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**Roma Children and The Right to Education in**  
**Serbia**  
Challenges and Pathways to Inclusion

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis seeks to explore and elucidate three primary research questions concerning the Serbian education system's engagement with inclusion of Roma children. First question is how has the Serbian education system addressed the needs of Roma children? What are the policies and what is the practice? The second one is what were the mechanisms for safeguarding the right to education of Roma children since the early 2000s and by who? Does civil society have an impact on the institutions? The third question is what needs to be further developed and which actions need to be taken for Roma children from all groups to be fully and respectfully included in the education system in Serbia? What role do teachers and other students have concerning this goal? The results have shown that: numerous efforts were taken in order for Roma students to be included in quality education by both institutional bodies and civil society. Policies and affirmative action measures have greatly contributed to inclusion of Roma children in education, however the consistency and monitoring data to present the most accurate picture was and still is lacking. The civil society plays a great role and perhaps crucial in numerous cases of good practice pressuring the institutions to take actions that are written in the policies. Finally, the joint efforts of the institutions and the civil society, intercultural learning, economic empowerment and emancipation of all citizens are needed for inclusion of Roma in the education system in Serbia.

## TABLE OF ACRONYMS

<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EAPN</b>	European Anti-Poverty Network
<b>ECHR</b>	European Convention on Human Rights
<b>ECRI</b>	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
<b>CERD</b>	Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
<b>CoE</b>	Council of Europe
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>FCNM</b>	Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced People
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>REF</b>	Roma Education Fund
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration on Human Rights
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1: Legal Framework of the Right to Education

- 1.1. Education as a Human Right and the right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- 1.2 The Right to Education in the International Covenant of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, European Convention on Human Rights
- 1.3. Convention of the Rights of the Child
- 1.4. Minorities and the Right to Education
- 1.5. The Right to Education in the Constitution and the Laws of The Republic of Serbia
- 1.6. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)

Chapter 2: Roma Minority in Serbia

- 2.1. Roma Settlements in Serbia
- 2.2. Poverty
- 2.3. (Under)Representation of Roma in Media and Public Life
- 2.4. Readmission of Roma individuals to Serbia

Chapter 3: Roma Children in Education System of Serbia

- 3.1. Barriers of Roma Children in Education System in Serbia
- 3.2. School Attendance and Assessment of Roma children in Serbia
- 3.3. Institutional Support of Roma Children's Education
- 3.4. Impact of the Civil Society Organizations on the Inclusion of Roma Children in Education

Interviews

Conclusion

Appendix

## INTRODUCTION

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) adopted a General Policy Recommendation on Combating Anti Gypsyism and Discrimination Against Roma in 2011 and amended it in 2020. The General Policy Recommendation No. 10 emphasizes combating racism and racial discrimination regarding education. It insists on preventing stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against Roma children by on one hand raising awareness among non-Roma parents and on the other by training teachers about intercultural education. One recommendation is also to include the Roma genocide (Parrajimos) in school curricula. Further, an urgent need is for states to take legal and political actions to end school segregation of Roma children and include them into mainstream schools. Following measures to combat harassment against Roma pupils, reduce absenteeism, and prevent dropouts. Other emphasized recommendations are increasing the awareness of Roma parents of the importance of education, removing financial and administrative barriers, and ensuring access to nursery schools. The recommendation also calls for hiring school mediators, including Roma individuals, who can foster communication between schools and Roma parents, as well as encourage more Roma to select teaching as their profession. States are called to provide preparatory and additional instruction in the official language but to offer mother tongue instruction upon request, ensuring continuous schooling for children from traveling communities, facilitating access to lifelong education for adult Roma, and ensuring that school textbooks do not perpetuate stereotypes. Information on Roma culture and history is also emphasized. Finally, it stresses the need for prosecuting and punishing cases of discrimination against Roma in education.

