

WHEN DOCUMENTS ARE FAR FROM REALITY

From Political Education
towards Self-Organisation



IMPRESSUM

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Introduction

For many years, Roma Forum of Serbia has been one of the rare Roma organisations working on the *political education* of the Roma community. Simultaneously, the organisation avoided “politics” which generate party membership of the current governing structures and mere bureaucratism which accumulates barren programs aiming to fulfil the procedures and not to contribute to genuine emancipation of the Roma community. This year as well, Roma Forum of Serbia, with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Office for Southeast Europe continues with more in-depth work. The first political education programs offered workshops, training courses, discussions and public lectures on basic political knowledge and helped participants

to achieve a general political literacy. Furthermore, those programs mostly focused on learning and understanding the fundamental notions of political theory and practice. In 2017, the programs of Roma Forum of Serbia took one step further by applying this knowledge to more concrete analysis and interventions in legal and political documents dealing with the state strategies for solving the problem of the “Roma question”. Therefore, activists studied regulations and strategic documents that are relevant for the social inclusion policy of the Roma. One of them is the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025*, currently a crucial document shaping the state policy regarding the problems that the Roma community is facing. They analysed and critically questioned these documents and endeavoured to enumerate the difficulties that such “document policy” creates, being miles away from the reality of the life of the Roma. Critical analysis of this document also encompassed two-years *Action plans* that concretize the implementation of the Strategy and their correlation with related law provisions. It has shown how many contradictions, difficulties, collisions, non-conformities, and how much non-transparency such legislation creates within its framework. Moreover, this resulted with an intervention in the political field, in the form of a *shadow report* based on critical analysis, entitled: *Between Form and Reality - Shadow Report on the Implementation of the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia (Activists’ Perspective)*. The report connected problems with larger socio-economic context. Then, steps forward were made.

While continuing the work on the political education, Roma Forum of Serbia endeavoured to make the first steps towards a more concrete political self-organisation of the Roma community with this year’s program. Besides panels, workshops, discussions and training

courses, RFS organised gatherings, meetings and planning sessions with the collectors of the secondary raw materials in Roma settlements in Niš and Novi Sad. Among important topics were: union organising and reflections on different ways of connecting politically with other progressive groups in the country. Hence, this year's program continued to critically question the measures that the state implements, or rather does not, to solve the problems of the Roma population, in parallel with making the first steps in working on self-organisation of the Roma.

Indeed, both aspects require continuity so that the policy, which would truly be democratic, non-discriminatory and would eliminate all types of social inequalities, could genuinely comprise the most extensive and (currently) the most vulnerable parts of the Roma community. Therefore, in this year's publication, the activists of Roma Forum of Serbia with collaborators and co-strugglers have given priority to the topics related to the framework mentioned above.

Since the official documents for inclusion policy are very far from the reality of the life of the Roma citizens, this publication mostly consists of texts that continue to critically analyse these "policies" while providing relevant insights from the field. The topics cover the issues that most of the Roma in Serbia share: they do not exercise some of the fundamental human rights such as the right to water and housing; the lack of measures which would provide access to employment for most of the Roma community and alleviate at least some of their problems; personal and public experiences related to the mechanisms of discrimination, both more open and more subtle ones, etc. This collection thus offers an insight into many topics related to marginalisation of people based on their ethnicity and other identity differences and, above all, class.

The collection starts with Radovan Jovanović's text that analyses what should be granted for human beings and their dignity: the right to water. It shows not only how questionable it is for the Roma to exercise this right, but it also questions the *Strategy*, which does not clearly and unambiguously establish a genuine solution for the issue of access to high quality potable water and basic water and sewage infrastructure. Jovanović points out the contradictions of requesting the right to water for all and simultaneously leaving the access to that right to be provided by the market that automatically excludes the parts of the population that cannot afford adequate access to water. Danilo Ćurčić writes about another fundamental human right, the right to housing. The author points out the inefficacy of the existing measures and the alternatives developed in the previous years and warns about the aspects of the "solution" for the housing issues based on the market logic that continuously excludes an increasing number of people. Milena and Jelena Reljić write about the situation regarding the position of young Roma women and men in Serbia, demystifying the discourse about "the equal opportunities" on the labour market and showing how relying on the state policies will not change fairly bleak prospects for the youth. Furthermore, Jelena Krivokapić analyses, on several examples, the role of media in the production and perpetuation of the discrimination of the Roma, warning about its different discursive nuances and the ways in which that discrimination manifests. One of the dominant prejudices about the life of the Roma is the early marriage of Roma girls and women as a part of Roma tradition. Jasmina Drmaku writes about this topic and asks whether the issue of the early marriage, attributed to the ideological mechanisms, is instead related mainly to the actual economic situation. Žarka Svirčev also pursue this line and deconstruct this myth, often used to perpetuate the practices of discrimination and oppression based on ethnicity

and sex/gender identity. She shares with us her personal experience of adoption of Roma girl and some of the racialised and patriarchal oppressive mechanisms that she has faced. Why is there still a lack of unity between different Roma groups and how is that hindering a more serious political parliamentary organising, are the questions raised by Robert Kasumović. Moreover, he emphasizes the overlapping problems that the majority of the community shares, reflecting on how these common points could shape a prospective endeavour of more coherent, more unified and more radical participation in the political arena. The collection ends with the text of its editor, Maja Solar, previously published on the platform *Slobodni Filozofski*. The text refers to the Roma Forum of Serbia publication *Roma Between Multiculturalism and Austerity Policies* and concludes that the existing “policy” based on numerous documents which essentially transcend the reality is not a policy but rather prevents the politicization of the Roma in a genuine manner.

Seeking to relate to the reality, the collection also endeavours to outline alternatives on the horizon. These texts offer some examples of practices that should contribute to an increasing politicization of the Roma community and could lead to a more serious political self-organising of the Roma if coupled with continuous political education. By pursuing such steps, we continue further, with all the means available.

December 2019,

Maja Solar, a member of *Gerusia Collective*, a collaborator of *Roma Forum of Serbia* and the editor of this publication



WHEN THE *RIGHT TO WATER* IS NOT ENOUGH

Everybody agrees that the water is indispensable for life and survival. However, people do not have direct access to water but have rules and systems that regulate access to water, right to water, as well as quality, accessibility and cost of water. That prevents many people from the possibility to have any access to water, let alone access to good quality water. This sounds cruel; does it not? In the capitalist system in which we live nowadays and whose integral part the processes of an overall commodification are, we often do not think that a common good like water can actually become a commodity and be more and more treated as such. That substance *that makes life possible* and that should be available to every living being on this planet, is already and can

become even more so, something that only those who have money will be able to afford. In that sense, water becomes an object of negotiations, investments, business plans, concessions, private property, etc. All with the aim to make a profit.

On the 28th of July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Resolution that recognised the right to water as one of the fundamental human rights. The UN General Assembly called on all the states to financially support capacity development and technology transfer by means of international collaboration and help. It called to increase the efforts and ensure that all the people can enjoy adequate, clean, available, accessible and affordable water and sanitation, with the accent on the developing countries. Some of the key aspects of the human right to water are the right to sufficient amount of water for basic needs (the principle of the use of water), availability and accessibility as well as adequate amount and quality of water, the obligations of the state and other individual rights that result from it. It might sound like the right to water is ensured, notwithstanding, it is far from the reality in which we live and especially the one in which the Roma community in Serbia lives.

Compared with the rest of the population, Roma in Serbia have difficulty accessing drinking water and sanitation, if they can access them at all. If we observe the usual appearance of Roma settlements, the image of extreme marginalisation of this ethnic group becomes telling. There are 593 Roma (substandard) settlements in which water and sanitation infrastructure are either non-existent or inadequate, poorly organised, of bad quality and, often, illegal. The differences in housing conditions compared to the general population in Serbia is tremendous, as the data from the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025* show: 37% of households in Roma settlements do not have adequate access to potable

water compared to 8% of households in the general population; about 67% of Roma households live in homes that have no connection to the sewage system, as opposed to 37% in the majority population; 11% of Roma households do not have electricity in their homes, compared to 0.1% in the general population; the average number of rooms per household in Roma is 0.63, compared to 1.13 in the general population; 79% of Roma households are forced to reduce the heating in their apartments due to insufficient income, compared with 61% in the general population, and so on.¹ The *Strategy* also cites data related to water and sanitation infrastructure in Roma settlements:

“In 38% of Roma settlements no single housing unit is connected to the water supply system, 32% of housing units are only partly connected, while in 30% of settlements more than two-thirds of the housing units are connected to the water supply pipes. In 74% of the settlements, not one single house/housing unit is connected to a sewage system or a septic tank. Only in 10% of the settlements over two-thirds of buildings are connected to the sewage network.”²

The situation with the water and sanitation network in Roma settlements is terrible, and the fact that the water pipes have been installed in some of the settlements still does not mean that all the inhabitants have access to water.³ While in some of the settlements there

1 The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025*, p. 36. Available in English at: https://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/national_strategy_for_roma_inclusion_2016-2025.pdf

2 Ibid p. 39.

3 Božidar Jakšić and Goran Bašić, *Roma Settlements, Living Conditions and Possibilities for Integration of the Roma in Serbia*, Center for the Research of Ethnicity, Belgrade, 2002, p.19

is no infrastructure, in some others it exists. However, either it is of bad quality/inadequate or the housing units are simply not connected to it because they are illegal. The *Strategy* also points out the issue of connecting the housing units to the infrastructure (if it exists):

“The question of connecting houses to the infrastructure concerns the quality of construction, as well as legality, of the already constructed houses and networks, which serve as the basis for all subsequent registration of executed works to the relevant utility companies. The prerequisite for the implementation of these measures is that urban planning documentation is duly created and ownership and legal status over the land on which infrastructure works are to be carried out is regulated. Other problems when connecting houses to community infrastructure are high duty fees for connections, the fact that poor households lack resources to start paying bills once connected, and lack of adequate internal installations inside their homes.”⁴

In a word: the Roma who live in the substandard settlements often do not have any water and sanitation infrastructure. If this infrastructure exists in the settlements, Roma inhabitants often cannot connect to it, because the housing units in which they live are not legally registered and do not have the status that would enable them to connect to the network. Moreover, even if they have *legal* conditions to connect the units to the infrastructure, the Roma do not have the money to pay for this and often have poor electrical installations in the housing units. If, in some cases, they are able to pay for connecting to the infrastructure and if they have adequate electrical

⁴ The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025*, p. 39.

installations, the Roma do not have enough money to (continuously) pay the utility bills. Multi-generational poverty, very low incomes and lack of employment are additional obstacles for the Roma to work on improving their housing conditions independently. At the same time, the housing costs are often so high that they impede satisfying basic needs or result with considerable debts and unpaid utility bills. It seems to be a vicious circle, just as the *Strategy* and other official documents look like legal texts that offer generalised measures and solutions that practically turned out to be just a list that the state uses to fulfil bureaucratic requirements in the process of accession to the European Union.⁵

The UN resolution addresses the state as the entity that should ensure access to water for every individual. Nevertheless, in Europe as well as in Serbia, the right to water is more and more in collusion with the economic imperatives that are a consequence of the neoliberal regime of capitalism and austerity measures. This is visible in some new laws or law provisions that correspond more to the logic of capital and less to the needs of people.

