

BARRIERS TO THE EMPLOYMENT FOR ROMA MINORITY IN SLOVAKIA

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Submitted to

Central European University,

Romani Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Roma Graduate Preparation Program

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Budapest, Hungary

2021/2022

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Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to find out what main barriers the Roma minority in Slovakia faces when seeking employment. Slovakia has one of the largest Roma populations in the Europe Union and one of the highest unemployment rates for Roma within EU countries. This paper argues that the causes for such a high unemployment rate include a lack of the education, discrimination, segregation, exclusion from labor market, work in informal part of the economy, inefficiency in unemployment policies, change of political regime and geopolitical division of business in Slovakia. The research focused on discrimination towards Roma minority in important parts of their life as school, work, and government measures. The research data were collected via an online survey shared on social media groups focusing on Roma minority in Slovakia. In this survey, 21 Roma women and 9 Roma men participated, aged 15 to 65 years old; half of the participants possess a university degree. The research revealed discrimination towards respondents from their non-Roma colleges and supervisors as hate speech, prejudices, stereotypes, rejecting applications for work, rejecting from work positions and lack of support for unemployed from labor office.

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Introduction

After Bulgaria, Slovakia has the second largest percentage of Roma population in the EU which is 9% of the total population of whom according to the UNDP Regional Roma Survey (2011) 70% are unemployed. Moreover, the unemployment rate of Roma population, especially marginalized ones and general population significantly differs (Holubova et al., 2021). EU SILC survey for marginalized Roma communities (2018) points out that only 14% of marginalized Roma population has full time employment in comparison with 47% for general population. About 1% marginalized Roma are self-employed in comparison with 9% among general population. On the other hand, 38% of marginalized Roma are unemployed in comparison with 5% among general population, 9% of marginalized Roma are retired in comparison with 24% among general population, 11% of marginalized Roma are persons in households in comparison with 1% among general population, and 13% of marginalized Roma are inactive in comparison with 3% among general population. According to the same survey, 85% of marginalized Roma are at risk of poverty, while 5% among general population. The aim of the thesis is to find out what main barriers the Roma minority in Slovakia faces when seeking employment. The thesis provides an overview of the research questions: 1. How does the discrimination of Roma children in the educational system influence their employability in future? 2. How does the discrimination of the Roma population influences in labor market influences their employability? 3. How does the inefficiency of employment policies affect Roma employability? The research argues that there are three main issues obstructing Slovak Roma in the labor market: discrimination toward Roma minority in education, the general labor market context and its openness towards Roma, and the inefficiencies of policies targeting Roma unemployment. The research data are collected via an online survey shared on social media groups focusing on Roma minority in Slovakia.

I. Literature review

The Slovak National Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation for 2020-2030 reflects these arguments and sets its overall aim to decrease the unemployment rate of Roma population in four steps. Firstly, Roma minority should have equal access to the labor market as general population. Secondly, Roma minority should have access to the quality employment services. Thirdly, the motivation for employers to employ Roma members, especially marginalized ones need to be increased. Fourthly, the discrimination of the Roma minority in labor market cannot be tolerated. In this respect, the Strategy also sets six indicators:

1. To reduce the percentage of Roma aged 16 to 24 years who are no longer studying nor employed from 68% to 40%.
2. To reduce the rate of the marginalized Roma women aged 16 to 24 years, who are no longer studying neither employed from current rate of 76% to 44%.
3. To reduce the difference in employment rate between marginalized Roma men and women from the current value of 16% to 8%.
4. To reduce the rate of marginalized Roma who felt discriminated against in the process of finding employment in last 12 months from the current value 22% to 11%.
5. To increase the employment rate of marginalized Roma from 20% to 45%.
6. To increase the employment rate of marginalized Roma women from 12% to 41%. (Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Communities, 2021, p. 30-31).¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all texts were translated from Slovak to English by the author.

If the current National Strategy for Roma inclusion will be successful, it would be an important step for Roma minority to escape from the cycle of poverty. Nevertheless, it would be an important step for Slovakia as nation. According to estimations, an increase in the employment of Roma population to the level of general population by the end of 2060, would increase the GDP of Slovakia by 12%, which would also result in an additional increase of GDP by 5% from fiscal revenues. In other words, exclusion of Roma minority from labor market results significant loss for Slovak economy (Bednarik, 2019).

Moreover, there is a strong need for better developed policies targeting the Roma inclusion. The Plenipotentiary of Slovak government for Roma communities plays a huge role in developing specific policies. The office should monitor the situation held household surveys in marginalized areas regularly to identify the most important action to taken. However, the office has just advisory function for government, what limits its influence. Integration of Roma minority require undoubtedly strengthen policies on education, labour market, health care etc., that why the cooperation with different ministries and strong position in institutional hierarchy is inevitable (Bednarik, 2019).

