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Social Integration Processes of the Roma in Montenegro in 2006–2017

Procesy integracji społecznej Romów w Czarnogórze w latach 2006–2017

• Abstract •

The article reveals the processes of social integration of the Roma in Montenegro in 2006–2017. The author analyses the performances of the government regarding the Roma issue. The article also shows that the Roma socialisation process is an essential premise for Montenegro in their determination to European integration, which requires substantial adjustment and improvements in the legal system. In the research, the author assesses official documents concerning the Roma, which shows that the Roma community complies with a significant part of the overall Montenegrin population. Interestingly, almost two-thirds of Roma in Montenegro arrived at the country during the war in Kosovo in 1999–2000 and then received the status of internally displaced persons what made them hostages of international law for the decade. In addition, considering the social and cultural differences of the ethnic group with other nations living in the country, the integration process into the Montenegrin society is a real challenge for the state. The problem of social adaptation of the Roma is a topical issue for national welfare and security not only for Montenegro but for the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. Being

• Abstrakt •

W artykule ukazano procesy integracji społecznej Romów w Czarnogórze w latach 2006–2017. Autorka analizuje działania rządu w kwestii Romów. Z artykułu wynika, że proces socjalizacji Romów jest dla Czarnogóry niezbędną przesłanką w jej dążeniu do integracji europejskiej, która wymaga znacznego dostosowania i usprawnienia systemu prawnego. W badaniu autorka analizuje oficjalne dokumenty dotyczące Romów, z których wynika, że społeczność romska stanowi znaczną część całej populacji Czarnogóry. Co ciekawe, prawie dwie trzecie czarnogórskich Romów przybyło do kraju podczas wojny w Kosowie w latach 1999–2000, następnie otrzymali oni status uchodźców wewnętrznych, przez co na dekadę znaleźli się pod kontrolą prawa międzynarodowego. Ponadto, mając na względzie społeczne i kulturowe różnice badanej grupy etnicznej ujawniające się na tle innych mieszkańców kraju, należy stwierdzić, że proces integracji ze społeczeństwem czarnogórskim stanowi prawdziwe wyzwanie dla państwa. Problem społecznej adaptacji Romów jest aktualnym zagadnieniem dla dobrobytu i bezpieczeństwa narodowego nie tylko Czarnogóry, ale także całej Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Będąc

a participant of the regional initiative “The Decade of Roma Inclusion” since 2005, the government of Montenegro have actively advanced the national legal system, developed and implemented projects for dwellings, education and culture of the Roma community. It is also noticeable that solving the Roma issue in the country correlates with the foreign policy objectives such as European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The author provides different examples to prove that in the first eleven years of independence, the government of Montenegro managed to make significant steps forward to the acceptance of European values through strenuous legal reforms.

Keywords: EU; Montenegro; NATO; Roma people; integration; language; census; minorities; population; socialisation

uczestnikiem regionalnej inicjatywy „Dekada na rzecz Romów w Europie” od 2005 roku, rząd Czarnogóry aktywnie rozwijał krajowy system prawny, opracowywał i wdrażał projekty dotyczące mieszkalnictwa, edukacji i kultury społeczności romskiej. Nietrudno zauważyć, że rozwiązanie kwestii Romów w kraju współgra z celami polityki zagranicznej kraju, a więc z ambicjami integracji europejskiej i euroatlantyckiej. Autorka sięga po przykłady dowodzące, że w ciągu pierwszych jedenastu lat niepodległości rząd Czarnogóry zdołał poczynić znaczące kroki w kierunku akceptacji wartości europejskich na drodze żmudnych reform prawnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska; Czarnogóra; NATO; Romowie; integracja; język; spis powszechny; mniejszości; populacja; socjalizacja

1. Introduction

Living in the era of open borders without statehood, the Roma people have to settle apart in every corner of the world. Within the framework of assimilation in Europe, the Roma are considered to be one of the most problematic ethnic groups due to their natural alienation and necessity to live in a closed society. Their social activity and traditions are widely biased and mythologised among other nations. In practice, it negatively affects the socialisation of Roma in the modern European community. Globalisation tendencies of the contemporary world demand changes from people. Hence, integration of the Roma in the social environment is a time requirement. However, the problem arises that most Roma people fail to adapt to society and therefore need facilitation.

