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POVERTY AS
A COMPONENT OF
THE SOCIO-CULTURAL
IDENTITY OF
THE ROMA

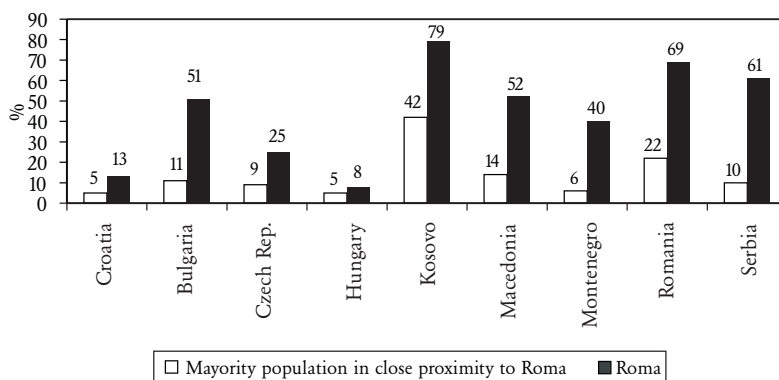
The objective and subjective indicators of Romani poverty

There is a close connection between the Roma and poverty and this has lasted for centuries. Almost certainly, the Roma are a group with the highest risk of poverty in all societies in which they live. Romani poverty is specific in relation to poverty of other ethnic or social groups. First, poverty among the Roma is significantly more widespread compared to other groups. The rates of poverty among the Roma can be ten and more times larger than the rates of poverty among the non-Roma. In Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary (countries that are members or candidates for entry into the EU) between 40–80% of Roma live below a poverty threshold of 4.3\$ a day per person (Ringold et al., 2003). On the other hand, the Roma easily become poor and stay poor for longer periods (their whole lives for many). This means that Roma poverty is often characteristically deeply ingrained and permanent.

Diagram 1

Share of the population below the internationally comparable poverty line (2004)

(income based - international poverty line of 4.3\$ per day at PPP - purchasing power parity)



Source: <http://vulnerability.undp.sk>

Note: When calculating per capita household income the OECD 'equivalence scale' was used (this assigns the coefficient 1 to the first adult household member, 0.5 to other adult members and 0.3 to children under 14). This means that per capita household income is not obtained by dividing the total income by the number of members, but with the "an equalized number of household members". For example, if the total income of a household consisting of a married couple with two children amounts to 1,200kn, the equalised household income is not 300kn (1,200÷4), but 571.43kn (1,200÷2.1).

A large majority of the Roma in Croatia are also absorbed by the problems of poverty, indicated by both the objective and subjective indicators of poverty. As can be seen in diagram 1, the rate of poverty among the Roma in Croatia is approximately two and a half times larger than the rate of poverty among the majority population who live with the Roma in the same settlements or close by. It is certain that the difference between the poverty of the Roma and the non-Roma majority in general would be substantially larger. When compared to other countries, Croatia belongs to the group of countries where there is less difference between the rate of poverty among the Roma and non-Roma who live in Romani neighbourhoods. It is evident that the material and financial circumstances of the Romani populations are far worse than the financial circumstances of Croatian citizens that live in absolute poverty (Table 1).

Table 1
The Living Conditions of the
total population, the poor and
Roma in Croatia

Life Standard Indicators	Total population (%)	The poor (%)	Roma (%)
< 10m ² of housing space per household member	8.1	25.0	67.2*
No electricity	0.3	2.1	26.0
No indoor toilet	8.8	37.2	66.0
No indoor bathroom	7.9	38.1	63.3
No running water	5.7	22.0	48.9
No sewerage	24.0	45.2	78.8
No telephone	10.7	40.1	61.1
No fridge or freezer	5.9	16.6	20.9
No washing machine	8.9	32.6	49.9
No car	37.0	89.2	67.5

Source: Field study 2004

Note: The life standard indicators for all citizens and the poor are based on Lutmer (2000). The threshold of poverty has been determined on the basis of minimum expenditure on food and other necessities.

* It needs to be mentioned that we did not have precise data on the floor space of Romani households, as household responses were classified into different categories of housing space. To calculate the size of housing spaces for each household member, it was supposed that all households in a particular category have the average amount of the mentioned category. This means that data on the size of housing spaces for each person in a household is not entirely precise.

When certain elements of the infrastructure and living standard are compared, for which a large part of household expenditure is spent in Croatia, then it is evident that more than a quarter of the Roma do not have electricity, while the share of these types of households among the overall poor population is around 20%. Almost a half of the Romani households do not have a washing

machine, which is considered to be a component of a minimum life standard in Croatia. The Roma have a significantly higher level of deprivation with regard to all life standard elements compared to the poor in general, with the exception of car possession. Research on poverty until now has shown that car possession is a relatively good rough indicator of poverty in Croatia. Approximately 90% of the poor and 95% of social welfare recipients do not own a car (Šućur, 2001; World Bank, 2000). It seems that the car has an additional function for the Roma. For a large number of Romani families, a car is very important in terms of livelihood, considering their livelihood activities to ensure existence (collection of scrap metal, small-scale trade and resale). For other citizens, a car in this respect is not existentially indispensable.

When we compare the present-day life standard of Romani households with those of six or twenty years ago, then it is evident that the standard of living has improved (measured by the possession of durable consumer goods) (Table 2).

Durable consumer goods	1982 study	1988 study	2004 study
No electricity	48.1	14.3*	26.0
No fridge	72.9	40.0	37.1
No TV	61.9	20.2	15.0
No washing machine	92.2	65.9	49.9
No car	83.1	72.9	67.5

Table 2
Changes in the living standard of the Roma

Source: Hodžić, 1985: 30–31 (for 1982 study), Štambuk, 2000: 307 (for 1998 study) and field research in 2004.

