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ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SEGREGATION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN ALBANIAN EDUCATION

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The goal of the article is to present research findings regarding the segregation of Roma children in Albanian education. The paper presents findings from a study carried out in Albania with 210 respondents divided into 3 groups: Roma children and their parents, non-Roma children and their parents, and teachers of Roma and non-Roma children. A questionnaire in 4 parts: “socio-demographic factors”, “attitudes towards Roma”, “the wide topic of discrimination” and “my personal opinion”, was used to conduct the study, in order to answer the question “Why are the Roma children discriminated against in the Albanian educational system?”.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The research thoroughly examines the segregation of Roma children in the school system in Albania, attitudes towards the Roma community, and integration of minorities in the country.
- ▶ *Score/results* – The article presents the stereotypical points of view of Albanians towards Roma communities. The study analyses the discrimination and racism factors in the Albanian society, the necessities in the state educational system for better integration of minority groups, discourse about the reasons underlying segregation of Roma children not only in schools but in society more broadly as well, and xenophobia towards the Roma community in general in Albania.
- ▶ *Originality* – This is the first time when a study with predominantly majority representatives, who acknowledge the existing discrimination to Roma children in society and at school, is conducted.

| **Keywords:** Roma, Albania, education, segregation

1. Introduction

Roma communities throughout Europe are discriminated against and in most European countries Roma children are placed in segregated schools. School segregation in Europe started in 1960-s and has the same features in all countries: poor school environment, not enough teaching books and materials, low quality of the teachers' working in those schools preparation, no school mediators, no lessons of Romani language, culture and history [Kyuchukov, 2006].

Kende [2021] reports the situation of segregated schools in different European countries. In Hungary, the school segregation of Roma children had significantly increased since the transition in 1989. In Romania, 27% of the children receive education in segregated schools. In Serbia, about 30% of Roma children are in special schools. In Slovakia, the segregation of Roma children at school is a regular practice. There is a lack of systemic measures to prevent segregation – 62% of Roma children are in segregated and special schools. The explanation of the Ministry of Education for this high number is simply “incidental”. According to Milenkova and Hristova, 58% of Roma children in Bulgaria attend “ghetto” schools in the segregated areas in Bulgaria. “Schools with prevailing number of Roma pupils are located also in the rural areas and, unlike the urban “ghetto” schools, the rural educational institutions have not been established especially for the Roma; however, they occurred as “mainly Roma schools” as a result of the outward migration of majority of Bulgarian families from the country towards the cities” [2016: 76]. Merhaut, Fulkova and Rudorfer reported that Roma children in the Czech Republic placed in segregated schools are victims of discrimination. According to the authors, the segregation in education is not functional, but rather abusive and criminal. At the same time, the children in the segregated schools and classes receive a “substandard education that severely limits their opportunities to pursue all sorts of professions, which disadvantages them in comparison to their peers educated in other Czech primary and secondary schools” [2022: 3].

Vagra, studying the school segregation in Romania, reports that between 1998 and 2016, the proportion of segregated schools increased significantly, and this became a barrier for the Roma integration. The author recommends that “Roma civil society should be involved in the process of monitoring segregated schools, enrolling Roma children from residentially segregated communities in mixed schools and informing parents about the consequences of segregation on Roma children” [2022: 82].

Minova [2025] studied the role of non-profit organisations bringing a non-formal education of preschool Roma children in Slovakia. The author finds out that providing non-formal education to children is very important, especially before starting formal education. Non-profit organisations also often adapt non-formal education to the needs and interests of children. The first author observed similar non-formal education in Edirne, Turkey. After school, the children attend the Center based in one of the Roma settlements of the town and there get additional information and help with their homework in non-formal environment.

In almost all East European countries, the Roma organisations were those who were fighting with segregated schools and institutions allowing them. There were cases in the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Bulgaria, where the parents of the children under the supervision of non-governmental organisations started court procedures against the governments and they went even to the Human rights court in Strasbourg.

