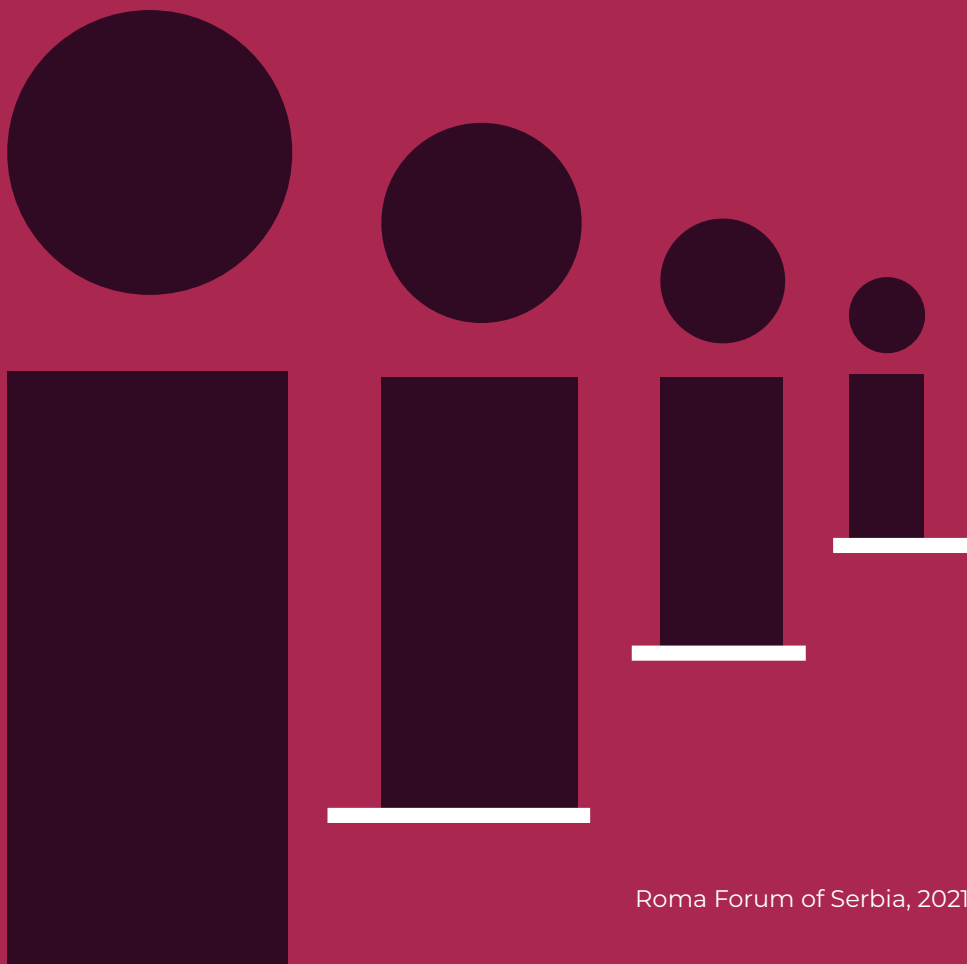


ROMA LIVES **MATTER II**



Roma Forum of Serbia, 2021

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– Introduction

The outcry Roma lives matter! marked the year 2021, just as it had marked 2020. The reasons that brought to this are manifold: the police murder of Stanislav Tomaš from the Czech Republic and all the premature and invisible Roma deaths and sicknesses produced by the state neglect during the pandemic that are not revealed by the statistics, among others. Antiziganism and racism, as inherent forms of capitalism, continued to show their bare faces in 2021, thus creating context for fundamental societal inequalities to further flourish during the pandemic.

In Serbia, there are still no systemic policies that could liberate the members of the Roma communities from their extremely marginalized position which the pandemic intensifies. Yes, policy makers continue to write documents, adopt and revise strategies, and there are myriad ideas for local action plans and programs that, presumably, will bring the Roma a better

future. Once in a while a story appears in the Serbian media that is supposed to show how the state takes care of its Roma citizens. Yet, to date there are no systemic vaccination campaigns nor adequate healthcare for those who live in substandard Roma settlements. Moreover, most of the settlements lack clean running water and basic infrastructure. The jobs reserved for poor Roma, which were already scarce and precarious, are further disappearing. Roma children's horizon of possibilities in education, considerably narrower for them than for non-Roma children, is shrinking even more. The major part of Serbia's Roma population still does not have personal identification documents, which makes it more difficult for them to solve any situation that requires confirmation of their citizen status or obtain any sort of state assistance that demands proof of citizen status. Further, even when a Roma person gets access to an institution that is supposed to provide help, healthcare, education, or other services, racism unfolds in all shades of gray. They run the risk of being refused entry into an institution or even left to die in front of the doors of the institution that is supposed to save their life.¹

The pandemic world paints its "grey on grey". Yet, the question is if a self-organized resistance will finally result as the oppressed reflect on this pandemic world.²

The Roma activists write this year's texts in such tone: the tone of rethinking the overall social grayness. They attempt to

1 For more information see: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/4326628/sremska-mitrovica-krivcna-prijava-dom-zdravlja.html>

2 Hegel's metaphor that describes how *philosophy paints its grey in grey* states that one form of life becoming old and cannot be rejuvenated and that it is ready for being known.

offer some directions for further actions. The conclusions of these texts vary, some are more skeptical and reserved, others offer concrete proposals. The proposals are not, of course, a magic wand for the Roma communities but are a more realistic framework for solving the issues than the declarative ones offered by the state.

In her text *Shades of the racialization of healthcare*, Jelena Savić analyzes issues that regard in/accessibility of healthcare for most of the Roma population. This lack of accessibility is clearly perceptible in their worse health status than the members of non-Roma population. Shorter life expectancy, higher child mortality rate, higher percentage of contagious and non-contagious diseases, famine, and malnourishment are just some of the indicators of the health status of the Roma who live in substandard settlements. Certainly, those issues are due to the Roma's poor socioeconomic position and to the continuous systemic state/social neglect of this part of the population of Serbia. Further, state and local health and other related institutions deepen practices of discrimination. Therefore, they deny entire social groups the opportunity for good health. The examples of neglect, discrimination, and racism in healthcare are numerous: state institutions denying or refusing healthcare to Roma individuals and not issuing them personal documents that would facilitate access to healthcare institutions; the distance of the healthcare institutions and centres from Roma settlements; the ever-present segregation mechanisms such as separated "Roma rooms" for pregnant Roma women. Different forms of violence against Roma women and forced sterilizations are also a part of this spectrum of harm in which all the

shades of racialization blend into an overall grayness. By addressing the gendered violence against Roma women, Savić points out that the violence does not only include intimate partner violence but also institutional violence (as she metaphorically describes it: “[...] it might be easier to believe that the Earth is flat than for a Roma woman, a victim of domestic violence, to obtain an adequate protection from the institutions”).

Continuing with a similar topic, Roma medical worker Sabina Drmaku describes numerous examples of deeply rooted racism in the healthcare system. She also thematizes the problem that was supposed to be a solution for the health issues of the Roma population – the problem of health mediators. In the text *Health mediators: yes, but Roma!* she questions not only the bad conditions of this precarious and underpaid position, but also the criteria that are required for it (before all, why the criteria insist on mediators being women or mothers and not, for instance, persons who speak Romani language and have an insight into the situation in Roma settlements). It seems that not only are there too few health mediators, who are underpaid and overwhelmed with the workload, but also this position is frequently occupied by persons who do not go to the settlements and do not have a contact with the community. As long as the state does not grant a serious systematization of the health mediator profession, and the employment criteria remain the same, this position will be something that cannot be blindly glorified.

In the text *What is that bad smell in the air? Ecological racism!* Predrag Momčilović writes on the topic of ecology from a class perspective which also takes into account racialized oppre-

ssion. Although we all are victims of the destruction of the environment and ecological pollution, we are not all affected to the same extent because poor people are more exposed to the impact of ecological degradation. Besides, the poor have fewer possibilities for better ecological choices. Then, their non-ecological practices are used reversely as a reason for criminalization and racialization. This is particularly the case with the Roma who are targeted as main polluters since they use dangerous fuels in their individual heating systems and burn certain secondary raw materials due to the lack of alternatives. However, as the author points out, the problem of ecological pollution was never a matter of individual responsibility but structural conditions produced by capitalism. Furthermore, instead of blaming the individuals (who are, incidentally, the smallest polluters according to all the statistics), he suggests several measures which would go in the direction of a structural solution of the problem.

Jelena Krivokapić Nikolić, in her text *I do not have a personal identification card, therefore I am not*, analyzes the numerous problems that result from lacking a personal identification document and the vicious circle of impossibility for many Roma to fulfill the conditions for its issuance. The situations are diverse: some Roma do not have legal residence, some have an informal residence (that they cannot register) while some register a second residence, and that result with other problems for those persons. By analyzing parts of the Law on Residence and Domicile of Citizens, Law on Non-Litigation Procedure, and other key documents, as well as socio-economic situation of members of Roma communities, the author demonstrates multiple con-

traditions as well as the issues that they cause for the Roma. Nonetheless, her conclusion is not skeptical, she finds that decisive political participation and organization of the Roma is the only way to reach a solution to this problem as well.

In the text *The Roma question trapped in a project box*, Robert Kasumović stresses some of the limitations of project engagement and depoliticization which it inherently implies. The author researches how the state, after the dissolution of Yugoslav socialism, strives more and more intensively to remove social security system and social care, tasks that the state delegates to the civil sector. He also demonstrates that the civil sector often does not have the resources to solve such critical issues. In the current situation, the state “care” for the Roma communities is purely symbolic, mostly bureaucratic, and first and foremost directed towards formal respect of the procedures (for example, when the representatives of the Roma civil sector are “solicited” regarding the adoption of strategic documents) while in fact, it is a policy of ignoring. The issues appear in the Roma civil sector itself: those whose livelihood depends on project salaries start to build careers out of project activism. Such employment then becomes their job and stops being truly transformative activism. So, even when genuine and militant activists are working in the non-governmental sector, the type of project engagement limits their potential. Therefore, Kasumović finds that the key task is to return to the political framework – to become seriously politicized (in the parliament as well as outside of it) to make steps towards changes.

The inclusion of Roma children in the education system is taken as one of the essential aspects of the Roma inclusion stra-

tegy. Since lack of education is the main cause of the poverty of Roma communities, and poverty is the cause of a low level of education, Dina Vučković analyzes in detail different aspects of these predicaments in her text *Vicious circle of education and poverty*. She shows the factors that contribute to exclusion of Roma children from education. These complex reasons include the socio-economic position of most of the members of Roma communities and the racism within educational institutions (prejudices and discriminatory behaviour of individuals and groups, discriminatory tests, lack of classes in Romani language, etc.) The author, however, does not stop at description of the current situation but also gives concrete recommendations for steps that can be made within the communities and would lead to breaking the “vicious circle”.

The collection ends with the text of Iva and Jasmina Barčić, *LAP for the Roma in the municipality of Niš: Will this bring any changes?* Continuing the previous text of Jasmina Barčić, who wrote for the collection *Roma Activism: Reality and Possibilities* in which she analyzes local action plans for the Roma in general, in this text, the authors analyze a concrete LAP for the Roma in the municipality of Niš. They start with the question of whether anyone from Roma settlements participated in drafting this LAP (which should address the inhabitants of these settlements). Furthermore, the authors question the overall structure and content of the LAP for Niš: from budgeting to planning in all the areas which are vital for Roma communities (according to the *Strategy*). As for Niš LAP, it is particularly interesting that it includes the area of culture, since the first and the only Roma Cultural Centre is situated in this town. The au-

thors investigate the possibilities that the LAP could eventually offer to this cultural institution (the building currently remains empty and locked).

Roma activism in Serbia certainly feels the burden that was shifted on it due to the lack of systemic state security, nonetheless, we do not have other solutions. The leftist party which was on the horizon for a brief time was dismantled, and there are no new leftist parliamentary groups that would incorporate Roma from the very beginning. The activists continue to rethink the situation, to speak loudly, to call for responsibility, to make at least small steps towards self-organization that sometimes in the future could break overall bleakness and grayness. Let's say, with the red colour of a revolution. And to politically affirm that Roma lives truly do matter.

December, 2021

Maja Solar, the editor of the collection

– **SHADES OF THE RACIALIZATION OF HEALTHCARE**

The right to healthcare as well as the right to education, work and employment, housing, food, and social security, represents another sphere from which the Roma are systematically excluded and marginalized. When the Roma try to access healthcare institutions, they face numerous problems, persistent discrimination, and even flagrant violations of their human rights. Furthermore, they experience worse health outcomes compared to the health status of the overall population (according to all evaluated health indicators).

