Social Exclusion and Double Marginalisation: Roma in Slovakia after 1989¹

*Michal Vaščeka*

**Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava**

**Abstract.** The article deals with an issue that is becoming one of the most important challenges to Slovakia and its social, political, and economic development in the 21st century. The article describes the factors that led to the rise of the debate on Roma issues in Slovakia. The author is intrigued by the specificity of Roma as a national minority, and he describes the pre-1989 conditions of the current unfavourable socio-economic situation of Roma communities in Slovakia. In an attempt to explain why whole communities of Roma have been sliding deeper into poverty, the author focuses on the policies of the communist state toward Roma, the demographic behaviour of Roma, the unpreparedness for the social and political changes of 1989, and consequently, the process of the ethnicisation of poverty. The article describes the processes of social exclusion, social isolation, and double marginalisation of Roma in Slovakia and analyses the strategies that the Roma and the majority population use to deal with poverty.

The shift in understanding the so-called Roma issues

*Rise of the debate*

The Roma issue has become the hottest topic in Slovakia during the last 10 years. Politicians and celebrities have realised the importance of investing significant amounts of time, money, social capital, and especially political will into solving the so-called Roma issue. This was a remarkable shift from the past, in that Slovakia’s political and social elite, regardless of their motives, began to understand the complexity of the issue and the urgency of dealing with it. Interest in dealing with the issue was encouraged by the following three motives during the last few years:

1. *Morality and the importance of human rights*: Some began to realise their obligation to help the Roma, and that inappropriate, misguided, or directly discriminatory methods and policies applied to Slovaks in the past should no longer be tolerated on Slovak soil. This reasoning,

¹ Based on the research conducted for the World Bank from November 2000 to April 2001.
however, is limited to a relatively small group of people who call themselves liberal democrats.

2. **Integration and pragmatism**: A significant number of Slovak representatives understand the importance of finding a solution to the Roma issue because the country’s integration ambitions and efforts to join the European Union and NATO depend on it. The deteriorating socio-economic status of the Roma and the majority’s strongly negative perception of them are becoming the most important challenges. Slovakia has the largest Roma minority of all EU-hopeful countries, and the one with the worst social status. The European Commission has repeatedly stressed that the situation of ethnic minorities in candidate countries aspiring to join the EU was acceptable, with the exception of that of the Roma.

3. **Self-defence**: A considerable proportion of the majority, represented mainly by the parliamentary opposition, admitted the necessity of solving the issue because of fears that stem from Roma demographic developments and the practically uncontrollable birth rates in Roma settlements (Vašečka 2001).

After the 1998 elections, a position of deputy prime minister for human rights, minorities, and regional development was created, and new government also created the position of governmental plenipotentiary for resolving Roma issues. However, what has remained unchanged since the elections of 1998 is the relationship between the majority population and the Roma. Due to the increased efforts of Roma to emigrate to EU countries and, consequently, visas imposed on Slovak citizens, in some ways attitudes toward the Roma in Slovakia have grown even worse.

**Roma in Slovakia**

Roma are the second largest ethnic minority in Slovakia. The latest census in 1991 (when Roma had a chance to claim their ethnicity for the first time) showed a total of 75,802 citizens claiming Romany nationality, or 1.4 percent of the population. However, various estimates put the Roma population at exponentially higher figures. Head counts conducted in 1989 by local and municipal administrations showed that there were 253,943 Roma (4.8 percent of the population); however, these statistics registered only socially dependent citizens. Therefore, it can be assumed that the number of Roma in Slovakia is even higher today. Current estimates by experts put the total number at between 420,000 and 500,000, a number continuously on the rise due to the high Roma birth rate. Many European countries have larger Roma communities than Slovakia, with the largest one in the world living in Romania (estimated popu-
lation between 1.8 and 2.8 million). However, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Macedo-
nia have the largest per capita Roma communities in the world (8 percent to
9 percent of the country’s population).

The Romany community has many different sub-groups. The most common
are colonies of settled Roma (Rumungres) and nomadic Vlachika Roma; the
remnants of the Germanic Sints represent a separate group. The Roma also differ
by the language and dialects they use – in a Slovak environment, they use some
Slovak language words and dialects, while in the Hungarian environment of
southern Slovakia, they use Hungarian. Like the majority population, the Slovak
Roma can also be distinguished by their place of origin (i.e. whether they are
influenced by an urban or rural environment) as well as by their affinity to a
particular region of Slovakia. The existence of culturally diversified and disas-
associated complex groups complicates the understanding of the Roma situation
both within and outside the community.

