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Roma Community in Kosovo: Between Reality and the European Dream

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Abstract. The integration of Kosovo Roma into social and institutional life in the Republic of Kosovo remains a challenge. The purpose of this article is to analyse and discuss the current situation of Kosovo Roma community. Analysis and discussion are placed in the context of the relationship between the real situation and the European dream of this community. The selected method for analysing literature and relevant documents is qualitative content analysis. After applying this method, the results are significant in several directions. It can be concluded that, despite all the problems and challenges faced by the Roma community in the path of achieving the European dream, they nevertheless consider Kosovo as their homeland. From the aspect of constitutional and legal reality, the Roma community has guaranteed rights and political representation, thus experiencing the European dream in this area. However, from the aspect of the implementation of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo and other laws, this community is far from fulfilling the European dream. The importance of this paper lies in providing a thorough picture of the situation of the Roma community in the Republic of Kosovo as a basis for understanding the problems of this community and outlining the ideas for concrete action in terms of accelerating the integration processes and positive transformations of the economic, social, educational and cultural life of the Roma community in the Republic of Kosovo.

Keywords: *Roma community, Republic of Kosovo, human rights, political participation, integration*

Introduction

In most cases, when it comes to the Roma community, it is about poverty, history, origin, shifting around the world, Roma culture and tradition. At the same time, attention is paid to the discrimination of the Roma community at local and global level. The main purpose of this article is to identify the situation of the Roma community in the Republic of Kosovo, which is between the reality and the European dream: the relationship between the rights guaranteed to them and the factual situation of the implementation of those rights but also of their social, economic, educational and cultural inclusion and integration. Also, another aim of the article is to find a way to reduce the inconsistency between the reality of the Roma

community and the European dream in Kosovo. In this regard, the reality for the Roma means the findings, facts, statistics, obstacles, problems of everyday life and dealing with them, but also the positive aspects of their integration into Kosovo society. While the European dream in this context implies full rights that a person can enjoy regardless of ethnicity, language, colour, religious and political beliefs or sexual orientation. Human rights can only be achieved and protected in a democratic society and state, which is based on human rights and universal principles.

Therefore, the fundamental issue addressed in this article is *to what extent is the European dream of the Roma community in Kosovo realised as well as what and how much can be done in this regard*. Consequently, the article provides information on how much is the Republic of Kosovo committed and oriented towards the implementation of these rights and principles.

The research method of this paper has been selected to be qualitative content analysis, as its primary tool is the interpretation of the researched text. This means reading certain texts, re-articulating ideas and information, understanding those texts in the perspective of assumed contexts, enabling research questions and answers to emerge from the texts provided. Through content analysis will be defined how the various political, economic and social problems of the Roma community in Kosovo are addressed.

Facts on the ground

Referring to all laws, strategies and the Constitution of Republic of Kosovo (Gazette, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo 2008), the protection and promotion of the rights of the Roma community has been and will be a commitment of the Government of Kosovo. Consequently, the full social integration of all communities, the institutional involvement of all citizens living in the Republic of Kosovo, is inevitable. Following the independence of Kosovo¹, the Roma community, compared to other countries in the Balkan region, has more guaranteed legal space for a life free from discrimination by being provided with equal access to health, education, employment etc. Although the situation is not ideal, from a constitutional and legal point of view, the Roma community is guaranteed a safer future.

The Roma community, according to scientific-historical data, is confirmed

¹ Kosovo declares independence on 17 February 2008.

to have originated from India, namely from Central India (Europe, Roma facts, uni graz 2002). After the XIII-XIV century, had begun the influx of Roma towards Europe (Panayi 1999), and around the XIV century the Roma had almost reached Europe (Europe, Roma facts, uni Graz 2002). The Roma have their native language, which is the Roma language. Like the Roma themselves, their language too has Indo-European backgrounds (Kosovo 2013). But Roma are not like other minorities and ethnic groups in Europe because they do not have their own historic homeland, live in almost all of Europe (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens 2005), and also in the Balkans (De Soto, Beddies and Gedeshi 2005), respectively in Kosovo.

