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SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF ROMA IN POLAND – BETWEEN MARGINALISATION AND INCLUSION

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present the process of social integration as assessed by Roma communities in Poland.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The analytical material was obtained on the basis of a survey conducted among 200 representatives of the Roma community living in Poland. Interviews were conducted using an author's questionnaire.
- ▶ *Score/results* – Based on the collected empirical material, it can be concluded that Roma are an ethnic group with a strong sense of cultural identity, which contributes to their low level of integration into the country of residence.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – Many studies have focused on analysing the inclusion of Roma in European countries. At the same time, there is a shortage of scientific studies resulting from empirical research relating to the social integration of Roma. This issue is still a relatively new research area, which requires systematic research and in-depth analysis in order to design the most effective measures. The research results that have

been presented are of twofold nature, being both research and application-based. It is therefore possible that they may serve as a basis for integration. The identification of the expectations, views and needs of the Polish Roma may contribute to the design of social integration programs that are tailored to their needs.

| **Keywords:** Roma, ethnic minority, social integration, local animation

1. Introduction

The Roma in Poland, are one of the four ethnic groups that have never had their own clearly defined territory. They are predominantly an urban population that resides in larger cities throughout the country [Lejb-Buryś, 2018: 188]. They are a heterogeneous social group that is culturally and anthropologically distinct [Ringold et al., 2005: 32]. In Roma communities the sense of strong attachment to traditions, values and culture is particularly important as it is a key element of their integration and community [Wojtanowicz, 2023: 10].

It should be emphasised that the current situation of Roma is the result of historical processes, decisions made over centuries to locate Roma communities away from society. In addition, they have negative experiences of forced assimilation, which has consequently led to ongoing and growing environmental antagonisms and the negative stereotype of the “gypsy-thief” [Bartosz, 2004: 36]. All this has contributed to the alienation of this group from the society of the country or region.

According to the Recommendation of the Council of the EU, social integration of the Roma, is a slow process in the social space, which is primarily aimed at empowering them to become active citizens of the country [*Recommendations of the Council...*, 2013].

According to Rabbit [1999], social integration is the bringing together of peoples, social groups or states into a certain whole on the basis of mutual contacts and actions in the name of a common idea. The author distinguishes between two planes in which the integration process takes place. The first one is the social-survival plane, in which the processes taking place in the group are experienced and lived out together. On the cognitive-intellectual plane, in turn, a process of shared learning develops. Integration is a set of interrelated changes leading to the merging of components of different domains and aspects of life [Turowski, 2001: 130].

Previous research among Roma communities in Europe has focused mainly on issues of poverty [Matache, Barbu, 2021; Anghel, Alexandrescu, 2022; León, Del Pino-Brunet, 2023] and exclusion [Hellgren, Gabrielli, 2021; Bracic, 2022]. There is a lack of broader research on programs supporting the social integration of Roma and their opinions on these programs. Therefore, the main aim of the research is to present the process of social integration as assessed by Roma communities in Poland.

1.1. Roma in Poland – historical and legal background

Roma in Poland belong to four groups: Polish Roma (Nizinni Gypsies), Lowars, Kelderash and the most numerous – Carpathian Roma (Bergitka Roma). In the 16th century, Gypsies from Germany, later referred to as the Polish Roma, migrated to Poland. The Kelderash and Lowarzy migrated from Transylvania and Wallachia only in the second half of the 19th century. Apart from the Bergitka Roma, all the arriving groups led a nomadic lifestyle engaged mainly in horse trading, crafts and divination. The Gypsies of the Carpathian Roma group made their living by providing services to the rural population [Bartosz, 2012: 9].

