between Northeast and Southeast Slovenia (Chart 13). The share of teachers who expect that remote learning during lockdown will have more negative consequences for Roma than for other pupils is higher in Southeast Slovenia (64.9 %) than in Northeast Slovenia (50 %).

Chart 12: Negative consequences of remote learning during lockdown for Roma pupils



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

Chart 13: Differences between Northeast and Southeast Slovenia regarding teachers' expectations about the negative consequences of remote learning for Roma and other pupils



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

* n = 109.

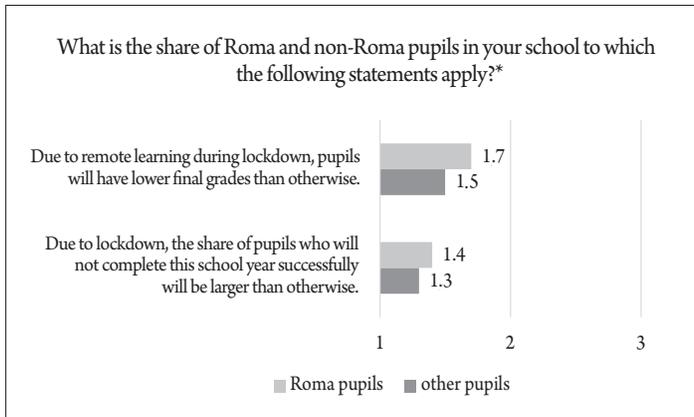
Teachers who thought that the consequences of remote learning would be more negative for Roma pupils believed that this was due to a combination of the following:

- rather discouraging home environment for Roma pupils and more supportive environment for other pupils,

- lack of motivation and responsiveness of Roma pupils due to lack of parental support, lack of understanding of learning content, lack of ICT skills, and lack of (appropriate) ICT equipment.

Teachers who thought that the consequences would not be more negative for Roma pupils explained that in principle the same applies to all pupils – those who had developed appropriate work habits before the onset of remote learning were successful and they also worked regularly at home, regardless of whether they were Roma or not.

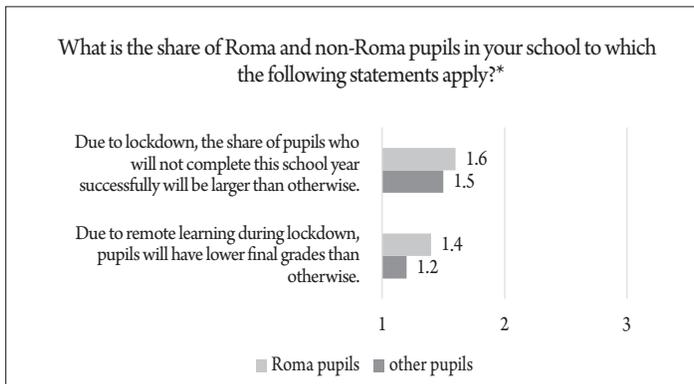
Chart 14: Consequences of remote learning for pupils in primary schools with Roma assistants



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants.

* 1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 233.

Chart 15: Consequences of remote learning for pupils in primary schools without Roma assistants



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

* 1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 63.

Teachers from both groups of primary schools similarly commented on two statements that apply to all pupils: that due to remote learning pupils will have lower final grades than they would otherwise have, and that due to lockdown, the share of pupils who will not complete this school year successfully will be larger than otherwise (Charts 14 and 15). According to teachers, both statements concerned a small share of pupils – both Roma and others. A larger, but still small share, relates to Roma pupils, who might have worse grades due to the above mentioned circumstances.

8. Conclusion

As one of the most marginalised and vulnerable population groups in Slovenia, the Roma generally record a low level of inclusion and performance in education. Negative factors or obstacles for Roma pupils are numerous, closely intertwined, and interdependent – from social and living conditions in the family and living environment to the educational level of parents and the social norms in their immediate and wider community. Therefore, it is all the more important that pupils who live in such conditions are provided with a stable educational environment and the possibility to regularly perform school and other related activities. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote learning was established – in principle, it was carried out by means of ICT, but physically took place in the family environment. The shift from established patterns of education brought new challenges to many Roma pupils and their families that most of their non-Roma peers did not have to deal with.

The study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education of Roma children included all major stakeholders involved in the remote learning process: Roma pupils and their parents on the one hand, and primary school teachers on the other, as well as Roma assistants as an intermediate link between schools and the Roma community. The article presents the results of the analysis of data in five areas that are relevant in the process of remote learning: technical conditions for remote learning and work, establishing contacts between teachers and Roma pupils, participation of Roma pupils and parents in remote learning, and the consequences of such form of education during lockdown for Roma pupils.

A prerequisite for the smooth implementation of remote learning in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was the availability of ICT and the skills to use such. Although at the onset of the pandemic schools, other institutions and organisations made sure that the vast majority of Roma families were provided with computers and other necessary technology, by the end of this period there were still some Roma families who did not have all the necessary equipment or had various other problems. An even bigger problem was the lack of ICT skills among Roma pupils and their parents. In many Roma families outside urban areas, this is also a direct consequence of other factors, such as a general lack of

infrastructure and poor living conditions in Roma settlements, and the low level of education or even illiteracy of Roma parents.

