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# THE PROCESS OF THE EDUCATION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN SEČANJ—A CASE STUDY

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This study presents the case of education of Roma Children in Sečanj<sup>2</sup>. Before setting this question at the local level, we shall present in short the process of education of Roma children on a wider scale i.e. over the territory of Vojvodina<sup>3</sup> as a whole.

Besides showing the present state of education within the members of a minor ethnic community which is usually endangered and discriminated, this study should focus on the causes of the present state and the long-term consequences.

## **The Process of Education of Roma Children in Vojvodina**

After the Albanians, the Roma are the largest national minority in Serbia and Montenegro, their status as a national minority only officially recognised in 2002, thanks to the Federal Act Securing the Rights and Liberty of National Minorities<sup>4</sup>.

At present, Vojvodina is inhabited by 29,057 registered Roma representing 1,43% of the population, but it is presumed that the numbers are higher. It is estimated that around 80,000 Roma live in Vojvodina. The exact number of Roma is however very hard to determine because a large number of Roma declare themselves to be members of other national groups i.e. Serbs, Hungarians, Romanians. A large percentage of Roma live in “wild” or

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<sup>1</sup> This is one part of my diploma thesis, Roma in Sečanj. I conducted my fieldwork research in Sečanj in April, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> A village and municipality in the Central Banat District of Vojvodina, Serbia. The village has a population of 2,645, while Sečanj municipality has 16,298 inhabitants. There are a majority of Serbs and Roma are minority of about 135, but unofficially Roma make up approximately one third of Sečanj’s population.

<sup>3</sup> Vojvodina is autonomous region within the Republic of Serbia.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dnevnik.co.yu/arhiva/21-11-2002/Strane/pero.htm>

unregistered settlements. Also, a large number of Roma do not register and are therefore not encompassed by the census<sup>5</sup>.

The Roma in Vojvodina live in very hard socio-economic conditions. Poverty is the shadow phenomenon tied to the members of this ethnic community. Mainly they live in bad hygienic conditions and often without documents needed to exercise the right to enjoy social as well as health benefits<sup>6</sup>.

At present the situation regarding the education of Roma children in Vojvodina is critical. The majority of Roma are illiterate or have only primary school education, which is the reason why the majority of Roma are unemployed or are employed in the sector of low-paid jobs. Poverty is one of the main problems of the Roma in Vojvodina and appears to be the main reason why Roma children attend barely a few years of primary education or in most cases do not attend school classes at all<sup>7</sup>.

The authorities responsible for educating the Roma enrol Roma children into “special classes” established for children with specific mental problems. Psychologists enrol them by comparing bad results in tests which should determine their intellectual abilities<sup>8</sup>. Often it is because of a poor knowledge of Serbian language and neglect of duty that the Roma children end up in “special classes”<sup>9</sup>. However, parents tend to enrol their children in such school classes since they offer a free breakfast. According to various researches, the remaining Roma children who attend classes are afraid of the other children because they are molested by them, and leave the school before the end of the eight-year primary educational period. The education authorities do not approve their return to classes although primary schooling is obligatory by law<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nshc.org.yu/Romi.htm>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Fond za humanitarno pravo, Romi u Srbiji, Press now (omogućio izdavanje), 2002, 003-004. (Humanitarian Rights Fund, Roma in Serbia, (publishing made possible by Press Now)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ekonomist.co.yu/magazin/em105/med/obraz.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Fond za humanitarno pravo, Romi u Srbiji, Press now (omogućio izdavanje), 2002, 003-004. (Humanitarian Rights Fund, Roma in Serbia, Press now).

### **The Roma in Sečanj**

The situation in Sečanj differs substantially from that in the territory of Vojvodina, as well as Serbia as a whole. That is to say, the Roma in Sečanj do not live on the “edge of poverty” as is the case of the majority of Roma in Serbia and Vojvodina, although not a single Roma in Sečanj is employed. Only one family has failed to solve the problem of satisfactory housing, while all the rest of the Roma live in good or excellent circumstances thanks to temporary work in Austria, Germany or Switzerland. Because of the existing socio-economic situation in Serbia stretching back over quite a long period the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro have problems in exercising their right to obtain entry visas to foreign countries, which is also the reason why Roma have even less opportunity to cross the border and must accept alternative jobs in their own country. In other words, the most poverty-stricken Roma accept physical jobs on the private estates of the non-Roma population while the wealthier Roma are engaged only in trafficking<sup>11</sup>.