World War II was a period in which the Roma experienced great cruelty. They were considered antisocial people of Aryan origin by the Nazi regime. The number of Roma who were murdered during the Second World War is difficult to estimate. The Roma Association in Poland only gives a possible range: between 220 000 and 500 000 victims. This represents 30–60% of the European Roma population respectively.¹

After World War II, the Polish government's efforts were directed towards achieving an ethnically homogeneous state. At the end of 1949, a census of the Gypsy population was carried out. Actions were also taken to provide material support to those groups that led a sedentary lifestyle. However, this did not encourage the nomadic Roma to stop wandering. On 23 March 1964, the ruling administration took direct action by checking the Roma's documents, living conditions, health situation, fulfilment of children's compulsory schooling, families' sources of income and the extent to which they used social welfare. The Roma were warned as to the consequences of their undertaking further migrations. As a result, by the end of 1969 almost all of them were settled [Sochaj, 2015: 27–36].

¹ The Roma Holocaust (1939–1945). Association of Roma in Poland [www 1].

The end of the 1970s was a period of deterioration of the economic situation in Poland and escalating hatred of the Roma. In the autumn of 1981, a pogrom against them took place in Konin and later also in Auschwitz [Adamczyk, 2013: 87].

The period of political transition initiated positive legal changes on the part of the state, including the status of minorities and the related rights enshrined in the Polish Constitution of on 2 April 1997, which raised hopes among Roma for an improvement in their lot and mobilisation movements. According to Gerlich [2001], this was a new approach, as Roma mobilisations had hitherto only occurred as a result of the occurrence of conflicts with the majority society. However, the changes brought about by the new state policy were initially received with great distrust.

The provisions regulating minority rights in Poland were contained in the *Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language* of 6 January 2005. In it, the Roma were recognised as an ethnic minority, i.e. not having a nation-state with which they could identify [Dz.U., 2005, No. 17, pos. 1–3]. In 2005, the Joint Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities was established – a consultative and advisory body to the Prime Minister. Within its framework, a Team for Roma Affairs was established, whose task is to monitor the situation of the Roma in Poland, especially paying attention to manifestations of discrimination and the operation of government programmes aimed at this minority. In order to counteract discrimination against minorities living in Poland, amendments were made to *the Labour Code, the Social Assistance Act, the Employment Promotion and Labour Market Institutions Act* and *the Equal Treatment Act*. The latter, in Articles 6, 7 and 8, speaks of the prohibition of discrimination in access to education, health and social care [Maciejewska, 2016: 14–21].

Currently, the largest number of Bergitka Roma reside in the southern part of Poland, mainly in small towns and villages located in the Podkarpackie, Małopolskie, Śląskie and Dolnośląskie Voivodeships. In contrast, the other groups reside mainly in cities: Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Łódź, Puławy and Mielec. The different Roma groups in Poland differ significantly from each other in terms of their social status, traditions, dialects used and attitude to society [Paleczny, 2007: 155].

1.2. Challenges to the social integration of Roma – national and European examples

Since the beginning of the endeavour to join the European Union in 1994, measures for the integration of the Roma have become one of the priority tasks of

the Polish government. In view of their multidimensional situation, a number of analyses were carried out in order to develop appropriate remedial projects. Education was one of the priority tasks on which the activity of aid programmes was focused. The first to be created was a pilot government programme for the Roma community in the Małopolskie Voivodeship for the years 2001–2003. It met the expectations of its creators and was positively received by the Roma community.

Another document was the programme for 2004–2006, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 19 August 2004, which aimed to combat forms of exclusion of the Roma community. Assistance was developed in the field of education, improvement of the living and social situation, health care and support for entrepreneurship [*National Strategy...*: 67]. Measures were also taken for security and prevention of ethnic crime, civic education, culture and preservation of the Roma ethnic identity and promotion of knowledge of the Roma community among Poles. The final report of the evaluation study of the above-mentioned programme showed that as many as 88% of the Roma surveyed declared themselves satisfied with the assistance offered to them. Especially the elderly evaluated positively the measures taken [Palewicz-Kwiatkowska, 2013: 153; *Final Report...*, 2011].