I.I. Causes of Roma unemployment

“Roma minority, “the reserve army labor” is often seen cleaning the streets, fixing the roads, and nevertheless is still seen as “parasites” who are no willing to work, just sit and waiting for social welfare. How is this possible? One explanation is that such works as mentioned above formally does not exist without legal contract. Instead of being employed Roma population often ends up in the informal economy as seasonal workers” (Cernusakova, 2017, p.104).

Messing (2014) has also pointed out the exclusion of Roma minority from labour market to informal segments with characteristics such as irregularity, instability. The rate of the Roma minority working in informal segment of labor market significantly differs from those who are non-Roma.

The proofs for discrimination of Roma minority in labor market are much more that can be possibly included in the paper. For an example, the Institute for Financial Policy in Slovakia (2014) conducted an interesting experiment by sending applications to employers. Part of them were written as coming from Roma candidates, with Roma last names and addresses located in Roma neighborhoods and other parts as compared to the non-Roma candidates, but other characteristics such as education and skills were the same. The results showed that 40,3% of non-Roma applicants were invited for an interview in contrast with 17,7% Roma applicants. Even in the replies on applications was found differences: 64,9% of non-Roma applicants got at least some answer for their application in comparison with 37,1% of Roma applicants. The experiment shows that the Roma minority members have less than 50% chances to be employed than the general population. Real life experiences unfortunately confirm the results of EU-MIFID II survey (2016) on Roma discrimination in labor market. Data shows that 53% of the Roma minority members felt discriminated against in last 5 years when they were searching for employment, and 18% felt discriminated even in their work position.

Discrimination in labor market is a huge barrier to the employment of Roma minority and yet it is not the only one. Other significant barrier to the employment is a discrimination in educational system. Roma children especially those who are marginalized are often segregated

in schools, or classes where general population does not study. In worse case they are labelled as students with special needs, with retardation of intellect and segregated in schools for disabled, in the so-called special schools, which do not provide necessary education to continue in further studies (ERRC, 2018).

Nevertheless, the number of Roma children segregated from proper education are astonishingly high and the Slovak Republic still does not have appropriate re-integrational policies. Being mentally retarded and having disadvantage social background are two different conditions and should not be mixed as educational system in Slovakia threatens them (Friedman et. al., 2009).

The discrimination in educational system is followed by early school dropouts. According to EU-MIDIS II. (2016) there is enormous difference between general and Roma population agreed from 16-24 no longer in education neither employed, 77% of young Roma women and 52% of Roma men are not studying nor working compared to 14% among general population. Rieglova et al., (2021) state that there are several causes of early school leaving of Roma youngsters such as bad experiences among classmates and with the pedagogical staff. The financial difficulties play a role as well, including a lack of finance for commuting, clothes etc. The authors also state that Roma youngsters often give up on studies for seasonal work to earn some money or taking care about depended on family members, in case of young Roma women teenage pregnancies are also responsible for leaving the education.

Beside discrimination in labor market and education still other barriers can be found. According to data from 1948 in Czech Republic 95% of Roma men and 81% Roma women in working age were formally employed. It is important to mention that the change of the

Communist regime 1989 in Slovakia caused a sharp rise of the unemployment not just for Roma minority, but for general population as well due to privatization of business and the low demand for not specialized workers (REF, 2020).

Kahanec (2014) pointing out the geographical division of businesses as another barrier for Roma minority employment. The business with highest demand of work force is situated in west part of Slovakia where the employment rate is highest. Although, the east part of Slovakia is where the biggest marginalized Roma communities are situated, with much less work opportunities resulting in the highest unemployment rate, both for the Roma and the general population.

The last barrier is Covid-19. The pandemic has impacted upon every segment of people lives, not excluding the field of employment. However, the Roma minority, already discriminated finds double difficulties. On one hand, the Roma population is most likely to lose their working place among the firsts. On the other hand, as was described above, a huge amount of Roma population members are working in informal economy, thus they cannot obtain financial help from the state as those who are legally employed (Korunovska, Jovanovic, 2020)

II. Methodology

The aim of research was to answer the question: what are the main barriers the Roma minority in Slovakia faces when seeking employment? The research argues that there are three main issues obstructing Slovak Roma in the labor market: discrimination toward Roma minority in education, the general labor market context and its openness towards Roma, and the inefficiencies of policies targeting Roma unemployment. As such this research addressed three other sub-questions that helped understand the mechanisms of the above-mentioned barriers:

RQ 1. How does the discrimination of Roma children in the educational system influence their employability in future?