The primary law that regulates water management, use and protection as well as the legal status of water is the *Law on water*. In 2016, article 5 of this core legal document was changed, and instead of defining water as a *common good*, it defines it now as a *natural resource*. This is not the only law that turns water, which is a universal right, into a commodity, thus giving people less and less access to

5 For more information on how far the reality is from what *Strategy* and the other documents (which allegedly regulate the inclusion of the Roma and improve their living conditions) promise, see: *Between Form and Reality. Shadow Report on the Implementation of the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia (Activists Perspectives)*, Roma Forum of Serbia, 2018. Available in English at: <http://www.frs.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FRS-izvestaj-EN-web-final.pdf>

good quality water and water management services. In 2017, using a special procedure, the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted the *Law on Changes and Amendments of the Law on Communal Services*. In addition, it adopted the *Law on Changes and Amendments of the Law on Public-Private Partnership and Concessions*. The adoption of these laws shows that the state is less interested in the common good that belongs to all of its citizens and more in the profit and capital. The door is wide open for the private companies and capital, which leads to an increase in the prices of services, decrease of their quality, firing the workers and exclusion of the poorest. The state further withdraws from the sphere in which it should not only guarantee but also make possible the fundamental human right to water, leaving it to the market. There are various “explanations” for this:

“As the reason for the problematic situation in the water management, it is often said that the capacities of the authorities in charge of water management as well as those of the public companies are not sufficient to adequately regulate this domain. Besides, there is the problem of insufficient funds from the state budget and local government units. For any strategic planning and implementation of infrastructure projects in this field, it would be necessary to grant a stable and continuous source of funds on behalf of the Republic of Serbia. However, the practice shows the opposite - the state has almost withdrawn from investing in this sector and implements only the reforms that give a more critical role to the market. The current state of affairs shows to what extent the highest levels of the governing structures neglect and systemically ignore the question of the protection of the environment and water resources. (...) “Actually, it can be said that the existing state authorities as carriers of the water policy are not engaged or interested in serious

consideration of the strategies that would substantially advance the water sector. Unless they are directly related to the environmental directives as conditions to the accession negotiations of Serbia and EU. In conclusion, there is an impression that the decisions are not made based on reasonably defined political aims that correspond to the public interest, but are in direct connection with the process of European integration.”⁶

This leads to a conclusion that the Roma who do not have access to drinking water and sanitation infrastructure will have fewer chances to obtain it in such a system. In the state documents and laws, there are still provisions that declaratively promise better access to water for all. At the same time, there are more and more provisions that offer “solutions” in the market and clearly show that the state is withdrawing from guaranteeing and subsidization of this right.

Nonetheless, the problem of the lack of access to water in Roma settlements is not only about the *right* to water. The *Strategy* emphasizes what are the main reasons for which the Roma do not have water: the problem of legalisation. Many factors contribute to the impossibility to legalise housing units in a Roma settlement: appalling housing conditions, lack of water-sealed sanitary toilets and bathrooms, bad installations and generally inadequate construction materials, etc. The state should solve this problem, but how? According to the *Strategy*: mainly by shifting the most significant responsibility to the local government units. The local government units are supposed to make new urban plans that would then enable legalisation of the housing units and infrastructure. The line ministry should provide expert and

6 *Water as a Common Good: Contribution to the Fight against the Privatisation of the Water Supply*, Centre for the Politics of Emancipation, Belgrade, 2017, p. 17, 18.

financial support above all in the part that concerns bureaucracy (creating databases about urban space, making planning documentation and action plans). Also, it is only generally stated that the government, together with the local government units and international partners, will finance *the implementation* of these plans. In the part of the *Strategy* that clearly specifies the measures and directions for finding financial funds for implementing these measures, the accent is on the local government units as well as on the organisations of the civil society and their role in “raising awareness” of the Roma about regular payment of the bills:

“Local government units shall include measures for building public infrastructure in Roma settlements into their local action plans on the inclusion of the Roma and provide funding from the budget for implementing those measures. Local government units and their utility companies shall build necessary infrastructure and structure connections while obtaining relevant construction permits and certificates of occupancy. Public utility networks and connections to them must be entered into registers and included into the public system and structures, thereby ensuring their regular maintenance, repair and building of annexes by competent utility companies. Local government units shall provide financial support to civil society organisations in charge of organising and carrying out activities related to fostering awareness and informing the residents of Roma settlements about the possibility of exercising rights related to the increased availability of utilities and services, the importance of public infrastructure development for such settlements, environmental planning and preservation, reasons why they should pay their utility bills regularly and possibilities and ways of receiving subsidies on utility costs. The line ministry shall

provide support for financing or co-financing the building of infrastructure network and connections to the network for structures in Roma settlements in local government units which have previously prepared necessary technical documents for such works funded from their own budgets or using financial resources they have obtained themselves.” (Italics added by the author)⁷

When will the housing units in Roma settlements be legalised? It depends on the local government units and how they will find the money for legalisation. If and when this happens, then the state *might* financially help to build the infrastructure and connect housing units to it. And then, to make this sustainable, allegedly, it is necessary to “enlighten” the Roma population about regular payments of the bills. Even if this *right* to water will be exercised, the Roma generally do not have financial means to ensure access to water in the long term. They cannot afford to pay the bills because of their structural position in society. How will the problem be solved? Who will manage to pay on the field of the market competition based on survival? Will more and more people find themselves without access to clean and potable water? The *Strategy* does not account for these questions. It seems that this is left to the market, the terrain on which chances of winning are unevenly distributed and for many individuals a lot depends on means for navigate these treacherous waters .

The *right* to water is only one step in the struggle over water to be available to all. The production conditions should change, as well. In that sense, the struggle over the right to water should be further radicalised, above all by enshrining this right in the Constitution.

⁷ The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025*, p. 71, 72.

Unless we join the forces and initiatives in the fight for water to be a constitutional right and above all a common good genuinely accessible to all, the potable and piped water could soon become an exclusive privilege of the rich.

HOUSING PROBLEMS OF THE ROMA IN SERBIA

Every conversation about the position of the Roma in Serbia inevitably ends with the conclusion that the state should do something to improve the situation regarding their inclusion, in the area of employment, education, health care, social protection or housing. The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025*¹ offers a certain number of answers to the question: what should the state do. Nevertheless, this document does not inspire optimism. Neither does the overall housing policy

1 Available in English at: https://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/national_strategy_for_roma_inclusion_2016-2025.pdf

situation in Serbia (unless there would be a radical change due to struggle over these rights).

According to the latest surveys, the number of informal or, as the line ministry calls them, substandard Roma settlements in Serbia is 583.² These settlements are located in 169 cities, towns and municipalities, and they are homes for many Roma who are the poorest among the poor population. In those settlements, there is often no access to clean water, sanitation infrastructure or electricity and the roads and sidewalks are a distant future for their inhabitants. In such situation, it is evident that the state of affairs will not and cannot be changed by “soft” measures that the *Strategy* identifies, even though this document is considered as a key one for advancing the position of the Roma in Serbia.

The *Strategy* stipulates the following operational objectives: “ensure program and information-related preconditions for improving housing conditions for Roma men and women” and “create spatial-planning preconditions to improve housing conditions in sustainable Roma settlements” as well as “create normative preconditions for resolving property-legal status of lots and facilities in sustainable Roma settlements, with a final aim of legalisation and improving housing facilities in these settlements. “Other than above mentioned operational objectives, *Strategy* also states the following: improve public infrastructure in Roma settlements, improve housing standards, implement social housing units construction programs, define and implement relevant international standards regarding the displacements of people from unsustainable sub-standard settlements and elevate

2 See: Aleksandar Đorđević, *Substandard Roma Settlements in Serbia*. Overview of the data from the Geographic Information System for 2016, OSCE Mission in Serbia, Belgrade, 2017. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/sr/mission-to-serbia/309401?download=true>

cultural standards of Roma population, economic empowerment and preservation of ethnic and cultural identity. However, the problem with the *Strategy* is that it mainly aims to create preconditions and conditions for improvement of the housing for Roma. Simultaneously, only 4.52 % of the very same Roma that the document addresses rate their housing conditions as very good, according to the latest survey of the implementation that the ombudsperson has conducted. The rest of them say that their housing conditions are either satisfying (22.03%), bad (38.42%) or very bad (35.03%).³ In those circumstances, it is necessary to analyse the causes of such awful housing condition and find out the ways to change the approach to solving them. Exercising the right to adequate housing is essential for many other rights: to health, education, employment, the right to live with human dignity, etc.

The analysis of the state of affairs in Belgrade, the biggest city in Serbia, with the most significant number of Roma settlements, shows that the situation is not changing, year after year. The first significant wave of the forced evictions of Roma settlements that were “in the way” of implementing important infrastructure projects, was between 2009 and 2012 and has affected over 2700 Roma.⁴ They either became homeless after the displacements or would receive an inadequate housing unit in so-called container settlements in Belgrade. Some would call those displacements pressures, while others call them recommendations and suggestions for changing such state of affairs (coming from international human rights and non-governmental organisations

3 The percentage does not show data obtained from a representative sample, but those obtained by the survey conducted in the Roma settlements in 20 cities and municipalities in Serbia.

4 The *Platform for Exercise of the Right to Adequate Housing*, available at: <http://www.mc.rs/platforma-za-ostvarivanje-prava-na-adekvatno-stanovanje.4.html?eventId=8820>

and activists). Afterwards, the new *Law on Housing and Maintenance of Apartment Buildings* was adopted. This law, currently being the umbrella law regulating housing, defines the eviction and displacement procedures for the situations similar to those when the informal Roma settlements were evicted between 2009 and 2012.

According to the Law, the eviction and displacement procedures are undertaken in the cases in which it is necessary. At the same time, the evicted persons who do not have the means to get other accommodation, have the right to adequate accommodation provided by the local government unit. This solution is an important step forward compared with the situation before the *Law on Housing and Apartment Building Maintenance* was adopted when there was no explicit law provision stipulating that in the cases of eviction and alternative accommodation has to be provided. Nevertheless, the problem is that this law does not guarantee in any way that eviction will be used as a *final measure*, in the situations in which it is not possible to improve the housing conditions or satisfy housing needs of the persons who live in inadequate housing. Thus, when a decision is made about the necessity of eviction and the plan of displacement, the Law does not specify a possibility for the evicted community to propose alternatives to eviction and other solutions for housing issues they are facing before being evicted. In essence, the Law does not prescribe mechanisms for citizens to participate in a decision-making process that refers to the settlement in which they live. This is why the Roma living in the informal settlements, and not being fortunate enough to receive support to improve their living conditions in the settlement, are often offered several solutions for their housing problems.

The first solution (still valid for about twenty families mainly evicted from the informal settlement Belville) offers accommodation in the metal containers in one of the settlements that the city of Bel-

grade formed after the eviction of the informal settlements Gazela and Belville. In these settlements, exclusively inhabited by the Roma, the families of five members or less live in 14.8 m². Families with more members have more space, but the biggest problem of all is that these are segregated settlements without adequate access to infrastructure, without its maintenance for years and the living conditions in such settlements are incompatible with human dignity.

In all the other cases, the Roma who cannot find a solution for their housing needs by themselves, either can apply for social housing or be displaced to the houses in rural areas of Serbia. Those who own land can apply for construction material, on the rare occasions when such programs are available.

