

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL POSITION OF THE ROMA IN SERBIA

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Abstract: *Despite the growing number, as well as a relative share of the Roma in total population of the Republic of Serbia, their socio-economic position doesn't show signs of visible improvement. First Decade of Roma Inclusion, from 2005 to 2015, which Serbia presided over during 2009, makes exclusion of the Roma population from Serbian social life socially visible and more comprehensible for the wider community. Some research conducted during that period shows certain progress in the priority areas of the Decade: education, employment, housing and health. During the last ten years, many laws, which have direct or indirect influence of the improvement of status of Roma population in Serbia, have been passed, especially having in mind enabling the establishment of national councils of the national minorities, as well as National council or the Roma national minority. However, Roma community, compared to other national minorities in Serbia, is in more unfavorable social position. The causes of such a position are partly due to the insufficiently built national identity and the complex problems that the Roma themselves face in the process of developing their cultural identity. In this paper there are analyzed socio-economic characteristics of the Roma population according to the last census of population of the Republic of Serbia and their correlation with national identity of the Roma population.*

Keywords: *Roma; social position; national identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Like a majority of countries of the modern world, Serbia also faces challenges of multiculturalism within its social community. However, social dynamics of relationships between members of different national minorities, and when their group or national interests are in question, as well as when fulfillment of their individual civil rights is in question, is dictated by specificity of its socially-political and economic situation. The consequences of turbulent political past during the last decade of the twentieth century: breakdown of mother country, long-term isolation and sanctions of international community, massive ethnic migrations of population, then bombing, are still visible both on economic and political plane, as well as through evident crisis of the value system.

Serbian society hasn't passed through economic and political transition quite luckily.

Socio-economic recovery is very slow, and democratization and cultural development blocked" (Komatina, 2018:56).

In that context, unfavourable social and economic position of Roma in Serbia is being maintained. During the Decade of Roma, by which Serbia presided in 2009, certain moves were made in the spheres marked as priority (education, employment, health care and housing), but the data about the progress were not summed up systematically.

Difficulties in improvement socio-economic position of Roma population partly come out of incapability of Roma community itself to use possibilities which are available to it at the institutional level. Still, a part of the responsibility has the state itself, which doesn't form adequate mechanisms for connecting of the legislative framework with real possibilities for it to be conducted in practice, it is often powerless and indifferent when the discrimination of Roma population is in question, and it also has unequal treatment of Roma to major population and other minorities, especially if it about violation of human and children's rights.

Analytical-descriptive method is applied in the work – the sources of data were analyzed at

the highest level of reliability as well as relevant literature so that specifics of social, economic, political and cultural position of Roma in the Republic of Serbia; basic problems of Roma national identity and their connection with socio-economic features of Roma population in Serbia are identified and guidelines are set for overcoming of obstacles in intercultural communication and empowering of Roma national identity.

2. ETHNIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTIC OF ROMA NATIONAL MINORITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Roma are one of more than twenty national minorities which, apart from major Serbian population, have been followed by regular censuses since 1948¹. After the Hungarians (3.5%), Roma is the second biggest national minority in the Republic of Serbia with the total of 147.600 people, that is, 2.1%, according to the last census from 2011.

However, the data about moving of the number of Roma minority from census after census show illogical trends which cannot be explained by demographic reasons, that is, by natural and mechanical movement of population².

¹ The oldest census of Roma on our soil dates from 1491, from the time of the Osman empire (Djordjevic, 1984). Tatomir Vukadinovic (1983: 22) states that the first Roma in Byzantium, i.e. in the Balkans, appeared in the middle of the sixth century when they, running in front of the Seljuks, left Armenia and moved toward Anadolia, and then also toward Greece and further north.

² Based on ethno-statistical data atypical variations in the number of Roma can be seen from census to census, which cannot be explained by demographic factors (birth and migrations), because constant changes in statements about the belonging to an ethnic group had the crucial influence on their migrations. In demographic literature, it is explained as a result of ethnic mimicry because of ever present, hidden or open discrimination toward Roma people, because of what they declare themselves as members of the other national corpus, losing or covering their own ethnic identity. It is well known that at census Roma most frequently declare themselves as the members of the major nationality in the region where they live, because of what their number is underestimated at all the postwar censuses" (Raduski and Komatina, 2013: 93)

Table 1 The number of Roma and their relative share in the overall population of Serbia, according to all the postwar censuses

Year	1948	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011
Number	52,200	58,800	9,800	49,900	111,000	90,900	108,200	147,600
%	0.8	0.8	0.1	0.6	1.2	1.2	1.4	2.1

Source: Table made according to: Raduski, 2013³

These illogicalities are attributed to the way of enumeration which enables the respondent to declare himself according to his own free will (Raduski, 2013: 15), but also according to the ethnical mimicry of Roma population which emerges as a result of its unfavourable status, discrimination and stigma which follows them (Mitrovic, 2000: 71).