Note: The samples in these studies were different, which may have affected the obtained results. The 1982 study included 20 Romani settlements, compared to the study in 1998 that included 5 settlements while the most recent study in 2004 included 43 settlements.

* Of the five settlements that were included in this study, the percent of households without electricity was between 0–11.5% in four of them, while in the fifth more than half of the households had no electricity.

The number of households without electricity has been halved in twenty years. Compared to 1998, the percentage of households without washing machines has mostly decreased (even though it is still relatively high). Still, the obtained results need to be considered carefully because there could be large differences in the standards of living between inhabitants of particular Romani settlements.

The subjective Romani perception of their own material position does not differ greatly from the objective indicators (Table 3). On a scale of 1 to 5, more than a third of the respondents graded their material position as 1, i.e.,

unsatisfactory. Moreover, if we add the number of respondents who evaluated their material position as 2 to this figure, then almost 60% of all households live in unsatisfactory or hardly bearable material conditions. In addition, the standard the Roma used while grading their material position also needs to be considered. Romani perception of an acceptable or decent living standard is likely to be more modest compared to the perception of other social and ethnic groups.

Table 3
The material conditions of households according to subjective evaluations of respondents* (N=962)

	%
1	35.1
2	24.3
3	22.6
4	8.4
5	9.6

Source: Field study 2004

* The rating is on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is unsatisfactory and 5 is excellent.

In addition, in table 4 it is evident that by far the biggest problem that Romani households face, based on respondents' opinion, is poverty and shortage of goods. Since the respondents could list up to two problems, it is indicative that there is a huge difference between poverty and all the other problems mentioned as first. Namely, 64.7% of the respondents first and foremost stressed the problem of poverty while 11.3% mentioned poor housing conditions, which as a rule, are closely related to poverty. When all the problems are ranked according to importance, regardless of whether they were mentioned first or second, poverty remains at the top of the list, followed by unemployment and poor housing conditions. All those who mentioned poverty as a problem, stated it exclusively first.

Table 4
The biggest problems of Romani households* (N=958)

Problem	% of respondents who list problem as first	% of respondents who list problem as first or as second
Poor material status (shortage, poverty)	64.7	64.7
Poor family health	8.6	19.9
Difficulty with schooling of children	4.4	8.1
Poor housing conditions	11.3	33.4
Long distance to place of work	1.3	2.6
Unemployment	8.5	47.0
Overburdened women (job, family obligations)	0.3	4.0
Other	1.0	1.8

Source: Field study 2004

* Two problems could be listed

Not only is poverty a key problem for the Roma but a “trade mark” or recognisable feature of the Roma (table 5). More than half of the respondents (52%) consider that poverty best describes the Roma as an ethnic group.

	%
Poverty	52.0
Customs	17.0
Folklore	13.5
Language	11.1
Typical trades	4.0
Other	2.4

Source: Field study 2004

Table 5

What best describes the Roma (N=959)

The Roma and the “culture of poverty”

The Roma are traditionally perceived through different stereotypes. The community perceives them as beggars and vagabonds or as thieves. They are often marked as the “undeserving poor” (Katz, 1989), that is, like people who are lazy, avoid work, have uncontrolled reproduction, are irresponsible and immature, who do not accept modern values and live off social welfare, etc. In other words, the Roma are blamed for their own poverty. There is a widespread image of the Roma as those who live in misery and poverty. However, the Roma are also perceived as those who excessively and unacceptably use state welfare, which promotes frustration and rivalry among Roma and non-Roma groups. Therefore the following question can be asked: Is Romani poverty “situational” or “cultural”? Is poverty an intrinsic part of Romani culture, such that the wider public in that respect cannot do anything or very little?

Some authors have the tendency to see elements of pathology and culturalism in Romani poverty. The “pathological” approach suggests that the sole responsibility for poverty lies with the individual, that is, that poverty is the result of social and personal disadvantages of the individual. The word pathology alludes to the active role of the individual in the “creation” of poverty such that individuals actively and consciously create their own misery. Moreover, it can be concluded from this approach that the poor are predisposed to be criminals and deviants and that any social intervention will not be successful due to the character of these people.

Nevertheless, authors more often endeavour to explain Romani poverty with the “culture of poverty” theory (Lewis, 1965; 1968), because culturalism does not allude to

the “genetic” code of the Roma but to their culture that encourages them, in accordance with stereotypes, to avoid work, to have lots of children or to accept a criminal way of life. According to this theory, the poor use life strategies, which are a result of culturally conditioned practices. They develop their own culture with peculiar norms and values that is completely different from the culture of wider society. According to Lewis’s findings, culture of poverty features can be analysed at the individual, family and community levels (table 6).

Table 6
Culture of poverty features

Individual level	Family level	Community level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marginality • helplessness • fatalism • present-time orientation • lack of impulse control • weak ego-structure • belief in male superiority • high tolerance for psychopathologies of all types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • free unions and consensual marriages • early initiation into sex • absence of childhood as a specific protective period of life • lack of privacy • matrifocal family • high divorce rate • abandonment of children and mothers by men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-membership and non-participation in social institutions (economic organisations, unions, political parties, etc.) • Weak use of social services (health, cultural, educational, bank, etc.) • Social disorganisation and chronic instability

Theft, begging, petty fraud, prostitution, loan-sharking, drugs, teenage pregnancies and other deviations are also included as features of the culture of poverty. The poor are caught up in an endemic persistent vicious circle, because they do not have the strength to stop the processes that cause and maintain their poverty. At first glance, the intergenerational poverty transmission argument can be “easily” illustrated using examples from Romani life. Lewis maintained that the culture of poverty is internalised and learned in socialisation processes, and for this reason has a great impact on children. Lewis (1968: 50) claims that: “By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.” In addition, new theories emphasise that the poor transmit beliefs, practices, ambitions and expectations from one generation to the next as a form of “heritage”. For example, if a poor (Romani) family have developed the practices of begging and fraud, these “skills” will be transmitted to the younger members of the family, because they present a mechanism

through which the poor can cope with social and economic marginalisation. Similar to the rich who transfer their wealth to descendants, the poor transfer their family “heritage” to the young, who internalise and use it later in life. In the same way, low educational aspirations or life ambitions among the young in these circumstances can be explained. This would mean that the poor contribute to their impoverishment by collecting, preserving and transmitting behaviour connected to poverty.