As previously mentioned, social housing is one of the options that is offered to the Roma as a solution for their housing needs. The problem with social housing in Serbia is that it is unsustainable: the number of social housing units is very small, and in some cases, it might be unaffordable, in particular to the poorest Roma. The question of affordability of social housing for the poorest is, in general, an example of how the state completely neglects the problems that the citizens of Serbia are facing. Moreover, a solution to these problems is not even on the horizon. To give an example, the above mentioned *Law on Housing and Apartment Building Maintenance* replaces the existing system of social housing with a whole range of rights that are granted by the *Programs of Housing Support*. Notwithstanding, it is not clear whether these Programs are even in the preparation phase while the authorities in the local government units find that the housing allowance is inapplicable.⁵ Besides, the Law stipulates the obligation

5 Data collected at the meeting with the representatives of the Local government of the City of Belgrade regarding preparation of the *Housing Strategy for the City of Belgra-*

to adopt a *National Housing Strategy*, which should specify priorities regarding exercising the right to adequate housing and would enable cities, towns and municipalities to adopt local housing strategies. The deadline for the adoption of the *National Housing Strategy* ended on the last day of 2017. Even though there is a two-year delay in adopting this strategic document that should help establish priorities for solving many housing problems that the citizens have, no one seems actually to care. The reason for this is, predominantly, the fact that the housing is, in a way, expelled from the public sphere, and not considered as a right that the state must provide to its citizens. Not a single program of any president of the Republic of Serbia has stated housing as one of the topics on which the state should work. This is the consequence of the fact that the housing is almost exclusively understood as a commodity that should be profitable on the market and citizens have to solve their issues by themselves - through inheritance, always precarious renting or housing loans.

In such situation, it is entirely logical that the Roma, as the poorest and certainly most vulnerable citizens, are left on their own, while the programs that they are offered would not solve their problems, not even in a decade. As an illustration, we can use the program for addressing housing needs implemented by the City of Belgrade. Apart from the fact that the city builds far too few apartments for growing housing needs, the problem with this program is that those who successfully overcome all the bureaucratic obstacles are offered a housing solution that very quickly turns out to be *unaffordable for those with the lowest income or those receiving a social allowance*. In practice, we can notice numerous cases of social housing users who get higher utility bills and rent than their pensions or social allowances. On top of that,

de, in December 2019.

as a part of austerity measures, the users of the social housing units have to pay the property taxes, according to the *Amendments of the Property Taxes Law*! The taxes for social housing are just the same as for any other rental property. Even though this, so to say, poverty tax was contested before the Constitutional court in 2015, the court still has not established that it is unconstitutional. Moreover, a considerable majority of the poorest users of social housing units are able to work receivers of the social allowance only during nine months in one calendar year, according to the *Social Care Law*. Finally, the right to subventions for the integrated utility bills (Infostan bills, as well as for the social housing rent) - which are allocated through the *Intervention Protection Measures of the Most Vulnerable Citizens* adopted by the City of Belgrade - is exercised under the condition of “paying the Infostan bill for the previous month during the current month”.

Thus, the users of the social housing units in Belgrade are under constant pressure to pay their bills regularly, and this is often a significant burden on the household budget. If they do not pay three or four bills in a row in one year, according to the *Social Housing Renting Contract* signed with the City of Belgrade, the Contract can be cancelled. Therefore, they live in constant fear of forced eviction. So far, it turned out that the legal protection in these cases is almost impossible, so the only solution left for the tenants of the social housing units who live in such conditions is to self-organise to stop the evictions when they are scheduled.

The second model for solving the housing needs of the Roma living in inadequate housing is the purchase of the houses in the villages in Serbia. Within the purview of this program, mainly abandoned houses are purchased, and the Roma who previously lived in informal settlements move into them. In this way, they become owners of the houses and are not allowed to sell them for at least five years. In some

situations, the users of these programs receive support for starting income-generating activities in villages, mainly through tools or machines that they could use. Even though this solution takes in the consideration the needs that are not exclusively related to providing a roof over one's head (which is the case with social housing), it does not have a stronger impact on the problems that the Roma displaced outside of Belgrade are facing. Providing them with houses and some land as well as tools and machines is not enough to overcome the consequences of the multi-decennial marginalisation. Besides, most Roma generate their income from the jobs related to big urban centers, and when displaced to the villages, they do not manage to secure a minimum for subsistence. Some members of the families displaced outside of Belgrade, return to the city and live in the informal settlements, doing jobs that generate enough income for the survival of their families.

The third, and the last, program comprises allocation of construction material for the houses in which the Roma live. This is, however, available only to those who already own the construction land. Therefore, the most vulnerable persons, living in the informal settlements, which are usually built on the public land, remain out of the scope of these measures.

This brief overview of the most typical social housing programs for the Roma clearly shows that they do not give answers to problems that have accumulated in this field. Apart from being unaffordable or not giving enough possibilities for social inclusion, sometimes they are not even designed in the way to meet the needs of most of the Roma in lack of housing support. The image is even worse because of the overall problem of segregation of the Roma in terms of housing (both in the settlements where they already live or the settlements that are being built for the Roma and/or socially vulnerable categories

of the population). It is followed by problems with discrimination in renting housing on the market, as well as the issues regarding access to other rights related to the right to adequate housing. Therefore, it is crucial to find ways to offer sustainable alternatives that would come from the Roma community and refer to the real needs of those who are most vulnerable within that community.



POSITION OF THE YOUNG ROMA IN SERBIA

The phrase *Young people change the world* is commonplace in the culture and dominant discourse. It is often taken for granted that the youth leads the society towards a better future. In the capitalist world, these words should affirm the creativity and spontaneity of young people as well as the existence of social mobility. The “youth” is supposed to be the social group whose vital element necessarily produces progress, and they are taken as individuals who have the same or equal chances in society. Of course, according to the capitalist ideology... However, reality shows something different. What happens with the young people who do not have equal starting positions in the race for a better place in society? What happens with the young members of a group

that is not only ideologically marginalised but also institutionally, and in every other sense, segregated? Thus, we will analyse the position of the Roma youth in Serbian society.

The position in society is determined in different ways and depends on many divisions, for instance those based on race, class, sex/gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, etc. The social position is often measured by the role that the individual has in the social structure and the status that results from it. Yet, what essentially determines someone's position in the capitalist structure of production is the class position one occupies. This is precisely the fact that the ideologue of *youth* neglects. When we talk about young people, we somehow take for granted that all the young people have the same starting position and if that is not the case, it is presupposed that they can easily achieve it with their work and effort. Nonetheless, the capitalist reality shows us how the position in the society, i.e. class position, is usually reproduced through generations. The individuals who succeed to overcome their class limitations and achieve better class position, are isolated cases and do not have a considerable impact on advancing the overall social positioning of the Roma ethnic group.

However, the dominant discourse continues to attribute the failure of the class mobility to the individuals themselves, as if they were the sole culprits for their misfortunes. The increasing empowerment of the right in the region and Europe shores up such image that refers specifically to the Roma community. Intolerance, discrimination as well as the frequent attacks on Roma youth, and the Roma community, in general, continue to be an everyday reality.

Their working status and employment possibilities also determine social position of young Roma. There are special employment measures for ethnic minorities, and they differ from the usual methods of selection and employment of others. So-called affirmative measures

are adopted to overcome great disparities in living conditions, to achieve more equality for those whose starting position is simply not equal and are proscribed as the right to be represented.¹ The employment rate for the Roma is very low. The data of the *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia* from 2011² show that 72.1 % of the Roma is economically inactive, while in the category of those who are active, 59.0% are unemployed. Apart from unemployment, low-skilled jobs and lower-paid jobs are characteristic for the economic activity of the Roma. According to the representation law, the Roma ethnic minority should be represented with 2% in the institutions (employment quota). Nonetheless, this law is not enforced. If this does occur, the decision-makers are proud to say that they employ the Roma in the state institutions. At the same time, the Roma are given public sanitation jobs and other low-skilled jobs that do not correspond to their professional qualifications. It is important to stress out that for obtaining those jobs, becoming a member of the political party in power is often a necessary condition, which additionally depresses and passivizes young Roma when it comes to continuing their education.

In this way and with such “employment measures”, the class affiliation is further reproduced: most of them remain in the same position or move to only slightly better one.

When it comes to the education of young Roma, the situation is bleak as well. One-third of the Roma, about 33.3%, graduates from the elementary school, 11.5% completes secondary school, and 0.7% obtain a degree in higher education. We can confirm that the percentage of the Roma with secondary school and higher education degrees has

1 <http://fer.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Forum-3-2018-SRP-290502018.pdf>

2 The *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia*, available at: <https://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Romi.pdf> (accessed on 3rd December 2019)

slightly increased in time, thanks to the affirmative measures; however, this situation did not considerably contribute to changing the economic position of Roma youth. A significant number of the Roma is still not economically active, notwithstanding a higher education degree. It is still impossible to talk about equal starting positions of this ethnic group and the majority population. The *League for the Decade of Roma Yearly Report* from 2006 confirms this. It states that 50% of Roma families do not send their children to school because of the lack of financial means and up to 20% because of the lack of personal certificates and other documents.³ Therefore, we can conclude that the number of educated Roma does change their education structure, and results with more highly qualified cadres within the Roma community. Nevertheless, it often does not change their class position. Even though educated, the Roma generally face tremendous obstacles when they try to find employment: discrimination, prejudices, political party membership as imperative to get a job, weak position in the power structures and generally, bad economic situation.

To give an illustration, Nenad Borovčanin recently said: “Your position depends, to a significant extent, on yourselves, but it depends as well on the opportunities that the state gives you, and they have to be the same for everyone”.⁴ Yet, the Roma do not need equal opportunities because those opportunities do not include equal starting positions. For instance, a young middle-class white man, member of

3 The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025*. Available in English at: https://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/national_strategy_for_roma_inclusion_2016-2025.pdf (accessed on 3rd December 2019)

4 Conference *Position of the young Roma in Serbia*, website of the Center for the Research of Public Policies, available at: <https://www.publicpolicy.rs/arhiva/322/odrzana-konferencija-39-39-polozaj-mladih-roma-u-srbiji-39-39> (accessed on the 4th of December 2019)

the majority population, who graduates from the university, is not in the same position as a swarthy young Roma woman, from lower-class family, who does not have a room of her own or other necessary working conditions and got the possibility to study thanks to the quota... What Roma youth need are equal access to education and equal conditions of study, equal positions in the society and support to create such conditions. Only then, it would be possible to imagine the world in which the young can start from the same positions and genuinely have equal opportunities.

The first *Roma Decade* was supposed to change the position of the Roma for better. Still, it did not end with good results - the situation remained the same or very similar. The current official Roma integration policies, which are often called the *Second Decade*, show the same: declaratively they aim to advance the position of the Roma but do not practically achieve the planned goals. And it all comes down to bureaucracy. It took one year to adopt the first Action Plan for implementation of the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men*. Yet, there were many inconsistencies that had to be redefined. The second Action Plan for the 2019-2020 period is still not adopted, and the (vicious) circle continues. While dealing with these bureaucratic problems, the first half of the so-called *Second Decade* has passed. Only five years remain to the end and results are not on the horizon. Simultaneously, the discourse of the right-wing groups is getting stronger, which perpetuates the worsening situation of young Roma.

In conclusion, the position of young Roma in society is terrible. Still, it remains on unstable ground, without signs of improvement in the near future - at least not with such policies. Notwithstanding numerous strategies, documents and laws multiplying, they are not implemented but rather used as political mimicry. Clearly, Roma youth cannot place their hopes in such policy based on papers. The young

people of Roma ethnicity have to organise by themselves and work closely with other groups. They have to show to the state not just that they are educated and qualified for better jobs, which are the core of economic reproduction, but that they are the ones who can have an impact on the laws that are promulgated and refer to their future; that they are in charge of solving their problems and not the experts who speak for them. Only in this way, we can have hope that the youth will genuinely be the motivator of changes in the society and the world.