A lot of research shows the unequal health status of the Roma population compared to the overall population. It has been demonstrated that, despite considerably variable circumstances, the majority of the Roma population has worse health compared to the non-Roma population including higher rates of contagious and non-contagious diseases, worse health of children and mothers, and higher mortality rates. Almost all of the statistics show a considerably higher mortality rate of the Roma population. The average life expectancy in Serbia is

about 74 years of age, while the average life expectancy of the Roma population is even 25 years below the one of the overall population. According to the 2011 census, the age structure shows that the highest percentage of the Roma is in the age category of 0-19 years (41, 5%), while the smallest number is in the category over 60 years (7.1%).³ The World Health Organization (WHO) states that only 16% of the Roma live about 50 years. There are many diseases and issues whose main causes are bad socioeconomic conditions. High rates of contagious diseases have been identified among the Roma population due to poor housing and living conditions, bad quality water (if there is any), bad sanitary conditions, lower rates of immunization and higher mortality rate of newborns, as well as famine and malnourishment.⁴

Furthermore, the research shows that the Roma face different forms of discrimination and other considerable obstacles when accessing healthcare. Racial discrimination of the Roma in the healthcare system is present on many levels of the system and ranges from open denial of medical services to more complex forms of discrimination which result in low quality or inadequate medical services being given to Roma patients.

In many cases, access to healthcare is impossible or very hard because of the very state policies which regulate access to social services. In some countries, the right to social allowances is a precondition for accessing health insurance provided by the

3 Available at: <https://pod2.stat.gov.rs/Objavljenepublikacije/Popis2011/Romi.pdf>

4 Cook, B., Wayne, G. F., Valentine, A., Lessios, A., & Yeh, E. (2013). Revisiting the Evidence on Health and Health Care Disparities Among the Roma: A Systematic Review 2003–2012. *International Journal of Public Health*, 58(6), 885–911.

state. In the places where the Roma are not among those who have social allowances – often as a result of arbitrary and racially discriminatory actions of the authorities – they also don't have the right to healthcare insurance which is provided by the state to socially endangered groups.⁵ In Serbia, every citizen has the right to free health protection, at least the basic one, if they are health insurance users. Legally invisible, the Roma from the informal settlements mostly are not registered in the Birth Register and do not own personal documents and therefore they cannot exercise their fundamental rights, among others the right to free health protection, namely, obtaining health insurance. The state is not interested in providing personal documents to these persons and the institutions respond with silence to numerous appeals of activists and non-governmental organizations who protect fundamental human rights. They have notified the ministries in charge of modifying legal acts which prevent registering into the Birth Register immediately upon the birth.⁶ Although the Constitution and international conventions grant to every child the right to be registered upon birth, children in Serbia whose parents do not have personal documents can remain non-registered for years, thus without access to fundamental rights. If the mother does not own a personal identity card it is necessary to start special procedures at Centres for Social Work, municipal organs of government, or

5 European Roma Rights Centre (2006). Ambulance Not on the Way – The Disgrace of Health Care for Roma in Europe.

6 For more information, see: <https://www.praxis.org.rs/index.php/sr/praxis-in-action/status-and-socioeconomic-rights/item/1618-apel-nadleznim-ministarstvima-za-izmenu-akata-koji-sprečavaju-upis-u-matične-knjige-odmah-na-kon-rođenja>

courts in order to register a child. Those processes can often be long-lasting and complicated: in the best case, they last for several months, most often years. It is clear that this problem mostly affects the Roma population even though it can be easily and quickly solved. In the cases when a person succeeds and obtains access to healthcare after all the bureaucratic procedures that this implies, a different problem occurs, namely, the health insurance does not cover all the costs. There are many medications that the state fund does not cover, hence, if some medication is not on the list, the patient bears the cost. It's important to say that access to health care services is impossible for many Roma who live in faraway, segregated settlements without healthcare institutions, and cannot afford to pay the transport to the institutions outside of the settlement. In 2018, 5.8% of the population of Serbia declared that they could not satisfy their needs for medical care because of financial costs, distance, and transportation or waiting lists. This percentage is considerably above the average of the countries of the European Union (2.0%) and much higher than in the neighbouring countries like Bulgaria (1.9%) and Hungary (0.8%).⁷

Women are a particularly vulnerable social group in the sphere of health as well. Racial and class discrimination put all the Roma in a very difficult position, yet, Roma women are even more exposed to discrimination and demonstration of power. A large number of Roma women experience physical, sexual, and psychological violence by men at least once in life, and the

⁷ Bjegovic-Mikanovic, V., Vasic, M., Vukovic, D., Jankovic, J., Jovic-Vranes, A., Santric-Milicevic, M., ... & Hernández-Quevedo, C. (2020). Towards Equal Access to Health Services in Serbia. *Eurohealth*, 26(1), 25-28.

cases of constant exposure to violence are no exceptions. Besides the fact that violence is a public and social problem (not a private one in any way), the intimate partner violence of men towards women is a public health issue that leads to many negative consequences for the health of women and their children. The consequences range from murders, suicide attempts, severe physical and psychological traumas which require intensive care. We have witnessed that the Roma women not only have difficult access to healthcare but also once they obtain it, they are further exposed to another type of violence, the institutional one. The healthcare systems have the responsibility to detect and react to the cases of violence against women as well as to timely coordinate with the other institutions, firstly the police and then the Centre for Social Work. From this perspective, considering the racist and misogynist social climate, it might be easier to believe that the Earth is flat than that any Roma woman victim of domestic violence, could obtain adequate protection from the institutions. Even when small improvements take place, Roma women mostly do not have conditions to get out from their communities and survive outside of them, and the state institutions do not have any solution for this. According to the data of OSCE, only 10% of women reports violence, and two out of three women experience some kind of violence in their life. Unfortunately, statistics for the Roma in Serbia are almost inexistent. On the state level, there is still no central register of domestic violence cases. One of the steps towards improvement in reporting violence is to inform women on their rights and reporting procedures and it should be organized on the state level. Such training and education are very rarely

organized and almost never address Roma women. We should take into consideration that the situation with domestic violence has gotten worse since the coronavirus epidemic started. The quarantine and lockdowns, as the measures for restriction of epidemics adopted during last year, make the situation much more difficult for the women who are victims of domestic violence. They must spend more time at home with the perpetrator and Roma women, in particular, have even fewer possibilities to overcome such situations.

Roma women are particularly exposed to mistreatment by doctors during pregnancy and childbirth. The recorded practices of extreme neglect and racism include the examples of death after childbirth, serious consequences for the health of the woman and the child, as well as forced sterilization of the Roma women without their knowledge and consent! Sterilization of the Roma women was a practice used in Nazi Germany, as a part of the darkest time of Europe, however, this practice is also a part of more recent history. The publication from 2003, includes the reports on the forced sterilization of Roma women in Slovakia. There are 110 cases and testimonies (only those that the research had comprised, yet the total number might be higher), and it exposes widespread forms of discrimination in the public hospitals, including verbal and physical mistreatment by the medical staff, racialized discriminatory standards of care, misinformation regarding health and direct refusals of medical services. This was preceded by a fascistoid climate in the state: the ministry of health of Slovakia, in the document about sustainable development from October 2000, stated that the decrease of Slovakian natality combined with the high na-

tality of the Roma could have a negative impact on the quality of the population of Slovakia.⁸ The procedure of sterilization of the Roma women was conducted in many insidious ways. One of them included practicing outdated and life-endangering vertical cesarean cut (instead of horizontal) during childbirth. Roma women have been sterilized during childbirth with such cesarean section under the pretext that the next cesarean section most probably will cause complications and possible death of the woman or the fetus. The Roma women were told that they have to be sterilized for their own safety, without adequate explanation or information about alternative methods of birth control. The doctors used sterilization as a means for preventing further pregnancy. It is important to point out that Slovakia is not the only country in which such practices were recorded – the cases have been discovered in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, etc.

Examples of racial segregation of Roma women in maternity hospitals are not scarce either. In many countries, Roma women are placed in separate rooms – “Tzigane room”, as patients and the hospital staff call them. These rooms have worse sanitary conditions than others and Roma women do not receive adequate healthcare service since medical workers pay less attention to them.⁹ There are examples of such malpractice in Belgrade, Niš, and other maternity wards. Such severe discrimi-

8 Center for Reproductive Rights. (2003). *Body and Soul: Forced Sterilization and Other Assaults on Roma Reproductive Freedom in Slovakia*. Center for Reproductive Rights. Available at: https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/bo_slov_part2.pdf

9 Parekh, N., & Rose, T. (2011). Health Inequalities of the Roma in Europe: A Literature Review. *Cent Eur J Public Health*, 19(3), 139-42.

minations that Roma women have been and are still exposed to, can lead to worsening of the health of the mothers and, in the long term, to decrease of the level of healthcare awareness. The mortality rate of infants and children up to five years of age in Roma settlements (12.8 and 14.4 for every 1000 live births in 2018) is almost 3 times higher than the national average (5 and 5.5 for every 1000 live births).¹⁰ Due to the lack of knowledge and other obstacles, many mothers who experience bureaucratic, financial, racist, and sexist discrimination in healthcare institutions, do not vaccinate their children on time. About 8% of Roma children are malnourished, and the estimation is that about 20% have developmental difficulties.

The Roma women less frequently attend and graduate from primary school and generally have lower education than the average Roma population. With the lower education level, the chances to make some smaller individual improvements and overcome bad position are decreasing or completely disappearing. This paves the way to the lower living standard and its numerous consequences including endangered health. According to the National healthcare survey from 2013, women (33.1%), less educated persons (35.9%), and the poor (14.1%) had a much higher rate of failure in solving their health issues compared to other groups of the population.¹¹ Compared with the people with higher education levels, those with lower education

10 Bjegovic-Mikanovic, V., Vasic, M., Vukovic, D., Jankovic, J., Jovic-Vranes, A., Santric-Milicevic, M., ... & Hernández-Quevedo, C. (2020). Towards Equal Access to Health Services in Serbia. *Eurohealth*, 26(1), 25-28.

11 Ministry of Health. Results of the National Health Survey of the Republic of Serbia 2013. Belgrade: Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia, 2014. Available at: <http://www.batut.org.rs/download/publikacije/2013SerbiaHealthSurvey.pdf>

levels had poor health 4.5 times more often. Unemployed, economically inactive individuals and the poorest ones also had bad health compared to the employed persons and those with the highest salaries. Women, persons with the lowest level of education, and the poorest ones suffered from some chronic disease or long-lasting health problems.

There are frequent accusations that Roma women's health issues are due to their lifestyle and culture. Such allegations fail to address deeply rooted structural inequalities, such as poverty, low education level, and patriarchal relations. These inequalities are at the same time the cause and the consequence of the poor health and inaccessibility of adequate health care. The report that published the cases of sterilization of women in Slovakia, also recorded that the two most frequent stereotypes among the health staff about Roma women are that they have too many children and are promiscuous. Generally, the entire society is very prejudiced and judgmental about the high fertility of Roma women and blames them for their situation. Racist statements such as "this is a part of their primitive instincts", "Roma women give birth to many children just to obtain social allowances and to get money from the state", etc. are not rare. Such poor treatment of the Roma women in the society legitimizes constructed cultural and social "backwardness". Essentially, the internalized forms of oppression are presented as cultural practices. One of the reasons for this is the fact that such discussions about cultural differences and practices are almost never contextualized nor is there a reflection on why these people react in a certain way in a certain social and political context. Contextualized explanations would give a different

perspective on many images full of stereotypes and prejudices, because “unbridgeable cultural differences“ of the people from the Third world are not something that it’s fixed and unchangeable, rather, they can develop through interaction with internal and external communities.¹²

The ministry of health of the Republic of Serbia has initiated the project of introducing Roma health mediators in 2008. Their task is to keep a record of the health status of the Roma in settlements, to support them, and help them to access adequate health protection. Their duties include educating and counseling the Roma on healthy habits, scheduling exams with the chosen doctor, as well as providing them healthcare cards and personal documents. In 2009, a total of 15 health mediators were employed, and, in one of the cases, one mediator covers the municipality in which about 25,000 Roma live.¹³ According to the last report on employment in Serbia from 2021, there are 75 Roma health mediators, yet this increase is not even nearly enough to meet the needs of all Roma settlements’ inhabitants. The service has achieved smaller improvements of health protection and an increase in the number of vaccinated children (if we can trust the official reports). Nevertheless, can we say that the health mediator service leads to a solution and change in the position of the Roma in the sphere of health and access to institutions and can we say that the state has taken care of its, obviously, not so equal citizens?

Moreover, the position of healthcare mediators is yet anot-

12 https://eige.europa.eu/docs/81_HU.pdf

13 Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/49420/zdravstveni-medjatori-za-rome.html>

her precarious job position in the domain of social care. Apart from health mediators, there are also the positions of pedagogical assistant, personal assistant of a child, and personal assistant. What makes these positions precarious is the high level of insecurity – people are employed on a short-term contract basis, often contracts for temporary occasional work, their working rights are barely respected, if at all, and they have bad protection. To those who work in these positions, the state gave the responsibility of working with the most endangered population such as the Roma, persons with invalidity, children with difficulties in development. If we see the bigger picture, institutions that should take care of these persons are either dismantled or work with lower capacities, while the part of the financial burden is most often shifted to the users. Introducing the position such as health mediator – that besides precarious working conditions also creates many underpaid workers – the state has lowered budgetary expenditures of the formal institutions from the domain of social care, which should otherwise provide help for the most endangered and marginalized persons.

When we put aside the working conditions of health mediators, the concept of “mediator” has something essentially wrong. In the first place, why is it necessary to have a mediator who would be a connection and bridge between “us and them”, as states see it if we are all equal?