If a Romani culture of poverty exists, what is its content? It is true that some of the features of Lewis’s culture of poverty are present among the Roma (feeling of marginality and helplessness, orientation towards the present, free unions, early sexual relations, absence of childhood as a specific protective period, and poor participation in social institutions, etc.) However, some components of the culture of poverty have become characteristic not only for the Roma and the poor but for other social strata in Croatia today. Many feel helpless and uncertain in situations of economic recession and limited employment opportunities. How is it possible at all to plan a future in a situation when individuals do not have influence whatsoever on the social environment. Cohabitation and a high divorce rate are not specific for the poor, but are already general trends in contemporary society. The same can also be said about the birth of children out of wedlock. In the most developed countries, more than half of the children are born outside of marriage. Early sexual relations are not a particularity of the poor or the Roma either. Following the sexual revolution, young people from different social strata had earlier sexual relations. However, there is a big difference between the Roma and non-Roma with regard to entry into a first marriage. “Macho cultures” or beliefs in the superiority of men are not especially linked to the Roma but with a patriarchal culture, which is still present in Croatian society. It is also true that Romani parents expect their children to “grow up” considerably earlier (to get married, earn a living or become independent) compared to non-Roma children (Šućur, 2004), while the Roma are simultaneously “accused” of having an overprotective relation towards children (i.e., too lenient and spontaneous upbringing).

If the Roma upheld the culture of poverty, this means that they would accept different values to those in society. However, table 7 shows that their system of values in all probability does not differ greatly from a non-Roma one (unfortunately, we do not have a sample control group to check this).

Table 7
System of Values among the
Roma*

Values	Not important at all	Very important	Average	Rank towards category "very important"
Marriage	1.6	82.0	4.71	7
Children	1.3	95.2	4.90	2
Work	1.3	79.5	4.70	8
Knowledge	0.8	67.8	4.52	13
Education	4.6	68.2	4.40	12
Honesty	0.4	88.6	4.85	3
Friendship	0.4	85.1	4.80	5
Leisure time	1.0	59.0	4.38	16
Love	1.6	83.6	4.72	6
Sex life	4.3	70.7	4.40	10
Environmental protection	2.5	68.4	4.49	11
Politics	48.3	11.7	2.14	18
Religion	6.0	62.9	4.26	15
Nation	12.9	49.7	3.85	17
Money	1.2	79.0	4.69	9
Freedom	0.2	88.4	4.85	4
Sex equality	3.0	67.1	4.43	14
Health	0.1	96.6	4.96	1

Source: Field study 2004

* The importance of each value is evaluated on a scale of 1-5 (1 - not important at all, 2 - mostly unimportant, 3 - I am not sure, 4 - mostly important, 5 - very important).

Family values, personal values and liberties (health, children, honesty, freedom, friendship, love, marriage) are at the top of the scale. These are followed by work-material values (work and money), while traditional and political values (politics, nation, religion) are at the bottom of the scale. It can be concluded from the represented hierarchy of values that life in poverty is not a way of life that the Roma prefer.

Work also occupies a high place on the scale of values, as a means of realising many other values. Thus, the value system of the Roma is not imperatively different from the value system of society as a whole. However, it is questionable to what extent these obtained value orientations are the result of the Roma's efforts to alter their responses to match general social expectations. There is a discrepancy between so-called explicit and implicit values among the Roma (Županov, 1995). Explicit (publicly recognised) values can be only declarations according to which people do not follow in real life, while implicit values are real values from which behaviour follows. This discrepancy between explicit and implicit values is not only particular to the Roma, but it is most noticeable among the Roma because they often do not have the possibilities to realise the values that they declaratively uphold. As the Roma are not in a

position to realise the goals of the culture of society, they create norms that are more appropriate to the situations in which they live ("value stretch") (Mitrović, 1990). Through their actions and behaviour the Roma and the poor can violate their own moral norms and values.

How can we explain the presence of some culture of poverty elements among the Roma? It needs to be noted that Lewis emphasised that the culture of poverty is simultaneously an adaptation and reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a highly individualised capitalist society. The culture of poverty represents poor people's attempt to grapple with feelings of hopelessness and despair, which come from knowing that the achievement of success consistent with the values and aims of wider society is impossible. That which some call "culture" in fact represents mechanisms of survival; the adaptation of the poor to life's difficulties. For example, are social disorganisation or instability really features of the Roma community?

A number of investigations have shown that the living conditions in Romani communities are not the same: in some they are stable, some communities struggle with life problems and misfortunes, and some are poorly organised and unstable. The Roma can organise their community activities successfully in a way that is different from the non-Roma. The Roma have their own models for solving problems. In this way, kinship networks can be understood as a form of "cultural capital", and not something that hinders cooperation and enterprise. Multigenerational family networks present a means of survival for different generations because they ensure the regular inflow of finances (child endowment, family allowances, pensions and unemployment benefits). These family networks also serve as information networks about the labour market, the possibilities of making money, gains and losses of leaving the local area and similar.