MEDIA CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS CRIMINALIZATION OF THE ROMA

The origin of the word media is the Latin word *medium*, which means, in the literal translation, *middle* or something that is in the middle. The main task of the media is to report different types of information to the public, or communication through various media outlets such as newspaper, television, internet, etc. The media considerably shape the lives of people, especially in the world in which we live today, since it is almost impossible to avoid media messages that do not only inform us but also form our opinions, attitudes and perception. The shaping process is often happening on an unconscious level, which means that media contents transmit certain value judgements about the world that we continue to nurture, develop and deepen. On that

account, the media can be a dangerous catalyst of stereotypes, ideological messages, racist and other discriminatory perceptions.

In particular, this is the case of the representation of members of the Roma community in the media. One of the indicators of media discrimination is that the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality receives more and more complaints about discrimination of the Roma in the media and on social networks in the past years. There was, admittedly, a progress to some extent and it seems that the media are reporting more accurately on problems that the Roma are facing. However, there are still problems with certain media outlets' reporting, which continue to shape the complex mechanisms of discrimination. Furthermore, the media often just enable repetitive transmission of information without analysing the context of the events, and media professionals very rarely critically question the position of the Roma. The media do not examine the efficacy of the state policies aiming to foster the social inclusion of the Roma population. They rather repeat what state documents, as well as state officials, announce and promise. What is happening beyond fulfilment of bureaucratic procedures and how the reality of Roma community life looks like - this does not seem to be of interest to media.

What is more, the media often take part in further stereotyping and discrimination based on ethnicity, skin colour, class, sex, gender, etc. Different media approaches are used to spread negative prejudice and stereotypes about the Roma. Since the media should have an essential role in the struggle against discrimination and promotion of tolerance – which would contribute to raising awareness of the general population – the negative image that they shape is thus more dangerous. This imagery continues to develop and persist in the minds of those who receive media messages, which is a considerable part of society.

There are many examples of unprofessional reporting on the Roma. Sometimes is not so explicitly, but rather in a more “subtle” or cunning way: by showing photographs or videos of minors; by intentionally stating the ethnicity in the cases in which this is not of crucial importance, which automatically leads to labelling; by reporting without naming sources... Some of the examples of titles that construct prejudice and stereotypes about the Roma are: *A Roma minor has committed a murder for money?*¹, *A Roma minor stole a car and crashed it: the owner is desperate, no one will repay the damage?*², etc. First example refers to a conflict between two groups of collectors of secondary raw materials, and the other example is about violence. Nonetheless, the newspaper articles unnecessarily report that some of those involved in the incident are Roma.

When we take a look at these newspaper headlines, which in the majority of cases has not been corroborated in court, we, Roma women and men, wonder how it can be that we never read headlines like “A Serb committed a murder”, “A Serb stole”... Is it not strange that only one ethnic group is targeted? Why is it necessary to state the Roma ethnicity in the headlines or articles, and why would this information be relevant when reporting on theft, for instance? Why media apply the label to the ethnic minority that is already having difficulties in confronting stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination? We know that the Roma community is the most vulnerable ethnic minority; therefore, such representation further incites prejudices and criminalises the whole community.

1 Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/hronika/aktuelno.291.html:591893-Maloletni-Rom-ubio-zbog-para>

2 Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/hronika/aktuelno.291.html:826978-Maloletni-Rom-mu-ukrao-auto-i-slupao-ga-Vlasnik-ocajan-nema-ko-da-mu-nadoknadi-stetu>

One of the crucial aspects of confronting discrimination is informing the citizens about this problem. According to the *Report on the Survey of the Public Opinion: Citizens' Attitude towards Discrimination in Serbia* from November 2019, one-half of the participants in the survey considers that the media does not cover discrimination sufficiently and does not pay enough attention to this social phenomenon.³ Likewise, the survey respondents believe that the Roma in Serbia are on the second place according to the degree of discrimination, among the following groups: poor persons, elderly population, women, Hungarians, Bosnians/Muslims, LGBT population, Albanians, migrants/asylum seekers, etc. The journalism that promotes discriminatory headlines and articles about the Roma certainly contributes to this perception.

Apart from the content that criminalises and labels the Roma, most of the newspaper articles cover the activities of the state institutions and international organisations in the field of education of the Roma, the celebration of the International Roma Day, Holocaust Day, topics such as housing conditions, health care, etc. The Roma in these articles do not represent the primary sources of the information, nor they are the crucial actors, but instead only mentioned subjects - while the main actors most often are state institutions or international organisations. Taken into consideration difficult material conditions of the Roma community, articles on the Roma are the most frequently written in relation with different types of aid, namely, the social allowance, etc. The media often cover measures that aim to foster employment, health care or education, yet there are very few positive stories about the Roma.

³ *Report on the Survey of the Public Opinion: Citizens' Attitude towards discrimination in Serbia*, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Belgrade, November 2019.

The positive context in reporting about Roma minority is mostly used in relation to cultural events. However, even when the positive stories and reports are published through ethnic categorisation, such representation of individuals can have ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, the positive portrayal of those who achieved a success that is above the average of the whole ethnic group can still deepen discrimination. Members of the majority population can wonder why that person is so special or continue to develop prejudices (“it’s easy for successful Roma to have good results if they graduate from the university thanks to affirmative measures, while no one helps our children”). The positive images of the success of particular individuals through the prism of the Roma ethnicity can thus create and perpetuate the stereotypes of the majority population. On the other hand, certain news or stories about political and other achievements of the members of the Roma community can sometimes be inspirational, and they can have an impact on the inclusion policies, with respect to power relations.⁴

Considering the observations mentioned above, I think that it is necessary to avoid Roma ethnic affiliation as an essential characteristic in reporting, particularly when it comes to criminal offences because it “adds fuel to the fire” of marginalisation and discrimination. Of course, this is valid for the members of the other ethnic groups as well. The situation is, however, different when it comes to the depiction of the essence of discrimination on the grounds of ethnic (or some other) affiliation. In the cases when individuals are vulnerable only because they are Roma and if there is a direct psychological or physical attack, this information is essential and relevant

4 For instance, member of the European Parliament since 2004, Livia Jaroka is Roma and currently the vice-president.

for reporting. In that way, the readers can see the vulnerability of one group that comes from its identity.

Numerous activists, in particular, those from Roma groups in the non-governmental sector, are confronting this type of media reporting. They are some kind of contemporary Roma “whistleblowers”. There is an increasing number of articles that present the real problems of the Roma professionally and in a non-discriminatory manner. However, there is still a long way to go before the media offer critical analyses of the questions of discrimination, racial hatred, as well as of the efficacy and breadth of the policies for inclusion of the Roma ethnic minority (and the policies related to them). Until we create such a media environment, which would then considerably change public attitudes, the whistleblowers will not stop warning and being loud.

DOES THE ECONOMY HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE ROMA CULTURE AND TRADITION?

Generally accepted point of view is that the following elements define the cultural identity of one people: language, religion, tradition and cultural heritage. On this account, we could ask: Do the Roma have their own separate culture or not? In seeking answers to this question, we should keep in mind the heterogeneity of Roma ethnic communities, as well as the different geographical area they inhabit, which have an influence on the construction of the identity of local Roma communities as well as on their social position. For that reason, it is very challenging to talk about a unique Roma tradition or, let's say, traditional ways of living or traditional vocations of the Roma. Romani language is not the same everywhere. There are many dialects,

and we still do not have a standard form of the language. Thus, Romani language forms its own distinctive area mainly as an oral language. Then, one could ask: Which religious group do we, the Roma, belong to? There is no a genuine religion of the Roma people, and nowadays, we practice various world's religions and profess different beliefs. One thing that is certain, regardless of this heterogeneity, is that we have distinct Roma culture. However modest it might be, we have our own culture, and we should not be ashamed of it or hide it, but develop and share it with other cultural communities. However, culture is not an autonomous sphere – it is intrinsically tied to the functioning of the social, economic and political life of a community. This means that the development of culture is also determined by the community's economic and political organisation. Subsequently, the culture can suffer consequences of the degradation or different ways of destruction of those systems. Actually, in the case of the Roma, we could conclude that the culture is the most visible victim of political and economic conditions.

The total number of the Roma in Serbia, according to the latest census from 2011, is 147.604, which makes up 2% of the overall population. There are over 500 Roma settlements in the country, and they are mainly on the outskirts of cities, often under bridges, too often in completely unhygienic conditions, etc. The media mostly represent the Roma community as the poorest one. Although that is the case, the media uses this fact in a way that deepens further stereotyping and discrimination.¹

The poverty of Roma communities is a result of historical discrimination discriminatory policies, of multifaceted factors of

1 For more information, see the text *Media Incitement to Criminalisation of the Roma* of Jelena Krivokapić, in this publication..

discriminatory policies. Anyhow, in the existing production conditions, one of the most important causes of the systemic marginalisation of the Roma is the unavailability of employment or discrimination at the labour market. The Roma are in all respects segregated and excluded from the modern labour configuration, they lack general and digital literacy skills, education and qualifications, they are not well informed (mainly due to unavailability of media in Romani language, and so on. For the reasons noted above, finding a job is almost a mission impossible for the inhabitants of informal Roma settlements. Nonetheless, another severe problem is that the employers – due to socially imposed stereotypes and racist mechanisms – do not want to employ the Roma.

What can be done in the direction of solving these multi-decade problems? The key document structuring the plan for Roma inclusion, the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025*,² mostly recognises the problems that our community faces and suggests the measures to help solve them. Nevertheless, it seems that the promised solutions principally remain promises. There is still a vast gap between the Roma and their non-Roma neighbours. It is the case in particular if we compare the youth statistics: the young Roma have almost less than half the chances to get employment, education or training, compared to the young from the majority population. To keep things the way they are has long-term consequences and blocks further possibilities for having a decent life.

The key reasons for poverty and a considerable (formal) unemployment percentage of the Roma population lie in the economic

2 The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men for the period from 2016 to 2025*. Available in English at: https://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/national_strategy_for_roma_inclusion_2016-2025.pdf

sphere, which is structured by racist mechanisms. Nonetheless, the dominant discourse often attributes the causes of poverty and unemployment of the Roma to their culture, tradition, attitudes, mentality, etc. *It is a part of the Roma culture to be lazy, not to do anything, except to have fun and organise weddings*, this would be a common sense attitude often reproduced in the discourse. Is this true? Are the Roma indolent? Are they lazy while every and whole day, be it +40 C or -15 C, thousands of them, together with their children, collect secondary materials for 1.000 or 2.000 dinars? While they struggle to secure the bare survival of their families? The state does not recognise their work, and it is legally invisible. Hence, it is even easier not to consider them as workers: they do not have formally recognized working arrangements or any insurance, they are stigmatised as state scroungers and dole bludgers, useless to society etc.

Another example of the dangerous discourse that uses culture and tradition as an explanation for the severe problems that the Roma community is facing: it is often publicly said that the Roma culture and tradition is the leading cause of early marriages of Roma girls. Roma girls indeed often do not continue the school but stay home so that they can learn how to cook and do other household work because at the age of 13-14 their parents marry them off. In this community as well as in the majority population, male children are in a better position than the female children are, and it is more probable that they will be able to continue their education. Hence, within the Roma community, there are also other lines of discrimination, which are not only founded on the ethnic identity but also on the sex/gender, just as there are deep class lines that divide community.