Regarding such differences, some experts on the Roma observe that the old
caste system continues inside the Roma community, determining in advance a
person’s role within the social system (in the case of Slovakia, we may speak of
clans and groups). The distinctiveness of the Roma minority is also illustrated
by questions of whether the Roma are a nation or merely an ethnic group. As
recently as 1991, the Slovak Roma ceased to be perceived merely as an ethnic
group and were treated by the country’s legislation as a full-fledged ethnic mi-
nority, equal to other ethnic minorities living on Slovak territory (Vaščeka 2001).

Yet the Roma constitute a truly distinct minority, and it requires a rather
complex approach. The unsatisfactory socio-economic situation of most Roma
in Slovakia raises the question of whether they are becoming a social, as well as
a purely ethnic, minority. Expert and professional circles see the Roma becom-
ing an underclass, a term that perhaps describes Roma settlements best. The
basic characteristics of the underclass are long-term unemployment, fragmen-
tary work history, permanent success on the secondary labour market only, and
dependence on social welfare benefits or on activities that have to do with the
shadow economy (Massey - Denton 1993). The underclass environment is un-
derstood as anomic in comparison to the majority environment and could be
characterised by general resignation, low respect for authorities, a low level of
self-control, reliance on welfare, and poor labour ethics. These general charac-
teristics of the ‘underclass’ environment perfectly capture the situation of those
Roma who dwell in Roma settlements and, increasingly, those who reside else-
where.

Discussion of the underclass, which has been going on for several decades in
some other countries, is perceived in Slovakia as having an ideological basis;
many people seem to erroneously interchange the terms ‘underclass’ and
lumpenproletariat. Nevertheless, opening such a discussion in Slovakia is vital
for the country to prevent further negative consequences of the transformation
from a modern industrial society to a post-modern, post-industrial one. Otherwise, the gap between the majority and Roma will continue to widen, and ethnic poverty will intensify.

Pre-1989 policies toward Roma in Slovakia leading to their social exclusion

Policy background

The communist regime deformed the general understanding and observance of civic and political rights, while developing social rights, which have been significantly expanded. In contrast to other totalitarian regimes, this one changed the system that determined the course of the economy, making it unable to compete by disregarding the rules of demand and supply. But the most significant intervention into the functioning of society was the forcible effort to change the organisation of society, changing its natural stratification. Within the frame of these efforts, a systematic favouritism towards the lower social stratum of society, at the expense of higher ones, while directly discriminating against several segments of the pre-communist elite and intelligentsia.

The majority of Roma belonged to the lower layers of society, and they were the targets of different experiments by the communist regime aimed at the improvement of their social status. The change that came in 1989 caught the Roma by surprise, with most authors writing about these issues agreeing that no stratum of the Romany population had been prepared for these changes.

The communist regime assumed that if the living standard of the Roma reached the average living standard, the reason for the differences between them and the majority population would be eliminated. In order to achieve this, different measures, which could be characterised as social engineering, were employed, such as:

- The diffusion of the Roma (within Slovakia but also from Slovakia to the Czech Republic), directed and supported by state policy,
- The disintegration of natural Roma communities,
- The movement of the rural Roma population from Roma settlements to cities and industrial areas,
- The destruction of the natural binding between the Roma community and the majority population,
- Insensitive and administrative (forcible) allocation of flats to Roma from socially disadvantaged environments,
- Forced compliance with the general compulsory labour service, under the threat of imprisonment,
- Statutory enforced obligation of school attendance by children,
- Obligatory participation of the Roma in the health care scheme.
These seemingly positive results were achieved by forcible means, using measures that imposed external pressure without the active participation and acceptance of the Roma community. This was reflected by the behaviour of some Roma towards the property that was allocated to them. Despite the fact that the government managed to achieve a much higher standard of living for most Roma in comparison to previous decades, many of the forms of behaviour typical to a traditional Romany family remained. The process of modernisation of the Roma community during the era of the communist regime was predominantly one-dimensional, taking place only on the level of material improvement.

The characteristic attributes of a traditional Romany family include the following:

- Life in an extended family, thus lacking the motion towards the nuclear family,
- Community oriented life style,
- An absence of borders between what is private and what is public (privacy is non-existent due to the way of life, but also because of the relationship to property),
- Considering the present housing as temporary or provisional,
- A clear division of roles in the Romany family (man as the provider, woman responsible for household maintenance),
- The demographic characteristic of Romany families is multiple family members.