Other tools fostering social integration were *the Programme for the Social Integration of Roma in Poland 2014–2020* and the current edition, *the Programme for the Social and Civic Integration of Roma in Poland 2021–2030*. The strengths of the measures taken in the previous initiative included the functioning of a network of Roma education assistants; the improvement of the educational situation, including the reduction of the percentage of Roma students in special schools; the empowerment and civic activation of Roma. However, the weaknesses are much more numerous than the strengths. The low level of education of students, the lack of effective strategies at the local level, and the lack of activities directly targeting Roma youth, women and girls were highlighted. Continuing to strengthen education in its broadest sense, which is most likely to make a real contribution to improving the situation of Roma, was identified as the most important objective of the new programme. Support will also continue in the area of improving the living conditions and professional activation of Roma [Bańka, 2018: 37].

As in Poland, in Romania the main problems of the Roma communities are related to the low level of education, unemployment and lack of employment opportunities. In 1990, the Romanian Ministry of Education initiated the first projects for the education of Roma, and since 1998, it is possible to speak of

a coherent strategy that makes today's "successful Romanian experience" unique not only at the European but also at the global level. The main objectives of this strategy are: the formation of a young Roma intelligentsia through access to secondary and higher education; the preservation of the Roma language, history and culture in the education system; the reduction of discrimination against Roma and their school absenteeism and dropout – this last objective is considered the greatest challenge of education policy in Romania [Szasz and Scesznek, 2019: 437].

Taking care of the preservation of the Roma identity, including Roma culture and language in the education system is also the responsibility of the Finnish authorities. Since 1994, it has had a Roma Education Department the task of which is, among other things, to plan and implement education so that the Roma population can receive primary and vocational education on an equal basis. It is the duty of public radio and television, to provide services also in the Roma language. The most important Roma organisation is the National Advisory Committee for Roma, which has been operating since 1956. The National Advisory Committee for Roma. Its main tasks are to promote the equal participation of Roma in Finnish society, to improve living conditions and socio-economic position and to support Roma culture. There are a number of other nationwide Roma organisations. The oldest and largest of these is the Romano Missio, founded in 1906. Romano Missio. Its key activities focus on child protection, welfare and social work. The Finnish Roma Association was established in 1967 to provide social support, and the National Roma Forum of Finland was established in 2007 to empower the local Roma organisations [Swed, 2022: 24–25].

One of the most successful European countries in terms of Roma social inclusion is Spain [European Commission, 2018]. The comparative results of the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II) conducted in 2017 show that the situation of Roma in Spain is better than in other EU Member States, with regard to areas of social inclusion such as access to health services and participation in education. Research in Spain also confirms that the quality of life of Spanish Roma has improved significantly in recent decades [Carrasco and Poblet, 2019: 24].

Although significant efforts are being made at national and European level to protect fundamental rights and increase the degree of social inclusion, the number of Roma facing extreme poverty, marginalisation and discrimination remains very high [Bańka, 2018: 38].

2. Research methodology

The proposed research area fills a gap in the scientific discourse on the issue of social integration of the Roma minority in Poland. The aim of the article is to present the process of social integration as assessed by the Roma minority living in Poland and to identify recommendations addressed to institutions dealing with minorities in Poland. In the context of the main aim of the study, the following two key issues were set:

- a) attitudes and opinions of the Roma minority towards activities undertaken so far for their integration into the local environment;
- b) local Roma activity in the cultural and civic sphere.

Primary research was carried out with 200 representatives of the Roma community living in Poland. A stratified random sampling was applied, where the counterparts of the strata were the macro-regions of Poland. Efforts were made to maintain proportions between the number of respondents from a given macro-region and the number of Roma living there (Table 1).

Table 1. the number of filled questionnaires in macro-regions

Macro-region	Number of respondents**	Percentage
Centralny	20	10
Mazowieckie Voivodeship	19	9.5
Północny	18	9
Północno-Zachodni	35	17.5
Południowy	47	23.5
Południowo-Zachodni	41	20.5
Wschodni	20	10

Source: the author's survey.