Analysing the engagement and representation of the Roma community in most areas such as politics, economy, culture, etc., it is very clear that they have become an integral part of state-building and state-formation of the Republic of Kosovo. Also, this community considers the Republic of Kosovo as their homeland. Referring to Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, which emphasizes that Kosovo society is a multi-ethnic society and based on the principle of equality for both the individual and all communities. The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (and in particular Articles 22, 59, 60, 61 and 62) guarantees the representation of the Roma community and at the same time fights discrimination against them. Also, a step closer to European integration means the integration of all communities, and in this case of the Roma community, which is also part of the strategy for the inclusion of communities in Kosovo society 2017-2021 (Prime Minister and Good Governance 2017).

In Kosovo, according to the census, there were 8,824 members of the Roma community in 2011 (Kosovës 2018). According to the census of 2011, there are 1,820,631 over 90% ethnic Albanian population, while the rest of the population consists of Serb, Turkish, Bosnian, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities (Arifi and Nuhiu 2018). Here it should be taken into account that a part of the Roma have exiled from Kosovo after the war, and the rest have boycotted the census. If this translates into a percentage of the total population, then it turns out that Kosovo has about 0.5% Roma citizens. According to the European Roma Rights Centre, approximately 15,696 Roma live in Kosovo today. But many have fled to Western countries after 1999 (Rugova 2018), while a number of them are displaced in camps in neighbouring countries (Isufi 2018). For example, only in Podgorica, Montenegro, there are about 2,000 Roma living

as refugees since 1999. Most of them do not like to return to Kosovo for many reasons such as political, economic, etc (Maeker 2018). But for many Kosovo roma, the real reason for not returning to Kosovo is 'fear'. Because a part of the kosovo population accuses the Roma community of having co-operated with 'Slobodan Milosevic's regime'. That means they are afraid of revenge. Based on this data it can be concluded that by the end of the war in Kosovo (1999) more Roma people lived than the aforementioned number derived from the census of 2011.

The rights of communities in Kosovo are protected by the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, which defines the rights of communities and their members in Chapter III. Within this chapter of the Constitution, communities are provided with general rights (Articles 57, 58, 59), as well as specific rights such as representation in employment in public institutions (Article 61), then representation in local government bodies (Article 62). Furthermore, under the authority of the President of the Republic of Kosovo there is a Consultative Council for Communities (Article 60) (Gazette, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo 2008), in which the Roma community is represented by two seats (Kosovo Republic 2018). It is understandable that the Roma community is also in a struggle for equality with other communities, such as Ashkali, Egyptian, Bosnjaks, Turks.

Also, Roma have their international day, known as the International Roma Day and celebrated on April 8th. In Kosovo, this day is also regulated by the law on official holidays (Gazette, Officiel Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo 2008). During the manifestation of the Roma Day by the Government of the Republic of Kosovo in 2009 and the space provided to this community in Kosovo after the declaration of independence (February 17, 2008), the former Kosovo Member of Parliament from Roma community Zylfi Merxha claimed, that " the Roma too, are equal with all nationalities that live in Kosovo" (Isufi 2018). In this regard, among the Roma community there are those who are satisfied with the rights offered in Kosovo, but there are some, who want further improvements and willing to take more responsibility (Isufi 2018).

One of the primary tasks of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo is to plan the distribution of textbooks in the Roma language at the level of primary education, and also to allocate an adequate budget for the project on Learning Centres for members of the Roma community. The situation of the Roma

community cannot improve only with aid but also with concrete projects that are related to its development, education, schooling and emancipation. Only in this way will unemployment, poverty and illiteracy be significantly reduced in the Roma community.