The Romany community can be characterised as a non-agrarian society that is not able to sustain itself from their own resources, thus traditionally entering into relationships with agrarian cultures. Agrarian cultures, with their relationships of private ownership to land and through land to the territory, have contributed to the establishment of institutional and customary norms in the non-Romany population. Since the Roma have never had an agrarian culture and their relationship to land has always been rather tepid, they did not establish mechanisms and institutions related to the agrarian type of private ownership relationships. Thus, the Roma never belonged to a territory and never attributed importance to the acquisition of property. On the contrary – their way of craftsmanship found demand thanks to their flexibility in relation to the territory.

The different relationship and responsibility of Roma towards ownership and their different relationship towards premises gives rise to the specific social structures of the Roma, which are based on kinship ties. These specific cultural norms of Roma can be called a strategy of permanent conditionality. Education in its institutional forms (formal and contextual) puts limits on the Romany strategy of conditionality. The educational institutions of the majority population thus lack an equivalent to the institutional structure of the Roma community. This
is a cause of conflict between the two types of social systems. The participation of Roma in two important activities – work and education – is from the Romany point of view a confrontation with a different world. Their incorporation into these two spheres is an asymmetric process, with Roma entering a game in which they did not contribute to the rules or regulations in any way; they are marginal and their only choice is to adjust.

Many of the measures undertaken by the communist regime undoubtedly contributed to an improvement in the living standard for the Roma population. But on the other hand, these measures were to the disadvantage of the Roma because of the insensitive placement of Roma families, adapted to the disadvantaged environment of a settlement, among the majority population. It often caused unsolvable problems in city housing estates, becoming a source of hate on both sides. This fact is at the roots of present outbursts of violence and racism.

The Roma community became, through the policy of resettling, diffusion, and employment, a part of the social provision system, which helped them to escape the situation of total material need reflected in absolute hunger and malnourishment. The result was that Roma gradually got used to state paternalism, which came to replace traditional family solidarity. This process led to the establishment of a new culture of dependence on state institutions.

Slide into poverty

In the pre-industrial era (until the beginning of the 20th century) the most important jobs of Roma included working as smiths or as musicians, although many also processed raw materials. Since Roma did not own land, they had to purchase basic foodstuffs from peasants. The peasant in turn needed a cheap labour force to collect potatoes, harvest grain, take in hay, build houses, dig wells, or prepare wood for the winter. The Roma usually demanded pay in food, used clothing, old furniture, or household items. The convenience of this system of coexistence for both sides has also been reflected in the relationships between Roma and peasant families. With the arrival of industrialisation these relationships gradually broke down and the Roma were forced to become a labour force for heavy industry. After 1989 the majority of them became useless in the new economy, mainly due to their qualifications, and the former relationships between Roma and the majority have almost disappeared.

The non-existent relationship to ownership and the strategy of conditionality influenced the access of the community to opportunities. The gradual social closure of Roma communities led to the social exclusion of the Roma. The process of social closure took place in two ways: one was marginalisation and the other incorporation. The result of marginalisation was a limitation of choices, often leading to the reproduction of poverty. During the communist regime, the government tried to solve the problem of marginalisation within the state-or-
ganised economy by incorporating citizens from rural areas into newly created zones of heavy industry, employing them mainly as unqualified workers. This incorporation had the form of illusionary integration, since it did not lead to an improvement of social status.

The determining influence on the social situation of inhabitants of the country during the communist era was the second economy. Only those who based their living strategies on participation in both economies had a chance to improve their social status. The second economy required the existence of financial household management and production (own land and own means of production). But this has never been an option for the Roma. Their exclusive dependence on the formal economy was the main factor for their deeper fall into poverty compared to the majority population.

The poverty of Roma during the communist era thus reached more significant forms than the poverty of the majority population with a similar degree of education and qualifications. Roma were much more dependent on income from social assistance, which made up a greater proportion of their income than did the income generated by work. Apart from the second economy, another significant factor contributing to the maintenance of the living standard of the majority population and their incorporation into the society was the participation of both partners in the working process, the so-called two-income family model. The risk factors contributing to Roma poverty included the fact that many Roma families had only one source of income (Roma women stayed at home with their children), not to mention the fact that the majority of families had many children.

Income differentiation and living standards in communist Slovakia did not match the degree of education achieved. Certain branches of industry, mainly the manufacturing ones, were preferred, and from the point of view of achieving a certain social status, there was a principal of collective, not individual, mobility. Education was not exclusively understood as a means of reaching a certain living standard and social position. The possibility of working in a certain sector, while having the type of education required there, was the guarantee of securing a living standard. The overall educational structure in Slovakia was adjusted to this principle, with the majority of citizens having only primary or secondary education without a certificate of apprenticeship. The orientation on these types of education became a trap after 1989.

