

Reflection of the Reasons for the Emergence and Expansion of marginalized Roma Communities in Slovakia after 1990

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Abstract:

Objective: Considering the social importance of this particular issue, we might register continuous interest in the Roma issue. Publications of shorter or wider scope are available nowadays, especially after Slovakia joined the European Union, in which there is a policy aimed directly at the fight against discrimination and racism. As of the assessment of available sources, these range from short informative articles to scientific monographs. Almost all the scientific publications reviewed were based on a quantitative research design. The common denominator of these works was to research and present quantitatively related to some of the aspects of life indicators of members of the Roma ethnic group.

Our research aimed to identify the territory of the emergence of new excluded Roma communities in Slovakia.

Design and methods: The research was conducted in a qualitative design. The main methods for data collection were

semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observation.

Participants: The **research set** was created by combining the available selection (Gavora et al., 2010) with the selection of compact groups. The members of the research group were 39.

Results: Based on the results, the identified significant factors that contributed to the creation and expansion of new marginalized Roma communities include *prejudice and discrimination, job loss consequences of restitution*.

Conclusion: Our findings point out that marginalized Roma communities are the result of a range of political, social and individual economic factor. We suggest verification by through quantitative research

Introduction

The existence of people living on the edge of society was already an object of interest in the Middle Ages when society tried to support individuals, or even entire families, who found themselves on the edge of social exclusion through voluntary help and charity. The majority society and marginalized social groups threatened by social exclusion have coexisted for centuries.

Theoretical concepts of the study of the social exclusion began in Europe in the 1970s (Vela-Jimenéz et al., 2021; Labonté et al., 2011, Pirani, 2011), i.e., relatively late. This concept got social attention primarily because the growing poverty raised concerns about the disruption of social cohesion and thus the stability of society. Economic insecurities reinforced by insufficient conventional measures focused on eliminating poverty also disturbed the normative social functioning (Labonté et al., 2011). Gradually, the concepts of poverty shifted to the emergence of the concept of social exclusion, which is currently understood not only as a complex and multidimensional process that is a disturbing element in social and economic development (Levitas et al., 2007), but also as no longer associated a priori only with the financial shortage. **Social exclusion** means not only the denial or lack of resources, goods and services but also the inability of an individual to participate in every day relationships and activities available to most people in society, whether in the economic, social, cultural or political spheres (Labonté et al., 2011, Atkinson, 1998). As noted by Atkinson, Marlier and Nolan (2004), the concept of social exclusion increasingly points to the links between the economic and social spheres and the need to find and keep a balance between them. At

the beginning of this millennium, the number of socially excluded individuals and groups living in cities also increased. Therefore, socio-pathological, antisocial phenomena and criminal acts has also naturally increased. The migration of these social groups across EU countries is as well a modern phenomenon in Europe. Because of the permanent increase in social exclusion, the UN included goal number 11 in the 2030 Agenda aimed at sustainable development, which focuses on achieving sustainable cities and communities, within which special attention is paid to socially excluded parts of cities (United Nations, 2022).

Currently, the concept of social exclusion includes social groups that are in any way excluded from ordinary social life. This approach was supported by several authors such as Beall (2002), Gore and Figueiredo (1997), who protested against linking social exclusion mainly with the low income of excluded citizens. As they concluded, linking social exclusion with low income may signal that the responsibility for social exclusion lies with the individuals themselves who are affected by this phenomenon.

Townsend (1979) contributed to this discourse by introducing non-monetary measures to emphasize the multidimensionality of the concept. Therefore, people are socially excluded not only when they lack the resources to cover basic needs but also when they do not have an access to such living conditions and services expected in the society to which they belong. Social exclusion can thus be characterized as a forced lack of socially perceived needs, based on which it is possible to distinguish between those individuals who cannot afford to fulfill their needs and those who have decided not to fulfill the needs of their own free will (Mack, Lansley, 1985). Brady