We can accept the last census data with the higher percent of reliability, considering the census was being prepared under the influence of the Decade of the Roma, so, among other things, apart from numerous consultations, it was preceded by a trial census at which members of Roma population participated, too⁴.

Out of ethnic characteristics, apart from the structure of *national belonging*, two more features are census monitored by Serbia: *mother tongue* and *religion*. As it can be seen in tables that follow (Tables 2 and 3), Roma population in Serbia isn't homogenous according to either of the two features. The largest number of Roma, 67% of them, claimed Roma their mother tongue, but it's not negligible that 30% of Roma that claimed their mother tongue is Serbian. The similar situation is with the religion, too. Almost 2/3 of Roma (63%) are Christians (56% orthodox, 3% Catholics, 2% protestants), and 25% of them claimed they are Muslims.

Therefore, census data about ethnic characteristics of Roma population in our country can implicate certain problems, which Roma face in the experience of their national identity, but they can also face troubles in achievement of their

³ Census datum from 1991 is here reduced to methodology of the 2002 census.

⁴ "Trial census of population, households and flats – Education of Roma" was conducted within the period from November 1st to November 5th 2009, at which Roma enumerators participated and during which they were educated, and they later took part in 2011 census. Mapping of 533 Roma settlements preceded this census (Roma settlements which had at least 15 households), and it was conducted in cooperation with National council of Roma national minority and Roma activists (Vukmirovic, Djordjevic i Lakcevic, 2010).

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national interests, considering it's about different education, informing in their mother tongue and practical needs in achievement of the right to worshipping.

Table 2 Roma according to mother tongue and sex

Mother tongue	Total	Male	Female	Total %	Male %	Female %
Total	147,604	75,042	72,562	100	100	100
Serbian	43,926	22,385	21,541	29.76	29.83	29.69
Albanian	1,393	724	669	0.94	0.96	0.92
Bulgarian	98	48	50	0.07	0.06	0.07
Vlach	332	170	162	0.22	0.23	0.22
Hungarian	912	466	446	0.62	0.62	0.61
Macedonian	109	58	51	0.07	0.08	0.07
Roma	98,872	50,187	48,685	66.98	66.88	67.09
Romanian	1,308	672	636	0.89	0.90	0.88
Other languages	225	115	110	0.15	0.15	0.15
Undeclared	180	94	86	0.12	0.13	0.12
Unknown	249	123	126	0.17	0.16	0.17

Source: Special processing of data of the Census of population, households and flats, 2011, RZS

Table 3 Roma according to religion and sex

Religion	Total	Male	Female	Total %	Male %	Female%
Total	147,604	75,042	72,562	100.00	100.00	100.00
Christian total	92,610	47,034	45,576	62.74	62.68	62.81
Orthodox	82,454	41,888	40,566	55.86	55.82	55.91
Catholic	4,865	2,518	2,347	3.30	3.36	3.23
Protestant	2,966	1,484	1,482	2.01	1.98	2.04
The other Christian religions	690	325	365	0.47	0.43	0.50
Christian – not known which one	1,635	819	816	1.11	1.09	1.12
Muslim	36,591	18,550	18,041	24.79	24.72	24.86
Eastern religions	13	11	2	0.01	0.01	0.00
Other religions	19	10	9	0.01	0.01	0.01
Agnostics	7	3	4	0.00	0.00	0.01
Undeclared	12,553	6,468	6,085	8.50	8.62	8.39
Atheists	1,094	598	496	0.74	0.80	0.68
Unknown	4,717	2,368	2,349	3.20	3.16	3.24

Source: Special data processing of Census of population, households and flats, 2011, RZS

On the other hand, if we observe *level of education, economic activity and profession* as determinants of socio-economic position of Roma population in Serbia, then we face with the fact this population is much more homogenous according to mentioned socio-economic characteristics, then

according to ethnic characteristics, which confirms status of Roma population as ethno class.

According to the last population census data, Roma population has a low level of economic activity: 28% of population is economically active, while 72% of population is economically inactive. Profession related census data tell us that

2,304,628 citizens of Republic of Serbia did some job in 2011, and that 16,887 of them (0.73%) were Roma. If we observe this number in the context of overall Roma population, then we come to the conclusion that just 11.4% of Roma in Serbia does some kind of job! These devastating data are under the influence of a very unfavourable educational structure of Roma population in Serbia (though it's much better, both with literacy and the level of education in relation to the previous census). Namely, 19.5% of Roma hasn't graduated from any school, and 34.2% of them haven't graduated from elementary school – which means that 53.7% doesn't have any level of education. One third graduates from the elementary school (33%), which also isn't qualification enough for getting a job, and 11.5% graduated from secondary school. All the versions of high education which are monitored by the census are below one percent (Komatina, 2017: 41-47).