In any case, are the tradition, customs and cultural codes the main reason for early marriages of emotionally, psychologically and physiologically immature girls? Many of those who attempt to answer

the question why frequent early/child marriages occur use these dangerous and racially coloured empty phrases about culture and tradition. Are the early marriages genuinely a part of the Roma culture? The Roma community is the poorest: multiple and long-lasting forms of discrimination prevent opportunities for employment or for normal life conditions. Taking into account the above observations, we will understand that the minor marriages actually are just one of the ways to exit poverty. Thus, early marriages of Roma girls are not due to the Roma culture and tradition but to the patriarchal and class limitations. The patriarchal relations are deeply rooted in the whole society, and they do not bypass the Roma community. Yet, we should take into concern that the economic restraints condition Roma marriages: in economically conditioned situations, the members of the poorest community use different ways to exit poverty, and early marriage is one of them.

Minor or so-called arranged marriages are a “sensitive” topic, often used to fuel the prejudices, which are, in our society, mainly associated with the Roma community. The public attitude is, for a significant part, formed through the media, in conjunction with the personal opinions of the individuals who think that the early marriage is exclusive feature of Roma tradition. Unfortunately, this is not only the opinion of individuals and the media, which often slip into the production of scandals, but also of the institutions. For instance, the Court of Appeal in Belgrade, recently, in the case of sexual intercourse with a minor that resulted in pregnancy, found the accused not guilty on the grounds of the Roma tradition and culture.³ In conclusion, when an adult engages in sexual intercourse with an underage Roma

3 See: Svenka Savić, *Justice for Roma Women. Regarding the Shameful Court Decision: Fake Multiculturalism of the majority Society*. Available at: <https://www.autonomija.info/svenka-savic-pravda-za-romkinje.html>

girl, it does not appear to be the same as if that person had sexual intercourse with a Serbian girl of the same age, for instance. In the second case, there are chances that the perpetrator would be accused of violation of child and minors rights. In the first case, it is far too easy to blame it all on the Roma tradition and culture, thus perpetuating and consolidating something as tradition and culture.

The existing affirmative measures for secondary and higher education enrolment may have contributed to an increase in the number of educated Roma, which might, in some cases, have helped to their better positioning on the labour market. Notwithstanding the acquired education, we should keep in mind that the significant number of the Roma remain unemployed or obtain jobs that are lower-paid than those for which they are qualified. Still, the affirmative education measures are for most of the Roma out of reach: it could be asked to which extent these measures help children from the informal Roma settlements? Would the Roma from informal settlements have a different “culture” and “tradition” if all of their children would have truly equal possibilities and *conditions* for education and decent employment opportunities? Is it specific only for the Roma culture that the boys are more encouraged to earn money and girls to cook and be good housewives, or does it also dominate our society as a whole? From that perspective, we could ask are early marriages a part of the Roma culture and tradition, or are they instead an attempt to find the best way to survive?

The economic position of the Roma community, great disparities in living conditions, multiple forms of discrimination, lacking in basic amenities and insufficient means of subsistence, inhumane living conditions etc.: these are parts of the constant reality in which the Roma community lives (or rather barely survives). Such a situation is even harder for the female members of the Roma community,

because of the patriarchal relations that are also pervasive for this ethnic group as for others. Therefore, the combination of the difficult economic conditions and patriarchal relations is what essentially determines early marriages, not the tradition and cultural codes that explain nothing but are used in lack of more plausible explanations. This is yet another way to continue to marginalise the Roma community, as well as to perpetuate, control, monitor, and deepen all layers of marginalisation. As long as the economic and all the other social factors that shape the situation of the Roma community are not genuinely changing for the better, “tradition” and “culture” will continue to be buzzwords used to point the finger at a wrong culprit and divert attention from the real one.



A DOLL FOR A ROMA GIRL

Child adoption in Serbia is usually associated with a long process, complicated bureaucratic machinery, and emotional and psychological exhaustion of potential parents. The media representations, supported by personal stories and experiences shared on the forums and in newspaper articles, do not contribute at all to promotion of adoption in our country. I do not recall that any organisation, or the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, organised, for instance, a media campaign that would encourage couples and individuals to adopt a child. Yet, in spite of this spectre of adoption, some people decide to engage in this process, for personal or other motives. My partner and I were among them.

However, our case is untypical in many ways compared with the usual child adoption scenarios in Serbia. Namely, we had been on the list of potential adoptive parents for only three weeks, when they first called us regarding the child that we wanted. Two weeks later, we had an informative interview in the local Social centre office. After a week, the child was in our home. In other words, only two months had gone by from the moment when our names appeared on the list to the child's arrival home. And no, we had not been lucky, nor did we have any connections and personal contacts in the services in charge of the adoption process and choice of parents; and no, it was not a combination of circumstances that saved us from waiting many years. We wanted a Roma girl.

We knew that the process would be short. When we had stated that we wanted our daughter to be Roma, the answer was that our phone would continuously be ringing since no one (or hardly anyone) wants to adopt the children from vulnerable social groups. Our desire caused a (twofold) surprise and astonishment.

The wish to have a daughter was estimated to be untypical, because the fathers in Serbia want sons. My partner was put in the situation to answer the question of why he wanted a daughter. I believe that the parents who desire sons or do not specify the sex of the child are not asked the same question. We insisted on our child being a daughter. And we insisted on her being Roma. That caused even greater astonishment coupled with curiosity. The protocol for the psychological evaluation of parents interested in adoption was supposed to be a mask for that curiosity. In our case, they also evaluated our suitability (i.e. normality) because we expressed such a wish. I have done detailed research on the matter, and, as far as I know, the couples who explicitly *do not* want to be parents of a Roma child, are not subject to further questioning with the purpose to establish their psychological and ethical suitability because it is assumed to be normal in our society.

The workers of the local office of the Social centre even suggested that we leave an option for our child not to be from a socially vulnerable group. During every interview, they would request us to explain once more or, more precisely, to justify, our “particular, extraordinary request”, as they said on one occasion.

In other words, the stereotypes and racialised attitudes do not require any justification; they are a part of the paradigmatic habitus and therefore are legitimate wishes.¹ At the same time, the desires that break the racialised frames have to be under constant surveillance and questioning, control and different pressures.

Child adoption policies in the Republic of Serbia are a reflection of the established socio-cultural perceptions deeply imbued with essentialism and racial elements. The Social centre workers told us on one occasion that the most wanted baby in Serbia is a healthy boy, up to one-year-old, blond with blue eyes.² A desire to have a Roma child is hard to understand and causes patronising and condescending attitudes. The people from our closest environment adopted such an attitude. Most often, we would hear the “affirmative” statements originating from an unconscious prejudice, such as *The Roma can be good pupils as well, it was on television the other day*, etc., which, we were guessing, were supposed to encourage us. In their everyday “small talks” people reproduce dangerous stereotypes, based on a complete absence of awareness that people are foremost shaped by the living conditions and not by “blood”, “origins”, “ethnicity” etc. For instance, when it comes to the health of our child, I sporadically hear: *How is*

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- 1 In one conversation, social workers asked my partner whether he is a socialist because only that fact could clarify our desire or, as they said, request.
 - 2 Huge majority of adoptive parents want a healthy non-Roma child. Paradoxically, there are higher chances that a Roma child is healthy, because the reason for adoption is usually not a health issue of the mother, which is often a case in the non-Roma population.

she getting sick so often, Gypsy children are very resistant and similar derogatory comments. In fact, we succeeded in destroying immediately one of the stereotypes (*Gypsies smell bad and that's genetically*) while it took us a week to deal with another one (*Gypsies have rough skin*).

Institutional discrimination was visible in the conversations with the state employees, even in an exaggerated positive reaction to our desire, and underlining our noble intention and moral virtues, which is often a way for people to feel better while they perpetuate racist ideologemes. It perfidiously keeps showing up where we least expect it. To give an example: our daughter did not have complete medical documentation, her medical diagnosis was incomplete, and her physical characteristics, specific for the Roma population, were wrongly interpreted. Of course, I cannot say that these mistakes occurred only because the child is Roma. However, I can say that these oversights, faults and irresponsible acts happened because the child was, for some time, without parental care.

Indeed, one of the most pernicious perceptions of our daughter is the total negation of her Roma identity. We often hear questions and comments like: *how can her tan be so beautiful, she is so tanned* (in April!), *do you take her to a solarium*, and remarks like *many Montenegrins have dark skin, so she will not be outstanding*, and so on. Evidently, people cannot accept the idea that a nurtured and “well” dressed child on a scooter in public spaces, usually reserved for the majority population (squares, playgrounds, theatres), can be Roma. Additionally, it is also hard for them to imagine that the parents who do not have the same skin colour as their daughter could love a Roma girl.

Since our three-year-old daughter was already playing imaginative game roles, I decided to buy a doll for her. I was looking for one that would be close to her and with which she could identify - these are key functions of having dolls in early childhood. I knew that the

toys convey the symbolic order of the community and that they are generally very restrictive in terms of shaping girl's identity (smiling, slim, with thick long hair and minimal clothing). Hence, I persistently looked for a doll that would have the physical characteristics of my daughter. Of course, it is difficult to find a doll with a darker skin colour on our market. Therefore, I decided to get a rag doll, because they are more beautiful than the plastic ones and I could have it made in the model of my choice. My only request was that the fabric had to be darker. Still, to my great surprise, or rather dismay, several doll makers refused to make such a doll with a simple "explanation" *I don't do that*. Finally, I have found a doll maker whose offer already comprised dolls made of different colours fabric. I was the first person who ordered a doll that would not have a white tan. Frankly, this might also be because I can afford to pay 50 euros for such a toy, which is a privilege nowadays in Serbia. Dolls for Roma girls are, as it turns out, a privilege in many aspects. Subsequently, the imaginary of being a Roma girl is a privilege. Roma girls are taught that entering the symbolic order is a privilege and that it is inaccessible to them. Already in early age and with types of toys, there are roots of gender-based and in this case, gender and ethnicity (and, indeed, class!) based violence.

Still, this is the reality in Serbia. In 2019, we witnessed the brutality of the institutionalised gender and ethnicity-based violence. The decision of the Court of Appeals in Belgrade that found not guilty the adult Roma who had sexual intercourse with a minor, thirteen-year-old Roma girl, has stirred the public. There was an agitated debate, and the organisations, such as the Autonomous Women's Centre, as well as individuals, reacted with strong disapproval. Part of the public, however, defended the court decision, stumbling upon legal shenanigans ("legal fallacy that could not have been eliminated" was the basis for acquittal of the man). It is not my intention to analyse this case:

this is, undoubtedly, a very complicated and challenging legal case. And yes, maybe this decision can be justified in the context of the current situation of the extramarital couple (in any case, the law prohibits extramarital union with a minor): the girl gave birth to a child, has dropped out of school and the man is providing for the family (he would not be able to do it from a prison). Nonetheless, the court decision discourse is an open, pulsating wound of our society deeply divided on the basis of ethnicity, class and gender. The court could have made the that decision, acknowledging that our society does not have social micro-institutions which would take care of the under-aged mother and her baby, providing her with financial aid, security and an opportunity to graduate from school and be independent of a partner. Yet, this would be a direct blow to the state and gender-based ideology. It is much easier to “hit” a “socially vulnerable group”. Certainly, precisely because it cannot strike back. Accordingly, the argumentation of the judicial decision is that early sexual intercourse is a part of the Roma cultural tradition or practice of Roma girls.