Additionally, the majority of Roma in Sečanj are registered; that is, they have proper documents which enable them to enjoy the rights related to social benefits<sup>12</sup> and health security.

### **The education of the Roma in Sečanj**

At present the situation in Sečanj is quite serious regarding the school attendance of Roma children. The primary school is attended only by six Roma children, four girls and two boys, from the first through to the fourth year, a very low figure in comparison to an unofficial figure<sup>13</sup> that more than 10% of the population are Roma. It is a regular phenomenon in Sečanj that Roma children leave the school at a very early age. Scarcely any child enrolls further into higher grades and even more rarely into a secondary school level and matriculation. Many children are illiterate because they do not attend school classes at all.

In order to present the situation more precisely, as well as the causes for the Roma children leaving the school, I have divided the tested Roma into three following groups: the first group, which consists of Roma born between 1938

<sup>11</sup> Most often it is clothing and car parts.

<sup>12</sup> A small number of Roma in Sečanj receive social benefits.

<sup>13</sup> This information I obtained from an administrative staff member in Sečanj who is in charge of the population size in Sečanj.

and 1064; the second, of a younger population born between 1968 and 1989; and the third group consisting of children born between 1990 and 1998, the three groups presenting in fact three generations: grandparents, parents and their children. The three generations shall be the basis for my research into whether there are differences between educational conditions twenty to thirty years ago and today, and if there are, what causes these changes.

It is important to emphasize that besides the three mentioned Roma generations there is also a fourth group consisting of children between 0 and 5 years, whose parents intend to enrol into school although they have yet to make the final decision for of two reasons: poverty and the fear that their children will be abused by the non-Roma children.

The oldest group consists of thirteen questioned Roma. However, only three have attended school classes: two women, one (1959)<sup>14</sup> up to fifth grade and the second (1961) to fourth grade primary school, and her husband (1964) who completed primary education and enrolled into the mechanics school in Zrenjanin, leaving it a very short time following the enrolment. Different reasons were given by these three people for leaving the school: the first Roma says she had to leave the school because she was about to get married, the second left the school because she went abroad with her family a got married a few years later, the same reason being given by her husband.

The second group consists of sixteen young people of whom fifteen attended school; that is, only one female Roma (1974) did not attend school classes at all and was illiterate because she was poor. Eight Roma within this group have completed primary school, two male Roma (b. 1968 and 1971) in Sečanj and one female Roma (1982) in Neuzin, a nearby settlement where she lived before she married, and five Roma who completed primary school abroad: four male Roma (born 1979, 1985, 1987 and 1989) and one female Roma (1989). One of these Roma also obtained a plumber's certificate in Switzerland and another left while attending the third year within the school for metal workers in Sečanj because he was to get married. To be more precise, he ran away to his aunt in Switzerland but his parents arranged for the marriage as soon as he returned at the age of eighteen.

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<sup>14</sup> Year of birth.

The remaining seven Roma left the school for different reasons. Five Roma left the school stating poverty as the reason—one male Roma (1969) left the primary school at fourth grade, the second (1976) at sixth grade, the third (1985) at fourth grade, the fourth at first grade and one female Roma (1976) at fourth grade. Another two female Roma also left the school. One of them (1968) left the school upon reaching the eighth grade and married and the other (1985) completed two grades of primary school abroad, completed the third grade in Sečanj and left the school after being maltreated by a Serbian child. Her parents say it was the son of their neighbours who abused her every day while she was returning from school. Her parents also said that they contacted the school headmaster. The boy's school grade for behaviour was lowered and the boy's parent made excuses to the girl's parents, but the boy continued with his abuses, and eventually her parents took the Roma girl away from the school because they were afraid. The mother of the Roma girl says, "Well, we did not want to worsen the relations with our neighbours".