In the Balkan countries, the population of the Roma people is reasonably high, and the level of their social and public interaction stumbles in various political matters. In particular, the issue is related to Montenegro, the youngest country of the former Yugoslavia, where foreign policy achievements are a significant precondition.

For Montenegro, the issue regarding the Roma's social integration became substantial during the Kosovo war in 1999–2000. The country became a recipient of numerous refugees from the Serbian province, including the Roma ones, most of whom refused to return after the ceasefire. However, the issue was not the quantity of Kosovar-Roma refugees in Montenegro but the lack of their legal status. The latter

has become a matter of concern for further socialisation and adaptation processes in the country.

During 2006–2017, a newly born state had been a dynamic and ambitious actor of the world politics while carrying out its internal political and economic affairs. For 11 years of independence, the authorities of Montenegro managed to make a significant step forward to the acceptance of European values. For example, the signing of many agreements with the EU and NATO, their responsible accomplishment and adherence. Making titanic efforts fruitfully resulted in NATO membership for Montenegro. Currently, the country is carrying out the conditions for the EU membership, one of which is the regulation of Roma socialisation process. Therefore, the research regarding the initial fundamental process of solving the Roma problem in Montenegro is relevant.

In general, considering the government policy of cultural minorities promotion and development, the country seems to be a welcoming environment for representatives of different nationalities and confessions to live there. However, the social integration of the Roma people, as in many other European states, faces challenges regarding overcoming biases in the modern Montenegrin society. It is essential to mention that the Roma community complies with a significant part of the Montenegrin population. Considering the social and cultural differences of the ethnic group, the integration process into the Montenegrin society is a real challenge for the state.

According to the research of the advocacy organisation Amnesty International, among the Montenegrin Roma people victimised for their ethnicity the problem is rarely reported to the police (Amnesty International, 2008). Generally, Roma victims of violence tend to have doubts about asking for help because of the lack of identity cards, or not enough conscientious lifestyle, or they do not want to worsen their status issue in future. Moreover, the lack of appropriate rights for the Roma who sought refuge in Montenegro during the Kosovo war of 1999–2000 made the situation mentioned above more complicated.

Taking into account problems in the modern Montenegrin society, the solution of issues concerning the social insecurity of citizens is an essential condition for Montenegro on its pathway to the EU. If the state is incapable of meeting life security needs, it may lead to the marginalisation of a community in a long-term perspective. Additionally, it will increase the risk of national minorities discrimination.

Recognising both threats for the internal security environment as well as benefits for the national foreign policy, the Montenegrin authorities made significant efforts to establish the inter-ethnic dialogue with Roma in 2006–2017. In this context, to encourage the Roma to cooperate with other ethnic communities, a public

awareness campaign was an integral part of an integrational process within the society. Consequently, the government of Montenegro has held many activities annually involving Roma representatives of all ages to enlighten them regarding the benefits of cooperation with the government and society in political and legal, socio-economic and cultural fields.

Nevertheless, despite all of Montenegro's achievements in breaking the wall with the Roma communities in the country, folklore stereotypes about them are more solid and still the reason for conflicts in the society. According to the statement of Elvis Berisha, the president of NGO Roma Youth Organisation (*Romska Organizacija Mladih*), although the Roma population is in decline, the standard of living has been becoming better recently (Omeragic, 2021). The problem is in the government's approach to solving everyday life issues and the lack of political interest amongst the Roma people, which becomes a recursive power regarding social integration.

2. Material and methods

The research could have been impossible without the implication of the reasonable number of resources which consist of *official state and international documents, information resources and media, and think tanks reports*.

Official documents comprise the Constitution of Montenegro of 2007, the Convention on the Reduction of Stateless (1961), the Foreign Nationals Law, Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011 by Monstat (2011), the international initiative "The Decade of Roma Inclusion", the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in Montenegro 2016–2020 by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights in Montenegro, the Strategy for Permanent Solution of the Issue Regarding the Displaced and Internally Displaced Persons in Montenegro with Special Reference to the Konik Area by the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare, as well as other minor reports and strategies.