Roma children are marginalized wherever they live in Europe. General discriminatory attitudes towards Roma national minorities are the reasons why their rights are endangered. Their underrepresentation in the media contributes to the 'invisibility' of their challenges, which also affects their education. Furthermore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a complete insight into the state of Roma children Since the official numbers of the Roma population have never been consistent.

This thesis consists of four chapters that give insights on the education of Roma children from different angles. The first chapter sets the legal framework for the right to education, the second illustrates the context in which the Roma minority in Serbia lives, while the third examines the educational policies, applications, different actors that are involved in inclusion of Roma children in Serbia's education system and the results of their efforts. Finally, the fourth chapter analyzes interviews with successful Roma activists engaged in various activities related to Roma education, emancipation, and empowerment.

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This thesis consists of four chapters that give insights on the education of Roma children from different angles. The first chapter sets the legal framework for the right to education, the second illustrates the context in which the Roma minority in Serbia lives, while the third examines the educational policies, applications, different actors that are involved in inclusion of Roma children in Serbia's education system and the results of their efforts. Finally, the fourth chapter analyzes interviews with successful Roma activists engaged in various activities related to Roma education, emancipation and empowerment.

The research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How has the Serbian education system addressed the needs of Roma children? What are the policies and what is the practice?
2. What were the mechanisms for safeguarding the right to education of Roma children since the early 2000s and by who? Does civil society have an impact on institutions?
3. What needs to be further developed and which actions are needed to be taken for Roma children from all groups to be fully and respectfully included in the education system in Serbia? What role do teachers and other students have in this goal?

## **Methodology**

The research conducted was a comprehensive review of existing literature. Besides that, four semi-structured interviews were conducted and qualitatively analyzed.

## **Thesis contribution**

This research illustrates a progress of inclusion of Roma children in Serbia. It gathers different sources and criticisms, and proposes a series of solutions, while approaching the lack of inclusion of Roma children in Serbia from different dimensions and perspectives. Additionally, interviews conducted with current successful Roma human rights activists bring up-to-date perspectives on the issue of Roma

inclusion in education. Finally, it highlights the impact of civil society, particularly the Roma Education Fund, which is not significantly represented in research in Serbia.

### **Limitations**

The limitations that are present in this work include the following: Firstly, few interviews were conducted that covered civil society workers, resulting in a lack of representation of current students and teachers. Secondly, extensive literature covers various aspects of Roma minority lives. When examining their right to education, all of these aspects must be considered. The second chapter of this thesis only briefly outlines the main issues that the Roma minority faces in Serbia which are highlighted to have the most significant impact on Roma education. Finally, the impact of civil society is a relatively new topic in Serbian academia, with few scholars engaging in thorough analysis of their work. However, this thesis focuses primarily on outlining the theoretical basis and interaction with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), rather than conducting an in-depth analysis.

## **CHAPTER 1: Legal Framework of the Right to Education of Roma children**

The aim of this chapter is setting a legal framework that the Republic of Serbia is responsible for respecting. From the international conventions to the Constitution and the State Law related to the right to education, and more specifically the right of national minorities related to their education. The research strives to present progress from the early 2000s until today. The entry into the new millennium brought many changes in terms of the right to education, both internationally and in the state of Serbia itself. Firstly, in 2000, the United Nations promoted the Millennium Development Goal that was supposed to accomplish the free universal primary education for everyone by 2015 (Lee, 2013). Serbia has entered a prolonged transition period after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Milošević was overthrown on the 5th of October in 2000. Serbia became a state party to UNESCO on 20th of December 2000. Most of the international conventions, such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child, International Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination etc., were ratified in the year of 2001 in Serbia.

The Office of the Council of Europe in Belgrade was opened on 15 March 2001 (CoE). Furthermore, the Roma community was granted a status of the national minority in 2002. After this, throughout time, the governments have started publishing and implementing inclusive and integration strategies and policies regarding Roma, among which were those related to the integration in education. The first one was Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. Several have been started and some have already

passed. One of the main questions of this thesis is how these strategies and policies have actually affected the Roma national minority and how has their right to education truly been respected and where the Republic of Serbia is standing now.