The youngest group consists of eight children: one girl (1998) attends first grade school classes, the second girl (b.1990) left the school at third grade and her brother (1990) at second grade because of poverty, according to their parents. The remaining three children, one girl (1992) and also her sister and brother (1992 and 1996) never even went to school. The girl did not want to attend school classes because she was afraid, since her sister had had a bad experience with a Serbian boy (this was confirmed by the girl's mother), while the other two children did not enrol in school because they have just returned from a foreign country. Abroad they did not attend school classes since they were not legally registered in Austria. On the other hand, they have not yet been registered in Sečanj because they intend to go abroad again.

Poverty is a phenomenon accompanying the Roma population, not only in Serbia but in Europe as a whole<sup>15</sup>, although at first glance its existence is not so obvious with the Roma in Sečanj. Parents take their children out of schools for various reasons: not being able to cope with the expenses not only for their education, day meals, school equipment, excursions, but also clothing and

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<sup>15</sup> J. Cvorovic, *Gypsy narratives: from poverty to culture*, The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, The Museum of Ethnography, Beograd 2004, 177.

shoes. The father of a girl says: “How can she go to school when she doesn’t have clothes to wear, I am ashamed, she looks dirty”.

Another reason for leaving school at an early age is marriage. Children do not have the right to express opposition towards their parents although there are two cases of two Roma running away abroad to their cousins to avoid marriage. However, they had to marry after returning to Sečanj. Their answer to the question, why it had to be so, was: “That’s how it is with us Gypsies”, without further explanation. A thirteen year old Roma who married at that age says he had a feeling of discomfort in school because he was married, but he did complete primary school. However, marriages at a very early age present a problem for those Roma who end school, the reason being that they do not continue their education.

The third reason is migrations to foreign countries. Roma who have lived for some time in a foreign country enrolled their children into schools but since they were often on the move they had to take their children out from school. Also, because of frequent changes in jobs, they worked abroad without stay permits. While the parents were at work, the children stayed at home with their grandmother. That is one of the reasons why children were not enrolled into a school. Upon returning to Sečanj, either for an extended period or to finally settle down, many parents did not enroll their children into schools because they had passed the age of nine, or even thirteen.

The fourth factor is the maltreatment of Roma children by non-Roma children. From the above given facts one might conclude that this factor is not one of the key factors since its impact was not emphasised as frequent. However, many Roma children suffer verbal maltreatment as well as being labelled as “After all, they are Gypsies,” which means “They are different from us”. In another words, separation of children, although it might not be obvious at first glance, is present and from my personal experience I can strongly assert as a former pupil of the primary school Aleksa Santic in Sečanj that even the school staff never showed the interest they should as regards the marginalisation of Roma children. I asked the school headmaster if the Roma children had problems with the rest of the children at the school. He said: “No, they are not discriminated at all. Oh, yes, I’ve had a few complaints that Roma children attack the [non-Roma] girls”.

However, as far as I have observed as a pupil who attended the school in question, Roma children did not have “the right of speech”. In another words, they were passive, isolated and bullied every day by the non-Roma children. However, this does not refer to all the Roma school children, and especially not those pupils who lived in wealthier, bigger homes<sup>16</sup>. But certainly a majority of Roma children was under pressure.

Unfortunately, such a situation repeats itself today. One non-Roma girl told me that a non-Roma boy aged seven blocked the way to a Roma boy. When she asked him why, the boy answered: “Because he is a Gipsy, he is not a man!”. Another non-Roma woman confirms the maltreatment of Roma children in Sečanj and says that it was customary behaviour that all the children teased a Roma girl who was in the same class with them. It happened in the school lunch room that all the children from the same class, after being through with their meal, threw small pieces of bread in front of their Roma classmate, laughing at the same time. To my question, “Why did they do such a thing?” the non-Roma girl answered: “We did that because she is a Gipsy, that was a way to tease her”.

Roma children usually have bad school marks, something confirmed by the school’s headmaster. Questioned whether the Roma children were bad pupils with bad school marks the Headmaster answered, “Oh yes”, in a manner which showed that this was a normal situation. On the other hand, the responsibility for the bad marks attached to the Roma children should be the responsibility of the school staff and the school itself. Although the headmaster insists that the school has done everything it can in order to improve the school marks of such children, it shows no interest in this problem. These children are simply labelled as bad pupils and that’s what dictates the attitude of the school staff as well as the non-Roma children towards them.