Information resources and media include the official newsletters from the portal Government of Montenegro or *Vlada Crne Gore*, the Regional Housing Problems, German NGO "Help", US Embassy in Montenegro, local newspaper *Vjesti* and *Analitika*; international news channels Anadolu Agency, BalkanInsight, and Join EU.

The think tanks reports include official documents of the British advocative organisation Amnesty International in 2008, 2009, 2012, and 2014.

Special features of the research also required the use of particular scientific methods. With the content analysis approach for the *Vlada Crne Gore* website, it became

possible to establish that the government is challenging such problems of the Roma adaptation as illiteracy, a tendency for early marriages, poverty, child beggary, low and non-satisfactory standards of living. In addition, the method helped to identify actions taken by the government to address those issues (organisation of educational events, annual celebrations of the World Roma Day, housing problem, etc.).

Applying statistical and analytical methods to the Population Census in Montenegro, features of complicated ethnic makeup and dwellings of Montenegro were identified (Monstat, 2011). The benchmarking and observation approach helped to estimate the significance of the Romani community to Montenegrin society. Moreover, it became possible to identify why the government paid a lot of attention to resolving the issue. It is necessary to highlight that Montenegro is a multi-ethnic state where the Montenegrins comprise together approximately only 45% of population. Therefore, benchmarking approach of the correlation between other ethnic groups gives the ground to understand the national picture in general and determine problem points regarding social and political life.

During the analysis of the immigration issues of the Romani people to Montenegro, the historical approach was essential. One of the research revelations was that war in Kosovo in 1999–2000 and the political position of the then Montenegrin elites significantly affected the situation in 2006–2017.

3. Results and discussion

First, it is necessary to analyse the demographic and administrative performances in the country to apprehend the importance of the Roma social integration in Montenegro.

The administrative-territorial division of Montenegro consists of 21 municipalities where the most densely populated ones are the capital Podgorica (30%), Nikšić (11.7%), Bijelo Polje (7.4%), Bar (6.8%), and Berane (5.5%) (Monstat, 2011, p. 3). The rest of the area is underpopulated, where the Roma comprises 5% and less out of the overall population. Based on the official statistical data, the Montenegrin population is settled nonuniformly. Subsequently, one third live in the outskirts of the capital.

First of all, the Montenegrin landscape is mainly mountainous terrain with insufficient land for reclamation. Therefore, geographical features significantly affect the economic development of the country. For this reason, there is a trend for seasonal internal migration among the economically active population who do not have opportunities for permanent employment during a year.

It is necessary to mention that the ethnic pattern of Montenegro is considerably diverse. According to the population and dwelling census in 2011, 602 029 people lived in the country where 44.98% (or 278 869 people) identified themselves as Montenegrins (Monstat, 2011, p. 3). Table 1 presents the statistical result of the census where it is clear to admit that excluding the Montenegrins, the most numerous ethnic groups are Serbs (28.73%), Bosniaks (8.65%), Albanians (4.91%), Muslims (3.31%), and the Roma (1.01%). Considering the overall population of the country, the number of latter is substantial. In general, the problem lies not in the fact of the ethnic group quantity but in the ability to adapt to the internal social conditions in the country. For instance, the Croats in Montenegro comprises only 0.97% out of the total population (see Table 1). The Croatian community does not require any special conditions or support to integrate into Montenegrin society as their language and culture are closely resemblant. In contrast, the Roma in Montenegro is one of the most marginalised ethnic groups and do need more help from the authorities and Montenegrin society.

