

Roma People in Slovakia: Building a Wall Around an Ethnic Minority

Neven Andjelic^{1,*}

¹Regent's University London, United Kingdom

*Correspondence: Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4NS, United Kingdom.
Tel: 44-207-487-7712. E-mail: andjelicn@regents.ac.uk

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Abstract

Slovakia, as multiethnic state, is home to significant Roma population making them third largest ethnic group in the country. Widespread discrimination in the society and inadequate state policies put many Roma in position of unemployment, bad or no education, horrendous housing condition with no running water or electricity and other infrastructure, segregation and walled off communities. Europeanization of state policies might have changed legislation but the practice is in many ways not affected.

Keywords: Roma, Slovakia, nationalism, discrimination, segregation, ghetto

1. Introduction

This paper is going to provide insight into the development of and present situation of minority policies and attitudes towards Roma people in Slovakia. The paper is based on official documents, both Slovakian national and European, academic works of experts in the field, and on two research field-trips that I have conducted, as part of Council of Europe's working group of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. I visited in the same capacity many central European countries, most notably the Czech Republic, Romania, Germany and Austria which provided me with more general understanding of the situation of Roma in Central Europe. However, restrictions of space are going to dictate focus on Slovakia only in this paper.

While I strongly disagree with language and wording of Slovakian agency, it is clear that they have noticed complexity of the issue in larger European territory: "The Roma/Gypsy problem is not specific only for Slovakia. Several Central and Eastern European countries, where the Roma/Gypsy population reaches the similar dimension, have similar problems" (Vaňo, 2001). The focus of this paper, however, is going to be on Slovakia.

Roma are the largest minority in Slovakia with no keen state. However, it is not possible to specify the size of this group because, as many academics and activists have found, "the absence of accurate data is in many different analyses replaced with various qualified estimates which amounts are significantly different (Matlovičová et al., 2012).

The Slovakian society might be described as the society with a deep rooted anti-Roma feelings found among rather large segments of the population. Policies exercised by state agencies and attitudes found often among their employees prove this impression. Therefore human and minority rights breaches are systemic in the country. I am going to argue that the conditions Roma people live in are the consequence of the stated feelings and attitudes expressed by both society and the state policies. Nevertheless Roma themselves contributed significantly to polarization within the society and a growing number of cases of segregated communities.

I am going to present the situation Roma people have found themselves in Slovakia, draw some comparisons to neighbouring countries, provide literature review and develop my own arguments based on field studies that I have conducted over the past four years. These elements of the research should point out the causes of the problems. It is safe to estimate that a number of Roma living in Slovakia by the end of a Communist era was around 5 percent (Matlovičová et al., 2012). Officially, however, there was only 1.44 percent Roma living in Slovakia (Vaňo, 2001).

2. Relations between Roma and the Rest of Society

The 1990s were the era characterized by staunch nationalistic government in Slovakia. During the first years of independence the policies of such government often discriminated against minorities or left minorities having such perceptions of the policies. Vladimir Meciar was three times elected between 1990 and 1998 as prime minister of the country on such nationalist agenda. Political changes are reflected, meanwhile, in different policies of new governments. Accession to the European Union, integrative processes in general have contributed to seriousness and significance of changes in the country. Local academic paper argues that "European Union accentuated policies of multiculturalism strengthening" (Matlovičová et al., 2012) but it is clear results are still lacking. Some changes actually had negative connotations. In 2012, position of a Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights and National Minorities has been abolished (Advisory Committee, 2014).

The Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality was established in 2010. It serves as the main advisory body of the government. However, Roma are considered different to other minorities. While Plenipotentiary for National Minorities is organised under directions of the Foreign Ministry, the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities is placed under the Ministry of Interior. Thus the message from the government is that Roma is primarily a security issue and not a minority issue. This organizational policy reflects attitude that is often found in the society that understand it is Roma that are causing problems, are involved in crimes and therefore should be excluded.