Health mediators are, potentially, just one of the tools that states use to maintain their racist policies and to maintain the same hierarchy, in which the Roma are always “different” and “backward”? In the last few years, the first critiques appeared

and problematized the institution of Roma mediators. Certain authors, who commented on the project ROMED (European Training Program for Roma Mediators) claimed that although it aims to strengthen the members of the Roma community and create inclusive public institutions, the design, ideology, and justification of the program are based on the dominant problematic discourses about the Roma and categories such as “underdeveloped” and “Other”.¹⁴ For instance, during one training, mediators had responded to the question of what their role is. Many saw themselves as “a bridge for people who are illiterate, use drugs, are sick and do not have the courage to get back on course and participate in real life,” “mediators are for people who are weak”, they hope that they “will be a model for their own people”, etc. The truth is that these people most probably have internalized discriminatory opinions that are prevalent in society, with affirmation and approval of the trainers and educators of the program.

What is the situation with the health protection of the Roma population during the current pandemic? Official statistics on the number of vaccinated Roma do not exist. In the Serbian media, we can find just a few reports on sporadic vaccination campaigns of the Roma population, only for major cities like Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad, and Kragujevac. The articles report on the campaigns in form of organized visits to the Roma settlements or in “Roma centres” as it was done in Niš. On the occasion of these visits and campaigns, some of the local politicians would make an appearance, but the vaccination campaign wa-

14 Petraki, I. (2020). Roma Health Mediators: A Neocolonial Tool for the Reinforcement of Epistemic Violence?. *Critical Romani Studies*, 3(1), 72-95.

sn't organized for the round of the second dose of the vaccine, because the representatives of the authorities were not present to underline that "the Roma community is an important part of the society" and that "the state takes care of them 365 days a year".¹⁵ There are also the actions of the non-governmental sector. As a part of one of those actions, 20 volunteers from the cities and municipalities all over Serbia, went to visit the inhabitants of informal Roma settlements in their local communities, for three months and inform them about how to register for vaccination, where to get vaccinated, and how the procedure goes. These volunteers had tablets with internet connection in order to help those who wanted to register for vaccination via the eGovernment portal.¹⁶ To get a vaccination appointment on eGovernment portal, or in any other way, one needs personal identification documents which many Roma do not have, but they also need a device to receive electronic confirmation of the appointment. Afterwards, they need to go to an institution or a vaccination spot which is usually far from the Roma settlements, in the city.

Without a clear plan on the state level, which would implement a mass vaccination campaign and organize mobile vaccination units, limited attempts of a few volunteers do not lead to improvements of the health situation of the Roma, which has further deteriorated during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Summing up the situation with access to health care of the

15 <http://www.beograd.rs/lat/beoinfo/1781836-vesic-romska-zajednica-je-vazan-deo-naseg-drustva/>

16 <https://www.rs.undp.org/content/serbia/sr/home/presscenter/articles/2021/kampanja-informisanja-romske-populacije.html>

Roma population, we can conclude that health care is not an exception when it comes to the level of racist policies and practices as well as discriminatory actions and positions that the institutions take. The situation is not improving, despite the existing support programs and policies, which aim to advance the status of the Roma in the sphere of health, education, employment, and housing. It is evident that the proposed solutions do not target the real causes of the issues and that the state remains blind in front of the catastrophic living conditions of the Roma, while shifting the blame on the individuals. Generalization of characteristics of the Roma, that even the persons who have the role of helpers perpetuate, combined with blaming individuals and communities, leads to the strengthening of cultural stereotypes and pathologizing of the Roma community as a “problem”, while complex, social, and institutional factors that create obstacles for many Roma communities are overlooked.

The health status of the Roma is often much worse than the one of those in similar economic-social positions, which demonstrates that the differences are not only a consequence of poverty¹⁷ but also other factors, such as the cumulative effect of long-lasting discrimination and isolation. It is necessary to draw attention to the manifold and overlapping nature of social factors that form identities, shore up discrimination and power imbalance and affect the health of the Roma population. The change is possible if we put pressure on policymakers and make

17 Janevic, T., Jankovic, J., & Bradley, E. (2012). Socioeconomic Position, Gender, and Inequalities in Self-Rated Health between Roma and non-Roma in Serbia. *International Journal of Public Health*, 57(1), 49-55.

them rethink critically their role in shaping the health status of the Roma. Simultaneously, we need to point out the failure of the key programs such as the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, which, so far, have not succeeded in helping improve the health of the Roma population. By sharing experiences and connecting activists in the region and beyond, it is possible to take steps towards a less racialized society.

– **HEALTH MEDIATORS: YES BUT ROMA!**

Based on the Law on Health Protection and Social Healthcare (2008), Article 11, the Ministry of Health supported the project that introduces health mediators in the healthcare system of the Republic of Serbia with the aim to advance the health and health protection of high-risk groups.

The role of health mediators is to keep a record of the health of the substandard settlements' population and work with them on raising awareness on vaccination of the children and the importance of healthy diet and hygiene.

This position comprises fieldwork with the goal to connect the Roma community with health services, education of the Roma population in the area of healthcare, participation in the campaigns for promoting health and immunization, and helping the members of the Roma community obtain their basic documents.

The conditions for the position of a health mediator are the following:

- being a woman/mother;
- having completed at least primary school education;
- letter of support of a Roma non-governmental organization active on the territory that the position covers
- desirable: knowledge of Romani language

So, this was the description of a medical job position whose function should be to take care of the Roma who really need healthcare, in particular those who live in substandard settlements. Health mediator should cover all the settlements in the municipality that the position encompasses. However, even when all the conditions for employing a mediator are fulfilled, some issues can occur.

One of the problems is: who defines the conditions for employing health mediators? Actually, the problem lies in the fact that those who make these decisions most often do not come from the Roma communities, often are not coordinators for Roma questions or other members of Roma mobile teams... So, the health mediators are chosen from “the top” just as other positions that directly concern the Roma.

I consider this to be a problem. The Roma truly need help regarding healthcare. They need those who should be a bridge between the Roma people and healthcare institutions. The problems of the poor Roma related to healthcare are numerous: from a lack of documents that should grant them access to healthcare, through lack of information about their rights and

complicated bureaucracy, to open racism within the healthcare institutions. Therefore the health mediators should know the situation in the substandard settlements and the real needs of the Roma who live there because they should bridge the gap between the Roma and the institutions!

This means, above all, that it would be desirable for the health mediators to speak the Romani language. Otherwise, how can they help those who need it the most if they do not understand them? Furthermore, many mediators do not even want to enter Roma settlements. Hence, it is crucial to hire those who genuinely care about the wellbeing of the Roma community and want them to get out of their marginalized position and have a better life.

This position is essential for the Roma population. Yet, those hired as health mediators often only receive money without doing their jobs, and the institutions and the whole system are to blame for that.

If the state truly cared to understand the real problems and needs of the Roma, it would have made sure that those employed as health mediators are Roma and medical professionals who know Roma issues and do not hesitate to enter Roma settlements of which they are in charge. Whether this person is a mother or a woman is irrelevant for this position. Moreover, the request to hire only women is discrimination against those who are not women and who could do this job very well.

The idea to hire only women as health mediators is discriminatory, yet, it was used, allegedly, as an anti-discrimination tool. It is a contradiction of this social system. I am of an opinion that the person who should work on advancing the health of

the Roma does not have to be a mother to spot the issues in the Roma community nor this person should be a woman to approach the youth and help solve their problems. Nonetheless, my opinion, as well as the opinion of most of the members of the Roma community, is not considered important. The Ministry of Health or the institution in charge of the position defines the conditions for applying for this job and decides whether they are fulfilled. And this is done without consulting Roma activists.

Furthermore, the salary for this position should be at the level of the average salary in the Republic of Serbia, however, it is below the minimum wage.

The goals of the health mediators are: improving the health of the Roma, especially women and children, making healthcare more available, informing the Roma about healthcare, and reducing inequality. Considering the above-mentioned goals, I think that this position should be filled by those who know very well the situation of the Roma who live in the substandard settlements and, first and foremost, those who speak the Romani language.

It seems to me that the goal of reducing inequality is not achievable unless the health mediator is Roma because otherwise, it is not possible to understand the issues that they encounter. Also, those who do not have a connection with the Roma settlements and have not lived there are not familiar with the situation in the settlements.

However, the health mediators are Roma in about 20% of the cities and municipalities. Even when it seems that this is not the case because things may appear different on paper, we

know the real situation from our practice because we work in the field.

As for the discrimination present in healthcare institutions and that the health mediators should reduce, prevent and eliminate, the situation is also not good. This is because health mediators are hired by an institution that enables systemic discrimination and racism! The health care professionals are the ones who most often discriminate against the Roma. How can we expect those professionals to truly fight discrimination, if they depend on those institutions that gave them jobs?

As a healthcare professional who works in a private institution, in a span of only a few years, I saw many cases of discrimination, segregation, rejection, malicious commenting of minority ethnicities, Roma ethnicity included. I consider it my duty, not only as Roma but also as a medical professional, to fight against that and always react in those situations. Nevertheless, the state should work on eradicating racism from all public institutions.

The Roma experience racism on an everyday basis and almost everywhere. For example, they come across racism when buying food in a grocery store if their skin is darker, if they are wearing different clothes or if they accentuate differently the name of the commodity that they are paying with their hard-earned money... Certainly, experiencing racism every day makes people lose the will to fight and to live. Moreover, this creates a fear that is hard to eradicate.

I will give just a few examples of racism that I came across in my healthcare practice. A patient came to a private clinic seeking help because she had not been able to wait or because she did not have a medical card (she had come from Germany and

had not had the time to finish the administrative procedure for exercising her right to healthcare provided by the Republic of Serbia). She experienced difficulties that are an obvious example of discrimination and racism. The patient is not informed about her rights and she found it normal for nurses to address her as “Tzigan”, “illiterate” and other ugly words no one would like to hear when people address them. Even though this Roma patient could afford to pay for her medical treatment, she had encountered a problem. The medical nurses treated her in that way although they were getting their salary partly from the money that the patient paid for her medical treatment.

Regarding Roma women and women reproductive health, I see labeling on an everyday basis because of how many children they have, bad hygiene, or their skin color..

What about those who cannot afford to go to the private health clinics and have to endure the terror that the medical workers inflict upon them without even knowing if they will obtain the healthcare service that they need. Although they come asking for help, first they have to face an obstacle, and only then they might get the care that they have a full right to obtain.

In 2005, the Republic of Serbia supported the Decade of Roma Inclusion and thus joined European governments in political dedication to eliminate the discrimination of the Roma and reduce the inequality between the Roma and other ethnicities. By doing so, Serbia has agreed to help the Roma in any way and five aspects are recognized as priorities (housing, healthcare, education, employment, and social protection). Nonetheless, this is not the case in practice and it will not be so, for as long

as it takes for the institutions and people to learn to accept the differences, be it ethnicity, gender, sex, religion, or any other. I think that the state could largely benefit from hiring Roma in public institutions. Namely, it would obtain more diverse and better-informed staff, that uses innovative methods, has more ideas, and better team energy. I do find the idea of health mediators a good one, but the conditions for these positions should be defined by those who need them: Roma activists, coordinators, pedagogical assistants, and all the other Roma who are in direct contact with poor Roma communities. When I say Roma, I mean above all those who constantly work on the well-being of the Roma population and speak the Romani language (any of its dialects, because we have many).

Finally, we should ask the question of whether we can confront the system individually and in small steps or should we come up with different and collective actions...

– **WHAT IS THAT BAD SMELL IN THE AIR? ECOLOGICAL RACISM!**

Over the past years, problems related to the degradation of the environment are becoming more evident to a large number of citizens of Serbia. The quality of running water is not satisfactory in many places in Serbia, while in Zrenjanin the water has not been potable for more than 18 years.¹⁸ Only about 10% of the population has access to the wastewater treatment system, while 30% of the territory of the city of Belgrade still does not have sewerage.¹⁹ The towns in Serbia and the region are often

18 Fabrika žednih – slučaj zrenjaninskog postrojenja za preradu vode (*The factory of thirst – the case of the Zrenjanin water factory*), CRTA, Polekol, March 2021. Available at: <https://cрта.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Fabrika-z%CC%8Ced-nih-studija-sluc%CC%8Caja.pdf>

19 *VODA je zajedničko dobro: prilog za borbu protiv privatizacije vodosnabdevanja (WATER – a Common Good, Contribution to the Struggle against Privatization of the Water Utility Company)*. Belgrade: Centre for the Politics of Emancipation, 2017. Available at: <https://cpe.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/>

on the lists of the towns with the highest air pollution level in the world. On the other side, public and green surfaces are disappearing daily, while buildings that negatively impact the quality of the living environment are emerging in protected areas. There are plans to open new mines, despite the fact that their expansion has brought some families to the edge of survival.²⁰ And besides all that, according to the data of the Serbian Environmental Protection Agency, there are at least 2305 identified, illegal landfill sites in Serbia.²¹

As members of marginalized groups, the Roma face all of the above issues and feel their impact in many ways. A lot of Roma households do not have access to potable water or technical water, and the sewerage infrastructure very rarely reaches Roma settlements. District heating still represents a privilege that only a very small number of the Roma have. Dumping grounds are often created near Roma settlements because the public utility companies do not collect the waste regularly.