It needs to be acknowledged that life in poverty affects the development of those forms of behaviour that are more of a situational character, but there is no need to exclude the possibility that poverty creates long-term patterns of behaviour (Gans, 1968) that can negatively influence the pace of change leading to the cessation of poverty. The adopted patterns of behaviour can lead to a "cultural lag", that is, they can prevent or obstruct an easy and quick "comeback" to society, even though it is believed that a cultural lag is of a temporary character. Thus, it is important during research on Romani poverty to establish which patterns of their behaviour are situational and which are internalised and have features of "culture". Situational behaviour changes in ac-

cordance with changes in life circumstances (without social intervention) while internalised behaviour can be changed mainly through organised activities.

A shortcoming in the culture of poverty theory is its implication that the poor and the Roma do not have their “own culture”, but that their economic position determines their values in a predictable way. Moreover, it is not clear whether the Roma have one culture or two: their ethnic culture and the culture of poverty. To what extent is the ethnic culture of the Roma compatible to the culture of poverty? The Roma are an ethnic minority in Croatia and other countries, which means that they have particular culture specificities in relation to the majority group. For example, early marriages are characteristic for the Romani ethnic group. They are a part of Romani tradition and Romani socialisation (Šućur, 2004). Early marriages, per se, do not have to lead to poverty. They are more an indicator of low level educational aspirations, early drop-out rate from school, which is related to low qualifications and poorly developed work skills that in the end decrease their chances in the labour market.

Here it is important to ask which traditional patterns of Romani culture prevent or obstruct the modernisation of the Romani community. It is possible to improve the material position of the Roma by holding onto past cultural patterns. Vašečka and Radičova (2001) claim that the following features of the Romani family, which differ from the non-Roma majority, can be related to problems of modernisation and poverty:

- life in extended families (there is still no dominant orientation towards nuclear families),
- community oriented life style,
- an absence of boundaries between what is private and what is public (privacy does not exist not only because of their way of life but also because of their relationship to property),
- considering the present housing as temporary and provisional,
- a clear division of sex roles in the family (the man is the breadwinner and the woman is responsible for household maintenance and bringing up the children),
- specific demographic features (young population with many children).

Thus, it needs to be recognised that the culture of poverty is based on unproved assumptions that there is only one functional model of adaptation to long-term deprivation. However, among the Roma and the poor we come across complex and various strategies of adaptation

to similar social circumstances. For example, the Roma can plan mass migration abroad as a form of political protest against discriminating local conditions or they can individually go abroad as illegal immigrants or migrate to countries in which there are more favourable conditions for the development of “small business” (Stewart, 2002).

The causes of Romani poverty

All research shows that the Roma are more vulnerable with respect to poverty compared to other social or ethnic groups. Some advocate the notion “the racialization of poverty” (Emigh, Fodor and Szelenyi, 2000) namely, that members of minority groups begin to abound among the poor, changing the profile of the poor. First of all, poverty is generally connected to some socio-demographic features like sex, age, employment status, education, the size and structure of the household and similar. However, the connection of poverty with these features varies between societies as well as between the Roma and non-Roma.

There are a number of factors that influence the increasing vulnerability of the Romani population. First, it is known that the Roma have low levels of education and poorly developed professional skills, which determines their position on the changing (transitional) labour market. The risk of poverty is generally high if the head of the household is unemployed or without an education or has three or more children. The connection between poverty and these three features (unemployment, low educational achievements, and a large number of children) among the Roma is considerably stronger than among the non-Roma. Non-Roma households with the mentioned features do not have to necessarily prevail among the poor. For example, most of the poor in Croatia with regard to their employment status are not unemployed but pensioners (Šućur, 2001; World Bank, 2000). According to one study (Ringoold et al., 2003), the rates of poverty among non-Roma families headed by persons without any education are several times higher than those among non-Roma families headed by persons with a secondary school education. There is a similar ratio between the rates of poverty of non-Roma households who are run by unemployed and employed persons. In comparison, there is a relatively high level of poverty among Romani families regardless of the household heads’ educational or employment status. The risk of poverty is high among the Roma even when the head of the household is employed. Data on the evaluations of material status show that the subjective evalua-

tions of material status do not significantly differ with regard to the educational and employment status of the household head or with regard to the structure of the household (tables 8, 9, and 10).

Table 8
Subjective evaluations of the material conditions of the household (on a scale 1–5) with regard to education of household head

Education	1	2	3	4	5	Total
No schooling	77 41.2%	48 25.7%	37 19.8%	11 5.9%	14 7.5%	187 100.0%
1–4 grades primary	54 33.5%	47 29.2%	30 18.6%	15 9.3%	15 9.3%	161 100.0%
Unfinished primary	41 34.5%	29 24.4%	29 24.4%	13 10.9%	7 5.9%	119 100.0%
Primary school	31 34.8%	19 21.3%	25 28.1%	6 6.7%	8 9.0%	89 100.0%
Secondary school	9 25.0%	6 16.7%	16 44.4%	3 8.3%	2 5.6%	36 100.0%
Total	212 35.8%	149 25.2%	137 23.1%	48 8.1%	46 7.8%	592 100.0%

$hi^2=20,94$ $df=16$ $p\leq.207$

Source: Field study 2004

Table 9
Subjective evaluations of the material conditions of the household (on a scale 1–5) with regard to employment of household head

Employment status	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Employed	16 28.6%	14 25.0%	18 32.1%	4 7.1%	4 7.1%	56 100.0%
Unemployed	196 36.6%	135 25.2%	119 22.2%	44 8.2%	42 7.8%	536 100.0%
Total	212 35.8%	149 25.2%	137 23.1%	48 8.1%	46 7.8%	592 100.0%