Table 1. Ethnicity in Montenegro in 2011

No.	Ethnic group	Number of the population	%
1	Montenegrins	278 865	44.98
2	Serbs	178 110	28.73
3	Bosniaks	53 605	8.65
4	Albanians	30 439	4.91
5	Muslims	20 537	3.31
6	Roma	6 251	1.01
7	Croats	6 021	0.97
8	Serbs-Montenegrins	2 103	0.34
9	Egyptians	2 054	0.33
10	Montenegrins Serbs	1 833	0.30
11	Yugoslavs	1 154	0.19
12	Russians	946	0.15
13	Macedonians	900	0.15
14	Bosnians	427	0.07
15	Slovenians	354	0.06
16	Hungarians	337	0.05
17	Muslims-Montenegrins	257	0.04
18	Gorani	197	0.03
19	Muslims-Bosniaks	183	0.03
20	Bosniaks-Muslims	181	0.03

Table 1 (continued)

No.	Ethnic group	Number of the population	%
21	Montenegrians-Muslims	175	0.03
22	Italians	135	0.02
23	Germans	131	0.02
24	Turkish	104	0.02
25	Other	3 358	0.54
26	Regional Qualification	1 202	0.19
27	Does not want to declare	30 170	4.87
	Total	602 029	100.00

Source: Monstat, 2011, pp. 5–6.

The major drawback of the research is that actual estimates regarding the Roma population and official statistical data can have substantial differences. Presumably, many Roma people of Montenegro did not hold any documents which could identify them or their place of living. Considering this fact, it was an issue for the society that could trigger security instability in the country.

In the research, the settlement of the Montenegrin Roma can be characterised based on the index regarding the general dwelling situation in Montenegro. The observations indicate that the city with the highest concentrations of the Roma is Podgorica (3 988), after which, with substantial disproportion, are Berane (531), Nikšić (483), Bijelo Polje (334), Herceg Novi (258), and Bar (203) (Monstat, 2011). Interestingly, despite the fewness, the Roma are represented in almost every municipality except Andrijevisa, Kolašin, Plav, Plužine, Rožaje, Šavnik, and Žabljak (see Table 2).

Table 2. Roma Population in Montenegro by Municipalities

No.	Municipality	Population	% in municipality
1	Andrijevisa	0	0.00
2	Bar	203	0.48
3	Berane	531	1.56
4	Bijelo Polje	334	0.73
5	Budva	33	0.17
6	Cetinje	97	0.58
7	Danilovgrad	28	0.15
8	Herceg Novi	258	0.84
9	Kolašin	0	0.00
10	Kotor	74	0.33

Table 2 (continued)

No.	Municipality	Population	% in municipality
11	Mojkovac	16	0.19
12	Nikšić	483	0.67
13	Plav	0	0.00
14	Pljevlja	12	0.04
15	Plužine	0	0.00
16	Podgorica	3 988	2.14
17	Rožaje	0	0.00
18	Šavnik	0	0.00
19	Tivat	35	0.25
20	Ulcinj	159	0.80
21	Žabljak	0	0.00

Source: Monstat, 2011, pp. 8–10.

According to the estimated data in Table 2, the Roma tended to settle in the municipalities and towns on the borderline (Podgorica – nearby Albania, Berane – Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina). In addition, infrastructure development should not be excluded as an essential condition for choosing a place to live. For instance, Herceg Novi and Bar municipalities are situated on the coast of the Adriatic Sea what makes the resort cities attractive for tourists. Moreover, Roma communities have been living in the coastline regions for several generations. However, at the beginning of the 2000s, central Montenegro and the capital challenged social changes as many Kosovo refugees fled to the neighbouring country.

Considering the geographic and economic features of Podgorica municipality, its high population density, it is not a coincidence that it is a place that became an asylum for forcefully replaced people from Kosovo. Having analysed data regarding the 2011 census, we can assume that almost two-thirds of Montenegrin Roma (63.8%) lived in Podgorica. During the protracted conflict, the state authorities had to establish a refugee camp in the outskirts of the city, which was called Konik (The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 2011).

It is necessary to highlight that readiness and willingness of the Montenegrin authorities were motivated by the activity of international advocative organisations. Remarkably, many Roma families from the Podgorica outskirts did take advantage of their locations as the refugee camp Konik attracted the attention of such NGOs like the Red Cross, Help, the Roma Education Fund, Amnesty International, etc.