The Headmaster emphasized that an extended school day, or “class stay” exists from the first to the third grade for the children of those parents whose working hours are not compatible with the class hours and also for children

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<sup>16</sup> I presume the reason for this was because these children had new clothes, and children basically value such children more highly than the ones with old clothes. It was also a usual case that the “richer” Roma children gave various things to the non-Roma children as presents (fancy pencils, note books, rubbers etc.) that they had received from their parents or grandparents from abroad. Such presents were very important to the non-Roma children because they had no opportunity to obtain them in Serbia.

who have problems with learning, but he did not say whether Roma children are included into such a programme. However, the situation does not change and the Roma children still have bad school marks. The reason for this should be looked for in the fact that these children listen to class readings in a language which does not represent their mother tongue,<sup>17</sup> although “the Law in Vojvodina allows for the education to be in the language of ethnic minorities, including a programme which encompasses the elements of the minorities’ culture”<sup>18</sup>. In Sečanj, however, such an alternative is not taken into account and is not even thought about.

To the question of why the school does not organize special workshops for children who have problems with the official programme of education or similar problems, the director of this school looked at me with a surprise: “Oh, no, that is hard...”; then, after a short pause, he added: “Well, we do have the extended class stay”. His reaction, besides showing a lack of interest in this problem, also confirms that the “extended class stay” does not fulfil the conditions given by the workshops. First of all the extended class stay has the function of accommodating children for a few more hours than usual in the school after all the classes have ended, as the Headmaster explained. Since the Roma children do not have the opportunity to receive knowledge about Roma culture in the school it is not surprising that they are discouraged and that a large number of Roma children do not enrol in school or else leave the school, because the concept of the educational programme is done on the basis of compatibility with the Serbian children who form the majority of the school population. In that way the Roma children are treated as “invisible”.

An additional problem is represented by the fact that the Roma parents usually have no education, even not the primary school and are not aware of the importance of being educated. Besides this, the Roma doubt that even with the school diploma they would have the opportunity to compete for a job, and as a woman Roma said, “What do I need the diploma for? My cousins have the secondary school diploma and nothing else”. She says that they have applied for several jobs but were rejected because they were Roma. Today they are in the

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<sup>17</sup> Roma in Sečanj talk among themselves in the Roma language.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.minorityrights.org/translated-pubs/EducationWorkshop%5BSerbian%5D.pdf>

feather business in Temerin<sup>19</sup>. Such phenomena are directly related to the low level of motivation of Roma parents to enrol their children into schools.

When we review all the aforementioned facts, the headmaster's statement, "They do not want to learn" seems to be very superficial, because the basic function of the school is to extend specific knowledge to the pupils. If a problem exists, the school should take into account all the factors which it is capable of changing and to try to improve them. However, this school does not feel responsible and passes the responsibility on to the pupils i.e. children for whose illiteracy the school itself is mainly responsible. The lack of interest by the school and school staff as well as the local authorities in Sečanj also adds to the discrimination of Roma in Sečanj. Non-Roma do not like to talk about this problem but say: "The Gipsies have the same rights as we do; they even live better than we do". Such a comment, or one that was similar, I heard personally from several non-Roma in Sečanj who were not interested in the Roma problem yet who were in fact responsible for their status, who also thought that the responsibility was solely on the Roma side.

I also wish to emphasize another problem. The headmaster of the primary school in Sečanj said that the Roma children do not register out of the school but simply leave the school without notice. Such children usually have parents abroad and are looked after by their grandparents. He also states that, since everybody knows everybody in Sečanj he frequently visits them at their homes trying to convince them to go back to school but "with them you simply cannot talk, they do not co-operate".

However, primary education is still compulsory. If children do not go to school, according to the law, a notice with their names should be extended to the Commissioner for Social Affairs, who then fines the parents<sup>20</sup>. Such measures are not implemented in Sečanj since the school does not want to "maltreat" them<sup>21</sup>.

One problem is that the Roma, since the majority lack in education and a large number is illiterate, are not in a position to suppose that education is important for them. Another problem is that they are used to irresponsible behaviour

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<sup>19</sup> A place in Vojvodina.