$hi^2=3,17$ $df=4$ $p\leq.529$

Source: Field study 2004

Table 10
Subjective evaluations of the material conditions of the household (on a scale 1–5) with regard to structure of household

Structure of household	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Single HH	21 47.7%	12 27.3%	6 13.6%	3 6.8%	2 4.5%	44 100.0%
Married couple without children in HH	26 50.0%	12 23.1%	10 19.2%	2 3.8%	2 3.8%	52 100.0%
Married couple with unmarried children in HH	163 32.8%	121 24.3%	108 21.7%	52 10.5%	53 10.7%	497 100.0%
Incomplete one-family HH	33 44.0%	14 18.7%	17 22.7%	4 5.3%	7 9.3%	75 100.0%
“Complete” extended HHs	23 26.7%	23 26.7%	22 25.6%	6 7.0%	12 14.0%	86 100.0%
Incomplete extended HHs	17 29.3%	12 20.7%	16 27.6%	5 8.6%	8 13.8%	58 100.0%
Other extended HHs	45 35.2%	35 27.3%	35 27.3%	7 5.5%	6 4.7%	128 100.0%
Total	328 34.9%	229 24.4%	214 22.8%	79 8.4%	90 9.6%	940 100.0%

$hi^2=32,27$ $df=24$ $p\leq.121$

Source: Field study 2004

The sole breadwinner model of the Romani family (the role of the man as the breadwinner, while the woman is reserved a place in the home with lots of children) amplifies Romani poverty. It is evident in table 11 that in nearly half of the Romani households only one person obtains a means for livelihood, while in 64% of the households there are no women among the “earners”. If we count the number of households in which only one person earns a living (49.2%) and households in which no one obtains a means for livelihood (15.6%), then in 65% of households one person at the most ensures a means for livelihood.

The number of members who obtain a means for livelihood	%	The number of women among members who obtain a means for livelihood	%
0	15.6	0	63.8
1	49.2	1	32.2
2	25.6	2 and more	4.0
3 and more	9.6		

Source: Field study 2004

Table 11

The total number of family members who obtain means for livelihood and the share of women among them (N=968)

Second, the post-socialist transition amplified the old and created new problems, which confront the Roma. In the formation of new inequalities, the Roma appear to be the “losers of transition”. Besides the already mentioned problems related to the labour market, transition has negatively affected Romani housing in many countries. It is clear that the Roma did not benefit from privatisation or property restitution. Moreover, the fiscal problems of post-socialist states resulted in the reduction of public funds for building or the maintenance of council housing which a part of the Roma population live in. Generally, changes in the market did not facilitate access to accommodation for the poor and low-income groups.

Third, the political transformation in post-socialist countries resulted in increased discrimination and aggression towards the Roma. Political liberation represented a “mixed blessing” for the Roma. Namely, opportunities for free expression of ethnic and cultural identities were created as well as chances to participate in society. However, new challenges and difficulties appeared as extremist groups entered the political scene, which opened new avenues for the expression of intolerance towards the Roma. Anti-Roma aggression was intensified in nearly all transition countries (skinhead attacks on the Roma occur in Croatia).

Fourth, the Roma also faced restricted access to social services because of a growth in the need for these services

and budget cuts. Most services were free-of-charge in socialism. Today, the use of these services requires formal or informal payment, and the quality of services has been reduced. Geographically isolated Roma communities are distant from the offices that offer these services. In view of their distance from these social services and illegal residence, a number of Roma do not have the required documents for school enrolment or to use health services. The over-representation of the Roma in the informal economy also reduces their rights in the social security system (i.e., their right to an unemployment benefit).

*Romani ethno economy, sources of income and changes
in the labour market*

Throughout history, the Roma have been mostly excluded from formal types of employment. There were high rates of formal employment (especially in some countries) among the Roma during socialism, when socialist ideology decreed that unemployment was considered to be a form of pathology (Human Rights Watch 1992; 1993). However, even when they were employed, the Roma most often did low-status, physically demanding and poorly paid jobs. The professions of the Roma today are also low-status and without significant social prestige. There are very few Roma who are in professions that are high prestige, which are linked to high economic rewards and power.

Changes in the labour market certainly did not help the Roma. The Roma, as a rule, are the first to lose their jobs (not only because of low qualifications). They are confronted with considerable problems when they attempt to return to the labour market, which influences their material well-being. During the socialist period, the Roma were employed in labour-intensive and unqualified jobs, which only existed because of the egalitarian-redistributive logic of the socialist economy. Many of the jobs that the Roma do are threatened by technological progress, since scientific-technological development generally decreases the need for low-skilled work. Considering the low level of human capital, the Roma have exceptionally high rates of (long-term) unemployment (diagram 2). This reveals the chronic instability of Romani formal employment. The data in table 12 shows the diminishing role of formal employment in ensuring livelihood since 1998. It is important to stress that the absence of formal employment means the absence of social status that mainly comes from formally paid work. Besides this, it implies exclusion from the social security system (Šućur, 2000).

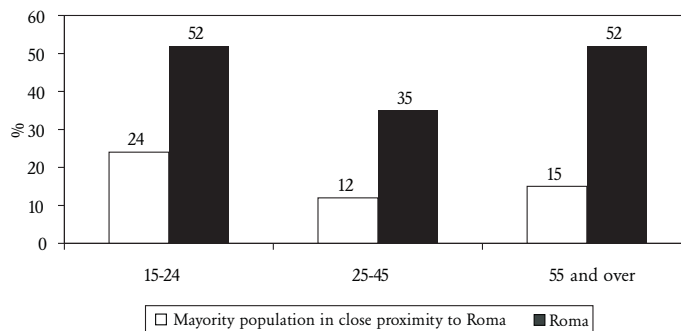


Diagram 2

The rate of unemployment among the Roma and non-Roma according to age categories (2004)

Source: <http://vulnerability.undp.sk>

Note: The rate of unemployment means the share of the unemployed in the workforce, where the notion “workforce” includes all persons of working age (over the age of 15), excluding pensioners, persons at school and persons who do domestic duties.