"Relations between Roma and non-Roma remain strained", (European Roma Rights Centre 2013) as described by the European Roma Rights Centre. Euphemistic expression of the "Roma issue" is a "designation [that] carries the negative connotation, often based on the media intensive image describing the Roma in very bad one-side light, which leads to a deepening of the barrier between the majority and the Roma minority" (Matlovičová et al., 2012). Thus the Prime Minister of Slovakia, officially being left of political centre stated: "The Roma problem in Slovakia cannot be effectively solved without enforcing some limitations on human rights measures to which Slovakia, as a member of the European Union, previously agreed to comply" (European Roma Rights Centre, 2013).

The exclusion of Roma from the mainstream society could be enforced by the majority population or could be voluntary by Roma themselves. It has some historical roots but is also a reflection of more recent policies that have resulted in numerous Roma settlements. The living conditions in these settlements and the settlements themselves are causing further deterioration of social connections between Roma minority and Slovak majority population. Roma live in several types of settlements. They could be classified as segregated settlements within the town or village, and settlements on the edge of villages or towns (Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia 2016). It is being estimated that less than half of Roma live dispersed among majority population (Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia, 2016).

Human rights activists and academics involved in the project of mapping Roma communities in Slovakia have found 804 Roma settlements in 584 municipalities. There are 327 settlements on the edges of towns or villages out of the total number of settlements and 231 segregated settlements in 195 municipalities (Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia, 2016). It is significant to note that the average distance from the segregated community is 900 meters while the biggest distance is seven kilometres. In addition to this, Roma do not live dispersed with majority in 153 municipalities but only in segregated settlements (Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia, 2016).

3. Segregation

This situation leads to a shocking fact that some settlements are actually walled off from the rest of municipality. According to human rights activists there are between twelve and fourteen walls in Slovakia that separate Roma settlements from the rest of population. The actual number depends on the definition of the wall (Anonymous, 2014).

Thus Roma citizens of Lunik IX ghetto in the second largest Slovakian city, Kosice actually do not complain against the wall that separates them from the rest of the community because they feel protected from some crime gangs that operate in the area. They also feel protected from expressions of anti-gypsyism that are not uncommon in east of Slovakia. The wall also forces them to detour on their way to local bus stop but, they claim, only slightly and provides them with chosen segregation. Therefore the actual wall is there and is defined as such but is not considered by many as an obstacle in their daily activities. On the contrary, it is ironic that both Roma living in the ghetto and other Slovak citizens living in nearby neighbourhoods actually appreciate the wall.

This understanding is open to interpretation and arguments. The wall in another location, municipality of Ostrovany clearly separates Roma settlement from the village. Some murals are painted on it in an attempt to make it look less

imposed upon the communities. I would argue they are both walls that clearly separate Roma areas from the rest of the society even though some Roma accept building of walls as beneficial.

It is impossible, like in many countries, to come to the real numbers of Roma living in Slovakia. Official numbers present difficulties in conducting research on Roma in Slovakia. According to the census, there are only around two percent of Roma in Slovakian population although their presence is much more noticeable. The Roma Atlas that is widely used by government agencies, puts the number of Roma at 402,840 which represents 7.45% (Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia). Another study puts Roma percentage in Slovakian society at 6.5 percent (Matlovičová et al., 2012). The official census, however, puts Roma at 2 percent of the population (European Roma Rights Centre, 2013).

There are objective causes for this discrepancies. A widespread anti-Roma sentiment has made many Roma people reluctant to declare themselves as such. Many Roma stated their ethnic belonging as Slovakian but many also stated Hungarian if they lived in areas where Hungarians are in plurality or majority. The language spoken by Roma is also an issue. Many of those living in significantly Hungarian populated areas speak Hungarian only or Hungarian as the first language. In the rest of the country it is similar case with Slovakian. Thus Romani is not spoken by all Roma people. Therefore it is impossible to find out the actual number of Roma people by either following official statistics on ethnic background or spoken language. This problem has been recognized by Slovakian government and the European Union (European Parliament resolution, 2011).