Regarding education, the Roma community in the school year 2017/2018 had a total of 9 pupils in pre-school education (Ministria e Arsimit and Agjencia 2018). At the level of pre-primary education in the school year 2017/2018 there were altogether 99 pupils (Ministria e Arsimit and Agjencia 2018). At the level of primary and lower secondary education in the academic year 2017/2018 there were altogether 1733 pupils (Ministria e Arsimit and Agjencia 2018). At the level of upper secondary education in the academic year 2017/2018 there were a total of 156 pupils (Ministria e Arsimit and Agjencia 2018). If the percentage of the Roma population is seen, then we can say that there has been a slight progress in this regard, but that does not mean that is enough, but still it is a good start. Referring to Kosovo as the youngest state in Europe, as far as university studies of the Roma community are concerned, the former Member of Parliament of the Republic of Kosovo, Kujtim Paçaku, emphasizes that in 2002 the Roma had only one student, while in 2017 there were more than 100 Roma students in Kosovo universities (Fazliu 2018).

This achievement is a result of the permanent insistence of Roma representatives in Kosovo institutions, but also a carefully added concern for the integration and inclusion of the Roma community in the Kosovo society, by Kosovo institutions themselves. According to their representatives, education is the strongest weapon of the human and only education would help Kosovo Roma move forward (Rugova 2018). In the field of education we have a partial reality and progress, fulfilling to a very small extent the European dream of Kosovo Roma.

Statistics in the field of employment show that the situation on the ground for all communities, especially for the Roma community, is quite grave. This is evidenced by the Human Development Report 2010, which reports that the unemployment rate in Roma families in 2009 was about 58%, while the unemployment rate for the general population was 45% (Prime Minister and Good Governance 2017). It turns out that the unemployment among the Roma community is 13% higher than the general population. In this regard, there is a significant stagnation because central institutions are not respecting the Law on

Civil Servants of the Republic of Kosovo, especially Article 11 paragraph 3 (Gazette, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo 2010), which explicitly stipulates that at least 10% of positions should be reserved for non-majority communities that meet specific employment criteria (Fazliu 2018).

The reality of employment of the Roma community is in an important discrepancy in relation to the European dream fuelled by this community. Factors that contribute towards this reality are related to chain problems that have to do with the non-implementation of the law by the institutions, the poor economy and the low level of education of this community.

Roma participation in a political life

Under the constitutional order in Kosovo for the allocation of guaranteed seats for communities, the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities have 4 seats guaranteed in the Kosovo Assembly. Each of these communities is guaranteed one seat, and the fourth seat is won by one of these communities, which has received the most votes in total (Gazatte 2008). In accordance with this constitutional order, the Roma community has been represented by Roma political parties in Kosovo's institutions since the 2001 parliamentary elections, thus being part of the Kosovo Assembly and the Government of Kosovo. In each Kosovo government formed after the national elections, there is also a reserved place for deputy minister from the Roma community. The Kosovo Albanian winning political parties, as well as the communities that have the guaranteed seats, become automatically part of the ruling coalition. This participation is a powerful guarantee for the Roma community (and others community) to articulate its problems and to find solutions for them within the framework of the government's program of each government. Also, this is an opportunity for this community to contribute to governance issues at the national level.

Taking Kosovo's liberation in 1999 as the starting point, it is significant that Kosovo Albanian parties, whether being in the position or the opposition, have never articulated in their political programs, political action or in any other way any discriminatory or racist comment to the Roma community (Arifi and Nuhiu 2018). This greatly facilitates the participation of the Roma community in political life, also serving as an important starting point for their full integration into society. In the last parliamentary elections in Kosovo in June 2017, the Member of Parliament, Albert Kinolli from the United Roma Party, represented the Roma community, although his election was with only 534 votes (Insajder 2017).

Bridging the gap between the reality and the European dream of the Roma community in Kosovo

Despite some positive developments regarding constitutional rights, increased participation in education, and the perception that the government should do more for them, as well as the feeling that Kosovo is their homeland, the Roma community faces a significant degree of marginalisation. An UNDP -2017 (UNDP 2017) survey confirms this degree of marginalisation through socioeconomic data. The following table summarizes some very significant data.