Social integration is a long-term and gradual procedure that requires considerable efforts from a state and a national minority. The extents of the Roma-Montenegrin

dialogue have been provided due to the permanent dynamics and development of an internal regulatory and legal framework that guarantees protection and arrange implementation of human rights and freedom, including national minorities. Providing the frequency of the issues, the Montenegrin government mostly relies on the Constitution of Montenegro of 2007, the Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms, as well as the UNHCR Convention on the Reduction of Stateless. Remarkably, during 2006–2017, the issue of legal status of many Roma families all over the country had remained unregulated what perplexed their access to the labour market, education, appropriate social benefits and healthcare. Although the government was willing to cooperate and assist, a substantial part of the Roma expressed no interest in starting the legal recognition process of their status in Montenegro due to the traditionally ascetic lifestyle.

On the state level, in 2006–2017, the Roma matter in Montenegro was the responsibility of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights (now Ministry for Justice, Human and Minority Rights), or *Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava* (Government of Montenegro, 2015, October 7). The ministry is in charge of monitoring the current situation with the Roma regarding the integration process, implementation of social projects, communication with NGOs and so on.

Another government institution in charge of the Roma socialisation was the Refugees Administration, or *Uprava za zbrinjavanje izbjeglica*, headed by Željko Šofranac till 2019 after merger with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Analitika, 2019). One of the primary matters of the Administration was the problems of social integration of the Roma, such as child labour exploitation, early marriages and housing problems.

The activity of the Ministry had an enormous influence on the results of the government in this field. Accordingly, the institution drew a lot of attention to the education regarding social adaptation cooperating and supporting Montenegrin youth movements and associations concerning the Roma issues. For example, the list of public cooperation includes such organisations as “Young Roma” (or “*Mladi Romi*”) and “Roma Youth Organisation” (or “*Romska organizacija mladih*”) (Government of Montenegro, 2015, October 7; Omeragic, 2021).

In defence of the Montenegrin government, relationships between the Montenegrins and the Roma people have significantly improved due to the efficient socio-political actions of the state even though domestic strife between the groups in 2006–2017 had not been uncommon. Moreover, the former ones are likely to attack outrageously. Public beating, bullying, evidence-free accusations of the Roma used to be the most frequent form of unilateral communication for Montenegrins. Nevertheless, the government have always convicted aggressive attitude towards minorities. For

example, in 2016, someone posted a video on the Internet where two Montenegrins were violently beating a Roma one, which followed a series of condemnations by the country's authorities (Government of Montenegro, 2016, May 17).

Another example of furious actions, which happened earlier and attracted the wide attention of the public, is the misfortune of the former police officer Senad Čobić who used to be one of the only representatives of the Roma community working for the law-enforcement authorities (Otašević, 2013). Due to the incomprehensible circumstances, his colleague wounded him by gunshot and then committed suicide. Mr Čobić became disabled for the rest of his life, lost his job and social benefits, which he had hoped to be guaranteed. Considering the latter reasons, Mr Čobić's family had sued the state, which was supposed to have cared about the former state worker.

These examples are only a few parts of the Roma reality which the people faced at the beginning of Montenegro's independence. Considering the government's firm determination for the country's European path, the social issue regarding the minority group had to become urgent.

Despite the state attempts, the process of Roma integration into the Montenegrin society had been progressing slowly. The analysis of the Montenegrin legal framework, represented by Amnesty International in 2008 and 2009, shows the government activity in Montenegro as insufficient regarding the problem regulation and provision of human and minority rights and freedoms (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 5; Amnesty International, 2009a, p. 1).

Within the legal context, the difficulties arose when the Roma, who had to leave Kosovo province at the end of 1999 due to the security instability and warfare, issued the status of internally displaced persons (IDP) in Montenegro (Amnesty International, 2009a, p. 1). Applying the case for the then Yugoslavia, the IDP status was logical enough as the conflict occurred on the territories of Serbia and Montenegro as a unified state. For that time, Kosovo was just a Serbian province, and its independent status was out of the Yugoslav agenda. Nevertheless, after the proclamation of Montenegro independence (2006) and the acceptance of the Constitution (2007), the IDP status for many refugees was not reconsidered. The situation worsened even more after Kosovo proclaimed independence in 2008 and the IDP Roma-Kosovars in Montenegro became hostages of international law. Practically, they were not internally displaced and resided in yet independent Montenegro. However, they were unable to travel across the country or leave it without an official status of a refugee. Hence, the representatives of the Roma community who originated from Kosovo were abandoned without rights and citizenship. That is what became one of the main challenges for the newly-created Western Balkan state.