Some theoretical analysis will be mentioned as well. Since the right to education was not always analyzed thoroughly and the discussions on the “notion” of this right was not very much present in academia (McCowan, 2010). International recognition of the right to education started after the human rights conventions that were adopted after the Second World War, firstly with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 26. The UDHR and the other legal instruments that are going to be analyzed are approaching the right to education in both liberal and socialist human rights concepts (Nowak, 2001). The UN recognizes that the right to education goes beyond formal education and is supposed to nurture life experiences and give them the knowledge and help them develop to live their lives in a society on a satisfying level (Lee, 2013, UN, 2001). In the early 2000s the international strivings for the improvement of education included that educated individuals should respect human rights and tolerance (Nowak, 2001).

The United Nations has adopted the agenda for 17 Sustainable Development Goals that should be achieved by 2030 (A/RES/70/1). One of the main goals is to achieve a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable world for all the citizens (Mitić et al, 2022). This goal includes inclusive and equitable quality education for everyone by 2030 (UNICEF, 2022). To reach it, it is said to be necessary to set new social values and establish a society that continues to learn. Some of the sub goals are education, gender equality, clean water, dignified jobs, reducing inequalities, renewable energy and access to justice for everyone. However, the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society, such as Roma, are not satisfactorily included in the Sustainable Development Goals (Mitić et al, 2022).

### **1.1. Education as a Human Right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

The right to education is one of the essential human rights of the contemporary world, it is a cultural right, but is at the same time interconnected with other human rights. It is “a precondition for the exercise of human rights” and gives one the opportunity and tools to enjoy civil and political rights such as “freedom of information, expression, assembly and association, the right to vote and to be elected or the right of equal access to public services”. Among economic, social and cultural rights that are conditioned with one's level of education are the choice of job, adequate salary for their work, forming

trade unions, participating in cultural life, contributing and receiving the benefits of the progress of science based on capacity (Nowak, 2001, p.245).

To recognize the right to education of every child is the way to give everyone the opportunity to receive at least a minimum level of protection in order to develop (Lee, 2013). The first international legal instrument to recognize the right to education is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), however this is not a legally binding document and relies on the custom law. Since then, many efforts have been made for education to become more available internationally.

The Article 26 of the UDHR, that deals with the right to education, states:

“1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

The third paragraph is controversial according to McCowan, as parents are allowed to educate children according to their beliefs, which can conflict with the state's mandate for compulsory primary education (McCowan, 2010). This creates tension between parental freedom in educational choices and the state's responsibility to ensure that all children receive a standardized and compulsory education. Lee presents two postulations on what the right to education should secure for children, as well as why education is a human rights issue. The first one is that the free primary education should ensure that everyone is literate and numerate, which should enable them to have the very elemental skills for securing a job and actively participating in the peaceful society and having an accomplished life. While the second

one is that, despite UDHR defining education as the universal human right, to the date of Lee's article, not every child has an even basic access to education, thus there can be noticed Lee notices the "positive recognition" of the right to education in the UDHR and the "negative reality" that many children face (Lee 2013, 1).

The definition of education can both mean the process of education or a certain stage in that process. The process involves recognizing different roles in the education system, such as those who are legally accountable to provide education — teachers, owners of institutions, parents, society, and the state — and those who receive it, such as children, pupils, and students. While the primary institution that provides an individual with education is the state, there are other actors who have different duties towards this right (Nowak, 2001).

McCowan argues that simply guaranteeing education as an absolute right does not ensure a well-functioning society. This is because the education provided typically covers only primary levels and is dependent on the state's available resources. Even the wealthiest countries do not provide free universal higher education. Nevertheless, more and more people are pursuing secondary and tertiary education primarily due to their personal financial means. On the other hand, he also notices how the pre-school education should also be considered in the right to education considering the impact of it for the development of children (McCowan, 2013). Furthermore, he recognizes the infringement of human rights in education of indigenous peoples and minorities groups, he claims how the systems are "at best unresponsive to and at worst actively repressive of their cultures" (McCowan 2010, p. 6).