Thus the relationship towards education and placement in the labour market was determined by two basic factors. The mechanism of closure of the Roma community led to a life on the edge of society, ultimately resulting in the reproduction of behavioural patterns in the area of education and the labour market. The new generation of Roma from the closed communities do not perceive or feel the need to choose a different educational strategy than the one chosen by their fathers and mothers. In this area the behaviour of the Roma minority dif-
fers significantly from the behaviour of other minorities, for example the Jewish minority. The Roma in the given community prefer the reproduction of approved patterns with an overwhelming orientation to the present. But education is connected with an orientation to the future. This reproduction of patterns was supported by the behaviour of the majority population, who knowingly or unknowingly failed to create the conditions for the improvement of education and qualifications for the Roma ethnic group. The communist form of extensive economy required a large unqualified work force, the Roma therefore did not need to improve their education or qualifications.

The historic experience of the Roma resulted in specific types of reactions and behaviour towards the majority population. Their withdrawal to the borders of society resulted in the Roma behaving as an endangered group – multiplying the cohesiveness of the community, with domineering strategies of escape (provisional escape–readiness to leave) or an offensive, almost aggressive strategy. This broadened the degree of seclusion and marginalisation of the Roma.

**Demographic patterns**

Family has always played a very significant role in the life of Roma. The head of the family is always the father. When it comes to raising children, Roma usually pay attention to the older ones, who then also take care of the younger children. Roma children are very reluctant to leave their parents, even once they reach adulthood and establish their own families. In general it is possible to conclude that the Romany family represents the traditional type of multi-generational family. This is also the most important difference between the Roma and majority population family; the traditional Romany household is only beginning to divide into its nuclear forms at present, while the same phenomenon took place in the non-Roma population during the first half of the 20th century.

The Romany family thus presently represents a different type of family, but the difference is not determined by ethnicity but rather by a drift in time. This is the reason why it is possible to talk of a phase drift in regard to this area, rather than of specific ethnic behaviour of the Roma. The data on the demographic behaviour of the Roma population in Slovakia strongly resemble data describing the demographic behaviour of the non-Roma population several decades ago, or are comparable to data from developing countries. As an example one can mention the data on child mortality that in the Roma population during the 1980s was very similar to the data from the whole of Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. The life span of the Roma minority between 1970 and 1980 was similar to the situation in Czechoslovakia between 1929-1933 (for Roma men) and to the era after the Second World War (for Roma women). It is realistic to assume that the present Roma population will reach the demographic characteristics of the majority in one generation.
The demographic boom did not occur among the Roma until 1945 because of high child mortality and inadequate health care. With a certain degree of simplification it is possible to conclude that the health of the majority of Roma was and still is worse than that of the non-Romany population in Slovakia (The health needs..., 2000). The communist regime achieved significant success in the overall improvement of the health of Romany population – lowering child mortality, increasing median life span, and eliminating certain diseases. It was mainly the mandatory health insurance scheme, improved living conditions, and quality of food that contributed to the significant growth of the Roma population during the communist regime. It is possible to assume that an important role in the demographic behaviour of the Roma was played by the population policy of the communist state (economy of full employment, social policy), which did not cause the people to consider or re-evaluate their own reproductive behaviour.

Despite the fact that health care was improved during the communist regime, the estimated median life span of the Roma population has been lagging behind the estimated median life span of the majority population. This is due mainly to their unhealthy life style, socially disadvantaged environment, high incidence of alcoholism, and most important of all, low quality, cheap food2.

Changes after 1989: from social exclusion to social isolation

When social, economic, and political transformations after 1989 began, the situation in regard to the Roma population could be characterised by the following:

1. A relatively tense relationship between the majority population and Roma, originating from feelings of unjust re-distribution of resources.
2. The Roma had fully adjusted to the conditions and rules of the game introduced by the communist regime.
3. The existent differences between some groups of Roma were marked as socially pathological behaviour patterns and some Roma communities as socially not adapted. The state approached them on the basis of these conclusions; the differences characteristic of the Roma were considered to be manifestations of social pathology. Social policy was targeted at their elimination.

2 The basic ingredient of the Romany diet has traditionally been entrails prepared in various ways. The food considered to be the most typical Romany dish is called “goja” and consists of washed pork large intestine, turned with the fat side inside and filled with potatoes, corn meal, grits, or rice. Also, floury pastry dishes traditionally dominated the diet in Romany families, with a low consumption of vegetables.
4. Roma entered the transformation period with considerably lower qualifications in comparison to the majority population and, in addition, with working habits inadequate to the requirements of the transforming economy.

The gradual reconstruction of economic, political, cultural, and social life of the society took away all of the securities obtained during the communist regime by the Roma. And the Roma were not prepared for any of these changes.