RQ 2. How does the discrimination of the Roma population influences in labor market influences their employability?

RQ 3. How does the inefficiency of employment policies affect Roma employability?

The research data were collected via an online survey shared on social media groups which are organized around specific Roma themes. The survey asked respondents open and closed questions formed to three groups according to three research questions which surrounded the discrimination of Roma students in educational system, Discrimination of Roma minority members in labor market and inefficiencies in employment policies. The survey was launched on the 23rd of May and was open until the 5th of June 2022. In total, 34 answers were obtained. Four answers have been deleted because 3 respondents did not identify themselves as Roma, and one respondent is currently studying at high school.

Out of 30 respondents 21 were Roma women and 9 were Roma men; 15 of the survey participants were aged from 15 to 25 (50%); 12 were from 26 to 45 (40%); 3 were from 46 to 65 (10%).

The choice for an online survey was given by the fact that it allows to collect data from a variety of respondents in a short time, covering different regions of Slovakia. However, the research has several limitations. The limitation is the small number of respondents whose answers cannot be generalized for the entire population of Roma minority members. The second major limitation is the respondents' characteristics consisting of only educated individuals from whom half have university degrees, yet unfortunately the reality about education level of Roma minority is different. Notwithstanding that survey has online form which makes inaccessible for Roma minority members who live in deep poverty to reach out, which makes our sample even less representative.

III. Results and Analysis

I. Research question: How does the discrimination of Roma children in the educational system influence their employability in future? Nevertheless, the research found out from the answers of survey which are described below that most of them they were unfair treated differently by their non-Roma classmates and teachers, some of them were put in segregated and special school at the beginning of their studies all respondents finished their studies successfully, half of them with academic degree (apart one who is still studying at university) This finding emphasises the suggestion that Roma minority members face double standards from society, even they are studying and working they are threatened without respect by general population .

Q1. What is your highest educational level?

Out of the total respondents 15 have high school diploma, 10 have master's degree, 4 have bachelor's degree, 1 has doctoral degree. None of respondents is without education and half of respondents have at least Bachelor's degree despite of geographical location which is in the east part of country connected with higher unemployment rate in general and lower income in country and discrimination towards Roma students who are often placed in segregated schools, classes or in special schools even though they are not mentally or physically handicapped. What contradict to negative stereotypes about Roma students which leads to exclusion from educational system and later from labour market.

Q2. Did your non-Roma teachers or classmates treat you differently because of your ethnicity?

Out of total respondents 8 choose were not treated differently. Rest of respondents were, and most common differences were worse grades than deserved, racist jokes, separation from classmates, bullying and segregation. What reflect how difficult for Roma students studying is just because of their ethnicity not due to difficulties with learning. This reflection supports the claim of Rieglova et al., (2021, p.18-20) about early school dropouts of Roma students caused by bad experiences with classmates and teachers which are significantly higher than among general population. According to EU-MIDIS II. (2016) 77% Roma women and 52% of Roma men aged from 16 to 24 years are no longer studying nor employed compared to 14% among general population.

Q3. How has your education level influenced your career?

Even though most of the respondents were discriminated in educational system 21 r. answered this question with positive answer.

Q4. Did you study in a segregated classroom or school?

Out of total 3 respondents studied, nevertheless 2 of them graduated from high school and 1 of them has master's degree and all of them studied in east part of Slovakia where the population of Roma is the highest. What suggest idea that Roma students are segregated in schools, classes just Roma population to not being together with general population because prejudices and stereotypes.

Q5. Did you study at a special school (if yes, why)?

Out of total one respondent studied due to physical handicap first two years and now is studying at university. Others r. did not but I will quote one of the of them.:” In 6th grade at elementally school all Roma students were sent to psychologist for exams and who did not pass was placed in special school”. After 5 successful years of studying at elementally school is for me as graduated psychologist unethical and unimaginable why the decided examined students in half of their elementary school studies with tests that are taken before beginning of the studies and they choose to examine only Roma students and all of them. In addition, this quote proves of institutional segregation of Roma students and support claim of Friedman et. al., (2009) that Roma students are overpopulated in special schools because of discrimination and not intellect deficit in most of the cases.

II. research question: How does discrimination of Roma population influences in labour market influences their employability? The research found out that only one sixth of respondents are unemployed which is far below mentioned 70% by UNDP Regional Roma Survey (2011). The survey was distributed online what makes inaccessible to reach for those Roma minority members who live in excluded communities without internet connection. However, similar to education system even though almost all respondents are employed or self-employed they discriminated by stereotypes and prejudices towards Roma minority in labour market in phase of application also in workplace. They are targets of hate speech

Q1. Your labour market status?