(2003) points to the fact that the majority society determines the scope and level of needs that enable citizens to access decent living conditions. The concept of social exclusion thus includes, in addition to poverty, educational disadvantage, poor health, inadequate housing, living in poverty areas (Townsend, 1979, Atkinson, Hills, 1998, etc.). Sena (1982) recommended that the concept of social exclusion also reflects the degree to which these individuals can participate in the critical activities of the society in which they live. It is, therefore a matter of considering the fulfillment of the principle of equality in the particular society. As a result of these discussions, in the 1990s, the UN affirmed that income is not the goal of human development but a means to it. As the UN states in its documents, human development is determined not only by economic factors but also by non-economic factors, among which are the *crime rate, the social status of women, respect for human rights, access to education and services, including social and health*. The result of these trends was the determination of the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1992 (Bo-rooah, Hillyard, Tomlison, 2006, Courtin, Knapp, 2017). The annual HDI measurement can thus be understood as a tool for reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion. The concept of social exclusion gained a new dimension after Atkinson (1987) recommended that it be approached from a human rights perspective. Atkinson and Hills (1998) then formulated three key ideas, namely:

- a) the relativity of exclusion, which must be reflected in the particular moment and context;
- b) the dynamics of exclusion, which refers to the need to understand exclusion over time, which requires long-term monitoring to be run;
- c) an effort to distinguish whether it is a voluntary exclusion based on one's own choice or an involuntary, i.e., structural, exclusion.

Thus, social exclusion unites specific individuals and the social and physical environment in which people live (Saunders, Naidoo, Griffitha, 2008, Buck, 2001).

Social exclusion in the conditions of Slovakia

Theoretical concepts are essential primarily from a scientific and political point of view. However, they only minimally influence the

opinions of the public; intergenerational transmission has a more significant influence on them, i.e., the transmission of information and attitudes from generation to generation. As part of this transmission, not only specific information is transmitted, but also prejudices associated with social exclusion. The persistence of prejudices in Slovak society can be identified as one of the factors affecting the dynamics of social exclusion. Paradoxically, it is the experience of prejudice that unconsciously affects some experts who influence citizens affected by social exclusion.

In the minds of the Slovak public, social exclusion is today almost exclusively associated with marginalized Roma communities (hereinafter referred to as MRC). MRC on the territory of today's Slovak Republic can be divided into two groups according to the time of their creation. The first group consists of MRCs, which we could describe as traditional. These are communities whose origin is associated with Maria Theresa, who in 1773 decided on a series of restrictions on the Gypsies, the most famous of which is the ban on uncontrolled traveling. Based on this decision, Roma were allocated plots of land on which they could settle. These were uninhabited, often forested sites that needed to be cleaned. This type of MRC was kept even after the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Segregation tendencies were partially mitigated in 1948-1989, but this did not contribute to the liquidation of those Roma communities outside the inner city of the municipalities. At the same time, social experiments produced new types of MRC, such as, e.g., Luník IX (quarter of Košice). The exact number of Roma living there is unknown; the estimate is around 6,000, of which about 2,300 are children. A new type of MRC is communities that were created after 1990. The creation of these communities is discussed rather exceptionally in the domestic environment. New MRCs, which were the object of our field research, were created or expanded during the last thirty years from an initially small group of Roma families who lived in the locality even before 1990.

The governments of the Slovak Republic have long been striving for a comprehensive approach to solving this problem, which can also be seen in the development of the document

Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation until 2030 (hereinafter referred to as Strategy 2030), which was the form of Government Resolution no. 181/2021 adopted on April 7, 2021. Within this document, four key priorities were defined on which application practice should be focused in the following years: employment, education, health and housing. By implementing this strategy, the government expects not only an improvement in the socio-economic situation of the Roma, but also the elimination of racism directed at the Roma, which also has an institutional character in Slovakia. It is clear from the content of the document that it has set itself the goal of stopping the segregation of Roma communities, improving the social inclusion of Roma and changing the attitudes of the majority towards Roma, which is a prerequisite for improving the coexistence of the majority and the minority (Strategy 2030, 2021).

Strategy 2030 was also supported by the inclusion of methods of financing individual partial tasks, which can be described as a good prerequisite for its implementation. It seems that the only element that Strategy 2030 did not consider is the readiness of Slovak society for this change, both at the level of the majority and the minority. A period of 9 years cannot be considered sufficient to realize such challenging goals, which are included in Strategy 2030.