**Education and health**

The liberalisation of constraining rules related to education, the school system, the placement of children in children’s homes, the pursuance of control, and obedience to the law is resulting in an increased number of absences and truancy by the Roma children. During the communist regime these situations were solved with the assistance of police, the placement of children into institutional care, a reduction of social benefits, etc. The Roma children from separated or segregated settlements are handicapped in three ways: the first time at their arrival in the primary school, the second time at the entrance exams for schools of higher education. The third way occurs when, after considering their chances, they do decide to continue with further education, and they end up choosing mainly apprenticeship schools (whose choice mostly depends on their availability-distance from home). Later they are trapped in the position of unemployed graduates of apprenticeship schools, without a chance of finding employment within the official formal economy, in the close surroundings of their home. If they finish their education, they go back to their original environment, where they reproduce the behaviour of their parents. They fall into the social safety net, and the young generation begins to perceive and consider this to be the normal way to behave. If they do get employed, it is mainly informal jobs, illegal work, or short-term jobs – opportunities for them diminish with growing segregation.

The change in the area of health care to an insurance system with an emphasis on personal responsibility for health (an example being the cancellation of mandatory public health insurance) is beginning to show effects on the worsening state of health of the Roma population. This is also related to the orientation of Roma on the present, neglecting preventive health care. The bad socio-economic situation and inadequate housing and infrastructure in the place of residency are the reasons behind the worsening health of the Roma after 1989. All available data reflect the worsening state of health, mainly in the constantly growing, isolated settlements. Many diseases eliminated or controlled on the national level are still found in the Roma settlements. The socially disadvantaged environment is also associated with a high incidence of different levels of mental retardation.
In the area of housing, there was nearly total privatisation. This includes flats and houses, as well as the land adjoined to the given houses or flats. Ninety percent of rental flats have been privatised, and the real estate has new owners. The land, which was in the so-called private holding, could be given to the tenants free of charge if the following two basic conditions had been fulfilled: 1) The house standing on the real estate had a valid building permit, or had been awarded the appropriate approval in the term given by the law, 2) The real estate was registered in the land-office, and no application had been filed for its restitution. When these conditions had been met, the tenant was free to apply for the transfer of the property to his name. While the majority of the population showed a significant lack of information concerning these procedures, the lack of information among the Roma was even more profound. The issue of ownership of land was non-existent during communism. Thus the changes after 1989 uncovered a large group of Roma living illegally on the land of other people. And also, the conditions for the legalisation of property have become very complicated, with increased demands and pre-conditions for the issuance of a building permit (it requires 32 individual permits). The houses of many Roma do not fulfil the norm dictated by the law and the Roma lack financial resources for the reconstruction of their houses. Even they have the resources, they often cannot use them, because they do not legally own the real estate.

After 1989 the government system of several types of loans for acquisition of housing, as well as the building of new houses by the state was cancelled, and the issues related to the problem of housing were transferred to communal municipalities and city councils. They began to behave just like any other economic unit. High demand has led to an increase in the prices of flats and houses, extreme from the point of view of citizens with an average income. The chance of gaining and maintaining housing has thus become minimal for the Roma because they are unable to succeed in this competition.

The building of housing estates in Slovakia after 1989 has been inadequately low compared to the demand. Despite savings programs and limited loans from the state, a system that would allow a citizen with an average income to obtain a flat in real time is non-existent. Thus the public reacts very sensitively to any kinds of unfair decisions regarding housing policy, allocation of flats, provision of low-interest loans, etc. Social housing as a partial solution to the situation with housing estates falls far short of covering the demands and needs of families in social and material need. The Roma are understandably not alone but are unquestionably the least successful at solving this problem. Rental price liberalisation and privatisation of flats, which led to the significant increase in housing related expenses (rent increases of 200 percent, similar to the increases of expenses related to water, gas, garbage, etc) pushes the Roma to cheaper flats or lodging-houses. The lack or absence of a realistic policy of social housing is
dealt with by the Roma by withdrawal strategies; they go back to the settlements, revitalising them. The reason for this is simple: Housing in settlements has minimal or no expenses related to it.