Considering Montenegro's determination to become a member of the European Union, one of the most important premises of its participation was improvement of legal system. Through its first years of independence Montenegro had made significant efforts to improve law regarding refugees adopting the Law on Foreigners in 2009 with its further improvements and then acceded the Convention on Reduction on Statelessness in 2013 (Government of Montenegro, 2009; UN Convention..., 1961). Notwithstanding, the government was not indifferent to the issue regarding the legal status of the Roma in Montenegro, step by step changing and adjusting the legal framework and regulations. A significant push within the development in this field was the impact of international organisations and the assistance of the EU.

3.1. International cooperation

Interestingly, the Montenegrin government observe the social integration of the Roma not only as an advantage for the national welfare; it also affects the impact on the international image of the country. In fact, the active Europeanisation of Montenegro and the formation of the Euro-Atlantic path took place in 2006–2017.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the Roma issue in Montenegro is not a unique one. The problem of Roma integration has been a key to improvements and security for many European countries, especially Western Balkans. In 2005, the governments of Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (nowadays known as Northern Macedonia), Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia established "The Decade of Roma Inclusion" initiative and developed an action plan (*Decade of Roma Inclusion...*, 2005). Later, Albania and Spain joined the project as the problem of Roma adaptation is related to them either. The trans-European project aimed at the social standing in education, professional employment, healthcare and living standards improvements for the Roma community in the countries.

What is important to emphasise is that at the time of the project proclamation, three initiator-states were the EU members (the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary since 2004); up to 2015, three more countries joined the European club (Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, Croatia in 2013). Presumably, the initiative had positive effects on improvements of social climate for the Roma in the hosting countries, as well as it brought benefits for the countries' international position. A successful example is a reasonable argument in building bridges between the Roma and other European nations in an active phase of the Euro-integration process, as in the case of Montenegro.

Without any doubt, the advances from the realisation of the strategy are still relevant and correlate with Montenegro's striving for European integration. Notably, the objective can be achieved by following the conditions of the EU membership and their implementation. At the end of March 2013, the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) and Open Society Institute Budapest held a panel in Podgorica (Laković, 2013). At the round table, the participants discussed the realisation of the 23rd Chapter regarding minority rights and internally displaced people what is a direct matter of concern for the government of Montenegro. Moreover, in December 2013, the EU opened new chapters for the country, including 23 and 24, that are far most essential as they raise the issues regarding the regulation and unification of the law system, fundamental rights, freedoms, and security (Council of the European Union, 2013).

In 2016, the international project "The Decade of Roma Inclusion" was prolonged for five years, and the government of Montenegro adopted it (Strategy 2016–2020 of the Government of Montenegro, 2016). Its main objective was to improve dialogue between the Roma and non-Roma peoples in Western Balkans and Turkey, directing the enhancements of state institutions' commitments regarding the Roma integration into political development (Government of Montenegro, 2016, May 19).

Notably, the implementation of the "Roma Integration-2020" project took place under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council sponsored by the EU and the "Open Society" fund. In addition, the German NGO "Help" in Montenegro participated in the 2016–2020 strategy. Overall financial aid to the project was approximately €500,000 (Joint EU, 2020). The first years of the strategy brought fantastic results in the social and economic standing of Montenegrin Roma.

In general, international engagement with the countries which have similar values and problems encouraged the government of Montenegro to settle the issue regarding the socialisation of the Roma community. Therefore, the implementation of internal integrational projects either increased the living standards of Montenegrins or helped break stereotypes between nations.

3.2. Regional housing problems

Amid all social challenges regarding the Roma people Montenegro faced in 2006–2017 was advancements in housing and living conditions.

As previously mentioned, most Montenegrin Roma lived in the outskirts of Podgorica in the refugee camps Konik I and II (The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 2011). Those camps were supposed to become only temporary shelters

for forcibly displaced people, as most of the resettled population would decide to return to Kosovo after the warfare ended. However, turmoil and uncertainty of Kosovo's future in the early 2000s made them think differently. For many years, Roma-Kosovars would live in wooden huts. They easily got accustomed to such daily routine even though it did not comply with civilised living standards (Amnesty International, 2009b, p. 5).