The research methods included: literature studies, a diagnostic survey and descriptive and mathematical statistics, while the techniques were telephone and face-to-face interviews and source document analysis. As mentioned, the research was conducted among 200 citizens of the Roma community. The respondents

were selected purposively and stratified, i.e. by cluster of residence (voivodeships/macro-regions). The respondents were categorised, *inter alia*, by place of residence, gender, age and education. The research was carried out between April and August 2024.

Due to the cultural distinctiveness of the studied group and the relatively small population nationally, the research required an extended period of fieldwork. During their implementation, there was a problem with reaching Roma communities. The reluctance of respondents was due to factors such as the hermetic nature of the environment and distrust and lack of belief in the validity of the research. In addition, many of the respondents felt that no one cared about their problems and that participating in the research would not change anything. It is also worth pointing out the lack of decisiveness or very limited decisiveness of the Roma women. It was necessary for them to obtain the consent of a male family member to be able to participate in the survey. A significant decrease in willingness to participate in the survey with age was also observed.

3. The results

The respondents were categorised by gender, age, education level and marital status. The heterogeneity and limited decision-making of Roma women translated into the structure of the respondents. More than 60 per cent of respondents were men. The vast majority of respondents were of working age (18–44 years – 54%, and 45–60/65 years – 36.5% of respondents). Half declared that they had primary education and nearly 40% had primary education. The majority of respondents were married (67%) (Table 2).

Cultural separation and a lower quality of life affect the degree of integration of the Roma community with non-Roma neighbours. The survey shows that 40% of the respondents have a sense of identification with their place of residence. One in four respondents declared a different opinion, while the rest were undecided. Most positive opinions were given by respondents who were members of families of five or more. Multiple Roma feel the need to engage with the local community for the sake of their children's future.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Demographic characteristics		Total		Macro-region						
				CEN	MAZ	PŁN	PŁN-ZACH	POŁ	POŁ-ZACH	WSCH
		NoR*	%	NoR						
Gender	female	75	37,5	11	5	6	14	14	14	11
	male	125	62.5	9	14	12	21	33	27	9
Age	18–44	108	54	8	9	15	16	24	25	11
	45–60/65	73	36.5	12	6	3	12	21	13	6
	60+/65+	19	9.5	0	4	0	7	2	3	3
Education	no education	1	0.5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	elementary	100	50	10	11	9	19	17	21	13
	secondary	20	10	2	2	0	2	9	5	0
	vocational	79	39.5	8	6	9	13	21	15	7
Marital status	divorced	5	2.5	0	1	0	2	1	1	0
	widow(er)	9	4.5	0	0	0	3	2	2	2
	single	52	26	0	5	8	8	12	14	5
	married	134	67	20	13	10	22	32	24	13
Ethnic group	Bergitka	44	22	0	3	0	3	19	7	12
	Kelderasze	4	2	0	1	1	2	0	0	0
	Lowarzy	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
	Polska Roma	150	75	20	14	17	29	28	34	8

Notes: Number of respondents (*); CEN – Centralny; MAZ – Mazowieckie Voivodeship; PŁN – Północny; PŁN-ZACH – Północno-Zachodni; POŁ – Południowy; POŁ-ZACH – Południowo-Zachodni; WSCH – Wschodni.

Source: the author's survey.

Only one in five Roma identifying with their place of residence stated that non-Roma were open and friendly to them (Table 3). The remainder expressed

negative feelings, claiming that the local community has a reluctant, distrustful or even hostile attitude towards Roma (68, 82 and 10 people respectively).

Table 3. Attitudes of local communities towards Roma

Characteristics	Number of respondents	Percentage
open and friendly	40	20.0
reluctant	68	34.0
distrustful	82	41.0
hostile	10	5.0

Source: the author's survey.

The presented results may be related to the actions dedicated to the Roma community. Only 4% of the respondents said that the measures taken so far to integrate Roma in the local environment were relevant and effective and helped them integrate into the local community. The opposite was true for 28% of respondents, while as many as 68% had not heard of such measures.