The official census, however, showed a rise of the number of persons declaring themselves as Roma and the decrease in numbers of Hungarians as a reflection of acceptance, by many, of their Roma ethnic background despite linguistic belonging to Hungarian speakers. Roma population in Hungarian dominated regions is thus faced with an additional problem. Many of them speak Romany, they learn Hungarian as their second language and Slovak would be only their third language. Thus they find themselves living in the state without adequate knowledge of the state language. Majority of Roma, however, live in the Slovak areas but the language is still the issue for young children who are often met with Slovakian language only after enrolling in the first grade of primary school.

One must notice that Roma segregation is not universal in Slovakian society. While there are many segregated villages and settlements in eastern Slovakia, there are also villages that are more inclusive like Rankovce with 780 inhabitants and additional 540 people living in a nearby settlement. The village mayor is Roma which shows social inclusion is possible. Even though this particular village might be a positive example of different approach to Roma issues there are still signs of deprivation. Housing is the main problem for the Roma in this village. In addition some 560 Roma have access to water only through municipal well. Unemployment rate is 90 percent and therefore the whole attempt of social inclusion might be endangered.

4. Education and Participation

Education is creating further problem as primary school is not in the local village and only school for children with special needs is located next to the settlement. Many parents gladly accept their children to attend this school in order to save them from trips to a more distant primary school. Therefore practice of Roma parents in addition to the government education policy contribute to the segregation of Roma children in the processes of education (Mayor of Rankovce, 2014). It is impossible to conduct a credible survey and one could only guess proportions in general population. However, it is clear that noticeable proportion of people prefer segregated children.

While some attempts of desegregation have been tried they are often not supported enough. The examples of such policies are found in Sarisske Michalany, a picturesque village in eastern Slovakia with a local primary school that was not dissimilar to many other schools to be found in this area. After the change of the school director, this school provided for a rare attempt to desegregate children. The school is attended by some 60 percent of children from the nearby Roma settlement of Ostrovany leaving remaining children to be Slovaks from the village. Director of the school put significant effort into desegregation. However, local authorities put a pressure upon him in a form of insufficient funds while parents are taking non-Roma children out of this school and driving them to a school in another village. The school director stated: "I accepted 31 children from the settlement into year 0. The mayor pressed charges against me" (School Director at Sarisske Michalany, 2014).

While efforts were obvious the results are less noticeable due to a general climate in the society. Both Roma and non-Roma parents create this huge obstacle to desegregation. An increasing number of non-Roma parents are taking their children to different school outside of the Sarisske Michalany. The result of such practice is that classes are less re-unified than it was originally intended. Many classes are Roma dominated if not exclusively Roma. Some 120

children from the village of Sarisske Michalany are attending their local school while another 120 are attending other schools that are often segregated.

The changes in this school were of great significance as many NGOs acknowledged the importance. "In the case of the school in Sarisske Michalany the ruling of the Regional court in Presov constitutes a major breakthrough in the history of the Slovak republic. It is for the first time that an independent judicial power acknowledged the existence of segregation in education on the basis of Roma ethnic origin while using the term 'inclusive education'" (EduRoma, 2014). Still, it seems that the central government is ignorant to the problems in Eastern Slovakia. Ministries of Finance, Education and Interior are planning to build a new school in Ostrovan which would be, therefore, attended by Roma children and would in practice, if not in name, completely segregate children.

Despite periodical changes of government, a functioning liberal democracy and the political forces in power that are mainly not perceived as nationalist, Roma are deprived of several rights. High unemployment rates of Roma are reflection of their position in education system of Slovakia. Some 60 percent of all pupils in special education are of Roma origin. Consecutive governments clearly and repeatedly failed to provide "policies to address and combat the disproportionate numbers of Romani children in special and segregated education", European Roma Rights Centre claims (European Roma Rights Centre, 2013).