**Unemployment**

The unemployment rate among the Roma has risen to extremes (see Graph 1), reaching 100 percent in some settlements. Precise statistics for Roma unemployment do not exist, and one can only make estimates by assessing the overall situation in Slovakia’s more troubled regions. Districts with the highest share of Roma are also the most severely hit by unemployment. The only data available on Roma unemployment, which still cannot be considered fully representative, are the unofficial data of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family, which were recorded by district labour bureau officers who wrote the letter “R” in the dossiers of Roma job applicants. Since this practice was illegal and discriminatory, it was discontinued after the 1998 elections. Unfortunately, one negative effect of that decision is that Slovakia now lacks a database on Roma unemployment. Nevertheless, unofficial data from the previous period show that the number of unemployed Roma in Slovakia is permanently increasing, and that the Roma represent a significant majority of the long-term unemployed in Slovakia. The main factors influencing the high unemployment rate among the Roma are the following: their low level of qualifications, the lack of interest among employers in hiring Roma due to the high supply of workers on the labour market, the poor work ethic of some Roma, the lack of interest among some Roma to find a job on public work projects, and the general scarcity of job opportunities, especially in regions with large Roma populations.

**Graph 1. Numbers of unemployed Roma in Slovakia (on 31st December of each year)**

![Graph showing numbers of unemployed Roma in Slovakia](image)

*Source: Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic, 1999*
According to expert estimates, approximately 10 percent of Slovak citizens are dependent on social security benefits, a significant proportion of whom are Roma. The disbursement of social security benefits to the Roma has become one of the main causes for the growing tension between the minority and the majority population. The majority argues that while doing nothing, the Roma receive large sums of money, which they waste on alcohol. The government’s inability to better plan the disbursement of welfare benefits, as well as widespread usury among the Roma, argue for the development of a supervisory mechanism through which the government could control the Roma’s spending of their social benefits. The most serious objection to the approaches was that they were implemented across the board, without applying individual criteria. The scheme was tested during the first half of 1999, and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family is not now considering a broader application.

Unemployment, especially the long-term and permanent unemployment so common among Roma, perpetuates the cycle of poverty and the unemployment trap (Graph 2). Roma become dependent on social security benefits, resulting in a high rate of long-term unemployment. The situation is then passed from one generation to the next. Consequently, the number of families in which both parents and children are permanently unemployed is also increasing; moreover, children have no experience of stable and permanent employment. Hence, all current conditions support a subculture of unemployed Romany youth.

**Graph 2.** Percentage of Roma out of the numbers of unemployed according to the period of registration (1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of Registration</th>
<th>Other registered unemployed</th>
<th>Roma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>up to 6 months</td>
<td>94.7%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 12 months</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 24 months</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 48 months</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic, 1999*
Strategies to cope with poverty among the Roma and the majority population

Changes in social stratification

The aforementioned changes demonstrate the new type of social stratification defined by new types of relationships in society. The forerunner of this new stratification was two stratification pyramids formed during communism: the pyramid of the establishment (social capital) and the pyramid of the second economy (private capital). These pyramids have been merging, with social capital producing opportunities for the creation of and access to material capital. Roma did not belong to either of the pyramids providing the potential for integration into a higher class of society. They did not have the chance nor did they manage to fulfil, with the help of the double life strategy (social and material capital), the requirements for integration into the new market relationships. Nor were they able to successfully master the new rules of the game on the labour market or the market with privatised property.

Poverty existed during the communist regime, and it was a problem for the Roma who had an above average standard representation in the category of poor citizens as well. After 1989 the term poverty gained a new facet, based on the inequality between individuals on one hand and whole social categories on the other. The individual criteria involve the old demographic poverty, where the basic factor of poverty is the number of children. This type of poverty can be escaped by individual strategies, mainly changes in reproductive behaviour (this strategy was implemented by the majority population in the middle of the 20th century). The communist regime implemented the same concept of poverty as demographic, which means poverty pushed into families and was connected to a certain living situation. Thus it transformed poverty from a public issue to a personal problem, which meant that poverty lost its dimension of social status. Poverty was understood as personal failure. The state regulated this poverty with means based on strong re-distribution, subventions into the infrastructure, prices of basic foods, and incomes.

The group characteristic is being described as the new vertical poverty, which, through changes in the structure of employment, moves a whole social category into social dependence. The main factor is not the number of children but a low degree of education in fields that are vanishing; whole branches of industry are disappearing, resulting in long-term unemployment. The specific characteristic of the Roma minority is the combination of the old demographic poverty with the new vertical poverty. In the case of group vertical poverty, individual living strategies are an unavoidable prerequisite to finding a successful solution but in itself it is not enough. The chances are determined by the system of social provisions and rights. The state of vertical poverty is the result of systemic changes
and not of individual failures. The degree and scale of poverty of the Roma is mainly related to their lack of integration; but the inequality of income and property is the direct result of this lack of integration.