Methodology

This paper is based on the author's findings, researched as part of a more broadly conceived field research focused on identifying the environmental problems of the residents of MRC. Our research used the following methods for data collection: semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observation. The field research took place from August 2021 to November 2022. As part of the research, we collected data from 12 MRCs, of which four communities were part of urban areas. Although the remaining communities are located in the cadastral territory of individual cities and municipalities, they are significantly spatially separated. The main objective of this study is to identify the causes of the emergence of new excluded Roma communities on the territory of the Slovak Republic, i.e., those MRCs created after 1990.

The available selected file (Gavora et al., 2010) was used to create the research set in combination with selecting compact groups. In total, 25 semi-structured interviews and six focus groups were conducted as part of the research. The research team consisted of 5 mayors, five female social workers, two social workers and 27 residents of MRC. The participation of all informants in our research was voluntary.

The researched data we obtained were transcribed and processed using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

Own findings

Based on the analysis, we have identified three key themes in connection with the creation of new MRCs and their expansion: **prejudice and discrimination, job loss, and consequences of restitution.**

Prejudices and discrimination

In the 1990s, due to economic and political changes, a high unemployment rate hit Slovakia, and Roma were among the first to lose their jobs. A frequent and sometimes the only reason was their ethnicity. This fact was also confirmed by P1(pd): *"This was originally a state cooperative company apartment building in which 3 Roma families lived. All adults worked in a collective farm. After 1990, individual cooperatives and businesses began to disappear, and thus the possibilities of work and accommodation for Roma families also disappeared. During this period, several municipalities and cities reacted negatively; they did not allow more to join the local Roma families. The Roma who had some relatives here came here first... and finally those who needed to settle somewhere."* Another participant had a similar experience. *"Everyone has a family, so I told my sister, come here; the mayor doesn't cause problems. We will find some wood in the forest, build you a hut and it will be great.."* (P4pd). After years of outwardly peaceful coexistence of the majority with members of the Roma ethnic group in the 1990s, the Roma became unwanted neighbors. This problem resonates in society even today. We rarely encounter the reaction described by one mayor: *"When it was bad out there, I asked them if I should evict the families with children and where? I also reminded them that a few years*

ago, they worked together in a factory in a cooperative... And so we have 300 more of them here..." (P2pd). P7(pd) assessed this situation similarly, "It's as if they forgot that we worked together for years, we also party and did things together...they didn't remember any of it. We were just gypsies..." New MRCs also grew due to physical attacks on Roma families living in cities, which happened repeatedly in the 1990s. "A cousin lives with his family somewhere there. They came here after skinheads repeatedly attacked them at night" (P31pd). These answers to the probands explain how the new MRCs were created but do not explain how they may still be a Slovak reality. The mayor pointed out one reason: "In the early 1990s, nobody dealt with it...we got used to such problems as unemployment, usury, etc. After that, when people were fighting for work, it was appropriate to point out that Gypsies are lazy; they don't want to work... Who would take care of them? Politically, it was an uninteresting agenda for so long that it became a serious problem. Some non-profit organizations and activists were here, but they didn't have the power to solve it... Some mayors solve it like I do, but everyone is alone. I wonder how it will be next...." (P2pd). Moving to a settlement is often the only solution for a Roma family who loses their home. However, this trend does not always meet with the majority's understanding. The acceptance of additional Roma as residents of the village is an exception, even if the Roma moves to the outskirts of the village. Most of society is worried that the growth of most people without work, living on benefits, will only bring problems. They fear theft, disorder and harassing behavior often associated with Roma.

Job loss

One of the consequences of the change in political and social orientation after 1989 was the sudden onset of unemployment caused by the disappearance of long-term employers. "Before that, there was a factory here... There were a few houses down here, so poor, but you could live in them. Women either worked in cooperatives or took care of children. The men worked in the factory. The factory was closed, the men lost their jobs, and the cooperative collapsed within half a year. I don't even know when exactly more Roma arrived, but you can tell by the cottages,