<sup>20</sup> This information I obtained from the member of the School Staff from the neighbouring settlement of Sutjeska

<sup>21</sup> As this member of the school staff explains.

because they do not experience any consequences. The school supports such behaviour participating in it without taking the steps and measures in order to change the existing situation. On the other hand, however, the school has no feeling of responsibility, passing this on to the Roma completely.

### **Analysis of Results**

Settling abroad, marriages, poverty and maltreatment of Roma children are the reasons for their infrequent attendance at school classes, or even leaving the school for good in Sečanj. The Roma are an ethnic community with a long tradition of not enrolling into schools<sup>22</sup> which certainly affects the present situation regarding Roma in Sečanj. They are not stimulated to think about the school as an opportunity for breaking with their centuries-long situation. They have no interest for education because they think it cannot change the situation they are in, especially their economic and housing conditions. Such a prejudice is certainly influenced by their long tradition of illiteracy which is unfortunately widespread among the Roma. They see no chance of obtaining an educational degree because, as one Roma puts it, “I shall never get a job because I am a Roma. Who would give me a job, ever?”

The school also presents a problem as one of the most important public institutions with a long tradition of segregation towards the Roma in Sečanj, which supports the above-mentioned opinion generally held in the Aleksa Šantić primary school in Sečanj that Roma children are traditionally bad pupils. The reasons for such a situation can be found partly in the fact that their parents cannot prepare these future schoolchildren for the school because they themselves have an obscure education with only a few years of primary education, if any at all. On the other hand, the school staff and the Headmaster treat them as “bad pupils” from the very beginning. That’s the way in which the segregation is expressed, by defining them at the very start as “the others” i.e. suggesting their inferior status. Such an attitude of the school authorities certainly influences the education of other, non-Roma children, who, as part of the given institutions at which they obtain their first knowledge and experience, form an opinion about the Roma children as “the others”. The

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<sup>22</sup> J. Čvorovic, *Gypsy narratives: from poverty to culture*, The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, The Museum of Ethnography, Beograd 2004, 54.

negative assumptions, which then tend to widen more and more, influence the antagonistic attitude of non-Roma children towards the Roma children, as well as creating a feeling of inferiority in Roma children, being the reason for not wanting to go to school. Roma parents give their children support not to go to school because they are not aware of the importance of being educated and to avoid possible abuses in the school. Class reading held in the Serbian language which is not the Roma mother tongue also presents a problem to Roma children. Before entering the school the Roma children do not have the opportunity to be with the other children and learn the Serbian language, which is one of the major problems tied to further education. The school does not consider having class readings in the Roma language at all.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the situation in Sečanj differs somewhat from that observed over the territory of Vojvodina and Serbia. Namely, if we compare the figures related to the education of Roma children in Sečanj with wide-scale figures for instance for the whole of Serbia,<sup>23</sup> we can certainly say that the situation in Sečanj is better. However, if the same situation related to Sečanj is to be compared with the situation tied to the education of non-Roma children in Sečanj we may conclude that the situation is quite bad because all mentally and physically normal non-Roma children, regularly attend school. On the other hand, although a certain number of Roma children obtain the primary school certificate, a large number of these children leave the school or do not enrol into it at all. Although various reasons for such a situation exist, there are a few major ones, as follow named in order of frequency: poverty, marriage, settling abroad, discrimination i.e. maltreatment by non-Roma children.

However, education is an imperative for all although the non-Roma parents do not bear the consequences for not fulfilling this obligation. Such an attitude of the public organizations in Sečanj responsible for this problem also supports in large the unfavourable situation related to education of Roma in Sečanj.

The consequences of not being educated are however very serious.

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<sup>23</sup> See: Fond za humanitarno pravo, Romi u Srbiji, Press now, 2002, 003-004 (Humanitarian Rights Fund, The Roma in Serbia, Press now).

Education is one of important ways of integrating Roma into the society as a means of improving their living conditions. To non-educated Roma (the ones without an appropriate education certificate), the right to work is being denied, which is one of the main problems they face.

Education and employment are of vital importance related to their integration into the wider part of society, as well as their equality with the rest of the people not only in Sečanj but in the whole of Serbia and Montenegro.

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