From the point of view of the economic structure, the Roma in Slovakia are to a large degree a homogenous group when it comes to social class and qualifications. A majority of them belong to the socio-professional category of non-qualified workers, which is the reason why they have such a high representation among the low-income groups of the Slovak population. From the point of view of employment, a certain “monotype” of the Roma family could already be observed during the communist regime: Romany families were those of unqualified building or agrarian workers, without professional or general higher education, with a low average income per family member, and with a prevailing majority of men working away from the place of their residence. Since 1989 the unemployment of Roma men, as well as the number of families with both partners unemployed, has been on the rise.

The state reacted after 1989 by creating a system of social assistance, a social safety net. But it narrowed the comprehension of poverty to a state of so-called material and social need. The state does not create nor reflect poverty as a social status, thus narrowing its comprehension to the procurement (excluding entitlements for those who respect the norms regulating behaviour of the status bearers). The absence of entitlements and emphasis on procurement reflects the comprehension of poverty as individual failure and leads to the provision of social assistance by testing, measuring, and monitoring individual behaviour and strategies. This reproduces and strengthens the culture of dependence with all the signs of reproduced poverty: feelings of marginality and being in danger, fatalism, desperation, passivity, aggression, communal closure, impulsiveness, absence of planning and saving, and distrust towards the authorities.

Coping strategies

The basic coping strategy of both the majority and the Romany populations is family cooperation and the differences are in the type of help provided by the family, and whether it is actually able to provide any help at all. Family strategies stem from the cultural and historical background and living conditions of individual families. Which type of family strategy becomes prevalent in a settlement or village depends much more on its socio-cultural character and the micro-climate in the settlement than on demographic characteristics of the families. The socio-cultural character of separated and largely segregated settlements is a type of collective marginalisation and social exclusion without the potential for mutual help. A living strategy oriented to family networks is ineffective in these circumstances. The more homogeneous a settlement is, the smaller the
chances are for supporting family networks to be effective. In segregated settlements these living strategies have zero effectiveness. Some NGOs are trying to replace the absence of family support networks and mutual help with their own activities, i.e. creating community centres.

In the new social conditions, it is mainly old, well-known, and time-proven family strategies that are being implemented as coping mechanisms. The traditional majority family revitalises (apart from family networks) the strategy of self-catering and departure with the goal of finding work abroad. But the method of self-catering has never been used by segregated Roma communities in the past nor in the present (so there is nothing to revitalise). The non-acceptance of this strategy by the Roma is considered by the majority not to be a result of traditional or typical behaviour patterns for the Roma but as proof of laziness and predisposition towards theft – choosing the easy way and unwillingness to actively change their living situation. The more open a Romany community is, the more heterogeneous the environment is, the greater the chance for reproduction of the self-catering strategy.

The Roma are left with only one active strategy – departure. This strategy is not possible in marginalised, segregated settlements (because a departure requires some resources). A specific phenomenon for the Roma is collective departure, the departure of entire families from a certain locality, while in the majority population usually one member of a family leaves to work. The collective departure of Roma creates and multiplies the tension existing in the society; the majority population is being “punished” by the introduction of visa requirements for certain countries (defensive measures by countries trying to stop the inflow of Roma). It is not easy to establish a clear profile of the typical Romany asylum seeker from Slovakia according to classic demographic categories. Most asylum seekers came from the Košice and Michalovce districts, especially from the town of Michalovce and the villages of Pavlovce nad Uhom and Malčice. The typical Romany asylum seeker:

- Hails from eastern Slovakia (the western Slovak territories have remained virtually unaffected by Roma migrations);
- Speaks Slovak (Hungarian-speaking Roma do not migrate often);
- Resides in towns and larger villages (smaller villages and settlements have also remained virtually unaffected);
- Enjoys an above-average social status (most migrants are recruited especially from members of the Romany middle class);
- Has an above-average education (most migrating Roma have completed primary, some of them even secondary, education);
- Has experience working outside his own region (among migrants, a significant number of Roma have worked in remote regions of Slovakia, abroad in Prague, or in the mining region of northern Moravia);
As far as Romany sub-ethnic differentiation is concerned, most migrants are Rumungres and not Vlachika Roma (although in terms of their habits and traditions, Vlachika Roma are much closer to a nomadic way of life than Rumungres).