UNDP: Regional Roma Survey 2017. Factsheet Kosovo Roma

Category	Indicator	Roma population	Non-Roma population
Education	Completion rate of compulsory education (% of population, age 18 - 21)	60	95
	Completion rate of secondary education (% of population, age 22 - 25)	20	78
	Completion rate of tertiary education (% of population, age 26 - 29)	3	22
Labour market	Employment (% of population, age 15 - 64)	13	21
	Unemployment (% of total labour force)	49	32
	Not in education, work or training (% of population 18-24)	78	47
Health	Self-perceived Health (% of the population reporting good or very good health)	69	78
	Use of preventive care (% of population 16+)	54	64
Accommodation	Use of electricity for heating (% of population)	1	11
	Access to toilets inside the apartment (% of population)	79	96
	Computers (% of population)	33	60
	Overcrowding rate (% of population)	72	49

The table above is indicative in the sense that Kosovo's government, institutions and society have much to do to reduce marginalisation and integration of the Roma community. The first step is to change the approach to solving the problems of this community. Roma community problems cannot be treated as overcome (Tileagă 2016), as various studies and documents have underlined a number of mechanisms in general, and in sectorial policies in particular, with the aim of reducing the barriers that prevent the full integration of the Roma community in the respective

societies. For example, one way to reduce stereotypes in the health sphere is the increased presence of medical or other Roma personnel in health care. Such professionals would have the effect that Roma patients would trust more the health system, while the latter would respond more adequately to cultural differences (Aiello, Flecha and Sarradell 2018). Another approach to the empowerment and social inclusion of the Roma community is presented by Crondahl and Karlsson which is labelled *work-integrated learning* (Crondahl and Karlsson 2016). This study shows that working with the Roma community through participatory approach and learning through work brings important effects to their psychological empowerment, to a greater sensation of power and a sense of social inclusion in line with their culture, which undoubtedly finally would generate more empowerment and social inclusion processes directed by them.

A very significant report in the field of early childhood education recommends (Foundation and UNICEF 2017) that policies include more strategies to attract more interest from the Roma community to be in the profession of the teacher, enabling the alternative training opportunities and providing resources for social scholarships. Also, this document requires the most appropriate monitoring and evaluation of preschool institutions (kindergartens) in relation to inclusive practices, which will then be the basis for redefining state policies. Clearly, education is a very important tool in multi-dimensional growth of the Roma community on many levels. Anna Kende, talking about the obstacles to the success of children, raised in an economically deprived environment, racially segregated neighbourhoods, identifies two key elements: the low quality of education received and the lack of aspirations for the future (Kende 2007). Therefore, in this regard, it is highly recommended that policymakers should consider how to best assist minority families to support their children; how they can reduce personal and institutional racism in school; how can non-governmental organizations and successful role models for the aspirations and chances of life of ethnic minority youth be extended and assisted (Tileagă 2016). In the end, the obligation of the government, public institutions and Kosovo society is that the discrepancy between the dominant and the Roma culture to become as insignificant in the essential issues of life such as housing, health, education and employment.

Conclusion

The integration of all citizens in the social and institutional life of the Republic of Kosovo, and especially of the Roma community, is not only a matter of

meeting a certain criterion or standard, but it is far more than that. This is about accepting each other as people born equal, with equal rights and opportunities, such concepts defined and protected by the highest acts of human rights at the European and global level. Analysing the constitution and the space given to communities, such as Roma, the laws and strategies for the Roma community (and other communities living in Kosovo), results that the institutions of the Republic of Kosovo are making efforts for emancipation and integration of the Roma community into the Kosovo society. However, in order for these efforts to have long-lasting results, it takes time. The success of this process depends on many factors, starting with the engagement of the Roma community to seek what the constitution and the laws guarantee. An important, perhaps decisive role for the fastest and sustainable integration of the Roma community in society is also the economic factor. Kosovo does not have a sufficient economic growth to impose dynamic development in this regard.

Nonetheless, the fact that the Roma community recognises Kosovo as its homeland and wants to contribute both to its integration into Kosovo society and state-building is a powerful cornerstone for the future and joint efforts. A success story is also the political participation and representation of the Roma community in Kosovo's institutions. Based on these positive premises, Kosovo's institutions should put more energy and generate more ideas, specifically through drafting and implementing development projects, for integrating the Roma community into society. This should serve as a recommendation for Kosovo institutions that the European dream of the Roma community should make sense in their daily reality, and not have it limited to the aspirational level only.

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