On the other hand, the Roma have been connected to some traditional occupation throughout their history (Clébert, 1967), but those links have disappeared today. It is well-known that traditionally the Roma were not landowners, which means that they rarely participated in farming or livestock-raising. The Romani non-agrarian community are not able to support themselves with their own resources. Moreover, the Roma as a non-agrarian culture had an indifferent relation towards land so they never established mechanisms and institutions connected to an agrarian type of ownership. The Roma mainly did not “belong” to a specific territory, nor did they give importance to the acquisition of ownership. On the contrary, their traditional trades gave them flexibility in relation to the territory. They often resorted to trades that guaranteed them independence from the majority population and those jobs that fitted into their way of life. As is the case with other nomadic peoples, the Roma had a different relation towards work and a different relation towards time. They worked as much as was needed to satisfy momentary needs. However, many traditional Romani occupations disappeared in the last century or have become seriously weakened as a result of industrialisation (the processing of metal and wood) so the Roma have turned to other economic activities. It is evident from table 5 that only 4% of the respondents perceive symbols of Romani identity in former Romani trades, which means that those occupations are no longer significant as a source of income.

The situation in the formal labour market illustrates only one side of the Roma’s material status. For the Roma, activities in the informal (“grey”) economy are a very im-

Table 12
Sources of income for the
Roma*

	1998 study	2004 study**
Agriculture	4.8	1.1
Livestock raising	2.4	0.2
Employment	23.0	17.6
Work abroad	...	1.3
Cottage industry	...	3.6
Temporary, seasonal work	31.0	26.9
Transport (truck, horse, etc.)	...	0.3
Collection of raw materials (metal, glass, paper, etc.)	20.6	19.7
Odd jobs (washing windscreens, selling door-to-door, etc.)	2.4	6.4
Rent (renting of office space, flats, property, shares, etc.)	...	0.2
Pension	15.9	4.8
Social welfare	46.8	74.2
Help from relatives	6.3	2.9
Begging	11.1	4.1
Fortune-telling	...	0.5
Other	...	4.2

Source: Štambuk, 2000: 309 (from 1998 study)

* It was possible to specify two sources **N=697

portant source of income, which is to be expected if one considers their sporadic presence in formal employment. In general, the relation towards the informal sector is not identical in all countries or at all times. In periods of economic stagnation or recession, this sector can even play the role of a social shock-absorber. However, since they are not regulated by societal institutions, informal activities sometimes become part of the “black economy” in which criminal and deviant activities dominate. The public believes that a significant part of Romani economic activity takes place on the border of what is permitted or on the other side of legality. The Roma are often not able to obtain licences for trade or for any other jobs that they do (Danova and Russinov, 1998).

The Roma obtain a means for livelihood in different ways and these ways of ensuring an existence can significantly change even during the lifetime of an individual. The Roma combine a number of income sources in ensuring their material existence. Even when they are formally employed, the Roma supplement their wage with other income. It needs to be mentioned that non-Roma also supplement their formal earnings with work on the side or production on their own property. Considering the non-agrarian features of Romani culture, the Roma rarely satisfy their needs with their own food production (because they

do not have their own land and/or they do not have a tradition of working the land). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Roma adapt to state paternalism in situations when the communities in which they live can hardly meet their needs.

The following occupations are widespread among the Roma: small trade and resale, work abroad, temporary and seasonal work for a wage in farming, small services (which are primarily related to repair work), the collection and sale of waste materials, the collection of medicinal herbs (table 12). Some old occupations have been kept, primarily as an additional source of income (music, entertainment, fortune-telling, begging, etc.). The inclinations of the Roma towards particular occupations and jobs (which as a rule have low prestige) have led some authors to suppose that a Romani “ethno economy” exists (Šućur, 2000).

The data from table 12 verifies that social welfare is most often a source of income for the Roma (in nearly three quarters of the households social welfare is a first or second source of income). In comparison with the 1998 study, the number of households that depend on social welfare as a source of income has significantly increased. With reference to state social benefits, a significant number of the Roma receive child endowment, which is not visible in table 12. Child endowment and social welfare do not collide because child endowment payments are disregarded as income in claims for social welfare benefits. Since the share of Roma among the recipients of social welfare is considerably larger than their share in the population this continually arouses public attention. These figures are often interpreted as an indicator of the mentality of dependency and shameless use of the state’s funds. It is generally thought that people are ashamed of being poor or receiving social welfare, but this does not apply to the Roma, who are always ready to seek state aid. There is a prevailing stereotype that the Roma are shameless because they seek whatever they can take from the state, while the non-Roma seek help because they live in poor living conditions. One can conclude that the Roma do not always live in undesirable living conditions. Or that they intentionally live in poverty so that they can get help from the state. The Roma are accused of living “from one benefit to the next”, even though it is recognised that those benefits are not adequate to cover the basic life costs. This type of accusation occurs in situations when a large part of the population perceives themselves as poor, that is, when “victims” compete for meagre state resources (“competitive victimisation”).