Out of total 20 respondents are employed, and 1 is self-employed. Two have part-time job, 1 is student, and 1 has maternity leave. Five are unemployed from whom are 4

women which leads to gender gap, even though unemployment of Roma minority members is alarming according to EU SILC MRC survey (2018) only 14% of marginalised Roma population has full time employment in comparison with 47% for general population and difference in employment rate between Roma men and women is 16%. Moreover, all of them live in east part of Slovakia where employment rate is in general lowest from Slovakia, but the concentration of Roma population is highest.

Q2. Have you felt discriminated in the work because of your ethnicity (if yes, how)?

Out of total 15 respondents have felt discriminated in their work. The most common of discrimination was hate speech about Roma from colleges, supervisor and customers. Moreover 16 respondents think that they had bad relationships with non-Roma colleges and supervisors because of their ethnicity. What similar to the discrimination in educational system, even though respondents work same as their non-Roma colleges they face unnecessary difficulties due to their ethnicity which could lead to leaving their work position and being unemployed.

Q3. Have faced stereotypes about Roma in your work (if yes, which)?

Out of total 19 respondents have faced with stereotypes as:

“You are good, because you are not like other Roma.”

“They asked me how the dog taste, or if I have higher sexual appetite as Roma woman.”

“You are do not look like Roma, because they are dirty.”

“Roma need to be controlled after work, because they steal.”

Q4. Have you been fired from work because your ethnicity?

Out of total 3 respondents think that they were fired from work because their ethnicity.

The quote of one who is Roma woman and been discriminated and faced stereotypes is:

“I do not look like Roma, but when my Roma friend came to my work to visit me, next day I was fired with reason that I would still something.”

Q5. Do you think that you were not accepted to the work position because of your ethnicity?

Out of total 21 respondents think so with as quotes:

“During the phone call they said to me that they have free work positions, when I came, they said they do not have any.”

“I have never found work in Slovakia.”

“Employers do not accept Roma people.”

Q6. Have you been asked inappropriate questions about your ethnicity at your interviews for work position (if yes, which)?

Out of total 3 respondents have been asked. Quote of one of them who is man and thinks he has not been accepted for work position because of his ethnicity is:

“Are you Roma? We cannot employ Roma if we want to keep our customers.”

Q7. Have you been working without legal contract in last five years (if yes, could describe the reason)?

Out of total 2 respondents have been. The quote one of them who is Roma man and felt discriminated in the work is:

“Of course, for extra money.”

Q8. What is your longest period without being employed or self-employed?

Out of total 18 respondents were unemployed less 6 months, 7 respondents more than 6 months less than 1 year, 3 respondents more than one year less than two years and 3 respondents more than two years. Those respondents live in the middle part of Slovakia and have high school degree.

III. Research question: How does inefficiency of employment policies affect employability of Roma minority? The research found out that only more than two thirds have not benefited from labore offices when thy have been unemployed; almost two thirds think that in their regions are not enough work opportunities and more than two thirds think that for Roma population is difficult to find work in their regions. The most respondents choose that discrimination towards Roma minority is the biggest barrier for Roma minority to the employment in Slovakia and also the most respondents choose that education of employers about discrimination towards Roma minority could be most important measure to prevent high rate of unemployment of Roma minority in Slovakia.

Q1. Have you benefited from labour office when you been unemployed (if yes, how)?

23 respondents have not, which support claim of Bednarik (2019) that there is not enough policies for decrease rate of unemployed Roma population. Those who have benefited, got information about free work positions or taken professional course.

Q2. Do you think there is enough work opportunities in your region, and it is difficult for Roma population to find work there?

Out of total 18 respondents who mostly live in east part of Slovakia do not think there is enough work opportunities in their region and 22 respondents that for Roma population is difficult to find work opportunity there.

Q3. What would Slovakia do to increase employment of Roma population?

The choices from 4 suggest are provided according to the rating.

Educate employers about discrimination towards Roma minority.

Decrease number of Roma students in special schools.

Opportunity of professional courses for unemployed.

Motivate employers to employ Roma with taxation benefits.

Q4. What are the reasons for unemployment of Roma population?

The common answers for this question are segregation, discrimination, low education level, low demand for work force.

IV. Policy Recommendations

In line with used literature from scholars about topic of Roma unemployment and knowledge from the current survey, this chapter puts forward key policy recommendations which could decrease the high unemployment rate of Roma minority in Slovakia.