Local and international NGOs had condemned the Montenegrin authorities for lack of relevant actions in providing appropriate living conditions to the Roma. The housing situation started changing after the series of fires on the camp territories (Amnesty International, 2009b, p. 5). In 2012, a mass fire occurred in the Konik camp, after which the authorities replaced destroyed wooden houses with metal ones. However, it did not improve the living conditions of the Roma radically (Amnesty International, 2012; Milosevic, 2013).

Housing issues were probably rigorous enough considering the fact that it required large sums of money, which the young state did not have. Notwithstanding, in 2014, the government announced the beginning of the construction work of dwelling houses for refugees from the Konik camp (Amnesty International, 2014). With the material aid of the European partners, the working group created a regional housing programme in Podgorica and Nikšić municipalities in order to provide forcibly displaced families with accommodations and close the camp. Moreover, the EU granted €23m to Montenegro for construction works and solving the Roma settlement problems (RHP, 2018). Interestingly, when the project was launched, it demonstrated fruitful results in a year. At the end of 2015, 44 Roma families were given keys to their new homes. Together with legal procedures, the housing programme had lasted until 2018, when the last 51 families received their certificates and keys to their new dwellings (RHP, 2018). It is remarkable that official representatives from Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia visited the ceremonial event. The list of guests included honoured Mr Aivo Orav, the EU Ambassador and Head of EU Delegation to Montenegro, who outlined the country's success regarding tackling regional housing issues on the way to European integration.

Despite realisation being slow, the authorities made reasonable attempts to improve housing conditions and provide the Roma with access to their rights following the international standards.

3.3. Education and culture

Ignorance and incompetence of basic skills such as reading or writing could lead to the inability to socialise. In the 21st century, education has become a mandatory

and fundamental premise concerning employment as an educated person has more chances to find their place in the economic niche. In this regard, one of the prime values for European society is the right to high-quality education. The literacy level among the European Roma population is critically low. In this regard, Montenegro prioritised education improvements within the 2005–2015 and 2016–2020 Roma socialisation initiatives. According to the estimates, in 2016, 40% of young women and 63% of young men out of the Montenegrin Roma were illiterate. Whereas illiteracy among women aged 20–24 was higher (Government of Montenegro, 2016, March 31).

One of the most urgent social issues among the Roma is a tendency for forcible and contractual marriages. In this regard, the government of Montenegro regularly conducted training courses on this topic for Roma school students (Government of Montenegro, 2016, March 31). Based on the UN Convention on Human Rights and Freedoms, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government of Montenegro had made significant attempts to break the Roma tradition to marry young girls forcibly. Roma women and girls occupy lower status in the community due to the customs and beliefs that, in turn, leave them without rights and suppress their ability to be equal at home and in the workplace. However, it does not mean that every Roma girl suffered from inequality. As previously said, several Montenegrin NGOs are run by the Roma where women have performed successfully and therefore might give good example for younger generations.

During the active phase of Roma socialisation processes, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights (or *Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava*) regularly organised training and open lectures for school students propagandising the respect for human rights and explaining the negative consequences of early marriages. One of the brightest examples of such an institution is the Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin school located near Konik. The school had been in the epicentre of national and international attention. Representatives of the EU, NGOs and Embassies have visited school students several times (Help, 2012; US Embassy in Montenegro, 2017).

An integral component of Roma identity is their language which connects the people with their culture and history no matter where they live. An immense obstacle for the Roma's education in Montenegro is a language barrier and incomprehension of Montenegrin language, low awareness, financial hardships and low level of parents' awareness regarding the benefits and necessity of education.

Language and culture are crucial in the processes of national and social emancipation of the Roma. Most of the stereotypes tend to appear on the ground of unawareness of a population. In this regard, cultural exchange between different minority groups may contribute to tolerance and mutual respect. In addition to

the celebration of the Roma people day mentioned above, Montenegrins also pay tribute to the Roma language on November 5 to eliminate existing biases concerning the minority and their values. Presumably, such actions could accelerate the integration processes of the minority in Montenegro (Government of Montenegro, 2015, November 4).