The Ombudswoman provided a report confirming serious breaches of Roma rights in education. Roma children are often segregated and placed in special schools. She has submitted a special report to Slovakian Parliament in August 2013 and requested the report to be discussed by the members. However, it is yet to be put on the agenda (Public Defender of Rights, 2013). She ended her mandate without the report being discussed by the Parliament. Her successor is also faced with similar set of problems in her work.

Slovakian society is showing signs of efforts to include Roma children into education system on the basis of equality and inclusion of Roma children into mainstream education and equal opportunity. However, it is also noticeable that large numbers of Roma children end up in special schools for children with disabilities. Thus segregation is kept and prolonged in the society and new generations are being brought up separately with very little experience of others.

Discrimination is not restricted to schools only. It is widespread and whole communities have been marginalised. Some actions by the Police force, election of the regional governor in Banska Bistrica on strong nationalistic basis and policies of some local level authorities are often aimed at Roma. Jan Kotleba, the regional governor of Banska Bistrica, is receiving collections from his employees in order to "invest the money in an excavator that he will use to clean up his property on which an illegal Roma settlement at Krásnohorské Podhradie in Rožňava district stands" (Spectator, 2015). He acquired the land after the settlement has been established.

The example from Budulovská where a Festival of Roma culture has been prepared for September 2014 but was cancelled at the end of August by the local council of Moldava and Bodvou. The reason stated was security concerns. Police took a rather brutal action in local Roma community during the previous year and local authorities, supported by the State Interior Minister, found grounds for their decision in this. Many local activists and NGOs, however, saw in the very same event and the police action grounds to prove discrimination against Roma and racial prejudice within the state agencies. The state ombudswoman "approached the government but was kicked out of the meeting" dealing with the issue of police brutality in Moldava (Dubovcova, 2014).

It is widespread perception, learnt in contacts with ordinary public, activists and Roma, that a strong anti-Roma discourse in society persists. Roma are often perceived and described as "lazy," and "criminal". They are also perceived as "burden to authorities' budgets" due to their reliance on social benefit scheme. They are often in such situation because of lack of integration of Roma communities into the society.

While Slovakia is not governed by nationalist political party any more, although junior partner in coalition government could be described as such, there are some strong signs of popular support for nationalist and extremist politics. Our Slovakia is far right political party whose leader was elected Governor of the region of Banska Bistrica in 2013. The region has the second highest number of Roma in Slovakia.

In Kosice, region with the highest number of Roma, local elections in 2014 were marked by a campaign of a small political party "7 *Statocnych*" - The Magnificent Seven. They wore cowboy hats and called on deeply racist policies. The "7 *Statocnych*" proposed and put up posters promising sterilisations of Roma with incentives and rewards of 10,000 euros and the one way tickets to other European destinations for Roma (*Antiziganismus Watchblog* 2014). The party leader Vladimir Guertler denied allegations of racism stating his "campaign is deeply moral and there are no marks of racism. It is human to Romas [sic!] and also to major population of Slovakia" (*Antiziganismus Watchblog*, 2014). He supported his denial by claiming local Roma living in Kosice's Lunik IX, Roma Ghetto that I

visited during the study, led him to his conclusions.

Hate crime is very present but seemingly remains underreported. Lack of trust in state institutions and especially security services is the main impression upon visiting Roma settlements and talking to local people. The cases of police violence when dealing with Roma people, although they might be in minority, contribute to the feeling of insecurity among Roma. One should add to this the relocation of the office of Roma Plenipotentiary within the Interior Ministry as the final proof of Roma being considered as security issue by the Slovak government.

The Interior Ministry ordered a thorough investigation of the Police raids in Roma settlement Moldava in December 2013 although the raid took place six months earlier in June 2013. This particular police raid on a Roma settlement drew condemnation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights while the Slovakian Ombudswoman had demanded investigation of the law enforcement agencies action in August 2013. The Ministry of Interior's internal inspection has previously found no wrongdoing. This reconfirms often perceived impression by Roma in particular of institutional racism. While this case might have become the most notorious one in recent history, it is not unique as police misconduct and occasional violence in contacts with Roma have often been reported. The Economist reported "the heavy-handed tactics and ham-handed official inquiry that followed are the latest signs of the government of Robert Fico, the prime minister, taking an illiberal turn" (The Economist, 2013).