These facts actually not just negatively affect the future economic and social emancipation of Roma population, but also homogenization and cohesiveness of Roma ethnic identity.

3. INSTITUTIONAL ASSUMPTIONS OF IMPROVEMENT OF THE POSITION OF ROMA MINORITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Since the beginning of transition of socio-economic and political systems in Serbia and introduction of democratic changes, as well as under the influence of stimuli that come from European Union, Serbia has been reforming its legal system for the two decades, it modernizes it and harmonizes it with the principles and guidelines of the union of European countries which it wants to join. Many of passed laws relate to overall population and improving of its civil rights, and some of them deal with special rights of national minorities. Because of lack of space, we shall focus only on those who are the most important and have the biggest influence on the improvement of the position and rights of national minorities.

Above all, we should mention the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia from 2006 which systematically and comprehensively arranges the rights of minorities stressing that the “country guarantees special protection to minorities for complete equality and preserving of their identity” (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, article 14, paragraph 2).

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the part of which Serbia was until 2003, passed the Law on protection of rights and freedom of national minorities (in power in the Republic of Serbia), which leans on the documents of the Council of Europe, Framework convention for protection of rights of national minorities (1995) and European Charter on Regional and Minority languages (1992). The Law sets very high standards of protection of minorities. Some domestic authors think that they are higher than those that are adopted in international documents (Basic, 2005, Stanovcic, 2008).

Beside the series of other laws which directly or indirectly refer to the issues of national minorities⁵, the Law on National Councils of National Minorities from 2009 should especially be pointed out. “It could be said that previously mentioned Law on National Councils of National Minorities represents the beginning of more active institutional organizing of minorities, as well as Roma community, aiming to protect their national interests. Firstly, it offers the members of minorities the possibility to choose their national councils as a form of self-organizing and institutionalizing their participation in decision making on all the issues related to their cultural autonomy, and then it regulates jurisdictions of national councils in the sphere of official use of language, education, culture and informing” (Komatina, 2017:32).

The right to education is a basic human right, but it is also specially protected collective right when national minorities are in question. Current legislature enables minorities to educate themselves in their mother tongues, but for the conducting of that practice, when Roma are in question, there are no real conditions. Above all, our educational system isn't capable of maintaining lessons in Roma language, for one thing because of drastic lack of stuff at all levels of education, and because of large dispersiveness of Roma population in the whole territory of Serbia, by which it differs from the other minorities which are concentrated on certain territories. (Komatina, 2018: 90).

There is the optional subject *Roma language with elements of national culture* in our educational system since the end of the twentieth century in certain towns in Vojvodina, but just from the school year 2015/2016 it starts to be

⁵ The Law on official use of language and alphabet (1991), The Law on local self-government (2007), The Law on the basics of education and upbringing (2009), The Law on prohibition of discrimination (2009), etc.

taught on the territory of the whole of Serbia, at the level of elementary schools. Just one university institution introduced lecturing in Roma language (High school of professional studies for educators 'Mihailo Palov from Vrsac), and modern Roma language is being studied at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade since 2015/2016 as an optional subject.

Nevertheless, numerous researches (Komatina, 2016) showed that many parents, members of Roma minority, don't want their children to learn Roma language at school even at the level of an optional subject. Some make comments that standardized Roma language (introduced in 2013) isn't the language they speak, and some point out that children should learn Serbian at school, because that's the only way to graduate from school and get a job.

It seems that Roma population hasn't equally managed to use all the benefits given to them by the legislative framework and that it is still way behind other minorities. Part of the reasons originates from the widespreadness of Roma national identity and incompatibility of the interests of different groups of Roma, and part of the reasons refers to especially unfavourable socio-economic position of Roma population which is a direct consequence of a very low average educational level. Lack of information and ignorance are the major barriers which stand in the way of emancipation of Roma population.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Characteristics of socio-economic position of Roma population in Serbia have an unfavourable impact on preserving and cherishing their national identity. It is clear that economic emancipation and improving of the educational status make indispensable preconditions on the road to their national emancipation and preservation and cherishing of their own cultural features.

When Roma national identity is in question, perhaps it's more correct to talk in plural, about Roma identities, because according to significant characteristics by which nations and minorities are characterized, and by which they differ from the others, and among them there are language and religion, but also customs which make everyday life, Roma people in Serbia are significantly different. That's why, within the wide possibilities enabled to them by the legal regulations, each group should find its own path and way to achieve its own interests.

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