All of the aforementioned strategies have the character of short-term and fast solutions, lacking the perspective of significant long-term improvements in the living situation. The revitalisation of strategies with long-term effects, typical in rural areas during the pre-communist era, like the development of agrarian small-scale production, animal husbandry, or retail handicraft, is rather sporadic and uncommon. Apart from lack of experience, there is also a lack of government support. For many villages, after the disappearance of the “Collective Farming Cooperatives” and state farms, which employed an overwhelming part of the majority and Roma population in agriculture, the aforementioned activities are the only possibilities for job creation. The cessation of agricultural production thus leads to the departure of the majority population – either happening through shuttle migration to working places or the abandonment of rural homes. The typical Romany handicrafts, being mainly supplementary production or services adjoined to these types of production, thus lost demand in these villages. Some NGOs are trying to supplement the absent government support, running several projects for the revitalisation of “classical” handicraft, several of them successfully.

Poverty enclaves: The double marginalisation

In the cases of some Roma settlements or in the case of a socio-spatial marginality of an area, there are instances of up to 100 percent unemployment in some places. Thus a situation is created, which within the Slovak circumstances has been given the title “valley of hunger,” being areas with visible “islands of poverty”. A “valley of hunger” is endangered by total social disorganisation and the creation of the culture of poverty as the only possible form of adaptation to the situation. Its results include the formation of a so-called underclass, rural and urban. Besides the structural dimension, the transformation after 1989 also had a territorial, regional, and micro-regional dimension. Some territories have been shifted to the margins of socio-economic development, becoming socio-economically marginalised territories. Marginalisation has its roots in the previous period of the so-called socialist industrialisation and industrial urbanisation of Slovakia. After 1989 the socio-economic marginality of the inherited regions has deepened, continually spreading to other territories. The marginalisation that has taken place within the economic transformation has created large compact entities within marginal territories in borderland regions of northern, eastern,
and southern Slovakia. These territories are inhabited by minorities, and that is why the issue also has an ethnic dimension.

Generally, the regions have several dispositions in common. They have increasing or “stabilised” levels of unemployment as well as other problematic qualities. These dispositions refer especially to human potential, as well as to the infrastructure, spatial position of the region, and the persistence of imbalance inherited from the past. They also share spatial, civil, and other marginal positions. There are concentrations of old demographic and new vertical types of poverty, low entrepreneurial spirit, and little influx of capital. Marginal regions are characterised by a decline of civilisation and cultural standards. Problems with access to education and social and cultural activities have been observed, adjoined to the limited potential for social and civil development. These regions have problems adapting to the current transformation, lacking social subjects able and willing to take the initiative and responsibility for the activation of the region. Marginal regions are seldom entirely marginal. Marginality is especially a problem in some villages. These regions are ethnically mixed, which adds political meaning to this feature of marginal territories.

The Roma living in segregated settlements of marginalised regions thus find themselves in a situation of double marginalisation. The weakened and very limited possibilities of a marginalised region in combination with the absence of potential for self-help, self-organisation, and activation require specific approaches, i.e. support and developmental social programs targeting the marginalised regions and the marginalised segregated settlements of the regions. Any concrete program cannot achieve long-term success without systemic changes, especially in the areas of employment policy and housing policy (social housing). It is not possible to overcome double marginalisation with an individual living strategy (unless it means moving). The multiplied effects of disintegration and marginalisation are reflected among the Roma in long-term lack of material security and life in absolute poverty. Material security means the availability of food, drink, clothing, housing, and warmth, enabling biological survival, the fulfilment of primary needs, and the organisation of activities leading to the fulfilment of this necessary security. But this is an orientation on survival, not on life. The orientation on material security is the bridge, a precondition to the achievement of social security and the fulfilment of secondary needs – mainly of self-identity, self-affirmation, education, culture, etc.

The most basic requirements for the achievement of social security are social contacts, which are the only possibility of incorporation into the social organisation of the society. The segregated Roma live under the pressure of trying to reach material security, leaving them without the potential for other activities for the benefit of themselves or others. So they themselves cannot ensure their participation in informal social networks. Their creation for the Roma and with the Roma is the most basic task for all social activists. The strategies of
segregated Roma oriented on survival make them dependent. This dependency is of a material character because their survival depends on state social assistance benefits and other institutions. The double marginalisation of the Roma is accompanied by material and social dependency. This double dependency causes a loss of self-confidence and self-respect.

Last but not least, the importance of examining the broad range of extreme experiences of Romany social life has to be mentioned. Too often discussion on the current situation or future planning lacks a clear conceptualisation of social processes. Too many pro-Roma programs are failing because they are aimed at integration, their procedures are assimilating, and in the long-term they lead to segregation. There is also general uncertainty on the political level about how to construct a society in which the Roma and the majority can coexist. Roma themselves are also far from reaching a consensus about the form of coexistence, balancing between assimilation and integration. One phenomenon of recent years is the radicalisation of Roma politics; some Roma leaders are pursuing the creation of separate Romany political, social, and economic structures.

REFERENCES