One form of the Roma integration into the local community is taking part in social, cultural and educational events in their place of residence. Only one in five respondents confirmed their participation in such meetings (Table 4). The others either did not participate (75 people) or stated that they were not interested in such meetings (44 people), or answered that they only meet in Roma groups (39 people). Among the 42 participating in integration meetings, young Roma were predominant (23 people aged 18–44).

Table 4. Participation of Roma in community integration meetings

Characteristics	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	42	21.0
No	75	37.5
I'm not interested in such meetings	44	22.0
We only meet in Roma groups	39	19,5

Source: the author's survey.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (107 people) rated *low* or *very low* the level of social integration and support for Roma (Table 5). *An average* rating was given by 78 people and a *high* rating by only 15 Roma respondents.

Table 5. The evaluation of the level of social integration and assistance for Roma

Assessment	Number of respondents	Percentage
very low	21	10.5
low	86	43.0
an average	78	39.0
high	15	27.5
very high	0.0	0.0

Source: the author's survey.

The respondents were also asked to give their opinion on measures for their integration into local communities in the regions where they live (Table 6). They were asked to indicate one of five ratings which, in their opinion, most accurately describes the reality:

- 1 – many actions are taken for Roma integration;
- 2 – various measures are taken, but they are generally not very effective;
- 3 – too little attention is paid to the rights of the Roma minority;
- 4 – there is a lot of talk about the Roma, but in practice there is a lack of appropriate action;
- 5 – I have no opinion.

Table 6. The opinions of Roma on measures to integrate into local communities

Ratings	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	4	2.0
2	29	14.5
3	53	26.5
4	55	27.5
5	59	29.5

Source: the author's survey.

A small number of respondents (4 out of 200 respondents) were keen to speak about the positive impact of the measures taken to integrate Roma into local communities. Almost 15 percent of respondents said that the measures were not very effective, and slightly more than half thought that there were few measures.

4. Conclusions

The social integration of the Roma is a multidimensional problem that requires continuous action and monitoring of its effects. On the basis of the carried out research, it should be concluded that the existing programmes for community integration have not been successful. Only 2% of the respondents gave a positive assessment of the measures taken so far by the local government and NGOs for community integration, while almost 15% said that they were not very effective. The predominant opinion is that *there is a lot of talk about the Roma, but that in practice there is a lack of appropriate action, or that too little attention is paid to the rights of the Roma minority in Poland* – such an opinion was expressed by more than half of the respondents (54%). According to the respondents, various measures are taken, but they are generally not very effective.

Less than half of the respondents identify themselves with their place of residence, while the feeling of integration is most noticeable among families with many children. Only 20% of the surveyed population said that the community they live among is open and welcoming to them. Negative feelings of rejection and local intolerance were the dominant responses among the respondents.

The presented research results indicate the necessity for further actions in the field of Roma integration in Poland, which should be oriented, on the one hand, towards the maintenance of cultural continuity, and, on the other hand, it should contribute to greater openness, with the simultaneous establishment of dialogue and cooperation with the non-Roma community. In the future, local, integrated programmes to support the integration of national minorities in Poland should be created, and the staff responsible for their implementation should be equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills in the area of animation and social integration. It is necessary to systematically expand cooperation between NGOs. The developed and implemented programmes should be multi-level and focused on open cooperation with the local environment.

It is disclaimed that, despite efforts, this study does not exhaust all the aspects of the issue. Therefore, the obtained results should be interpreted taking into

account the specificity of the described assumptions and ranges. Considering that the conducted study included a sample of 6 macro-regions of Poland this limits the generalisations that can be drawn from its results. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the presentation of a social integration of Roma in Poland is an important contribution to future research, not only on a larger sample, but also extended to other countries. The most interesting research questions in the context of further social integration of Roma include: Which programs implemented for the Roma community in Europe are most successful and why? What should be taken into account in the context of the cultural identity of Roma when developing social programs aimed at their inclusion in the regions where they live? Are European funds allocated to Roma social integration programs planned and spent effectively? We will try to answer these questions in the near future.

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