2. Roma in Albania

Albania is a developing country, among the least prosperous in Europe. Struggling now for years to get join the EU, Albania and its government is working hard to improve the institutional and legal framework, economy, and other areas in order to qualify for membership in the EU. Assisting minority communities in this connection has not been a government priority, but that is slowly changing. Law no. 96/2017 “On the Protection of National Minorities in The Republic of Albania”, ratified by law no. 8496, dated 3 June 1999 states in Article 3 that:

1. A national minority is a group of Albanian citizens residing in the territory of the Republic of Albania, having early and lasting links with the Albanian state, display distinctive cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or traditional characteristics and who are willing to express, preserve and develop together with their distinctive cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious or traditional identity.
2. According to this Law, national minorities in the Republic of Albania are the Greek, Macedonian, Aromanian, Roma, Egyptian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, Serbian, and Bulgarian minorities.

Zacellari, Mico, and Sinistra [2018] mention many important points regarding the educational situation of Roma children in Albania. The fact that Albania has basically granted formal recognition to the Roma community as a minority since 2017 has not aided much over the past seven years with their integration into society or achieving a satisfactory level of involvement of Roma children in the education system as a whole. Moreover, that is a common factor encountered in most European countries, including the most developed ones according to UNESCO [2010: 45] as cited in Zacellari et al. [2018].

The authors stress that since the fall of communism in Albania, the transition towards democracy has impacted many aspects of Albanian life, including the lack of access in strengthening education for the Roma. Like other European countries, Albania has ratified a wide variety of conventions related to the protection of human rights including the right to education. Education and its lack is still viewed as the main factor for the marginalisation of these groups: “In Albania, despite the status of being a minority, the inclusion in education of Roma children suffers from low participation. The level of enrollment of children in school is low, and nearly half the Roma children have dropped out of school”. This is according to the decision of the Council of Ministers [2016: 15], cited in Zacellari et al. [2018].

It was also found that pre-university education in Albania was not of equal quality for all students in all the regions of the country. Many differences between rural and urban schools in the quality of the teaching force and the availability of different resources were identified. The fact that also groups of minority students (such as Roma, Balkan-Egyptian, low-income students, and students with disabilities) were not yet being well-served, was also noted.

To make a significant difference in the gaps that were found in educational equity and equality, the EPR recommended that teacher training and professional development have to be expanded and an increased emphasis should be placed on inclusiveness while teaching (through differentiated instruction) as well as on the effective pedagogy and classroom management in order to engage all students in the learning process [UNESCO, 2017].

The report further mentioned it was clear that the government was making efforts to integrate all children into schooling, but a significant group of the population was being left behind, in particular Roma children, children in rural and remote communities, and children with disabilities, who did not have proper access to quality education which was “promised” and entitled by law. “To achieve the goal and targets of SDG4-Education 2030, as well as Albania’s own national priorities in education, the Government must do more for these children” [UNESCO, 2017].

The advice from UNESCO will be difficult to achieve based on the fact that due to the internal migration and rapid urbanisation in Albania, many schools are working at the brink of capacity or in excess of the allowed capacity. As a result, implementation of any reform can be compromised.

The EPR report recommended “that the Government increase investment in institutions, including by strengthening the capacities of teachers and school leaders, and school infrastructure. The targeted investments need to reduce overcrowding in public schools in the urban area and to increase educational access and quality for the marginalised and disadvantaged populations, including Roma and Balkan Egyptian children, children in the remote rural areas, and children with disabilities” [UNESCO, 2017].

Consequently, there is a need for more investment for these institutions, we need special teachers who are prepared and well-qualified and have the abilities to teach these groups of students. And we have to work on school infrastructure to reduce overcrowding in public schools, and to increase the access to education and the quality of education for the marginalised and disadvantaged populations in Albania. We can confirm and underscore once more that education is still the main factor in marginalisation of these groups, so there is much more work to do regarding this by the government and by other linked institutions. To sum up, we see a lot of rhetoric at state level about diversity and inclusion, but little concrete action. Such a contradiction is familiar to other countries as well. For example, Kyuchukov [2006] described similar situation in Bulgaria with segregated schools. And for so many years the situation in those schools did not change although Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007. Even still today, the segregated schools in Roma settlements of Bulgaria exist and the quality of education in them is very low.