Moreover, a remarkable episode in Roma-Montenegrin understanding was a presentation of the first Roma-Montenegrin and Montenegrin-Roma dictionary in November 2015 (Government of Montenegro, 2015, November 19). The event was of importance both for Romani and Montenegrin culture in terms of supporting the internal state development. Speaking about the Roma, it was the only opportunity to document their preserved cultural heritage as they have not had their own country. From the Montenegro perspective, it meant meeting social and economic living standards and establishing a favourable ethnic and political climate. On top of that, the improvement of living standards in Montenegro boosted their European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes.

Amid assimilation issues of the Roma in Montenegro, advances in education seem to have been substantial due to the increase of Roma children entering schools (Mina, 2013). However, child beggary and high unemployment rate have still been widespread, which could be explained by the incompetence of the Roma people in various spheres of economics (Omeragic, 2021).

In addition to the national minority languages respect, propaganda of learning foreign languages, in general, can increase curiosity among children towards research and self-development. Within the framework of cooperation, the representatives of the US Embassy in Montenegro had contributed to Roma children's development by organising training and thematic lectures to encourage the young generation to learn English (US Embassy in Montenegro, 2017). A significant role of English could bring lots of perspectives for further employment of the Roma, which also means their integration in the world community.

In 2016, Sokolj Beganaj became the first-ever Roma in Montenegro who obtained a master diploma. Later, he even succeeded in gaining a government position (Raičević, 2016). Significantly, the area of study for Mr Beganaj was preschool education which is crucial for the young Roma generation. He claimed that understanding the psychology of Roma children could help the state find a common language and improve understanding between ethnic groups and generations.

Considering all internal and external political risks and advantages that appear with tackling the Roma issue, Montenegrin authorities encouraged Montenegrin scientists to research Roma issues by presenting annual awards for best scientific studies. Starting in 2007, the government have given awards to national scientists

for the best article on the topic of “Social Integration of Roma in Montenegro” (or *Socijalna Inkluzija Roma u Crnoj Gori*) (Government of Montenegro, 2016, April 6). The award ceremony is always dedicated to the World Day of Roma, which is on April 8. In this regard, it encourages assessing the current state of a problem and developing a strategy for dealing with the social marginalisation of the ethnic group. The attempts made by a constructive empiric knowledge application in practice have given significant results. For example, in 2016, the award was granted to the Media Chief Executive Željko Rutović.

4. Conclusions

A multi-ethnic society is a unique trait of Montenegro, which is a significant peculiarity of the country regarding the issue of Roma social integration. During the first eleven years of independence, Montenegrins, Serbians, Croats, Albanians, and Bosniaks have peacefully lived on the territory, which is unusual for the former Yugoslav republics. In percentage correlation, Roma comprises 1,01% of the overall population which is more than, for example, Croats (0,97%). Therefore, the integration of the Roma into society positively affected the economic and social life of Montenegro.

The Roma is one of the most vulnerable ethnic groups in Europe. Almost two-thirds of the Roma in Montenegro arrived in the country during the war in Kosovo in 1999–2000. The people did not have their national land which made them wander around the world in search for their place. A high percentage of the Roma do not have high demands for living standards, which makes them adaptable to any conditions. However, at the same time, they hardly can adjust to a social environment.

The problem of social adaptation of the Roma is a topical issue for national welfare and security not only for Montenegro but for the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. Being a participant of the regional initiative “The Decade of Roma Inclusion” since 2005, the government of Montenegro have actively advanced the national legal system, developed and implemented projects for dwellings, education and culture of the Roma community. Moreover, the firm determination of Montenegro to join the European Union and NATO significantly boosted the country to take urgent and necessary measures in tackling the problem of national minorities.

In addition, the results started to be observed after 2013, when Montenegro finally improved its national legal system by amending specific laws and acceding UN conventions relating to the issues. On this background, educational activity

and encouraging training for school students contributed to positive changes in the Roma community. Tight cooperation between Montenegro and international organisations resulted in a favourable climate for European values, respect for the law, human rights and freedoms.

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