1.The educational system should provide culture free testing before placing Roma students to special schools: educational system must provide culture free testing for Roma students. Roma students who are not mentally or physically disabled should not be placed in special schools and labelled as “mentally retarded” to increase the employability of Roma minority members.

2. The educational system should provide quality education for Roma students without segregation: the educational system must provide equal education for all students without considering ethnicity and economic status.

3. The educational system should prevent early school dropouts of Roma students by monitoring school policies whether they are inclusive, educate pedagogic staff and students about discrimination towards minorities: educational system must treat Roma students equal to prevent early school dropouts of Roma students who are bullied by classmates and feel ashamed in the school.

4. The government should educate employers about discrimination towards minorities: the employers must be fully conscious about their own prejudices and stereotypes towards Roma minority to prevent early judging and rejection of Roma minority members candidates for work positions.

5. The government should motivate employers to employ Roma minority members by tax benefits for those employers who employ Roma minority members: to increase employment rate and decrease work in informal economy of Roma population, employers need to be first motivated to employ Roma minority members.
6. The government should provide support from labor offices for unemployed by providing professional training: unemployed must have opportunity from requalification and new skills to be quality candidates for work opportunities.
7. The government should increase efficiency of government policies tackling unemployed: the current policies are not effective in decreasing high rate of unemployment of Roma population. The government policies on unemployment must be upgraded to be more efficient by targeting discrimination towards Roma population in labor market and provide opportunities for professional trainings to increase their employability.

Conclusion

Prejudices and stereotypes follow Roma minority in every important part of life, whether education or employment. On one side Roma population is described as “lazy to work” on other side it cannot be overlooked how many Roma are working, but without legal contract due discrimination and exclusion from labor market. The purpose of the thesis is to show true reasons behind the unemployment of Roma minority, because this vicious spiral cannot be broken if majority will think about Roma population as unable to learn or think, while at same time Roma children are excluded from educational system or unable to work while being excluded from labor market. The aim of the thesis was to find out what main barriers the Roma minority in Slovakia faces when seeking employment. The research argued that there were three main issues obstructing Slovak Roma in the labor market: discrimination toward Roma minority in education, the general labor market context and its openness towards Roma, and the inefficiencies of policies targeting Roma unemployment. The research revealed discrimination towards respondents from their non-Roma colleges and supervisors as hate speech, prejudices, stereotypes, rejecting applications for work, rejecting from work positions and lack of support for unemployed from labor office. Therefore, the thesis in line with findings suggest several policy recommendations for educational system and government: The educational system should provide culture free testing before placing Roma students to special schools, quality education for Roma students without segregation, prevent early school dropouts of Roma students. The government should educate employers about discrimination towards minorities, motivate employers to employ Roma minority members by tax benefits for those employers who employ Roma minority members, provide support from labor offices for unemployed by providing professional training, increase efficiency of government policies tackling unemployed.

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Appendices

Which Barriers Roma minority face when seeking employment in Slovakia? (Survey)

Categories and questions:

I. Personal information

- 1.** Do you identify as a Roma man/woman?
- 2.** In which city (town) do you live?
- 3.** What is your gender?
- 4.** What is your age?
- 5.** What is your highest level of education achieved?
- 6.** What is your current professional status on the labor market?

II. Discrimination in the education system?

- 7.** Did your non-Roma classmates or teachers treat you without respect because of your Roma origin (if so, how)?
- 8.** How did your studies affect your professional development?
- 9.** Did you study in a segregated school or class only for Roma students?
- 10.** Did you study in a special school (if so, can you describe the reason why)?

III. Discrimination in the labor market

- 11.** Have you felt discriminated at work because of your Roma origin (if so, how)?
- 12.** Have you faced stereotypes about the Roma (if so, which ones) in your work (if so, which ones)?
- 13.** Have you had a bad working relationship with your non-Roma colleagues or superiors due to your Roma origin?
- 14.** Have you been fired from work position because of your Roma origin?

15. Have you felt that you were not accepted for the position due to your Roma origin after the job interview?

16. Have you been asked inappropriate questions about your origin at the job interview (if so, which ones)?

17. Have you been working without legal contract in the last five years (if so, can you describe the reason)?

18. Do you think that in your region is enough work opportunities, and it is difficult for Roma population to find work there?

19. What is your longest period without being employed or self-employed?

IV. Inefficiencies of unemployment policies

20. Have you benefited from labor office when you been unemployed (if yes, how)?

21. What would Slovakia do to increase employment of Roma population?

a. Educate employers about discrimination towards Roma minority.

b. Decrease number of Roma students in special schools.

c. Opportunity of professional courses for unemployed.

d. Motivate employers to employ Roma with taxation benefits.

22. What are the reason for unemployment of Roma population?