3. Methodology of the study

The study is based on a research conducted with a questionnaire of 25 questions, related to the attitudes towards Roma students and the Romani language. The interview is anonymous and is formulated in the Albanian language. The data collection was done online. The data from this interview gives a general idea of the situation and attitude towards the Roma community and Roma children within the rest of the society in Albania (parents, teachers, and other students) focusing on their origin and mother tongue.

The questionnaire was addressed to three groups of respondents (Roma children and their parents, non-Roma children and their parents, and teachers of Roma and of non-Roma children). The questionnaire is formulated mostly by closed questions (compulsory), in which respondents must choose only one of the answers. The last question is open-ended (non-compulsory) for giving a personal opinion about what participants think is the main reason why Roma are discriminated in the Albanian society.

The questionnaire is formulated in 4 parts. The first section “socio-demographic factors”, specifically the first 9 questions (1–9), are about getting to know the participants, and are mainly questions about age, gender, profession, education, race and ethnicity, mother language, etc.

The second part “attitudes towards Roma” (8 questions, 10–17) concentrate mostly on the opinion of the participants regarding the importance of the Romani language, discrimination at school and society against people using the Romani language or simply being of the Roma minority, etc.

The third section (7 questions, 18–24) “the broad topic of discrimination” consists of a variety of questions about the personal opinions of the participants regarding the feeling of discrimination in different aspects, along with questions concentrated especially on discrimination against Roma children and the Roma community.

The final section (question 25), “my personal opinion” is an open-ended question about one’s personal opinion regarding “Why are Roma people discriminated against in our society, what are the reasons?”

The main goal of this research is to raise awareness that in every school there are children that come from minority families and most of the time these children are segregated, separated from the others, and bullied by other children or even by the teachers themselves. The majority of the teachers usually have difficulties and do not know how to deal with these students, they leave or make them feel separate, excluded and do not give them enough attention during the class.

The working hypothesis is that as in most European countries, Albania will not make a difference and take concrete steps in the policy and civic action regarding the general opinion in the society regarding discrimination against Roma. We have seen the way Roma are treated with disrespect, because of the color of their skin, the way they dress, the language they speak. They are not viewed as equal compared to the rest of the society and this not only with Roma, so-called “*harixhinj*”¹ or “*gabele*”.

¹ *Harixhinj*, *gabele* – are negative prejudicial slang terms used to refer to Roma in Albania.

4. Research findings

The study reached an unexpectedly large number of participants, but 210 of them answered all the questions. The questionnaire was online and the participants in the study answered the questions online.

Table 1. Number of participants in the study

The first group Parents and/or teachers	Aged 30–50 (62.4%) Aged 50+ (12.4%) 74.8% = 157 participants
The second group Young parents, young teachers, and students in higher grades at school	Aged 16–30 24.3% = 51 participants
The third group Students of primary and secondary school	Students aged 6–15 0.9% = 2 participants

Source: autor's own elaboration.

The majority of participants are adults aged 30 to 50 + , 74.8%, representing the substantial majority of the respondents, 157 out of a total of 210 participants. These participants in the survey are parents and/or teachers, young parent and/or teacher, relying on their age, or a student in a higher grade.

In Albania, no school uses the Romani language in the teaching program at school. So Roma children do not have the opportunity to acquire school-based literacy in what is their home language.

99% of the participants think without a doubt that education in their mother tongue is very important for the learners. However, 58.6% of the participants stated that the Romani language is not important at all for them. This is a quite expected result of this question. Most of the Albanian society does not have a direct connection with the Roma community and Roma culture so the Romani language is not in their interest at all, and they do not feel any deep stimulus or reason to learn more about this language. When it comes to interest in languages, young people in Albania are more attracted to learning languages like English, Italian, and German which will serve them to get a better job and most likely a better income. Quite naturally, Romani does not fit into this group of conventionally “useful” languages.