Also the next chapter on the establishment of contacts between teachers and Roma pupils shows several closely interconnected factors that negatively affect the inclusion and performance of these pupils in education. As many as half of the teachers in our study were unable to make contact with all their pupils during lockdown – the vast majority of them were Roma. Teachers reported unresponsiveness and lack of interest of Roma children and their parents as well as lack of appropriate ICT equipment on the Roma side as the main reasons for this problem. Due to the listed obstacles to remote communication, several teachers had to make additional efforts and show some ingenuity in providing school materials to Roma pupils. An important role in establishing and maintaining contacts with Roma pupils was played by Roma assistants.

According to teachers, the collaboration of Roma pupils and their parents with schools during lockdown was, on average, modest. However, generalisation is not appropriate here, as there were differences between them, too. Teachers found that most Roma pupils were less responsive than their non-Roma peers, that they performed their assignments less regularly, and that they had more difficulty understanding the learning content. It needs to be reiterated that such a situation is also the result of less favourable factors and circumstances, more specifically the problems and obstacles that Roma pupils face more often than their non-Roma peers. This is especially true for Roma pupils from Southeast Slovenia. In alleviating these problems, as in establishing contacts, the role of Roma assistants was important as they provided additional explanations of the learning content, encouragement for school work, etc., thus significantly contributing to better participation and performance of Roma pupils. This statement is supported by the teachers from schools employing Roma assistants. According to their estimates, almost half of Roma pupils were in contact with the school only through Roma assistants, and a quarter of the teachers from these schools believed that Roma parents were in regular contact only with Roma assistants and not with teachers.

According to the answers of teachers from all schools covered by the survey, about a third are convinced that remote learning during lockdown will have negative long-term consequences for all pupils in general, for their knowledge and school performance. A good half of teachers from both groups of primary schools believe that these consequences will be more negative for Roma than for other pupils. Such opinion is more widespread among teachers in Southeast Slovenia than among teachers in the Northeast. The reasons for lower expectations regarding Roma pupils can be found in the already mentioned factors – especially in the unstimulating home environment, lack of motivation and responsiveness by Roma pupils due to lack of parental support and encouragement, lack of understanding of school materials, and lack of ICT skills or lack of appropriate equipment.

In view of the above, courses to raise computer literacy or even basic literacy of Roma families should be organised even when schools operate normally, and parents and children should be constantly made aware of the importance of education through various methods. In the long run, it is necessary to provide for appropriate infrastructural equipment in Roma settlements and for a rearrangement of the unsuitable living conditions some families live in, in order to provide children with more appropriate room for study. These measures go beyond the domain of education alone. They require long-term plans and close inter-ministerial cooperation between ministries as well as cooperation between other institutions in the field of social affairs, spatial planning and the environment, employment, etc.

In practically all the above areas, conditions were critical in a large part of the Roma community in Slovenia even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Predictions as to whether the pandemic will worsen the position of Roma pupils in education vary among teachers. As some of them pointed out, remote education in the second half of the 2019/20 school year was not long enough to have long-term negative consequences for most Roma pupils. However, due to unforeseen circumstances in connection with the said pandemic, more permanent damage could be expected in the event that longer-term remote learning needs to be re-introduced in the future.

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- ¹ This applies to Slovenia (Bešter & Medvešek 2007, 134–135) and other Central and Eastern European countries (European Roma Rights Centre 2004; Kontseková & Košťál 2011, 23–24; OSCE ODIHR 2012).
- ² More on policies and measures to include Roma children into the Slovenian educational system in Bešter and Medvešek (2007), Brezovšek et al. (2008), Nečak Lük and Novak Lukanovič (2011).
- ³ Full closure of educational institutions in Slovenia was in place between 16 March and 18 May 2020. After such date, primary schools gradually reopened (Kustec et al. 2020, 10).
- ⁴ The project Together for Knowledge – Implementing Activities of Supporting Mechanisms for Acquiring Knowledge for Members of the Roma Community is co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union from the European Social Fund. The project is run by the Centre for School and Outdoor Education on several locations throughout Slovenia. More at internet site Skupaj za znanje (2020).
- ⁵ Research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question.
- ⁶ The term Roma assistants refers to individuals who work with Roma pupils in selected primary schools in Slovenia under the Together for Knowledge project. They represent a link between members of the Roma community and educational institutions. In addition to schools, they also work in kindergartens and partly in Roma settlements (Pirc 2016, 6). More about the tasks of Roma assistants, their work under the projects preceding the project Together for Knowledge, and the occasional ambiguity of the concept and responsibilities of Roma assistants in Bešter et al. (2016, 6–7).
- ⁷ In this case, branches of schools are added to main schools.
- ⁸ Information and Communication Technology.
- ⁹ The National Education Institute only states on its website that data were gathered by means of online surveys until and including the first week of June 2020, and does not indicate when the research started (National Education Institute Slovenia, 2020).
- ¹⁰ The share was similar in schools with Roma assistants and in schools without Roma assistants.
- ¹¹ These data are not shown in Charts 5 and 6 as they refer only to Roma pupils attending primary schools with Roma assistants.
- ¹² However, this does not apply to everyone. Some Roma families have a more favourable socio-economic position. Munda and Peček (2013, 152), for example, write about Roma in Maribor and point out that their “socio-economic position [...] is more comparable to the families of the majority population than the Roma average.” Vonta et al. (2011) point out in the National Evaluation Study on the Performance of Roma Pupils in Primary School that there are differences between Roma families and that the valuing of education and support of Roma parents for their children’s education differ from family to family.

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