Air pollution particularly affects the Roma who are left on the front line of pollution, due to their class position. The Roma most often live in the most polluted areas of towns, with the smallest amount of green and public surfaces. On top of that, the majority of the Roma are coerced to gain their livelihood through jobs that are performed outdoors where the air quality

Vode-je-zajedni%C4%8Dko-dobro_WEB- CPE-2017-1.pdf

20 Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2021/11/11/zivot-uz-borske-rudnike-samo-cekamo-da-nam-se-kuce-sruse>

21 Upravljanje otpadom u Republici Srbiji u periodu 2011-2019 (*Waste Management in the Republic of Serbia*) Available at: http://www.sepa.gov.rs/download/Otpad_2011-2019_Final.pdf

is worse. Roma children are in particular exposed to pollution because while they work, they have to inhale toxic gases from traffic and industry emissions. Besides outdoor air pollution, there is also indoor air pollution, due to energy poverty which results in households using inefficient heating that additionally affects women (who spend more time working at home because of patriarchal relations in capitalism).

Instead of understanding the position of the Roma minority concerning the growing issues of degradation of the living environment and proposing systemic solutions, the non-Roma social groups and the majority population judge the Roma. The inhabitants of the Roma substandard settlements are often blamed for the air pollution. Hence, the attention is diverted from the systemic causes of this issue and shifted to individual examples of those who, in fact, suffer the consequences. Consequentially, the whole social group that is already marginalized is additionally targeted.

Instead of including the Roma community in the process of solving the air pollution issue, they are unfoundedly blamed on a racist basis. We can see a lack of understanding of the gendered and racialized class position of the Roma in the current capitalist system, as well as rethinking the ecological relations related to the structural conditions. Instead of recognizing poverty and energy poverty as the causes of the issues related to air quality and environment degradation, the focus is shifted on the ethnic group that is itself the most affected by pollution.

In this text, we will try to detect major issues of the Roma population due to air pollution, analyze their causes, and propose short and long-term solutions that could firstly mitigate and then eliminate the problem.

State of Affairs

In its yearly report on air quality in the Republic of Serbia for 2020,²² the Agency for Environment Protection states that the air quality was in the third category, that is to say, it was too polluted in many towns in Serbia. Excessive pollution with suspended particles has affected the air quality in Belgrade, Niš, Užice, Valjevo, Kraljevo, Novi Pazar, Zaječar, and Popovac while in Bor the pollution was due to sulfur dioxide levels that were higher than allowed. Probably, some other places were also polluted but since the system for measuring air quality does not exist in all places in Serbia, there is no data for the whole territory.

In the same report, it is stated that the main sources of pollution for the whole territory of Serbia are: heating plants with a capacity of 50 MW and less, and individual heating, industry, agriculture, energy production, and traffic. It is obvious that the issue is complex and the solution requires long-term, systemic, and multi-sectoral cooperation.

However, instead of putting the focus on systemic solutions, the blame for bad air quality is often shifted on the citizens. Frequently, the individual heating systems and traffic are designated as the main problem, for which the citizens who use dangerous fuels and drive old cars are responsible. In this way, the blame is shifted onto the citizens in a hierarchical order, so we can regularly see the responsibility being transferred to the most marginalized and silenced groups—such as the Roma.

The ecological issues are often used as an excuse for racist

22 Available at: http://www.sepa.gov.rs/download/izv/Vazduh_2020.pdf

rhetoric and action. The first case of exploitation of the ecological issues and question of animal welfare for promotion of the far-right ideology and attacks on the Roma²³ in our country was the one of the *Leviathan* movement. In all their activities, as well as in the discourse of this far-right group, the Roma community is targeted under the excuse of animal protection.

Nevertheless, it seems that *Leviathan* is not an isolated case – in other aspects of environmental protection, more and more frequently there are organizations or initiatives which use right-wing populism and blame the Roma for air pollution. While doing so, they do not address the real causes of pollution, but merely stigmatize social groups on ethnic and racial basis. Besides, the media plays an important role in this dangerous rhetoric and radicalized representation, because they sensationalize such non-scientific claims to attract the audience, among other reasons. Even the media like one of the largest daily newspapers *Politika*²⁴ and public service media RTS²⁵ have many times reported on this matter without getting information from both sides, thus, in such reports, the voice of the Roma cannot be heard.

The Roma are most frequently blamed for pollution due to the dangerous fuels that they burn in their settlements for heating as well as the secondary raw materials that they burn

23 Robert Kasumović, *Rasizam prurušen u aktivizam za prava životinja? (Racism Disguised as Activism for Animal Rights?)* Available at: <https://www.masina.rs/rasizam-preprusen-u-aktivizam-za-prava-zivotinja/>

24 Available at: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/491905/Beograd/Spaljuju-izolaciju-sa-kablova-i-truju-zitelje-Cukaricke-padine>

25 *Nelegalno paljenje otpada guši sve veće gradove u Srbiji – koliko je opasno. (Illegal Incineration of Waste Suffocates All Major Towns and Cities in Serbia – How dangerous is it?)* Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/4084415/pal-jenje-otpada-zagadjenje.html>

in order to obtain material for sale. The fact is that the Roma settlements do contribute to the pollution to a certain extent and efforts should be made to reduce it. Nonetheless, it is also true that this contribution is most often exaggerated, it is not compared to much larger polluters, the voice of the local Roma community is never heard and the class position due to which the Roma have to burn secondary raw metals in order to survive is never observed.

A critique of the Current Situation

A frequent argument in the debate on the impact of the Roma settlements on the air quality in urban areas is that the use of different low-caloric and very harmful energy sources in substandard Roma settlements causes air pollution. On the face of it, this argument seems logical but if we further analyze the issue and observe it within the social structure, we come to the fact that in these cases, poverty is the main issue and that the pollution is not related to individual actions of those who have a different skin colour. Yet, these arguments are intentionally or unintentionally conflated, since the Roma communities are the poorest social groups.

When we talk about the harmful gases emission from the settlements where the Roma predominantly live, we should take into account that from the total of 34.375 Roma households, registered at the 2011 census,²⁶ 1.032 households, or about 3%, do not have access to electricity infrastructure. 16.7% of

²⁶ Available at: <https://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Romi.pdf>

the households do not have access to water infrastructure and a similar percentage does not have sewerage. An even higher percentage of the Roma households does not have bathrooms – 37, and up to 89% of the households do not have access to district heating networks. This data shows that a large number of the Roma in the 21st century live in deep poverty, below the line of dignified living, without access to basic utility services.

Today, more than 21% of the Roma households live in informal housing made of bad materials. The houses in which the Roma live on average have much smaller surfaces compared to the houses of the members of the majority population. At the same time, in 2011, the average number of persons per household for the Roma (4.1) was much higher than the general average (2.8 persons per household). From the above data, we can conclude that the overall use of energy sources per capita in Roma households – despite inefficiency – was much lower because of the smaller surface and higher number of household members.

In the case of the Roma minority group as well as other poor social groups, the use of dangerous but cheap fuels is not a choice but a matter of necessity. “The freedom of choice” comes down to choosing between freezing in a badly isolated house or getting at least some heat by using inefficient and harmful fuels, whose price the users will pay in long term in the decline of their health.

The Roma are criticized for burning secondary raw materials that they collect in their houses, but those critiques overlook the fact that the Roma collectors of the secondary raw materials are the ones who help the recycling system in Serbia to functi-

on. Furthermore, they are the workers who collect and provide most of the recyclable secondary raw materials.²⁷

The second group that is often under attack are the collectors of secondary raw materials who burn certain raw materials to obtain pure metal for sale. They mostly burn plastic parts, which can be carcinogenic and emit very harmful airborne substances. Such activity, first and foremost, puts in danger those people and the inhabitants of their settlements and then the areas around the settlement. Nonetheless, we have to understand that for the majority of the secondary raw materials collectors this is the only way to survive and that they have to accept it despite high health risks and miserable salaries. Part of the responsibility, in these cases, goes to the buyer of the raw materials, who incite these activities to lower their costs. The solution for this problem is, above all, systemic and consists of helping as many collectors as possible to overcome poverty so that they can have a choice.

The narrative of those who target Roma settlements and secondary raw materials collectors often implies that these settlements considerably contribute to pollution and these processes emit diverse, very toxic substances such as dioxins and furans. The truth is that there is no study or clear proof for that causal connection, and it is only *probable* that *some part* of the pollution comes from these activities. As, for the time being, there is no precise measurement, many claims are only allegations. Furthermore, in Serbia, there is no laboratory that mea-

27 *Sakupljači sekundarnih sirovina – (ne)vidljivi radnici (Collectors of Secondary Raw Materials – (In)Visible Workers)*, Roma Forum of Serbia, Belgrade 2021. Available at: <http://www.frs.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Skupljači-sekundarnih-sirovina-3.pdf>

sures dioxins and furans levels in the air and the ground, so this claim remains not only unverified but also non-verifiable.

To advance the quality of life and reduce air pollution in the Roma settlements, it is necessary to unite efforts of the inhabitants of those settlements, state institutions, and civil sector and not to keep (racially) targeting and blaming the Roma for causing the air pollution.

How to Achieve Better Air Quality

To advance air quality but also the living standard of a large number of the Roma, it is possible to undertake many short and long-term measures.

Instead of targeting the secondary raw material collectors who burn plastic, it is necessary to change the regulation on the purchase of secondary raw materials. It is important to make the purchasers buy all of the raw material for a fair price and not to transfer the costs of pure raw material production on the Roma collectors and the inhabitants of the nearby areas who suffer the consequences of the burning process. If this protocol is introduced, in the next phase, the purchase of burned raw materials could be forbidden, but this step has to be made at the very end when the collectors have a secured income – otherwise, they will be pushed further into poverty.

To reduce emissions of the harmful substances that come from individual heating, support from the city and state level is essential because only in this way the inhabitants of standard Roma settlements can get a possibility to replace their inefficient heaters with more efficient ones. This incentive

should be fully subsidized because most of the inhabitants of substandard settlements do not have any capital for co-financing this measure.

Another measure that would positively affect air quality but also the overall well-being of the people who live in Roma settlements is to ensure stable access to the electricity grid and other utility services for all. Access to the electricity grid would at least partially reduce the use of the most harmful energy sources.

In the same package with stable access to the electricity grid, it is necessary to ensure better coverage of the Roma settlements by the public utility services. Ensuring a continuous waste management service will reduce the need to burn the waste.

In the parts of the city where it is possible, it is crucial to ensure access to the district heating for a price that would be affordable to households from socially sensitive groups. The shift to district heating would considerably improve thermal comfort while significantly lowering the emission of harmful gasses and substances.

Finally, it is vital to raise awareness of the majority population on privileges and prejudices. Only when those who accuse the Roma understand that the Roma or any other social group are not the main problem related to the air pollution that comes from poor communities, but the poverty itself, the problem solving can begin. In this case, we can paraphrase the quote from the famous television series *The Wire*: “If you follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers. But if you start to follow the money you don’t know where it’s gonna take you”. In this case, it is evident that the rich people profit from the pollution that

the poor people suffer from. The same goes for CO₂ emission, which is one of the main causes of global warming. The research conducted by OXFAM and the Stockholm Environment Institute²⁸ reveals an extreme inequality of carbon emissions that brought the world to the verge of a climate disaster. The research states that 10% of the richest people (about 630 million) are responsible for 52% of the total carbon emissions in the 1990-2015 period. While 1% of the richest people who own about 44% of the global wealth is responsible for 15% of the total carbon emissions.

Instead of targeting collectors of secondary raw materials and Roma settlements, it is necessary to initiate a larger, participative conversation on the topic of pollution, so that everyone can get familiar with the issues, for a beginning. Engaging in a conversation and getting to know better the Roma community can be the first step towards a joint effort to reduce air pollution on the local level.

28 Tim Gore, (2020), *Confronting Carbon Inequality*, Oxfam. Available at: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621052/mb-confronting-carbon-inequality-210920-en.pdf>

– I DO NOT HAVE A PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION CARD, THEREFORE I AM NOT

For the Roma, the housing question is one of the most important aspects of socio-economic integration. It is one of the most visible parameters of the quality of life of individuals and families as well as an essential part of the right to an adequate standard of living. However, this right, as many others, is narrowly tied to exercising the right to personal documents, or a personal identity card which is granted to any citizen of the Republic of Serbia over the age of 16.²⁹ This document is a condition for exercising basic rights granted by the constitution, such as the right to healthcare, social protection, marriage, vote, etc.

It is beyond doubt that, in Serbia, many Roma live in dire conditions and that there is a considerable gap between the

²⁹ *The Law on Personal Identification Card* (The Official Gazette RS, N. 62/2006, 36/2011 and 53/2021), Article 2.

housing conditions of the Roma community and the general population. But, why do we talk about the housing question before all else? There are many other issues that the Roma encounter, described in more detail in the *Strategy for the Social Inclusion of the Roma*, which the government of the Republic of Serbia adopted for the 2016-2025 period. The *Strategy* aims to create conditions for social inclusion, reduction of poverty, and elimination of discrimination of the Roma, that is the conditions for full access to exercising fundamental human rights.