In conclusion, the court decided to support the vital stereotypes about sexualised Roma girls, because the majority of the population will not react to it. Just the same as they will not respond to the legal ghettoisation or sexual targeting of the Roma. The individual characteristics of the young man were taken into account, as it was stated in the argumentation since the “legal fallacy” was taken as an alleviating circumstance. I feel uncomfortable even writing that they have not for a second asked themselves whether thirteen-year-old Roma girls are mature enough to have sexual intercourse or a partner relationship, regardless of the number of documented cases. They are not. This is what the law says, on the grounds of psychological insights and evaluations. And the judges, in this case, neglected it. The law excludes Roma girls, depriving them of their rights beyond all reasonable and civilisational limits.

At about the same time, in autumn 2019, media reported the rape of a fifteen-year-old girl in Zadar. All over Croatia, in Serbia, as well as on social networks, there was a campaign under the slogan *Justice for girls*. The girl who was raped is not Roma. The case that ended with the shameful decision of the Court of Appeal in Belgrade did not motivate protests under the slogan *Justice for girls*, because in the collective consciousness, in this part of the world, thirteen-year-old Roma are not girls. Moreover, *Justice for Roma girls* did not result with reactions on social networks or protests, although one Roma girl had her childhood brutally interrupted and wounded. She does not have the support from her environment or the system that is putting her where she will be completely invisible and silenced. I will allow myself to be sentimental as a counterpoint to the dehumanisation of Roma girls, and I wonder what she whispered to her doll while dreaming her childhood dreams. If she ever had a doll. Or childhood dreams.



LACK OF POLITICAL UNITY OF THE ROMA IN SERBIA

According to the official data, the Roma ethnic minority is the second largest minority in Serbia, with about 146 000 members. Unofficially, this number is at least two times higher. The conditions in which the members of this minority live are causing them numerous problems. The problem of precise statistics is one of them because it is difficult for those who do not have legal documents to register in the official census and be a part of the statistics.

The Roma ethnic community members have shared the problems of other people in Serbia for centuries, since their arrival to this part of the world. However, they are still the poorest, most segregated and discriminated community in the country.

The reasons for such a development of the situation are numerous. Still, one of the most important is the fact that, for over a decade, the Roma do not have their political representatives who would represent them in the power structures, fight for solving their problems and coordinate the policies that would improve their lives.

Common goals

Although it is evident that in the circle of Roma non-governmental organisation activism the serious political participation of the Roma ethnic minority is increasingly being considered, for the moment, there are no concrete steps towards major organisational changes of the community itself.

The non-existence of a Roma national state that would put pressure on the state institution as well as organise the community to establish common political goals makes the process of political participation of the Roma community even more difficult and complex.

The lack of any political structure of the Roma minority leads to the problem of divided positions on the most crucial political questions. Taken into account that the members of the Roma ethnic community face all sorts of hardships, the current situation requires selecting commonalities that can be considered a priority in solving problems and for the future development of the community. Above all, the political articulation of Roma should comprise common attitudes regarding priority questions such as employment (addressing the problem of discrimination in employment), education, housing, etc.

Without harmonising their positions and establishing common political goals of all the Roma who in any way represent the Roma minority in the institutions, it is not possible to create pressure on the political scene and thus achieve any results. Hence, without a structure that

a serious political organisation would make possible, Roma minority - that indeed has certain political strength - remains non-articulated and completely marginalised.

Reasons for the lack of political organisation

The first and certainly the most pressing reason for the lack of political organisation of the community is the fact that the Roma ethnic minority lives on the margins of the society, with the most severe existential problems. We cannot expect from the people who are not sure whether, the next day, they will have enough food for themselves and their families, to easily become politically engaged. Improving the basic living conditions is a decisive aspect of a more serious political engagement of the Roma ethnic minority. In the current situation, the poor and hungry Roma population is nothing more to the non-Roma politicians than potential electoral votes that they can easily buy. This crowd does not have the capacity to hold the politicians accountable for their pre-electoral promises, nor do they have any influence in the sphere of real politics.

The essence of the capitalist system, in which we currently live, is based on the exploitation of the poorest strata of society. The members of those strata do not have almost any vertical mobility through the system because they are coerced to be exploited. Therefore, one could say that the Roma, as the poorest members of the society in capitalism, will never prosper because – among other reasons – the influential capitalists will disable their political participation.

Furthermore, the nationalist and right-wing movements are getting stronger, and assault on the members of the Roma community are increasingly tolerated in Serbia. Hence, it is clear that the present

combination of circumstances is not at all favorable for the political organisation of the Roma minority.¹

In the context of political organising of the Roma, the essential fact is that the behavior of the individuals that the Roma minority considers as their “leaders” reflects the arrogant behavior of most of the politicians. This phenomenon is the most visible among the members of *National Council of the Roma National Minority of the Republic of Serbia* as well as those Roma who represented the key institutions in the process of implementation of the project *Roma Decade*.

The Roma who somehow obtain certain positions within institutions frequently mimic the arrogance of the non-Roma politicians in the interactions with their community. These individuals represent a considerable part of the problems of the Roma community and should not be considered in any way as their genuine leaders because they are only and exclusively party hangers-on.² A certain number of Roma receive threats that they will lose their job or be harmed, which diverts them from the community interests.

What are the possibilities?

Although the situation is challenging, the Roma ethnic minority needs political organising more than ever. Taking into consideration all mentioned above, one could get the impression that the political organising of the Roma is almost impossible. Nevertheless, establishing the common political goals of all the Roma has a certain potential that is not being used at the moment.

1 <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a525773/Srbska-cast-oduzela-konja-maloletniku-u-Nisu-za-primer.html>

2 <https://www.masina.rs/?p=3675>

An important space for the organisation of the Roma community can be achieved by working on those common points. One of these commonalities is the organising of the secondary materials collectors. Many of Roma from almost all Roma settlements work as secondary materials collectors. Their work is legally unrecognised, even though it enables the existence of the recycling industry, which is owned by the private sector.³ The collectors do not have formal workers' status or any insurance and they, at best, for a whole day of work can gain about 1.000 dinars. For all the reasons mentioned above, by organising numerous collectors in unions and cooperatives, it is possible to organise the whole Roma minority.

In this way, it is possible to define rallying points regarding common problems that Roma from different parts of the country face because, in spite of geographical diversities and distances, they share similar or same issues.

Parliamentary political participation of the Roma through a self-organised political party is almost impossible at the moment. The cost of registering a new political party and collecting signatures for participation in the elections is considerable (around fifty thousand euros just for notarisation of the signatures), thus, the question of financing the eventual political party of the Roma arises. Even if the financial resources would be secured, it is almost certain that such party would not be able to reach the census due to significant number of the Roma who are blackmailed on different grounds by the political parties that are financially stronger. Therefore, it is not realistic to

3 Collectors of the secondary raw materials provide up to 80% of the raw materials for the companies that are in the recycling business in Serbia, even though they are not formally employed in those companies. For more information see: Robar Kasumović, *How to Unionise Invisible Workers?* In: Portal *Mašina*, 22nd November 2019. Available at: <https://www.masina.rs/?p=11217>

expect that the Roma could represent the interests of their community in that way.

Nonetheless, the Roma can actively participate in the creation of new political options with non-Roma citizens. Participation in these processes would result in imposing the problems of the Roma community as some of the issues that newly established political options would deal with since there are entwined political goals. Any new political party that has the intention to work on social and economic justice ought to address the problems of the Roma community very seriously. The most legitimate way to do so would be to include the Roma in every phase of the process of politicization.

It is, therefore, necessary for the Roma community to establish common attitudes in setting priorities of the broader community and to organise around those common points in order to create solutions through the process of political participation. Consolidation with the other social strata of the oppressed and exploited population opens the space for the unity of the Roma community.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AS DEPOLITICIZATION OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

(Review of *Roma between
Multiculturalism and the Austerity Policy*)¹

Inclusion is a magic word around which revolves the political projection of the European *Other*. The idea of this policy is: the Roma should be conveniently integrated into the ethnic majority communities while remaining Roma, and all of this should occur under the guidance of the supranational European institutions. In a certain sense, Europe did not only invent programs and projects for social inclusion of the Roma into the majority societies, but it also invented the Roma identity through a process of homogenisation of different ethnic, religious,

1 The text was initially published on the website *Slobodni Filozofski*, available at: <http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2019/12/inkluzija-depolitizacija-romske-zajednice.html>

national, race, geographic and linguistic communities. The process of construction of the Roma identity started when the idea of multiculturalism came knocking on the door, at the end of the XX century. This combination of production and collective experience of the imaginary ethnic collectivity was formed as a part of the capitalist mechanisms and dynamics that govern ethnic, racial, national and other differences. Therefore, the policy for the integration of the Roma is inextricably entwined within the neoliberal coordinates.

On the surface, it emerged primarily from a normative and political framework: many documents and strategies have been written as well as the measures for the solution of conflicts that are igniting along the *us-them* dividing lines between the majority and the Roma communities. However, “the Roma question” is mostly recognised in the context of culture, entirely in accordance with the overall culturalisation of what is supposed to be political and inseparable from economic. On that account, all the discrimination and marginalisation of the largest European minority is treated as if it mainly resulted from a *cultural difference*. At the beginning of creation of the European model of policy for the social inclusion of the Roma, and in the time of the retrenchment of the Keynesian-Fordist social state model, the Roma were legally recognised and identified as an ethnic particularity. Culturally specified “Roma community” was constructed, while, based on the production of exclusive cultural differences and European institutions’ stereotyping, the Roma identity was created as only another link in the chain of cultural differences. According to the paradigm of multiculturalism, these differences should function in peaceful coexistence, recognising each other as differences and appeasingly participating in the capitalist market exchange paradise. This is entirely on the lines of neoliberal forms of creation of an imaginary for (ethnic, national, supranational, etc.) collectivity

through production, management, discipline and control of the differences: they are desirable as cultural differences, yet the capitalist market, ultimately, gives a universal framework to all differentiations. According to that same paradigm, the class conflict does not seem to exist, and all the other conflicts can be pacified, put under surveillance and disciplined by a wise techno-management. Thus, identity is established and culturally founded. In addition, the wave of documents mentioned above – integrative policy plans, intercultural dialogues strategies, integrative multiculturalism measures – flooded all the other ideas how “the Roma question” should be solved, or how the discrimination and poverty of the Roma community should be addressed. Moreover, all of this is declared as a policy.

The collection of texts *The Roma between Multiculturalism and Austerity Policy*² sets out to analyse to which extent social inclusion policy, designed in such a way, actually depoliticizes the Roma community. The first two introductory texts of Ivan Radenković present the context in which depoliticization is understood. On the one hand, “the Roma question” had not existed before the European institutions and bureaucracies invented it (by forming a uniform Roma identity into which they squeezed very heterogeneous communities). On the other hand, this expert-bureaucratic “policy” which balances between the civil society organisations and the state institutions, and which, in the early 2000s, could be lucrative, was never a policy in a genuine sense. Of course, if we do not apprehend policy as techno-management “from above”, by which the roots of social inequalities are not eliminated but merely disciplined, or as political posturing through which the Roma elite tries to grab as many crumbs as possible and buy off

2 *Romi između multikulturalizma i politike štednje*, editor: Tamara Baković Jadžić, publisher: Roma Forum of Serbia, 2018.

the votes of the Roma people for even smaller crumbs... If, however, we understand policy in the broadest sense of the term as a collective practice or the human ability to self-organise their communities as a *public thing* or *common issue* that is supposed to be beneficial to all, based on equality (democracy aspect), then every technocratic management of the communities based on particular identities – which are then divided – and on the inequality (aspect of exclusion-inclusion in the hierarchical model of the society) is rightfully classified as *police*. Slightly along the lines of the Rancière's differentiation of policy and police, Radenković states that the current European strategy of managing the Roma question is rather a *policy* than *politics*:

“I distinguish the term *policy* from the term *politics* because it refers to narrow technocratic-expert types of management. At the same time politics, as a more complex notion, in the broadest sense, would comprehend collective-active social forms referring to the problems of managing public affairs, solving but also producing conflicts (interior and foreign affairs), and problems of managing production and distribution of the social resources (economic and fiscal policy), etc.”