which are poorer and poorer." (P2sp). One of our participants described it as follows: "There were four families here. We all worked in the cooperative; the children went to school...And suddenly there was no work. Our apartment building belonged to a cooperative; I don't remember who bought the cooperative first and last. What remained of the cooperative were the dilapidated buildings that housed the cattle and these two apartment buildings. White people used to live there; they left a long time ago. When my brother-in-law told me they had nowhere to live, I said come here; apartments are available. And so they came." (P3sp). Job loss, debts, financial executions were the most common reasons several Roma families lost their homes. "You know, ma'am, we all worked under socialism. There was enough work even for us, Roma. Yes, there were rascals among us, but weren't they among the white people? We would all like to work because if we had a job, we would also have a salary. Do you think we want to live like this? (P8sp). They see the lack of work as a cardinal problem also from the point of view of raising children and youth. "Dear lady, there is already a third generation of young people growing up here who don't know what it's like to go to work every day. Yes, early in the morning, if you came, you would see how entrepreneurs arrive with vans and choose whom they will take today and who will stay home... If you are lucky, they will choose you and you will receive the money in your hand in the evening... But tomorrow it doesn't have to be and not even in a week...young people survive from day to day, what can they plan? Only going to Austria, Germany or elsewhere..." (P10sp).

Consequences of restitution

After February 1948, several processes damaged property and legal relations in society. All property, including land, was nationalized and was under the administration of bodies and institutions representing the state. After 1990, the restitution process, i.e., the return of property to the original owner, began. For several MRCs, this was another reason for losing their apartment or home. In some MRCs, community members live under the constant threat of losing their homes. "Look, every house has a house number. They already had these numbers under socialism, so how is it possible that these are not our houses?"

They told us 15 years ago that we should not repair them because they will be demolished, the land is not ours, the houses are not ours... If they demolish them, where will we go? Nobody is interested in that except our social ones” (P5dr). The location grew from a small part of the city where a few families lived and worked. “You see, these houses don’t have numbers; they came here after they lost their housing and jobs... They wouldn’t be able to afford new apartments even if they had a job, but they don’t, so they’re here...” (P6dr). In a similar situation are the residents of another MRC, who were informed in 2011 that their houses are not their property. “Lady, look, my father did this; I was born here in that house; my wife was born a little further away. Our parents, and after them, we, too, made sure it was possible to live in those old houses. And all of a sudden, the people from the city say that we must not repair anything because these are not our houses. The houses and the factory that used to be here belong to someone somewhere abroad. It’s his property, and he doesn’t want us to fix anything here. The city will remind us from time to time that it is not ours and we will have to leave... but where?” (P20dr).

Discussion and conclusion

Although the results of qualitative research cannot be generalized, it is possible to conclude facts that point to essential situations requiring further scientific attention. Our findings confirm the legitimacy of the WHO (2010) recommendation that, in connection with social exclusion, attention should be paid to all aspects of this phenomenon: economic, political, social and cultural. Only a holistic approach to the researched problem will allow us to obtain enough information to set up effective solutions.

Based on the analysis of the obtained data, we identified three dominant thematic areas - the causes of the creation and expansion of MRC, which showed up after 1990, in particular **prejudice and discrimination, loss of work, consequences of restitution.**

We consider the dominant cause to be the collapse of the labor market, associated with a sharp increase in unemployment in a short period. The demise of enterprises and companies was often associated with the cancellation of various forms of accommodation for employees.

Another factor was the gradual return of lands to their original owners, from whom they were taken during the 1950s as part of the collectivization process. In connection with this, several houses or apartments inhabited by Roma were destroyed. The social factors supporting the process of marginalization include prejudices and the associated discrimination, which appeared in Slovak society to an unusually high degree after 1990. And paradoxically, mayors who showed understanding for Roma families without homes and did not prevent them from building shacks on the outskirts of municipalities also contributed to creating new MRCs. According to our participants-mayors, the lack of social housing or financial resources for its construction prevented them from providing the Roma who lost their housing with another, better alternative.

Persistent long-term unemployment and subsequent living on material poverty benefits prevented MRC residents from obtaining housing outside the settlement. The participants consider a permanent job as an essential prerequisite for solving their situation. Prejudices persisting in the majority, however, make it difficult for them to access more permanent employment, reinforcing the concept of Roma’s bad relationship with work.

We agree with the statement of Atkinson and Hills (1998) that the solution to social exclusion must occur in parallel at the individual level, i.e., in strengthening the skills and competencies of specific individuals, and at the structural-social level, i.e., at the measures and interventions of the state. Watt (1996), because large-scale marginalized communities are not the result of short-term social processes, stated that the solution to social exclusion does not lie in countless attempts to fix society but in convincing relatively wealthy groups that social inclusion is worth paying for.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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