As we mentioned above, housing is narrowly tied to exercising the right to personal documents because it is necessary to have the residence on the territory of the Republic of Serbia to exercise the right to personal documents. The place of living, address, and municipality are defined in the legislation as *a residence* on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. To request personal documents from the local police department, one must show a legal proof of residence, which represents a place where a person intends to live for some longer period, and the center of person's activities, and professional, economic, social, and other ties that demonstrate the connection with the place where the person lives.³⁰

Having a personal identity card³¹ is a legal obligation and the duty of citizens over the age of 16 who have a residence on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, but what about those who do not have a residence? Or, to be more precise, what about those who have an informal "residence" but since they live in illegal settle-

30 *The Law on the Residence and Domicile of the Citizens* (The Official Gazette RS, N. 87/2011), Article 1. Provision 1, Point 2

31 *The Law on Personal Identification Card* (The Official Gazette RS, N. 62/2006, 36/2011 and 53/2021), Article 3.

ments their address and the place of their professional, social and other activities cannot formally be accepted as a residence?

The Roma who live in informal settlements mainly encounter such problem, due to the lack of documents that prove the property ownership or any other legal basis for housing as well as the Roma who came from Kosovo and live on the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

For instance, a person that is born in Serbia and has Serbian citizenship might live the entire life on the territory of Serbia but without a registered residence, most rights and institutions will be inaccessible to him or her. This indicates that having Serbian citizenship may be indisputable but, if the residence is not legally registered, one cannot benefit from it.

As we previously mentioned, this problem affects mostly the Roma community because of the poverty and bad living conditions in the informal settlements, hence they cannot provide legal proof of housing when they register their residence. In some cases, they can solve this problem by registering at the home of a cousin or a neighbor who has a legal residence (who often asks for money in return). Nevertheless, this is more difficult for the Roma citizens of Serbia who came from Kosovo because there are additional conditions for registering residence that have been created exclusively for this category of citizens. For them, the procedure for registering and canceling the residence as well as issuing a passport is regulated by the government's *Provision on the Procedure of Determining Legal Conditions Passport Issuance to the Inhabitants of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija*.³²

32 Provision on the Procedure of Determining Legal Conditions Passport Issuance to the Inhabitants of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija: 76/2009-3

In practice, the process goes like this: a Roma person who is originally from Kosovo and Metohija submits a request to the local police department for issuance of a personal identity card. Nonetheless, since this person lives in an informal Roma settlement, he or she states the address of a neighbor or a cousin who legally owns a house, but often does not want to do a favor for free and asks for money regardless of the financial situation of the person. After they submit the request, the Ministry of Internal Affairs employees come to inspect and sometimes they do not find the person at this address which results in refusal of the residence and thus the person cannot exercise their right to a personal identity card. Moreover, sometimes the person is at the given address but the law enforcement agents come again one or two more times, do not find the person there, and issue a refusal of residence. In some cases, the person is present at the address during every inspection but law agents still decide to refuse the residence because, based on a *free estimation of the police officers*, this person does not intend to use this address as a permanent place of living and center of his or her professional, social and other activities.

The question arises: On what basis do the agents of the Ministry of Internal Affairs make such conclusions? Does this represent an abuse of their discretionary authorizations? Do the agents consider any of countless possible issues, namely the fact that the persons without a personal document cannot even register their children,³³ find formal employment, get married,

³³The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has emphasized that this year marks the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the 1961 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and that *"It is possible and more important than ever to reduce statelessness and ensure the*

exercise their right to health care, and consequentially, they do not have a registered medical record and cannot get vaccinated? Do they ever take into account that during the inspection, the person works (often informally) to provide a minimum livelihood for their families? What is the purpose of the *Strategy for the Social Inclusion of the Roma*, which describes the issues that the Roma communities in numerous informal settlements face because the Ministry of Internal Affairs is not applying the *Strategy* adopted by the government of the Republic of Serbia of which that ministry is a part?

The Law on the Residence and Domicile of the Citizens provides a possibility that, in the case of citizens who cannot register a residence on the basis of property ownership, renting contract, or any other legal basis, the legal authority in charge can confirm their residence on their permanent address, the address of their spouse or civil partner, their parents or the address of the Centre for Social Work.³⁴

The only bright light on the end of this long-lasting problem was a new provision in the Law: the residence can be registered at the address of the Centre for Social Work. However, this has not brought out results, as I can confirm from my professional

right to citizenship". Namely, children of Roma parents who face this problem of inability to exercise their right to a personal identification card are at risk of their children not being registered in the birth register, which puts them at risk of statelessness. If they are never registered in the birth register, they will be completely prevented or significantly hindered from exercising their right to education, health and social protection. They will never be able to marry and the risk of their children losing their citizenship increases. This would be a problem that would be passed on from generation to generation and create minimal chances for any success or progress, because not registering a birth introduces uncertainty about the facts that are crucial for acquiring citizenship, such as the child's place of birth or its origin.

34 *The Law on the Residence and Domicile of the Citizens, Article 11*

and activist's experience since I have often submitted information of public interest to many Centres for Social Work in the areas where many Roma live. In this way, I have learned that on the addresses of these Centres, there are very few persons registered. Further, we cannot know the exact number of Roma among the registered since many Centres do not include information on the nationality of the users of their services.

This issue has been affecting the Roma community for many years and the new ones keep emerging. All of us are witnessing the disaster caused by the coronavirus which affects the whole world, as well as Serbia, for over two years and we still struggle with it. To alleviate the consequences to some extent, the state has adopted the *Law on the Temporary Register of the Citizens of Serbia over 18 Eligible for Financial Assistance that Aims to Alleviate the Consequences of the Covid 19 Pandemic Caused by the Virus SarsCoV-2*. This Law regulates the creation and maintenance of the Temporary Register of the Citizens of Serbia over 18 who receive financial assistance and additional financial assistance with the purpose to alleviate the consequences of the pandemic, and defines how this financial assistance should be transferred as well as other questions of importance for this matter.³⁵

As important as the intention of the state to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic might be, this financial assistance has put the major part of the Roma community in an unequal position, because they were not able to exercise their

³⁵ *Law on the Temporary Register of the Citizens of Serbia over 18 Eligible for Financial Assistance that Aims to Alleviate the Consequences of the Covid 19 Pandemic Caused by the Virus SarsCoV-2*. (The Official Gazette RS, N. 40/2021 and 96/2021), Article 1.

right to assistance without a registered residence on the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

We should bear in mind that the high poverty rate and the fact that some Roma households do not have access to running water and the electricity grid in informal Roma settlements make them more vulnerable in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence it is important not to leave them without support in this period.

The issues that the Roma community faces do not end here. The amendments of the Law on Non-Litigation Procedure from 2012 introduced a new type of procedure in the legal system – the procedure for determining date and place of birth.³⁶ The residence is one of the important conditions for exercising the right to a personal identity card, the other one is birth registration and there are persons whose birth was not registered in the Official Birth Register. By introducing the procedure mentioned above into the law, the citizens who had not been registered in the registry of births and were not able to get registered got a possibility to obtain personal identification documents and access many rights and services that they previously could not. This is one of the positive measures which have caused significantly positive changes, nonetheless, this could now be questioned. Namely, the *Conclusion of the Department for Citizens of the Supreme Court of Cassations on the Non-Litigation Court's Jurisdiction* in the procedure of registration in the birth registry could considerably endanger the above-mentioned measure.

³⁶ *The Law on Non-Litigation Procedure* (The Official Gazette SRS, N. 25/82 and 48/88 and The Official Gazette RS, N. 46/95 -state law, 18/2005 - state law, 85/2012, 45/2013 - state law, 55/2014, 6/2015 i 106/2015 - state law) Articles 71a to 71lj.

This Conclusion to a great extent cancels the positive changes brought about by the amendments of the Law on Non-Litigation Procedure because the Court stated in this Conclusion that non-litigation procedures for determining date and place of birth can be conducted only if there had been a previous unsuccessful procedure for subsequent registering in the Official Birth Register. Besides, in the Conclusion, the Supreme Court of Cassations, states that the person who had been registered in the Birth Register which afterwards was destroyed cannot start the procedure for determining date and place of birth, neither can the persons “who had been registered in the Birth Register of the so-called Republic of Kosovo”.³⁷ “Such decisions of the Supreme Court of Cassation not only make it more difficult or impossible for the citizens to access the Court but also do not correspond to the current regulation and the Constitution of Serbia. Due to insisting on the administrative procedure in the cases when it is obvious that the parties do not stand a chance to succeed, not only does the period in which the citizens are not officially registered gets prolonged unnecessarily and the citizens have to bear additional costs, but there is also a higher risk that the citizens, discouraged by a failure in the legal procedure, will abandon the legal procedure and remain non-registered in the Birth Register.”³⁸

Taking account of the above facts, and adding that, accor-

37 Praxis, *Problemi u primeni postupka za utvrđivanje vremena i mesta rođenja* (Problems in the application of the procedure for determining the time and place of birth).

38 Praxis, *Problemi u primeni postupka za utvrđivanje vremena i mesta rođenja* (Problems in the application of the procedure for determining the time and place of birth).

ding to the research of the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the government of Serbia,³⁹ that there are 702 substandard Roma settlements whose inhabitants often are not registered as owners of the land and/or houses,⁴⁰ we can conclude that the problem is alarming. Since the situation is worsening, it is obvious that the multitude of projects or state policies such as the *Strategy* did not give many results. The only thing that is left for the Roma community to do – and which should have been a priority for quite some time – is the political participation of the Roma. If the Roma are not a part of the political decision-making process, especially the state decisions that regard directly the situation in which they are, they cannot make progress either as a community or as individuals. We have personally experienced the failure of the era of humanitarian aid which did not solve the situation of the Roma and even when it did alleviate the consequences, it did not root out the causes of the problems.

39 *Mapiranje podstandardnih romskih naselja prema rizicima i pristupu pravima u Republici Srbiji* (Mapping of substandard Roma settlements according to risks and access to rights in the Republic of Serbia).

40 *Report The Roma in Serbia and the Situation of Romani Returnees from Western Europe*, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

– THE ROMA QUESTION TRAPPED IN A PROJECT BOX

Although the Roma minority group is the poorest one in Serbia, their problems are almost invisible to the general public, and the media rarely reports on them. The issues of the Roma community come to focus only on August 8, International Roma Day, or other similar occasions, yet, even then, the obvious ones are merely rhetorically listed without deeper analysis or eventual proposal for their solutions. Nevertheless, as opposed to these symbolic representations, the way in which the authorities treat the members of the Roma ethnic minority can be best described as complete neglect.

The state does not allocate almost any funds for solving the problems that Roma encounter in the spheres of employment, housing, and education. If some funds are allocated for these purposes, they are often spent on something else or without legal traces and justification of the expenditures.

Today, practically all responsibility for the integration of the Roma ethnic minority is shifted to the civil sector that relies exclusively on project financing and support of the foreign and local foundations, with almost no participation of the state. When the state does take part, nominally, it is because of the requests of the bureaucratic framework, obligations towards the European Union, or the use of the funds allocated through projects.

Given that the current situation has been lasting for decades, we can say that the Roma question became solely a project question, and therefore it is depoliticized. Nonetheless, the questions remain: can the non-governmental sector by itself improve the situation of the Roma minority, and is it realistic to expect any improvement in the current circumstances?

In the Time of *Decade*

The period after 2000 is in many ways important for the Roma minority. At the elections in 2007, the Roma obtained their representatives in the Parliament, because the threshold for the minority parties had been canceled. Two representatives of the Roma ethnic minority, Srdjan Šajin, and Rajko Đurić became members of the National Assembly. However, this success did not last very long – at the following year’s parliamentary elections, the Roma minority lost their representation in the parliament since the above-mentioned measure had been canceled.

More importantly, in 2005, the project *Decade for the Roma Inclusion* started and lasted until 2015. This project was implemented under the guidance of the European Union with the

aim to enable the Serbian state to advance the position of the Roma population and solve some of the key issues that they face in the areas such as employment, housing, education, and social security.

The *Decade* project was of key importance for the integration of the Roma community that accepted it with great enthusiasm. Although it seemed like a good project on paper, it was implemented very superficially and the largest portion of the funds was spent on documentation and bureaucratic framework of the European Union while the Roma community was left empty-handed. The only slight improvement was made in the area of education, above all thanks to the affirmative action measures in school and university admissions as well as to the engagement of the pedagogical assistants who contributed significantly to raising the level of education of the Roma. The position of health mediators that was introduced during the *Decade* improved access to healthcare of the Roma citizens.⁴¹

Furthermore, instead of creating better conditions and encouraging the political participation of the Roma minority, the way in which the *Decade* was implemented led to the opposite.

At the beginning of the *Decade*, many different foundations and donors gained interest in projects that have the Roma population as a target group. Consequentially, a huge number of Roma (as well as non-Roma) non-governmental organizations

41 We have to underline that although there was certain progress in these areas, the introduction of the two professions (pedagogical assistant and healthcare mediators) was not without issues. Moreover, the state failed one more time because it had created these professions as short-term, underpaid and precarious positions. Rather, it should have secured these positions and enabled further progress of the Roma community.

were created with the aim of addressing the Roma issues. It can be said that instead of politicization, “projectization” intensified.

By ratifying the *Decade*, the state has expressed some concerns about the process of the integration of the Roma population. The aforementioned affirmative measures in school and university admissions were proof of that interest. Even so, as time went by, the state showed less and less interest in solving concrete issues of the Roma community, and the whole process was left to the non-governmental actors which became the main holders of all the projects directed towards the Roma community. Since a large number of donors and foundations showed interest in funding projects that targeted integration of the Roma minority during the *Decade*, the state slowly withdrew from financing these projects and, consequentially, from the whole process.