48.6% think that “perhaps” the Romani language should be studied at school. So, they do not agree nor disagree with this fact, or probably they just do not have a strong opinion about this question. Yet 41.4% of the participants are of the opinion that the Romani language should not be studied at school. This negative feedback should be seen in the light of its context, namely that the greater majority of schools in Albania have a small number of the studying and enrolled there, or no Roma children whatsoever. This is because of a high drop-out rate of Roma kids from school in some areas, and the geography of Roma settlement: Roma kids at school are often concentrated in schools mainly where Roma live. So, for most of the respondents there is no sense that just for 1–2 students they should be offering Romani language as a classroom subject in the curriculum. Only 10% think that the Romani language should be studied at school. This suggests the conclusion that the majority of participants, 90% of them, basically do not care about the topic or think that the Romani language should not be studied in schools, or is just not important enough to be part of the school curriculum even if Roma children are studying there. Such a question requires greater more focused research.

36.7% of participants think that the Roma minority is discriminated today just as they were at the time of Enver Hoxha’s dictatorship decades ago. 23.8% think that Roma were more severely discriminated against under the authoritarian system in past decades than they are today. 20% think that the Roma minority is more discriminated against today than they were in the time of the authoritarian government in the socialist Albania.

90.5% of the survey respondents are not of Roma origin so logically they never felt this kind of discrimination at school. Moreover, most of the participants are adults and not students at this point. 6.2% responded that they do not feel discriminated against at all at school. 2.4% say that they feel just a little discriminated against now and then. Only 0.9% of the respondents note that they feel very discriminated at school. It can be assumed that these respondents feel discriminated against because of their Roma origin, because if they were not Roma, they would select the fourth option, that they are not of Roma origin. In any case, very few of the participants were of Roma origin. This finding in response can reflect a normal phenomenon of bullying common in almost in every school all over the world and that these respondents wanted to express this fact.

This constitutes a more concrete and direct question if someone has ever felt discriminated against because of the fact of being of Roma origin and using Romani as a mother tongue at school. Since most interviewees are not of Roma

origin, 89% of the respondents, consequently, they have never experienced this kind of discrimination.

5.2% accept the fact of their Roma origin but do not use the Romani language at school. These results give pause for reflection. Question № 5 asked the respondents about their origin. Yet, nobody confirmed that they were Roma but called themselves Albanian, and even question № 6, in which they were directly asked if they come from a family of Roma origin, only 1% confirmed this fact. So, we are discovering that indeed ever more participants do in fact have some connection with the Roma community and language, but somehow did not want to accept that right at the outset earlier in the survey.

43.3% of participants think that Roma children are very discriminated against in Albanian society. 35.2% think that Roma children are just a little discriminated in the society. 11% think that Roma children are not discriminated against at all in our society. 10.5% do not have an opinion about this question or they do not know how to answer it.

In any case, these are in the main subjective answers and thus difficult to evaluate. It depends on the environment a person has grown up in and what they have seen and experienced. The second author has witnessed both sides, many people feeling hatred against Roma people for no tangible reason; treating them with no respect because they were observed begging on the streets, and even youngsters made fun of other Roma kids. At the same time, from this researcher's own personal experience, it happened that in the first author's hometown there was a used clothing market where the majority of the traders were of Roma origin, and that every day the market was full of people, and nobody seemed to be disgusted or fearful to be a customer and purchase some goods at this market from traders who were clearly Roma. They were even the most preferred tradespersons because they were selling cheaper than others. Some people were even making friends with the Roma traders they were talking with and buying from them.

90.5% of the respondents think that Roma children deserve and should be treated in the same way as other children in society. This is an encouraging finding as response, and this researcher was hoping that most of society would empathise or at least sympathise with this topic and answer that they are not in agreement. 8.6% say that Roma children should be treated differently from other children. Here we can observe a discriminatory opinion, since quite a significant percentage of respondents in the survey believe that Roma children have no right to be treated the same as Albanian children.

90% of the participants say that they would react if they saw and were confronted with a situation or case where a Roma kid was being discriminated against or mistreated in front of them. This is a very positive approach and an expected result. Of course, what does “react” mean here is a separate issue. It is an unfortunate finding that 10% of participants are not sure if they would react at all some way or maybe even would most probably not react if they encounter this kind of situation in the future. But one can also surmise that these respondents answering in this way would not react even if some other kid, not Roma and a stranger, was to be discriminated against or mistreated in front of them. On a positive note, at least there are relatively few respondents who think this way compared with the majority who believe they would certainly react. Of course, for some it is normal behavior to avoid interfering in other people’s problems on the street or they are just afraid that they will get negative feedback if they undertake to do something, since strangers are involved.