Techno-policy that “churns out *policy* documents” is actually a symptom of failure and “policy inflation”. (Ivan Radenković, *European management of the Roma Question as an Escape from the Politics*, p. 18) European engineering, which is used to keep the potentials of democracy under control, is, thus, an indicator of the essence of social inclusion “policies”: the lack of politics.

Simultaneously, national and supranational (European) framework of the inclusion “policy” is occurring in the constellation of the world divided by the lines: center/core – semi-periphery – periphery. In such a milieu, the inclusion of the Roma population is, more

or less, planned in the following way: 1) the core states have financial resources and, together with different European and other institutions, allocate funds and bank loans for social inclusion of the Roma; 2) the semi-periphery and periphery states do not have enough financial means for implementation of these “policies” 3) the governments of these states apply austerity measures and thus drastically slash funds for social transfers, which significantly reduces the state allowances for the Roma; 4) the semi-periphery and periphery states entirely or partially pass the buck to the civil sector as well as local government units; 5) civil society organisations work on the integrative “policy” while their funds come, partially, from the state and mainly from the sponsors from the West; in other words, the money comes from the core states; 6) (semi)periphery countries and their civil sector at the beginning had received ample financial aid for implementation of this policy, yet when the money partially stop flowing (on the heels of 2008 financial crisis) and the doctrine of multiculturalism was shook up, the “policy” for the Roma integration in the (semi)peripheral states has remained only an obligation required by the conditions for the membership in the European Union. And, of course, it is welcomed as a folklore ornament in the discourse of the liberal and right-wing politicians.

An even more bizarre part of the European tolerance and integration project is that the European core states invented the inclusion “policy”, yet, they completely, or for a significant part, exclude the Roma communities from their societies. The most powerful European countries govern the policies for the Roma community by expelling the very same community from their national borders. To give an example, in 2013, France deported the Roma, “the German government undertook similar actions regarding the Roma from Kosovo, as

well as the governments of the Scandinavian and Benelux countries”.³ Germany continued to exclude the Roma community by applying a series of restrictive regulations, such as creating a “safe country of origins” list in 2015.⁴ It made the right to seek asylum (vastly used by the Roma community) very limited, and the Roma were in a considerable number of cases deported to those countries.

The observations stated above point out the essential failure of the European frame of inclusion “policy” for the Roma community. That is primarily evident in addressing the problems of the Roma community as isolated from the issues of the broader community, as well as in the European efforts to control migratory fluxes and prevent workforce emigration to the core capitalist countries: all in accord with the neoliberal labour regimes. The attitude of Europe towards cheaper (non-skilled and skilled) labour force is complicated because it is basically about the mechanisms for maintaining the competition with the aim of flexibilisation of work (for which the Roma *reserve army of labour* is needed, in specific periods) and creating the conditions in which parts of the population are an absolute surplus on the labour market (hence, the Roma labour force is unnecessary in specific periods). The tension between the need and the surplus of the cheap labour force (consisting also of the Roma) reflects in the fact that the Roma particularity is rhetorically accepted in the core states, while in reality, the Roma community is internally excluded

3 Andrea Radak, *The Roma, Eternal Foreigners Sided to the Edge of Law*, Bilten, 1st November 2018.

4 For more information see: *Not Safe at All. The Safe Countries of Origin Legislation and the Consequences for Roma Migrants*, editors: Wenke Christoph, Tamara Baković Jadžić and Vladan Jeremić, published by the Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung Office for the South East Europe, 2016. Available in English at: https://www.rosalux.rs/sites/default/files/publications/safe_countries_publication_web_2016.pdf

and only externally included. That is to say: on the ideological plane, there are efforts towards integration, but on the economic plane, only as integration occur as far as possible from the core countries' backyard; therefore, let Roma be integrated into some other societies! Inclusion "policy" in the regime of the labour precarisation and with reconfigured contours of the labour division is, thus, in accord with the general economic currents of the neoliberal world.

As concerns Serbia, it is one of the Balkans safe countries of origin to which Roma are forcefully deported;⁵ still, it is the country in which a considerable number of the Roma ethnic minority members already live.⁶ In Serbia, the policy for inclusion of the Roma is entirely defined by the European framework, projects and recommendations. This policy is not only copied but, as well, imposed. No government in Serbia has adopted the inclusion strategies because it suddenly got enlightened and started showing interest for the largest and, on the racist grounds, most marginalised minority community in Europe. The policies for Roma in Serbia were initiated in accordance with the European directions that for the Serbian government were an entry

5 About different issues that the *Strategy for Reintegration of the Returnees in Serbia* does not solve (from inadequate conditions in the reception centers, through xenophobic reactions of the local population to complications that occur when they try to get personal documents etc.) see: Julija Janačković, „*The Dawn of the Readmission in Serbia*“ p. 113-118, as well as: Zoran Kuzmanović, „*Report from the field – Integration of the Returnees in Practice*“ p. 51-54, editor: Roma Forum Serbia, Belgrade, 2018. Available in English at: <http://www.frs.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FRS-izvestaj-EN-web-final.pdf>

6 Because of the problem of ethnic mimicry and lack of registration methodology, the exact number of the Roma in Serbia is unknown. However, most of the data show that there are at least 200,000 and potentially even up to 600,000 Roma. The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men 2016-2025*, p. 18. Available in English at: https://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/national_strategy_for_roma_inclusion_2016-2025.pdf

ticket to the European Union from the very beginning. The Serbian government must adopt policies that aim to include the Roma population into the majority community because otherwise, it cannot close the Chapter 23 in the process of negotiations for Serbia's accession to the European Union.

As for the Serbian version of techno-management, the "policy" for the Roma inclusion also mainly revolves around the policy documents and bureaucratically conforms to the European regulations. Thus, in Serbia as well, the "ten-year plans" appeared as key documents for the implementation of the inclusion policy for the Roma community, adopted for a ten-year period. The first was the *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015*, then the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025*. There is a series of complementary documents, reports and action plans, but these two strategic documents comprise the leading guidelines for the inclusion of the Roma community. Besides the gender-politically correct addition to the title (Roma Women), the new document added the component of the social protection to the existing priority topics: education, employment, health care and housing.

At the time of the implementation of the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, the emphasis of the Roma inclusion policy was on the area of education. The role of education was exaggerated at the beginning, as if the children could get an education while they lack food or other basic conditions for learning and as if a degree can magically liberate people from poverty. Nonetheless, being priority did not ensure the implementation of the education policy without difficulties. On the contrary, in spite of the results achieved by the affirmative measures and quotas, the main problems of the education of the Roma have remained: scope and the rate of the Roma children enrolled in the pre-school, elementary and secondary school are still very low in comparison

with the children from the majority population; the language barrier (because the Roma children do not speak well enough the language in which the education is delivered while the constitutional right to mother tongue education is not respected); the discrimination of the Roma children is systemic and is visible also in the fact that the Roma children often enroll in “special education classes”; the percentage of the functionally and technologically illiterate Roma is still high, which significantly restricts their employment possibilities.

In the course of the *Decade*, education was also supposed to be the field in which a certain number of the Roma would be able to get employment. Nevertheless, here arose other knotty problems, as the example of pedagogical assistants shows. Pedagogical assistance was introduced in secondary education as a part of affirmative measures. It went a long way from the pre-school Roma groups, launched in 1997, to the final institutionalisation of the working place for the Roma in 2011. Although the role of the Roma pedagogical assistants was designed as a central pillar of the additional educational support to the vulnerable children’s groups, the work of the pedagogical assistant became yet another precarious and poorly paid job. Such development opens a whole array of problems: this job position, with a temporary work contract, is treated as a provisional measure for external assistants, based on the decisions of the school principals; the scope of the work is not clearly defined, therefore, the pedagogical assistants have many obligations which are not necessarily related to pedagogical assistance and which overburden them while state seeks to “compensate for the restricted scope of the social care and lack of public services” (Sladana Miladinović, *Prekarious Position of the Pedagogical Assistants*, p. 96); the salary of pedagogical assistants is equivalent to the minimum wage in Serbia and depends on the financing of the local self-governments; even though for obtaining this insecure

job one has to complete a comprehensive training program, the profession is underestimated and treated as less valuable by the regular teaching staff, hence, it does not have an equal position in educational system; although envisioned as work with children from the vulnerable groups, the pedagogical assistance is reduced to the work with the Roma children exclusively, additionally contributing to the Roma community segregation.

To sum up, things did not go smoothly in the area of education, while the results of the educational measures at the end of the *Decade of Roma* served for bragging about some kind of integration results. Symbolically, in 2015, when the *Decade of Roma* ended, the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić said that Roma are “traditionally poor” as if he wanted to suggest that the fault is not in the projects and inclusion policies, but that the poverty is somehow inserted in the Roma identity (the Roma culture or maybe even Roma genetics). The failure of the *Decade’s* measures has further spurred chauvinist stereotypes and violence against the Roma. Furthermore, the rhetoric that produces statements as the one made by the president essentialises the position of the Roma citizens and normalises the poverty, which is “attributed to the cultural identity of the Roma community”. (Milena and Jelena Relić, *Traditionally Poor and Discriminated*, p. 37-38)

Still, the Roma in Serbia remained poor and marginalised; they are segregated on the outskirts of the cities in settlements which are sometimes surrounded by walls (example is the Roma settlement *Marko Orlović* in Kruševac); they have no other choice than to get by in the substandard settlements where they often do not have access to potable water and grid-connected electricity; the jerry-built shelters do not comply with the minimum requirements for the adequate housing, while simultaneously their roof over head is under constant threats of confiscation and eviction (for instance, the mass eviction

of the Roma settlement from the city dump Vinča, as well as the uncertain future of the Roma settlement *Crvena Zvezda* in Niš); the housing problem is not solved neither by the “famous” social housing program, envisaged for the most vulnerable but in reality created for the market and inaccessible to the ones in need: “the role of the state in solving the housing questions (...) is still minimised and relocated in the frame of voluntary action” (Slađana Miladinović, *Roma Housing between Basic Human Right and Urban Segregation*, p. 83); the Roma still do not have access to the labor market; considerable financial aid from European and other funds for Roma inclusion have been squandered or, often, embezzled because “although very well planned on paper, the state activities came down to (...) maximal bureaucratisation and malversation in which certain organisations of the civil society played a paramount role” (Robert Kasumović, *The End of the Roma Decade*, p. 69); the political representatives of the Roma are marionettes of the parties in power and yet another small part of the political elite alienated from their own people, etc.