Furthermore, it is important to underline that for some projects the plan was to start with the funding from donors, and once they are implemented the state was supposed to take over management and funding of those projects. Most often, the state was not interested in doing so, as shows the example of the projects that offered university scholarships to Roma students in the area of healthcare. At the initial phase of the *Roma Health Scholarship Program*, Roma Education Fund (REF) was providing scholarships for Roma students. The state made strong promises to join the project once it would start and take over the management. Nevertheless, the project was funded for almost ten years by REF and the state showed no interest in taking over and continuing this project. Thus, this project remained one more example in the long line of unsuccessful

collaborations between the state and the foundation. Certainly, the long-term effects of education in the field of healthcare cannot be obtained without continuous efforts which no short-term project can achieve.

By withdrawing from financing and monitoring the projects aimed at helping the Roma population, the state shows a lack of political will for solving the issues that the projects address. In this way, the issues of the Roma community are reduced to “seeking solutions” in the civil sector. Those who obtain jobs in this way not only make a living but also a career out of it and the process of integration becomes depoliticized.

Can Civil Society Solve the Problems?

The role of the civil sector in society should include pointing out the issues, proposing potential solutions, and taking part in the solution process that the state or other organizations lead. The non-governmental organizations that address issues in support of the public good play a very important role in society because they can, in a certain way, monitor policy implementation.

Since the Roma are the poorest stratus of the society with a large number of existential problems, it is expectable that the non-governmental sector shows interest in these problems and addresses them. Taking into account that the state is not interested at all in the problems of the Roma community and the local authorities completely ignore them, we can conclude that the NGOs are the last resort of the Roma population.

The problems that affect the Roma community in Serbia are more than serious. Only 6% of the Roma children enroll the

preschool while only 22% of young Roma enroll the secondary education (in the majority population it is 90%). More than 37% of the households in the Roma settlements do not have access to clean water and in 11% of the households, there is no access to the electric grid (compared to 0,1% of the majority population). There are no exact data on the unemployment of the Roma population, but it is known that the percentage largely surpasses 50.⁴² Considering the facts mentioned above, it is obvious that the numerous and very complex issues of the Roma community exceed the capacities and activities of the non-governmental sector. Therefore, it will not be possible to bring a more concrete solution to these issues without the help of the state. The aforementioned affirmative action measures in school and university admissions for Roma children are illustrative examples that showed that with the minimal effort of the state some improvements in the lives of the Roma can be achieved.

Even if there is goodwill, the non-governmental organizations often do not have the human and other resources that are necessary for addressing adequately these problems. Time and again, the state solicits the representatives of the civil sector when drafting important documents, however, in most cases, it is merely a procedural move that does not allow for real participation.

There is a huge number of non-governmental organizations that address the Roma issues and they have realized a large number of projects since the beginning of the *Decade*. This leads us to a conclusion that many of them were founded with

⁴² *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma for 2016-2025 Period*

the aim to gain a financial benefit. Unfortunately, because of this brazen and irresponsible spending of project funds, many projects did not have any effects on the Roma community. Also, we should add that many donors do not have a clear idea of the situation in the field, so the calls for projects often set unmeasurable and unrealistic goals that do not benefit the Roma community.

Nevertheless, even if the money had been spent only on what it had been allocated for, there still would have been the realistic limits of the action of NGOs. Therefore, thus the NGOs cannot contribute to making the necessary space for politicization.

Since the unemployment rate is very high in the Roma community, it is clear that certain members of this community have found employment through project activism in the civil sector, which is also the case with some non-Roma organizations that address social issues. These activists depend on salaries obtained by working on the projects for their existence. This is why they are not in the position to point out the faults of projects to the donors. Rather, they accept any available job which puts the project quality and the interest of the Roma population in second place. Many activists who used to be progressive before entering the non-governmental sector lose the sharpness of their resistance once their activism becomes their job and career and stops being the true fight for the collective good. Certainly, this does not mean that in the non-governmental sector there are no individuals who are still truly dedicated to the struggle, but it does show that the NGO form itself can easily lead to depoliticization.

Finally, it is not realistic to expect the NGOs to solve the

issues such as housing and employment of the country's poorest population, because such a huge material task certainly belongs to the state. The Roma community does not have political representatives and the state completely ignores this obstacle. This shows that the struggle through the non-governmental sector is the only available resource. Taking into account the above considerations, some of the most important tasks of the non-governmental sector should be repositioning the Roma question into the political framework, parliamentary as well as non-parliamentary, and pointing out the problems that emerge from the lack of interest by the state and its institutions.

– ***The Vicious Circle of Education and Poverty***

The issue of the inclusion of Roma children in the public education system is one of the most acute problems of the Roma community. Further, it is perceived as one of the ways of integration of the Roma into society. Good quality education and equality in schooling would open a possibility to avoid life on the margins of society and poverty that has marked the lives of many generations. Poverty affects Roma children the most – not only does it endanger regular schooling, education, and development but also makes the accessibility of education system institutions questionable. Diverse studies and projects that aim to implement models of good practice into the education of Roma children suggest that these children are often excluded from the main aspects of education and can reach only low-quality education, which increases the risk of exclusion in education. The first step towards the integration of Roma

children into the society through education is including Roma children in the public preschool education, which represents a starting point of inclusion of Roma children into the education system or exclusion from it.

However, it is important to consider the situation in the public preschool institutions in its entirety, because the position that Roma children have influences their position and success throughout their schooling. The socio-economic status prevents or restricts the development of the capacities that are mainly developed by educational stimulation (for instance: logical operations which are crucial for learning mathematics). Therefore the children from families of low socio-economic status have fewer chances to be educationally stimulated and directed towards the behaviors that the school system expects (interest, working habits, attitude towards school, etc.)

On one side, the low education level is an obstacle to employment and earning a living, as well as to conditions for development and progress, thus it leads to deepening of poverty. On the other side, poverty certainly is an obstacle to schooling. So the Roma population has been going in a vicious circle for decades and cannot exit it by itself. Taking into account that education is a key to overcoming poverty, it is necessary to take measures that will contribute to improving the very position of the Roma, starting from the facts and analysis of the reasons that contribute to that difficult situation.

The low education level of the Roma reflects negatively on their professional structure, hence the majority of them are poor, without a regular job, and are not able to compete in the labour market. The jobs that the Roma can do are badly paid,

underestimated, and mostly seasonal. The non-differentiated socio-professional structure is an indicator of a low social position and a vicious circle of poverty.

The Position of the Roma in the Public Education System in Serbia

There is no reliable data on the Roma in the education system in Serbia. These are some of the main reasons: lack of personal documents and/or the residence registration of the Roma, mobility of many families that are looking for jobs, and widely spread reluctance of the Roma to declare as Roma, due to the diverse prejudices and stereotypes on the Roma as well as to the discrimination against them.

The lack of education is a consequence but also a cause of the Roma's difficult economic position. The exclusion from the sphere of education deprives Roma children of one of the fundamental human rights—the right to education—and the consequences of the exclusion of the Roma on the social plan are reflected in the reproduction of poverty and the lack of any perspective for a better future.

Possible Reasons for the Lack of Inclusion of the Roma Children in the Public Education System in Serbia

The factors of the low inclusion of Roma children in public education are numerous and mutually connected. These factors include racism of the non-Roma parents, who oppose the enro-

Illment of Roma children in schools, discriminatory practice of the public education authorities and bureaucratic procedures for school enrollment, the poverty that holds them back from financing education, social and physical exclusion of the Roma from social life, and living in segregated and ghettoized settlements far away from schools. Specific needs of some groups are encompassed by the activity of specialized institutions or special programs, some of which are not of the integrative type. Unlike them, the Roma are in particular endangered because they are not included in almost any kind of public education. Many Roma children do not attend a school or they drop out early. The causes of the low presence of Roma children in the public education system in Serbia are numerous and complex. Roma children do not have any conditions for studying in their places of living while they encounter many problems in school. It is difficult for them to fit into the primary education system, they do not speak well the language in which the lessons are conducted, and because of the subjective difficulties, multifold prejudices, and discrimination they drop out from school very quickly. Often they are transferred to special educational needs schools (approximately 80% of the students in those schools are Roma) and the main reason for this is their poor knowledge of the Serbian language and the parents' wish that their children get free schoolbooks, transportation, meal.

Some think that the lessons in the Romani language, their mother tongue, would facilitate the schooling of Roma children, rather than cause additional ghettoization. Others find that the language barrier is not the main obstacle to regular schooling, but mostly the bad economic position of

the family, low level of the education of the parents, tradition, customs, etc. For the Roma who have dedicated their entire life to mere survival, schooling of their children does not have a particular value. Semi-literate and uneducated parents cannot help their children in achieving better school results or professional advancement, while, on the contrary, their children can help them in the informal or other work that helps them to survive.

Moreover, the teaching staff shows a lack of dedication and motivation for specific work with Roma children while the general society refuses them and does not understand their living conditions. The teachers who work with Roma children do not know enough about the issues and the culture of the Roma because during their education they do not get training in these areas. They are mostly perceived as teachers whose school class does not have good results which are blamed on the abilities of Roma children, the environment in which they grow up, and the characteristics of their families, hence the teachers themselves feel helpless and non-motivated.

Recommendations for Participation of the Wider Society

As it is stated in the initiative *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, which has been implemented from 2005 to 2015: education has an essential role – it is considered a starting point in the process of breaking the circle of poverty. This initiative defines the aims of the public education reform and specific issues of the education of the Roma population. It would be useful to continue

with the realization of these aims and the implementation of the activities that were proposed.

The first step for advancing the education status of the Roma is certainly to include them in the public education system and to ensure the continuity of their schooling. To make this step, it is necessary to create the conditions for the inclusion of the Roma into the education system through the creation of bodies that would be in charge of achieving this goal. Their function would be to implement the activities that should contribute to the inclusion of the Roma and coordination of the work of the institutions and other actors that participate in this process. It is also important to develop special enrollment policies for Roma children and youth. The enrollment policy should pave the way to the education system, eliminate the differences that are consequences of the educational deprivation, instead of deepening them and creating the conditions for discrimination. As stated earlier in these recommendations, it is important to prepare the public educational institutions for the inclusion of the Roma in education, and the local communities and educational institutions should be the main actors of this initiative. The Ministry of Education will help to realize this process through the implementation of different solutions for inclusion of Roma children, coordination of the activities of some institutions, and additional funding of the costs of preparation and realization of the program and providing the institutions with didactic tools. The preparation phase should also include Roma children who are enrolling in school for the first time. This means that Roma preschoolers should undergo systematic preparation so that they can fulfill the requests of the school

enrollment process and satisfy the general criteria. The child who is unprepared for entering the school system has difficulties adapting and quickly drops out of it. The preparation of Roma children includes working with their parents, whose motivation is one of the key conditions for successful enrollment and regular attendance.

It would be useful to financially support the Roma in the process of education because the low socio-economic status tends to be the key factor in preventing the inclusion of the Roma in the school system. The financial support should provide elementary conditions that regular schooling requests and it should be flexible in the response to the needs of different levels of education.

The inclusion of Roma children their remaining in the public education system requires making the school environment more sensitive to interculturality and recognition of the specific needs of Roma children. For a better perception of their efficacy and a more successful step towards the inclusion of Roma children, it is important to strengthen the professional role of the teacher as a partner in the pedagogical communication, foster affective interaction, improve the social relations in the school class as well as to develop competence for tolerance and respect of differences.

The Position of Roma Children in the Public Preschool Institutions and Recommendations

The research shows that the number of Roma children who regularly attend a preschool institution is lower than expected

but that it is satisfying because more than 76% of the parents state that their child regularly attends preschool. The low socio-economic level of living conditions of Roma families is one of the factors that hinder the inclusion of Roma children in preschool groups, but it is not the only one. The research also demonstrates that the teachers are prejudiced against Roma parents. These prejudices impact the collaboration of Roma parents and teachers and consequentially the quality of preschool education of Roma children. The indicators of the existence of these stereotypes are visible in contrasting examples of a partially successful collaboration of the parent and teachers that may reflect in the inclusion of children in the preschool institutions, irregular attendance, passive attitude of the parents who remain mere spectators without participating in the work, occasional fear and reluctance in communication, as well as usual structuring of the space where the children spend their time or the lack of Romani culture products in these spaces. All of this clearly shows a presence of stereotypes but also a lack of inclusive culture in the institutions.

It seems that establishing connections between the preschool and the family which would include more frequent interactions of the parents and teachers, would enable a constant flow and exchange of information, ensure the presence of Roma parents with an equal role distribution in the educational process. This would also diminish the degradation of Roma parents and their requests and reduce the behaviors which lower the professional reputation of the teachers. It would be necessary to define the optimal conditions for the institution to represent a context for development but not separately from wider society,

which would alleviate negative factors of the relations between the educational institution and Roma parents. This could be achieved through an all-encompassing model and methodology for an inclusive approach to education, with the active participation of Roma parents in the form of partnership. It is important to underline that there is readiness and need of Roma parents to take part in the work of preschool institutions, regardless of their economic status, if the institutions are ready to create conditions for adequate participation of the family. To achieve this, it would be necessary to eliminate the stereotypes that the non-Roma population has regarding the Roma and the discriminating attitude of individuals and institutions so that the latter would allow for an integration in the social mainstream and life in general.