44.8% of participants think that Roma children are not treated the same as other children in the society/ school or other environments in Albania. 25.2% think that “maybe” they are treated the same but are not sure since probably they have never had to experience any situation where a Roma person was involved. 24.3% think that Roma children are treated the same as other children in Albania. Once again, this is a very subjective question. It all depends on the personal experience regarding the topic.

90% of respondents think that yes, without a doubt there should be measures taken against those who discriminate against Roma children in schools, including other children/students or even teachers. 9.5% say that they feel or have felt a bit discriminated against in general (no reason specified). The remainder.

80% of participants think that there is no gender difference when it comes to discrimination of Roma in school, or out in the society in other environments. 7.1% think that Roma girls are more discriminated against than boys.

Albania retains elements of a patriarchal society, so such a response is not unexpected in dealing with a questionnaire survey. This dimension can apply not only in the Roma environment but even in other layers of society, since Albanian women can, like this researcher personally, feel at times discriminated against. This discrimination is pretty visible in different professions, such as that of the teacher, considered almost exclusively as a women’s profession, or working in construction trades and handicrafts, almost a 100% male profession in Albania, or other higher positions in society and administration, which customarily are staffed by males.

The final question which was an open-ended question about the opinion of the participants regarding what reasons there are for Roma to suffer discrimination in the Albanian society? This question brought some very surprising results. The mentality of the Albanian families is of a type that encourages a division between two communities: Roma and non-Roma. Anyway, in recent years, many Roma families appear to look like they are more integrated into society. In the group of kindergarten kids, this division does not exist, over time (years) in grown-up kids the opinion and reactions of family influence the socialisation with people of this community. We think they get discriminated against without a concrete reason only because they are Roma. They can be very good kids, they study hard in school, and come from a good Roma family like all other families, but again get discriminated by other kids because that is how their parents teach them. We think that is connected with family education. The child is the mirror of the parent, a child 5–6 years old did not “make up” the epithet “*gabeli*, *evgjiti*, *arixhiu* (Gypsy), *gogoli* (scarecrow), *bolua* (dumb)” And other such negative slang words, etc., etc. He/she has heard it in an environment where he/she has to grow up and often without even knowing the meaning.

5. Discussion and conclusions

From the answers, it is clear that a large majority of the respondents think that the main reason why Roma people are discriminated against in society is because of their skin color. Other reasons can be anything that is stereotypically connected with the Roma minority but not only that minority: for example, the way they dress, the way they live, their economic level, their social inclusion, their educational level, because of their language and origins, some “strange” traditions, marriages at a young age and so on.

Most participants in the survey think that Albanian society is a discriminatory society in general and not only against Roma but for other minorities as well. Some others think that the Roma minority on its own is responsible for being a target of discrimination, for many reasons. The main one is cultural: that parents of Roma children marry their children at a very young age, do not send them to school, and do not take care of their personal hygiene, making this a reason for the other segments of society to distance themselves from them.

Others attribute the fault to parents of non-Roma children, who with their prejudices are the reason their kids have a discriminatory attitude against Roma

children. It is because that is the idea the parents have transmitted to them, that Roma kids are dirty and have a bad smell and they should not make friends with them. There is a proverb in Albanian: “The child is the mirror of his parent.” (*Femija eshte pasqyra e prinderit*). So, family education is very important.

Our hypothesis was confirmed because Albania, like most European countries, is not different with regard to the general opinion in the population and in civil society regarding discrimination against Roma. Roma in general in Albania are treated with disrespect and racism because of the color of the skin, the language they speak, their culture, their ways of life. For such reasons, they are not viewed as equal compared to the rest of the society.

However, this study showed an unexpected result: almost 90% of the respondents acknowledge that in Albanian society there is racism against Roma, and they will not tolerate a Roma child to be discriminated against in front of them. Almost all the participants in the study think that mother tongue for Roma children is important and they have to have possibility to study it at school. These are things which never came out from other studies with the majority representatives towards Roma in other European countries. These findings are show new tendencies in the attitudes towards the segregation of Roma children through education.

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