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The Hard Life of Roma People in Serbia

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The Roma people in Serbia face disproportionately high rates of unemployment, poverty, and discrimination. Available data are incomplete because of the stigma attached to Roma identity in Serbia, but what is known paints a sad picture of dire life circumstances and exclusion from mainstream society and opportunties.

Severe Deprivation

Serbia is a country of 7,310,555 people, many of whom live in difficult economic circumstances – but none more so than the Roma minority.

- About a quarter of all Serbians are unemployed, but for Roma the jobless rate is over 60%.
- Nearly two-thirds of Roma live in settlements lacking safe drinking water and more than three-quarters live without any sewage system. One in four Roma even lacks access to electricity.
- More than half of Roma people are not educated compared to a fifth of non-Roma Serbians, and one-fifth of Roma children have only attended pre-school. Of all of the Roma children who enroll in primary school, between 70% and 90% drop out at some point. Social discrimination and family financial difficulties hinder Roma children, as do strict school policies and lack of academic support. Serbian authorities tout education as the key to economic advancement for the Roma, but only 8% of Roma people complete high school or the equivalent, and less than one percent attain college degrees.

Amid all of the severe deprivations Roma face in Serbia, Roma women and girls are the most vulnerable. Today in Serbia, almost all Roma women are jobless and 80% are functionally illiterate.

A Stigmatized and Undercounted Group

Beyond economic suffering, Serbia's Roma people bear disproportionate burdens because of the stigma their identity carries. The name "Roma" and "Romani" is used interchangeably. The word "Gypsy," however, is a racial slur to most of the Roma population and their allies. It is a word that carries negative connotations of lazy, dirty, and cheating people and it falsely attributes Roma origin to Egypt, when these people actually hailed from the Indian subcontinent. The "Gypsy" name is an "exonym," a name imposed on the Roma by outsiders. As the correct way to refer to this population, the word "Rom" means "human." Yet to the dismay of many advocates for Roma rights, the exonym is still widely used, reinforcing derogatory stereotypes.

Some 149,000 Roma officially make up two percent of the total Serbian population according to official statistics, but other estimates suggest that there are at least 500,000 unregistered Roma who live in informal settlements. Given the stigma attached ot their identity, many Roma try to engage in "ethnic mimicry," identifying as part of the majority population. Every ten years, the Census Office produces aggregate summary statistics about the country, but information on the Roma is incomplete, because many Roma do not disclose their identity at Census taking and Serbia does not collect microdata. Furthermore, due to the isolated circumstances of their daily lives, many Roma are invisible in the eyes of the government and simply are not counted.

Feeble Efforts at Inclusion

Serbia has pursued educational policies to help the Roma, but none of them have ensured full educational inclusion or greatly improved the economic standing of the Roma citizens. Labor market barriers have not been sufficiently investigated or addressed through policy initiatives. Serbia is pushing for Roma inclusion into mainstream K-12 education but the economic standard of living, education, and health indicators of Roma families remain alarmingly poor, preventing many children from doing well in school. Educationally focused

efforts to include the Roma in the Serbian mainstream suffer from many shortcomings:

- Educational inclusion is encouraged for school-age Romani children only, leaving those who are too old for school without sufficient workforce preparation and without any adequate social safety net.
- Because Serbia relies solely on education to bring about better labor market outcomes for the Roma, no meaningful policies have been devised to ensure adequate job opportunities for them.
- Beyond educational deficits, Roma suffer in the labor market from discriminatory hiring practices, which undercut gainful employment even for those who are qualified.

All of these factors need further investigation – especially the labor market issues that leave gainful employment out of reach for the majority of Roma people.

Escaping the Politics of Undeservedness

The treatment of the Roma in Serbia resembles the fate of poor, stigmatized minorities in other nations. Romani are regarded as "undeserving" while the non-Roma Serbians, even those who are poor, are considered more "deserving" of social respect and support. The European Commission allocated nearly €35 million to combat social exclusion of the Roma, but the nations receiving funds did not spend most of the money between 2007 and 2013. Today, people across the European continent continue to struggle with austerity and high levels of joblessness – and giving extra help to the Roma is widely unpopular. Life has become so bad for the Roma that the European Commission declared a continent-wide emergency. Doing more to boost the Roma is a daunting task for countries like Serbia – yet it is a task that must be vigorously addressed if Serbia wants to attain full membership in the European Union. To make progress, the voices of Serbia's Roma people must be heard in discussions to fashion stronger reforms.

Read more in Marija Bingulac,"Understanding Romani Deprivation in Serbia: From Symbolic Inclusion Prescriptions to Meaningful Pathways to Economic Integration," PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Boston, forthcoming.