Preparation of Roma Children and Their Parents for School Enrollment: State of Affairs

Child's school enrollment is a financial burden for parents but not in the same way for all of them. Economically deprived parents and members of the marginalized groups carry heavier loads in that transition. A child who comes from a poor family lives in the conditions of social and educational deprivation has a different cultural milieu and often has limited knowledge of the language of the majority population. We can say that the ultimate and most drastic result of an unsuccessful adaptation to school can be dropping out of school very early. Moreover, the chain of poverty continues because the children quit school early. The issues that the Roma encounter in education someti-

mes are a direct consequence of poverty and harsh socio-economic conditions and sometimes they result from the inability of uneducated, illiterate Roma parents to support their children in studying. Sometimes the problems arise from low motivation, lack of recognition of the importance of education, and lack of interest of Roma parents in the schooling of their children. This has the following consequences: Roma children lack interest in school, they quit school early and value more earning money than education. Yet, Roma children enroll in school just like the non-Roma children, without special preparation.

Preparation of Roma Children and Their Parents for School Enrollment: Recommendations

It is essential to prepare Roma children for school enrollment in a timely manner and systematically through preschool institutions. These institutions should simultaneously impact cognitive capacities, develop learning motivation and make up for missing stimulative parental impacts. It is also important that this activity should involve pupils' parents. They should be informed on time about all of the aspects of schooling and education, should be instructed on behaviors that foster inclusion in school and regular attendance. Besides, it is important to evaluate what are the forms and types of help that parents realistically can give to their children. The parents should receive support in concretely helping their children as well as feedback information on the school results of their child.

It is indispensable to improve the socio-economic conditions in which Roma children are born and live but it is also

important to work on recognizing the attitudes of the parents that can be relevant for their relationship with the child who is starting formal schooling. In particular, the attitudes that could have a negative impact on regular school attendance should be improved. In the value system, a school should be an institution that offers a chance for an education and a better life for the children. Parents' preparedness for school should be advanced, and this should result in better preparation of children with unequal chances to recognize and keep their place in the school system.

The Impact of the Specificity of the Romani Language and Culture on Education

During the education process, it is crucial to pay attention to the cultural specificities of Roma children that regard their language. Roma children can have bad notes generally and in the Serbian language school subject because they come from a different cultural environment and have significantly lower rates of attending preschool. It has been found that 30% of children who are among the poorest pupils in Serbia were not able to acquire even the basic knowledge of mathematics and Serbian language after three years of elementary school. When we analyze the results of Roma pupils on the basis of the same data the observations are even more devastating.

Roma children are bilingual because, in preschool, they learn the language of their environment besides their mother tongue, while in preschool and school they also learn another foreign language. The society in which the Roma live imposes

the obligation to speak more than two languages, which they accepted over the centuries in order to survive and integrate better into the society. The experts find that bilingualism has a great impact on the development of talents. Being bilingual, Roma children have to activate higher mental processes to prevent language interference. This undoubtedly demonstrates Roma children's good capacities for learning and adaptation, which could be used in more desirable ways with adequate stimulation at school.

Even though nowadays the tests are culturally adapted to Roma children, we must not neglect the fact that the way of living affects cognitive capacities and preparedness to study. The research shows that, in culturally adapted tests, Roma children have lower scores in visual and motor coordination, which can be understood considering the lack of experience in manipulating toys. They also have lower scores in memory capacities, which can be explained by attention deficit. These are some crucial guidelines for working with Roma children in preschool and first grades of elementary school which could be used as a base for drafting a support program.

Non-Discriminative Intelligence Testing of Roma Children: Recommendations

Although the intelligence tests have been criticized and their use questioned, for several decades, psychologists still use these tests to evaluate children. When using these tests, we should keep in mind that “the tests are valid in the hands of competent practitioners willing to see more than numbers or

who, at least, use the numbers to understand the child and give useful recommendations based on the results.”⁴³ It is very useful to obtain the data about children in this way to give further recommendations about the learning style that can benefit the child the most and identify the areas in which it is necessary to stimulate the child. Nonetheless, the test proctors have to be sensitive and skillful when testing children of a different cultural origin since the child might not express his or her capacities and knowledge due to the testing situation. The testing language should also be adapted. The test proctors should verify with the child if they speak the “official” language. When a child that does not belong to the dominant culture is tested, the results of traditionally standardized intelligence tests cannot be used as an absolute index of the child’s cognitive functioning. Rather, it should be considered as a current level of testable functioning and the information should be given in the form of the degree, skill, and knowledge type that the child from the minority group demonstrates compared to other children. This data is just a starting point for future planning, additional estimations, and/or education recommendations.

Authors from Serbia offer some concrete recommendations for testing of Roma children and point out the importance of a good test preparation phase. In cooperation with the local administration and Roma organizations, the data on all Roma children who start school that year should be collected. It wo-

43 Tovilović, S. and Bauca, A. (2007). Procena zrelosti za školu: Kako pristupiti problemima procene zrelosti i adaptacije marginalizovane dece na školu? (*Maturity Assessment for School: How to Approach the Problems of Maturity Assessment and Adaptation of Marginalized Children to School?*), Center for Applied Psychology of the Serbian Psychological Society, p. 96.

uld be useful for the expert assistant to visit Roma settlements and get familiar with the conditions in which the children developed before starting school. In this way, they establish the first contact with children whom they will test but also with their parents. From conversations with parents, the expert assistant can obtain information regarding the child's social adaptability to the environment. If it is possible to conclude from this that the child is well socially adapted to the conditions in which he or she lives, consequentially, it cannot be concluded from poor testing results that the child should not enroll in regular school. The visit to the Roma settlements would be useful for forming partner relations with the parents as well. As we have stated previously, cooperation with Roma parents is an important factor in the successful schooling of their children. During the visit to the settlement, the very contact with the child will make testing easier since he or she perceives the testing as an unknown and unusual situation. In this way, the expert assistant identifies the children who do not have a sufficient level of the language in which the testing is to be conducted and they have the obligation to provide an assistant who speaks the Romani language.

We recommend that the testing assistant should be someone from the non-governmental organizations which hire the Roma because they understand Roma culture and tradition so that they can help the expert assistant in understanding specific difficulties which Roma children might have in solving certain problems. Before the testing, it would be useful to make sure the child gets familiar with the school and the room where the testing will take place. After the testing, the data obtained

from it should first be evaluated in a standardized way, then the results should be linked with the other information so that a more valid evaluation of what could have led to these results can be made.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of some important segments of education of Roma children that we have conducted in this article, we can conclude that the education of Roma children is challenging because of their socio-economic position and poverty, but that is just the beginning of the difficulties that they encounter. Roma children face many issues in education, such as stereotypes and prejudices of their teachers, peers, and parents, the language in which the classes are conducted which often is not their mother tongue, the tests that can be discriminatory, and the lack of specific culture to which they belong. Therefore we have offered some recommendations for improving the position of Roma children in education and those steps could be the tools for ending the vicious circle of poverty and education. Furthermore, it is crucial to train the professional staff who works with the Roma to increase their sensitivity to the Romani culture and their situation. It is, as well, important to adapt the school program and teaching methods used to work with Roma children. Considering the fact that the prejudices are also present among their peers and parents, it is essential to work on the level of the wider society and to raise awareness about the position of the Roma and their style of living, so that the people can learn about these specificities and, ultimately, further include the Roma in all the levels of education.

– ***LAP for the Roma in the Municipality of Niš: Will This Bring Any Changes?***

In Serbia, there is a considerable number of strategic documents, legal frameworks, and institutional bodies in charge of improving the living conditions of the Roma community, on the republic as well as the local level. These documents are often budgeted and successfully realized, according to the competent non-Roma decision-makers and the Roma “representatives” of the non-governmental sector. This dominant opinion particularly refers to the *Local Action Plans* (LAP) because they are taken as an example of a more concrete way of solving the problems since such plans should be easier to realize.

Therefore in this text, we will choose one of the LAPs and analyze its scope, realization, and impact on the local Roma community. However, first, we will give a brief overview of what

the creation of LAPs comprehends.⁴⁴

For the process of the preparation of a LAP, it is important to be familiar with the *Law on Local Self-Government and the Law on Planning System*. The *Law on Local Self-Government* defines units of the local self-government, the criteria for their creation, jurisdictions, organs, monitoring of their documentation and activities, protection of the local self-government, and other questions important for exercising the rights and responsibilities of the local self-government units.⁴⁵ The *Law on Planning System* defines the planning system of the Republic of Serbia, namely governing of the public policies system and short-term planning, the types and content of the planning documents which all of the actors who participate in the planning system adopt and implement, according to their competencies, as well as the harmonization of the planning documents, the procedure for defining and implementing public policies and reporting on the planning documents implementation and respect of the obligation to analyze effects on the legislation and evaluation of the impact of the legislation.⁴⁶

To draft a LAP for the Roma, it is necessary to get acquainted with an array of strategic documents adopted by the government of Serbia, such as *The Strategy for Social Inclusion of The*

44 Jasmina Barčić wrote more extensively on this topic in the text *Local Action Plans: Solution to the Problems of the Roma Community or Yet Another Link in the Chain of (Nontransparent) Bureaucracy?* published in: *Roma Activism: Realities and Possibilities* (editor Maja Solar), Roma Forum of Serbia, 2021 (forthcoming).

45 Source: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_lokalnoj_samoupravi.html

46 Source: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon-o-planskom-sistemu-republike-srbije.html>

Roma in Serbia for the 2016- 2025 Period (in further text: the *Strategy*), the *Guidelines for Drafting Local Action Plans of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities* (SCTM), as well as the scope of activity of the Roma Ethnic Council (REC), the coordinating body for monitoring and realization of the *Strategy*.

Once you know a lot more about all of the above documents, as well as the structure and the needs of the local Roma community, you can start drafting a LAP for a specific municipality or town, while you hope that the LAP will be adopted and the funds for its realization allocated...

Since a LAP is an official document, it should be public and available to everyone, nevertheless, on the website of the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Governance, there is no official data on the total number of LAPs nor the list of municipalities/towns that have adopted and budgeted the LAPs for the Roma. This means that the number of municipalities, as well as the number of adopted and budgeted LAPs for the Roma, are officially unavailable information. For the purpose of research, we requested information on the number of LAPs and the municipalities and towns that have adopted them from the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Governance. The Ministry's written response was that it was not competent for the Roma and LAPs and that we should try to obtain this information from other ministries (the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy, and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights). As we wanted to avoid further shifting of responsibility from one institution to another, we obtained unofficial information from the representati-

ves of the Roma organizations. According to them, in Serbia, there are 32 municipalities/towns which have adopted LAPs for the Roma that are still active in 2021. Yet, we still have no answer to the question of why it is impossible to find these LAPs on the websites of the majority of the municipalities and towns, although the authorities insist very much on the transparency of these documents.⁴⁷

The city of Niš is one of those 32 places which have adopted the LAP for the Roma in the period from 2021 to 2023 and made it available on the official web page of the city. This LAP is a result of the implementation of the IPA 2016 program “EU support to Roma inclusion – Strengthening the Local Communities for the Inclusion of the Roma” that is financed by the European Union and implemented by SCTM.⁴⁸

Same as most of the other available LAPs for the Roma, the one from Niš, at least declaratively, aims to strengthen the local communities for the inclusion of the Roma, to improve the socio-economic position of the Roma population, and to implement the priority strategic measures of the *Strategy*. LAP was drafted by the working group that consisted of 17 members, of which only 5 were representatives of the Roma non-governmental organizations from Niš, and, ambitiously, it contains 85 pages.

This LAP should be referring to the members of the Roma community and this begs the question: Have they participa-

47 Source: *Local Action Plans: Solution to the Problems of the Roma Community or Yet Another Link in the Chain of (Nontransparent) Bureaucracy?* published in: *Roma Activism: Realities and Possibilities* (editor Maja Solar), Roma Forum of Serbia, 2021, (forthcoming).

48 Source: https://www.ni.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Nacrt_LAP_Nis_final-1.pdf

ted in any way in drafting this strategic document? Who has taken part in the focus group in October 2020 when the goals, measures, and activities of this LAP were presented? Amid the Covid 19 pandemic, did the organizers invite anyone from the informal Roma settlements of Crvena Zvezda, Beograd Mala, or Stočni Trg in order to present them the measures and activities that will to a great extent define their relations with the local authorities in the two following years? Did any of the Roma who live in the substandard settlements and whom the LAP addresses manage to make any proposal for changes?

Even though 85 pages should not be excessive for a city such as Niš because this community is in dire need and there is a lot to do, about 30 pages describe general information about the city. The following 30 pages show the action plan table with the activities that should be realized by 2023, most of which are educational and informative workshops that should be realized by non-governmental organizations.

The areas that had been encompassed by the previous LAP for Roma in the city of Niš were copied into the current one so it encompasses: education, employment, health, housing, social protection, and the culture and media. Besides these 5 main areas which have been repeated in all strategic documents as important for the Roma community since the adoption of the *Decade* in 2005, we see that this LAP has included culture and the media. This is not insignificant, because culture is a crucial area for the Roma and it is particularly important to include it in the LAP for Niš because the first *Roma Cultural Centre* was established there.