The Roma as an “underclass”

The Roma have always been poor and have occupied the lowest position in the stratification system. Following the collapse of socialism, the Anglo-Saxon concept “underclass” has been used more frequently to describe the social position of the Roma (see Katz, 1993; Mincy, 1996; Wilson, 1987; Gans, 1995). Some authors have endeavoured to show that the so-called transition led to the deterioration of the Roma’s social position and their constitution as an “underclass” (Emigh and Szelenyi, 2000; Szelenyi, 2001; Vašečka and Radičova, 2001). In pre-socialist times, the Roma were marked as “under-caste”, “pariah” and as “untouchables”. They were poor and discriminated against, but they lived in their traditional communities and carried out their socio-economic function that was neither prestigious nor socially “rewarded” (playing musical instruments, entertaining, repair work, etc.). They were considered important for the social functioning of society. Socialism, in many ways, wanted to integrate the Roma into society, but left them at the bottom of the social ladder. The Roma had to carry out physical, dirty and poorly paid jobs along with the discrimination that continued. They constituted a part of society (the lowest level in the stratification system), even though some positive results during socialism were achieved by forced measures, without Romani participation and acceptance. Post-socialist transition pushed the Roma back “beyond” the borders of society and intensified processes of their social exclusion. The Roma are no longer only poor; they are now “useless” and socially “superfluous”.

By applying the underclass concept to the Roma, social scientists emphasise their discrimination and isolation from the rest of society in such a way that they as an underclass have almost no chance of finding their roles in the new divisions of labour or of having a “normal” jobs, incomes, housing, security or access to better education for their children (Stewart, 2002). An underclass would then be made up of persons who have a high probability of staying unemployed and poor their whole lives as a result of inadequate education and work skills and whose children are “trapped” in a similar social world, detached from the rest of society as the “undeserving poor” or “no-hopers”.¹

By merging different definitions of underclass MacDonald (1997: 3–4) understands underclass as “a social group or class of people located at the bottom of the class structure who, over time, have become structurally sepa-

rate and culturally distinct from the regularly employed working class and society in general through processes of social and economic change (particularly deindustrialisation) and/or through patterns of cultural behaviour, who are now persistently reliant on state benefits and almost permanently confined to living in poorer conditions and neighbourhoods". From this definition it follows: 1) that underclass is a level below the lowest class in the population of the employed, 2) that the unfavourable situation of an underclass member is long-term and permanent (lasts a lifetime or for generations), 3) that an underclass is socially, culturally and spatially separated from the unemployed or other poor groups and 4) that the "culture" of the underclass can be a barrier to renewed inclusion in the regular work force.

J. Wilson (1987) also insists on the difference between "lower class" and "underclass". Wilson claims that their community or social milieu that contributes to their marginal position or their weak connection with the labour force market distinguishes members of an underclass from other economically deprived groups. In other words, the problems of marginal economic position and social isolation in areas of concentrated poverty present a dysfunction, which cannot be explained by using the standard concept of "lower class". Areas of concentrated poverty have a drastically high level of dependency on social benefits ("dependency culture"). Moreover, large shares of people living in areas of concentrated poverty are excluded from the workforce and a high percentage leaves the educational process (Hajnal, 1995). These three features are present in a large number of Romani communities. The underclass approach singles out social isolation; one of the key problems of Romani life.

From a historical point of view, the concept of underclass is similar to Marx's concept - lumpenproletariat (Stewart, 2000), as an aggregate of individuals on the margins of the social structure, who are not integrated in the social division of labour, who do not have a systematic approach to professional training, who mainly do marginal or seasonal jobs that do not guarantee an income or a career, and who live on the outskirts of society as well as depend on help from the social services. Besides, while other classes are constituted through relations (conflict or cooperation) with other classes, the formation of an underclass is due to the absence of relations with other classes.

Some have warned of the dangers, which are related to using the underclass concept when discussing the Roma

(Stewart, 2002). First, there is a fear that members of an underclass are attacked by right-wingers as “social parasites” and persons “in the grip of crime”. There is also a trend among researchers to avoid concepts that could contribute to “blaming the victim” (Wilson, 1987). However, it needs to be mentioned that G. Myrdal, who coined the term of underclass, used this concept in a structural sense (underclass as a group of individuals who did not participate in post-war economic growth because they did not acquire an education and skills required in a modern economy). Cultural and behavioural components are not the focus of structural approaches to underclass. It is absolutely unacceptable to relate the concept of underclass to concepts such as “asociality” or “criminality”. The term – underclass, per se does not relate to pathology. For example, in comparison to underclass, the term underworld refers to a more pathological social space that has its own rules and norms.

Perhaps underclass overemphasises a real social separation of the Roma and there is a danger that the Roma are blamed for their situation. This is one of the reasons why M. Stewart (2002) prefers the concept “social exclusion” to underclass. The term – social exclusion is milder. However, does a concept need to be rejected just because there is a possibility that it will be used differently or abused? The underclass approach suggests that the key theoretical concept “is not a culture of poverty but social isolation” (Wilson, 1987: 6). The culture of poverty implies that the basic values and attitudes of that culture are internalised and in this way influence the behaviour of the poor. This means that improvement of their life’s opportunities presupposes social policies that are directed towards changing the sub cultural features of the poor. On the other hand, social isolation does not only imply the absence of contact between classes and ethnic groups, but that the nature of this contact influences the life of those that live in areas of concentrated poverty. Social isolation implies limited opportunities with regard to: the ecological conditions of life, access to jobs and information concerning the labour market, choice of suitable marriage partner, inclusion into a quality school, and adoption of conventional role models.

In comparison to poor members of the lower class, whose poverty is a result of low income, family characteristics, as well as shorter and longer absences from the labour market, poverty and unemployment among members of an underclass (the Roma) infrequently are a permanent state (many Roma are never formally employed). Besides,

when they are registered as unemployed, there is suspicion around the motive of their application (registration at an unemployment office may be motivated by an interest to receive social benefits, and less by a desire to find a job). The concept of underclass cannot be applied to all Roma, but to some Romani communities or to parts of these communities.