Institutional racism towards Roma is thus expressed in fields of security as it was noted and proved police dealings with Roma are often heavy handed, discriminatory and occasionally violent. They cannot be located in just one of Slovakia's regions but are spread over the country. Banska Bistrica region led by nationalist governor is not unique in its policies as they are particularly spread across Easter part of the country where many Roma live. Central government also shows signs of different approach to Roma as the Plenipotentiary for Roma is under the Interior Ministry unlike other minority offices.

Institutionalised racism is clearly proven in the system of education as noted previously. Disproportionate number of Roma children in schools and classes for special needs, segregationist policies of educational authorities reconfirm the general official attitude towards Roma. Higher unemployment rates among Roma than other ethnic groups reconfirm problems and inequality that is initiated from the earliest ages of pre-school education to which many Roma have no access.

Housing is yet another field that proves the existence of this institutionalised racism. As the Roma Atlas has found, the conditions of living, whether in suburban settlements or urban ghettos, are putting Roma in position of greater health danger and often segregated from the rest of the society. Building of walls that separate Roma from other population are yet another proof of such policies.

Roma are affected by the post-communist changes more than other segments of the society. Economic transformation meant redundancies targeted low skilled labour which was the main area where Roma sought work. Long term unemployment triggered family financial crisis that was reflected in accumulated debts. The state provided housing for the population in the communist era but the roles have changed since and it is mainly municipality that is dealing with these issues. Subsidies in 2009 were as low as "52.12 EUR per month for a single person household and 83.32 EUR per month for a household of more than one person" (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009 and Pusca 2009). The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights states Atlas of Roma Communities survey that found 60% Roma living dispersed among general population while the others live in urban and rural concentrations on the edges off societies (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009 and Pusca 2009). "Only 19 per cent of the settlements have a sewage system, 41 per cent have gas, 63 per cent have a running water distribution system and 91 per cent have access to electricity" (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009; Pusca, 2009).

This does not mean that citizens living in these settlements actually use infrastructure provided as many of them cannot afford use of electricity or running water. During the visit to Lunik IX in Kosice, I witnessed only two buildings actually had a running water while the others had pipes in front of the buildings with running water twice a day. The reason authorities actually cut off supply is unpaid bills in majority of the buildings in this Ghetto.

5. Conclusion

As Ombudswoman in 2014, Jana Dobovcova described the situation as "there is no genuine willingness in public institutions to deal with Roma issues" (Dobovcova 2014). The state authorities live in denial and stress that "they are of different opinion" and therefore segregation in schools does not exist (Jaraba 2014). Roma people contribute to their own position in the society by often taking easier option and accepting segregation as a way of their lives. The

society, however, and democratic representatives of such society create policies and customs that are perpetuating this kind of situation and Roma are going to be discriminated in future in similar, if not the same, ways as in the past.

The evidence found during the two field research trips is shocking. Some government policies have changed significantly since 1990s but institutionalised racism is still to be found and government agencies live in a state of denial. Therefore it is impossible to radically change the state agencies' general behaviour. There are examples of serious attempts for positive change but these attempts are rarely supported or not supported strongly enough by the state institutions and therefore results are not as they have been expected and planned. Society as whole is often ignoring the issue and seem to be preferring segregation due to widespread prejudices.

Thus all three elements, firstly Roma, usually victims of discrimination, secondly society, creator and disseminator of prejudice and racist attitude, and thirdly political elites, executors of often discriminating policies, are in a state that is increasingly difficult to be changed. Democratic rules, respect of democratic will of the people are actually significant obstacles for any political group to actually attempt seriously to stop discrimination of Roma. It is an ultimate irony that a respect of democratic procedures creates conditions for the lack of the respect of the rule of law. The reasons are mainly to be found in the mainstream society but even the victims are doing very little to try to change the general attitudes, policies and their own overall position in the society.

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