It is of the key significance for this LAP that it has been bud-

geted. For the period from 2021 to 2023, it costs 584.447.500,00 dinars (4.970.335,00 euros) of which the city budget will cover 148.513.749,00 dinars (1.263.165,00 euros) while the rest will be financed by the donors. Thus the social and child protection for the three-year period will be financed with the amount of 30 million dinars (255.161,00 euros) and the largest part of that will be spent on the scholarships for the Roma students. When it comes to the part of the budget that was not spent, it is not clear what will be done with the money. In 2021, the total of 4.812.500,00 dinars (40.932,00 euros) was allocated for the scholarships of which 1,250.000,00 dinars (10.631,00 euros) for Roma university students and 3.562.500,00 dinars (30.300,00 euros) for Roma primary and secondary school students. Nonetheless, the call for applications was never published nor did anyone receive a scholarship. Were all these millions of dinars redirected to some other activity, for instance, help to the Roma community during the pandemic of Covid 19?

Furthermore, the part of the LAP from Niš concerning culture and media is very interesting, since it is to be expected that it would in particular cover the first (and only) Roma Cultural Centre!

The Roma Cultural Centre in Niš has been recognized as the most important resource in the area of culture and its founder is the Roma Ethnic Council. Accordingly, the city has financed the creation of the centre and provided funds for initial activity through the previous LAP. Nonetheless, the problems in the functioning of the centre are numerous, namely, the lack of a program, delay in the beginning of the activities, and also the issues with the Roma leaders who are “in charge” of the

function of the centre. And while the leaders and local authorities keep delaying the activities, the centre remains unused, Roma artists do not have a space or the resources for developing their talent and ideas. Taking into consideration the fact that the city of Niš has the biggest number of the Roma artist and Roma with a university degree, this raises a question whether the Roma “leaders” should be in charge of an institution of this kind or should this be left to the arts/cultural professionals?

Moreover, in the current LAP for the three-year period, Niš has allocated 3.250.000,00 dinars (27.642,00 euros) for the support to the Roma cultural institutions and organizations for advancing programs and project activities from the area of culture, tradition, and media in the Romani language. From this budget, only the amount of 600.000,00 dinars (5.103,00 euros) has been allocated for the regular functioning of the *Roma Cultural Centre*, which is 200.000,00 dinars (1.701,00 euros) yearly and the rest, 2.650.000,00 dinars (22.539,00 euros) is allocated for the non-governmental organizations. Here, we need to ask how those 200.000,00 dinars (1.701,00 euros) allocated for the *Roma Cultura Centre* will be spent yearly since we are witnessing its current closure... So, for the moment the situation is the following: the only Roma cultural institution does not have any program or visitors nor does it organize any activities, yet it has a budget allocated by the city for regular functioning. The locked doors of the centre at any time of the day symbolically illustrate the above-stated facts.

For the goal of advancing the position of the Roma on the labour market and higher employability, the LAP from Niš allocated 1 million dinars (8.505,00 euros) for subventions to the

employers that hire the Roma. It is well known that employers are not particularly keen on employing the members of the Roma community. Further, most of the Roma workers are currently losing their jobs and the question is how this measure will be realized. When we try to get more concrete information on the real effects of the policies introduced by the LAP, we are constantly referred to the reports on realization, which are written after a LAP is finalized. So, here as well, it is only left for us to wait and see if the Roma obtained jobs.

With the goal of better accessibility of the primary health-care and advancement of the reproductive and general health of all of the categories of population, the amount of 150.000,00 dinars (1.275,00 euros) was allocated for supporting Roma children who want to join sports clubs in the period from 2021 to 2023. The question arises of how this will function since the issues are manifold. As an example, it has not been defined whether there would be public calls for applying for this help. Also, it remains unclear whether a child will be accepted in the sports club if the membership is paid but the child does not have adequate sporting equipment.

The measure for improving the access to information, rights, and social protection services for all the categories of the Roma population, specifies the introduction of a coordinator for the Roma questions and the amount of 1.800.000,00 dinars (15.309,00 euros) was allocated for this mechanism. From many other examples, we know that the Roma coordinators often do their work poorly and sometimes not at all, yet in Niš, the Roma coordinator does not even exist! It is only left to wait for the end of 2023 and see if Niš, a town with a large Roma population, will

finally get a coordinator for Roma questions. Another very interesting point of this LAP is the fact that for the three-year period, 5.457.000,00 dinars (46.413,00 euros) have been allocated for the activities that can be financed directly from the LAP on the request of the Roma community. The question is whether the Roma community members know this? Did anyone inform them that such an amount has been put at their disposal for priority problems? So, the Roma community should organize themselves and ask the city to finance, for instance, the costs of preschool for Roma children above 3 years of age and not just the mandatory preschool enrollment (5 years and older) as it does currently.

From all of the facts stated above, we can see that the budget has been planned and drafted in detail and that the users of the allocated funds are mostly non-governmental organizations and city institutions. The part that is directly put at the disposal of the Roma community is not to be underestimated, but its realization is covered in a veil of a mystery considering that already in the first year of implementation the funds did not reach the Roma people. Taking into account that the reports should be written once a year and that the deadline for the 2021 report is March 31, 2022, we can only wait and see what goals of the LAP have been realized in the current year. Since then, the Roma in substandard settlements in the municipality of Niš keep struggling on an everyday basis while the situation keeps getting worse day by day. They remain left to themselves without visible effects of the policies that result from all those documents, might they be local or general...

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE AUTHORS

Jelena Savić holds a master's degree from the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. The main focus of her work is on social protection while other topics of interest are the question of the position, discrimination and economic and social rights of marginalized groups. She worked on the international project on migrations where she provided psychological support to unaccompanied minor migrants. As a volunteer of a non-governmental organization, she worked on the program of support of early development of Roma children in informal settlements in Novi Sad. Working with primary and secondary school pupils, she gave workshops on the topic of destigmatization of people with mental health issues.

Sabina Drmaku was born on September 24, 1997 in Novi Sad. She graduated from primary school in Beočin, then secondary medical school in Novi Sad. Sabina graduated at the private Faculty of Medicine in Novi Sad. During her studies, she worked in a private hospital and after that she got a job in a private IVF institution in Novi Sad. She is active as a volunteer in various projects related to Roma, and especially in relation to women's reproductive health. Her motivation to be fair, sharp and deci-

sive stems from the fight against ethnic, racist, gender and all other discrimination that are present every day in the Republic of Serbia.

Predrag Momčilović is a researcher, journalist and political activist from Belgrade. His work focuses on questions in the field of political ecology, social aspects of climate change, equitable energy transition and degrowth. He completed his undergraduate and master's studies at the Department of Geospatial Basics of the Environment at the Faculty of Geography in Belgrade. He is a member of the Platform for Theory and Practice of Social Goods – *Zajedničko*, the editorial board of the *Mašina* portal, as well as the energy cooperative *Elektropionir*. He has been a long-term collaborator of the Roma Forum of Serbia, where he is mainly focused on the problems and possibilities of organizing Roma collectors of secondary raw materials. He is the author of the book *Sustainability, Degrowth and Food*.

Jelena Krivokapić Nikolić was born on February 11, 1990 in Subotica. Jelena holds a master's degree in law. She participates in the movement *Opre Roma Serbia* as a leader of the legal team that works on reducing discrimination in the Republic of Serbia, attaining equality and bringing the priorities of the Roma community to the decision-makers. While she was a member of the *Roma Forum of Serbia* she worked for many years as legal assistant of the *Centre for the Roma Community* project in Novi Sad which offers pro bono legal advice to the members of the Roma community. 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)*, and put focus on the problem of impossibility to exercise the right to social protection of the Roma in Serbia. The Roma Forum of Serbia published some of her texts, namely: *Media Incitement to Criminalization of the Roma* – published in the collection *When Documents Are Far from Reality, From Political Education towards Self-Organization* in 2019 and *Social Injustice during the Pandemic* – published in the collection *Roma Lives Matter* in 2020. She is also a co-author of *Antifascist Guide for a Better World* published by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Europe, where she wrote on the topic of antiziganism. In 2020 she became the mother of a wonderful daughter Mila, who is her main inspiration and support to persist in the struggle for a better future.

Robert Kasumović holds a master's degree in pharmacy. He is an activist of the *Roma Forum of Serbia* and mostly works on political education projects as well as projects that address the collectors of secondary raw materials. Robert also writes for the portal *Mašina*. With Predrag Momčilović, he co-authored the publication *Collectors of Secondary Raw Materials (In)Visible Workers* (Roma Forum of Serbia, 2020).

Dina Vučković has a degree in psychology and is currently a master student at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. She is engaged in projects that address Roma children in education as well as Roma families. Her narrow interests are family and par-

tnership relations, as well as the early development of children. Dina attends training in systemic family therapy and is actively working in counseling.

Jasmina Barčić graduated from the Faculty of Economics (Department of Finance, Banking and Insurance), and her dissertation offers an analysis of foreign direct investment and their impact on the Serbian market through factory privatizations. She has been active in the Roma Forum of Serbia since the very beginning, first as a participant, and then as a lecturer. She is engaged in programs in the field of political education, writes texts focusing on economic and political influences on the position of the Roma community, especially on employment, education, the position of collectors of secondary raw materials, and economic impact on culture and tradition. Within the Roma Forum of Serbia, she works directly with the Roma community on self-organization and collective endeavor for solutions to improve its overall position.

Iva Barčić was born on December 2, 1996 in Niš. He is a student of the final year at the Faculty of Arts in Niš, at the department for Wind Instruments – Clarinet. The city of Niš has awarded him many times for good results at national and international competitions for classic clarinetists. He lives in a Roma settlement, and is active in the Roma community where he fights on everyday basis against discrimination that its members experience. He also works on strengthening the Roma identity and culture of the Roma community, particularly through his work with youth. He participates actively in

political education workshops, and writes texts focusing on the identity, culture and position of the entire community. Through activism, he works directly with the Roma community on self-organization and jointly finding solutions for their better position. Iva collects and records the intangible Roma cultural heritage, he is an author and music teacher. *Traditional and Old Roma Songs from Niš and Southern Serbia* is his first collection and he is currently collecting material for the second collection.

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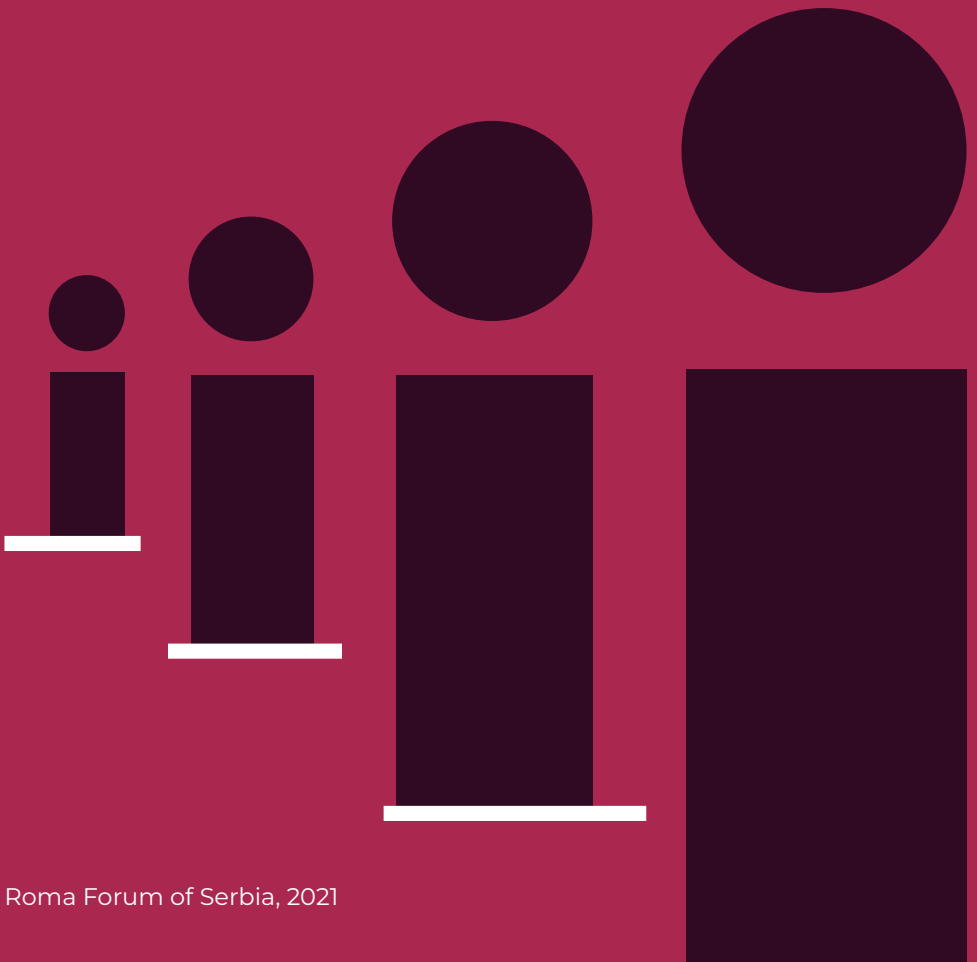
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