Is it possible to break out of the “vicious circle” of poverty?

When planning measures to alleviate Romani poverty, the multidimensional roots of Romani poverty and the heterogeneity of Romani population (the Roma differ according to their ethnic, professional, religious and economic characteristics) need to be considered. The different causes of Romani deprivation influence one another in a vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion. Romani poverty is indeed partly linked to low levels of education, limited opportunities to participate in work and large families, but it is also connected to a minority status, that is a number of social exclusion dimensions. For the Roma, to be poor does not only mean to be without money, but to have a poor work situation and education, inadequate accommodation and a long history of problematic relations with the majority group. The level of poverty is infrequently linked to the marginalisation of Romani settlements (the problem of space segregation). The Roma who live in distant and segregated communities have considerably less possibility of participating in the formal economy or using the social services (educational, health). Geographical and social exclusion are important correlates of Romani poverty.

An efficient campaign against Romani poverty is necessarily directed towards different areas and would include a wide range of activities, among which the following should be selected:

- Improve housing conditions through the building of infrastructure and development of public services especially in distant and isolated Romani settlements (development of roads and telecommunications). The advancement of housing conditions also implies the clarification of ownership rights to land where the Roma live and stimulates the local authorities to offer services in these Romani settlements.
- To increase employment and earning opportunities among the Roma through their inclusion in training programmes, consistent with anti-discriminatory legislation and stimulating employers to employ the Roma. It

certainly will be difficult to reduce the high unemployment rates among the Roma not only because of Romani employees' unfavourableness among employers but because the motive of some Roma for registering as unemployed. It is well-known that some Roma register at employment offices to take advantage of their social rights.

- Encourage schooling among Romani children by reducing or eliminating the barriers that discourage Romani children from entering or staying in the educational system (sometimes Romani children do not have enough food, clothes or support to continue their education). To increase inclusion of Romani children in preschool institutions or to facilitate their attendance at secondary schools.
- To improve access to health services through information on health, health campaigns, and more frequent presence of health workers in Romani settlements. In view of their living conditions, the Roma are more susceptible to some diseases than non-Roma, which means that it is necessary to systematically monitor their health status. Moreover, the average lifespan of the Roma is a third shorter than the average lifespan of non-Roma. It is necessary to raise awareness of the importance of health, especially reproductive. The promotion of different activities linked to health is necessary especially among children.
- To deal with problems of social exclusion of the Roma through anti-discriminatory legislation and practices. To inform the non-Roma public of the life problems that the Roma face through multicultural education and information on Romani history and culture. Socio-cultural factors influence Roma's access to social services or their communication with those who offer these services. The Roma can have difficulties in communications with teachers, doctors, local or state employees as a result of their poor language knowledge. Weak communication and deep-rooted stereotypes nourish interpersonal distrust between the Roma and non-Roma. There is a distinct absence of Roma who work in the social services; this would contribute to the bridging of the gap between cultures.
- To transform social welfare programmes in such a way that they do not create a "dependency culture" and "poverty trap" (not to discourage the work initiative of the user). It has already been mentioned that social welfare benefits provide an important source of income among the Roma and that the Roma are over-repre-

sented among the recipients of these benefits. It is necessary, to a greater extent, to include a component of work in aid programmes (public works) to improve and gain work skills to increase the level of employment. In addition, it is necessary to monitor how these social benefits are spent, as in many Romani settlements alcoholism and other forms of unacceptable behaviour are linked to poverty.

- To integrate the Roma into institutions of wider society (educational, economic, social, and political). As some authors have warned (Šporer, 2004), exclusion from the community and group in which members belong needs to be differentiated from exclusion from society and social institutions. Participation in social institutions is the foundation of social status and ensures the material conditions of life. Besides, inclusion in institutions of wider society facilitates interaction with members of non-Roma and other Romani groups and participation in the dominant values of society. Intervention needs to be directed towards offering more opportunities for Romani initiative as well as reducing their isolation and social exclusion. A different relation and responsibility of the Roma towards ownership as well as different cultural patterns have created a specific social structure based on kinship ties. Vašečka and Radičova (2001) call the specific normative and cultural system of the Roma “the strategy of permanent provisory”. Education in its institutional form puts limits on the Roma strategy of provisory. As the authors claim, the educational and economic institutions do not have an equivalent in the institutional structure of the Roma community. This refers to two types of organisation and social functioning. Inclusion into the world of work and education presents an “asymmetrical” process, because it requires the Roma to adjust to institutions in which they have played no part. The traditional (dominant) patterns of behaviour create more problems in urban areas.
- To ensure the inclusion of the Roma in projects which in turn will have an impact on their lives. It is necessary for the Roma to actively participate in programmes that are intended for them. “Rescue” from poverty and isolation cannot be realised without their involvement.

The social exclusion of the Roma is obvious, first of all, in the absence of material security, which implies the availability of food, clothes, housing and other basic needs. However, the achievement of material security is only a

pre-condition for social security and to fulfil secondary needs (educational, cultural, needs for self-fulfilment, etc.). Modernisation processes of the Romani community cannot only be oriented towards the material aspects of life. The basic prerequisites for social security are social contacts, as the only means of inclusion into the social organisations of society. The Roma, who under the circumstances are oriented towards material security, are not in the position to organise participation in informal social networks on their own so they need help for different social activists.

FOOTNOTE

¹ Vašečka and Radičova (2001) mention the following features of an underclass: long-term unemployment, disrupted or non-existent career, exclusive presence on the secondary labour force market, dependency on welfare benefits and activities of the shadow economy, general resignation, low respect for authorities, low level of social self-control, poor labour ethics.