The first inclusion project has ended unsuccessfully and made clear that education cannot solve the burning issues of the Roma community. The second inclusion project (ongoing) introduced the social policy as an additional priority area of the Roma policies. Though it seems paradoxical to introduce social protection in time of austerity measures, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, under the guidance of the minister Aleksandar Vulin, figured out how to deal with “the indolent Roma who live at the expense of the state”: therefore, from 2016, the social allowances for the vulnerable groups and unemployed are conditioned by an obligation to work. The eligibility requirements of social assistance programs thus have become –tightened. The Minister explained: “healthy and able-bodied users of the social assistance will have to understand that they

will have to work for it” (Aleksandar Vulin, *Social Assistance is not a Vocation, it will not be Unconditional any more*, in newspaper “Blic”). Actually, Vulin was not the first to conceive the idea: it is one more measure copied from the neoliberal Europe and its doctrine shifted from the *welfare* to *workfare* regime. Nothing is for free anymore, and according to the dominant ideology the unemployed themselves are to blame for being in an unfortunate position. Therefore, the threat to suspend social allowances should have a function of stimulation to work, because the reasons why some people are unemployed come off as discouragement issue, lack of motivation and as consequences of other personal traits of the “lazy” people. This logic leads to the conclusion that people are poor by their own will, and when the state awards those who are “indolent”, those who work become discouraged. Take from the poor to give to the rich and to stimulate the economy – this is the ultimate motto of the *workfare* imaginarium. Consequently, following the inclusion “policy” in Serbia, the Roma are obliged to work for the social welfare.

Although the problem allegedly is in the insufficient stimulation and work engagement of the unemployed, those who work up to eleven hours a day to gain a maximum amount of 2,000 dinars (about 17 euros) are not even recognised as workers because they have to navigate between illegal work and social allowances. In Serbia, the Roma survive mostly by combining low incomes from informal jobs and small amounts of social allowances. Nonetheless, “the social aid provision stipulates that the users are obliged to accept jobs that they are offered for the wage that is much lower than the minimum wage and to put aside the jobs that are their main source of income, for which they do not have a work contract”. (Jelena Kasumović, *Inclusion by Social Repression*, p. 87)

The survival from the mixture of social welfare and informal job incomes is particularly called into question in the case of one of the biggest Roma groups: collectors of secondary raw materials. These extralegal workers in the waste management, whose number in Serbia is higher than 3,000 according to the unofficial data, would lose the right to the social allowance and thus further reduce their already low income if the legalisation (announced continuously in the strategic documents) occurs. On the other hand, the enormous profits of the recycling industry and the state⁷ are based on the super-exploitation of this informal and invisible labour force. The other competitors in the waste management business even perceive this as a theft of the city property (so, the local city authorities in Novi Sad hired private security agencies to guard the trash containers and pursue and punish Roma collectors). And while this situation is favorable for the major capitalist players, the small capitalists are looking for a way to grab the remaining profit and eliminate Roma collectors from the waste management business.

The proposal of a solution for the collectors, pursuant to the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia for period from 2016 to 2025*, aims to encourage these workers to become entrepreneurs and foster self-employment programs, which would put the Roma in an even worse position. The small amounts of money that are allocated for starting a business are

7 “Up to 75% of the raw materials for the recycling industry are provided by the informal collectors of the secondary raw materials. Thanks to their work, this industry (for which they provide raw materials) and the state (that collects the VAT [value-added tax] for the raw materials that are sold) make multi-million profits almost without any investments. The state does not recognize collectors of the secondary raw materials as workers and therefore cannot exercise any rights that a work contract grants” Robert Kasumović, *What Smells at the Dump?* Mašina 27th June 2017.

another problematic component of this “policy” according to which the Roma should survive in the market competition arena, in spite of their lowest position on the racially and ethnically segmented labour market. At the same time, the *Strategy* does not offer the possibility to employ the collectors in the “public utility companies, but only requires legalization of the collectors’ status, their individual registration and stimulation of entrepreneurs” (Jasmina Drmaku, *Collectors of the Secondary Raw Materials – Persecution instead of Inclusion*, p. 108). It does not show, either, that the party hangers-on run those public utility companies. Such inclusion “policy” does not recognise the necessity for the companies to remain public property and for a fight to take them away from the party interests and direct them towards a policy organized around human needs. So-called inclusion policy continues and strengthens the practices that systemically exclude the Roma population from the juridical sphere of labour while hyper-exploiting them on the grounds of racialized and chauvinist divisions of the labour.

The second decade of the Roma inclusion has already advanced in Serbia: still under the vigilant eye of the European techno-police government and in the spirit of multicultural discourse that is, at least rhetorically, a regular component of the government’s iconography. However, the reality of the Roma community remains a cruel race to the bottom, as the editor of this collection concludes:

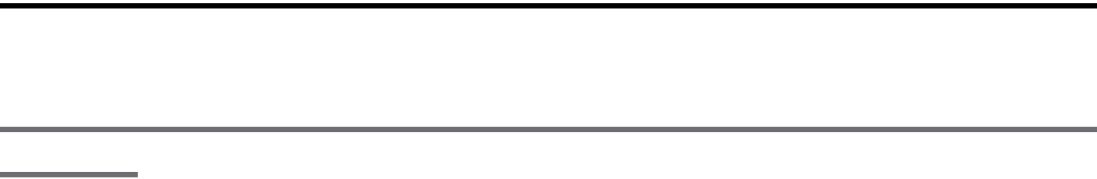
“When the curtain had fallen, as sugarcoated formalities and promises stayed somewhere in the space between Balkans and European Union, the efforts towards the inclusion of the most discriminated and most oppressed European minority community returned to its usual state. In the existing political and strategic form, they are a mission impossible in the Balkans. For the European Union, the efforts towards the inclusion of

the Roma are a measure for suppressing further immigration of the low-skilled Roma population into the developed countries of Western Europe. To make things worse, it seems that, in the next half-decade, the questions of the Roma inclusion will remain in the shadow of the new competitors in this race to the bottom, the refugees from Asia and Africa.” (Tamara Baković Jadžić, *People without Political Opponents*, p. 121-122)

Europe designed a “policy” for integration of the Roma into the society based on the contradictions of inclusion and exclusion: the Roma community is included into the society by being separated and excluded as a particular community; the Roma community is governed “from above” because it does not make decisions about its own life and organization, the “expert elites” working in the interest of the capital do it instead; the Roma labour force without papers is criminalized and thus easily surveilled and exploited; the Roma labour force that endeavours to become legalized is left to the market mechanisms and easily eliminated from the game due to its lowest starting position, thus being further marginalized; the competitive relations continue to divide and individualize the Roma communities, simultaneously producing and reproducing the relations of distrust of the Roma towards majority communities, and the production of distance ignites the right-wing discourse of fear (the Roma become those who “steal our jobs”, “destroy our culture” etc.)

At this point, the inclusion means integration into techno-bureaucratic supra-national as well as a national entities. The states are not neutral. They are the ones that regulate the recognition of the difference. Yet, since there are no more socialist states, or some new forms of the welfare states, neoliberal redistributive social mechanisms and resources occurs only incidentally. Ultimately, the field of

inclusion – through supra-national and national – is market, with all of its ambivalences; hence, the existing state of affairs is normalized, and the overall socio-economic inequality is deepened. If the social inclusion is all of the above described, then it cannot be the area in which the Roma community should politically self-organize towards emancipation.





BIOGRAPHIES OF THE AUTHORS

Radovan Jovanović graduated from the Preschool Teacher Training College in Novi Sad, in 2012. From 2006, he is an activist and volunteer in Roma non-governmental organisations. Radovan comes from a Roma settlement. His work focuses on educational support to Roma children and dropout prevention. He has participated in different projects and attended seminars and training that helped him acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for having more possibilities to support his community. Together with his co-strugglers, he is fighting for a better position of the Roma in society and thinks that the highly educated Roma youth is a motivator of changes. Radovan currently works in the *Roma Forum of Serbia* team in Novi Sad and as a social mediator in the *Centre for the Roma Community*.

Danilo Ćurčić completed bachelor studies at the Faculty of Law of the University of Belgrade, and thanks to the Chevening Scholarship program of the Government of the United Kingdom, he completed masters studies in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at the University of Essex. Prior to working in the *Initiative for Economic and Social Rights A11*, Danilo worked in and cooperated with various non-governmental and international organisations, dealing with the topics related to the exercise of economic and social rights of marginalised groups, discrimination and exclusion of socially vulnerable citizens.

Danilo occasionally writes about various human rights topics for different online portals and media, and his main areas of interest are the right to housing and segregation in housing, discrimination and criminalisation of poverty as well as the effect of economic policies on the exercise of economic and social rights.

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Milena Reljić was born in 1995 in Niš and lives in Pukovac. She has a degree in psychology and is a consultant. As a volunteer of United Nations, Milena started to work in the area of human rights, with the focus on the Roma ethnic minority and had a chance to broaden her knowledge by working in the Human Rights Committee. She leads the national research team that collects, analyses and manages relevant information about the Roma, which aims to bring changes in the Roma community. Contact email: milena.reljic95@hotmail.com

Jelena Krivokapić holds a master's degree in law. She is a member of the *Roma Forum of Serbia* and legal assistant on the project *Centre for the Roma Community* in Novi Sad. Jelena participated in the writing of the *Shadow Report on the Implementation of the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia (Activists' Perspective)*, focusing on the problem of impossibility to exercise the right to social protection of the Roma in Serbia.

Jasmina Drmaku graduated from the Department for Finances, Banking and Insurance in Novi Sad, at the Faculty of Economics in Subotica. Her graduation thesis was an analysis of the direct foreign

investments and their influence on the market in Serbia through privatisation of the factories.

Jasmina started focusing on the Roma questions after studies of Romology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad (Head of Department - Professor Svenka Savić). She has been active within *Roma Forum of Serbia* since the beginning of the political education workshops, at first as a participant, then as a panellist. Her writings mostly analyse the economic and political influence on the position of the whole community, the questions of employment, education, the position of the collectors of secondary raw materials and the economic impact on the culture and tradition of the Roma community. In the frame of collaboration with *Roma Forum of Serbia*, she directly works with the Roma community on self-organising and finding common solutions for advancing their overall position.

Žarka Svirčev (1983, Senta) is a research associate at the Institute for Literature and Arts in Belgrade. Her research focuses on Serbian / Yugoslav literature from the perspective of feminist and gender studies. She writes literary critique for Novi Sad publication *Polja* and is the author of four monographs: *Ah, the Identity!/- Deconstruction of the Gender Stereotypes in the works of Dubravka Ugrešić*; *Vinaver's Republic of Letters*; *The Portrait of a Predecessor: Draga Dejanović and Avant-gardists*; and *Essays on (Serbian) Women's Avant-garde Literature*.

Robert Kasumović graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in Niš and holds a master's degree in pharmacy. He has been a Roma activist for many years and currently works on the political education projects of *Roma Forum of Serbia*. Robert writes for the portal *Mašina*, mainly on ecology topics. He is active in music and sports.

Maja Solar holds a doctoral degree in Philosophy. Her research work focuses on political theory. She translates from English and French and writes poetry and prose. She is a member of the *Gerusia Collective*, left-oriented theoretical and political organisation, and one of the editors of the journal for theoretical practices *Stvar*. She published three books of poetry and is the author of more than thirty articles on social theory. Her fields of interest are Marxism, Marxist-feminism, history of socialism, property theories, luxury theories, antifascism and fascism, etc. From 2015, she has been working as a translator for the Serbian edition of *Le monde diplomatique*.