However, the progress is noticeable in the 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Reaching the Marginalized, as UNESCO notices that the progress was made, for example the number of children who were not attending schools has dropped since 1999 to 2010 for 33 million, the gender gap became smaller, while the literacy among adults has increased (Lee, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). While on not so positive note, the number of children who were still not attending schools worldwide was estimated to be 67 million in 2009 (Lee, Naidoo, Saihjee, Motivans, 2011; Watkins 2010) and the projections were for it to be close to 56 million by 2015 (Lee, 2013). These numbers become additionally worrisome if considered the statement by McCowan how those who complete only primary education, are already "severely disadvantaged in most spheres" compared to those who have completed the highest levels of education (McCowan 2010, p.7-8).

The definition of the right that Lee uses is "a justified claim on someone, or on some institution, for something, which one is owed" from Orend (Lee 2013, p2 from Orend 2002, p.17). Thus, an individual person has the right that they can claim, as when it comes to the context of the right to

education, “someone else” is responsible for providing it to them (Lee 2013, p. 2). For example, among other rights, the democratic state should have in its Constitution the provisions that guarantee at least primary education (Lee, 2013). Lee cites Orend who is writing about the moral grounds of the right to education, stating how education should be of a high priority of the state to provide for each individual to have the “minimum decent treatment” (Lee 2013, 2 from Orend, 2002, p. 34). The violation of dignity is at the same time the violation of the individual as well as the whole of humanity (Konsta, 2019).

Budget can be one of the problems of providing the right to education, especially in poorer states, thus Orend notices how the real reach of the right to education can only be understood when we know that the means to achieve the right are at a reasonable cost for the state (Lee, 2013, in Orend 2002). On the other hand, some would argue that free, compulsory and public education does not have to exist (Lee 2013: e.g., Farson, 1974; Holt, 1964, 1967, 1974; Narveson, 2001, 2002; Purdy, 1992; O’Neill, 1988).

Lee claims that every social context should ensure that all children have the “meaningful and manageable” right to education in the 21st century (Lee, 2013). This is in the context of education as the institution in states, which is built on the “collective social desire to have civil and supportive societies”, where many societies have the notion of education as “genuine public good”. This relation between the quality of each individual’s education and the quality of the whole society, determines education as a qualified right (Lee, 2013. p. 2). The notion of education as the public good has emerged with the modern secular state, which has its roots in the Enlightenment period and its values, as well as the striving for dividing education from the influence from the Church (Nowak, 2001). The concept that first started giving the responsibility for providing a system of education that is guaranteed to every citizen is a socialist concept of human rights, as besides the right to work and to social security, it was among the most important rights in the constitutions of all socialist states (Nowak, 2001).

## **1.2. The Right to Education in the International Covenant of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, European Convention on Human Rights**

Another crucial international legal instrument that stipulates the right to education as a fundamental right is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted on 16 December 1966, by the General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) and entered into force on 3 January 1976, according to article 27 (OHCHR).

Just as the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the Republic of Serbia has ratified this document on 12 March 2001. Education is addressed in Articles 13 and 14 of the ICESCR. The first paragraph

states the right to education as the right guaranteed for everyone, signing parties should be responsible to direct this education towards the “full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity as well as participating in free society, where understanding, tolerance and friendship should be promoted among all nations and races, ethnic or religious groups and continue the activities that United Nations launched in order to maintain the peace (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 2). Further, primary education is to be compulsory and free for everyone, secondary education should be provided in more forms, with technical and vocational education available, it should be “generally available and accessible to all”, by appropriate means and progressive introduction of free education. When it comes to higher education, it should be made equally accessible to everyone, based on the capacity and the appropriate means, also by the progressive introduction of free education (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 2). For those who have not completed primary education, they should be encouraged to attend the fundamental education and receive essential skills. The Covenant emphasizes that the quantity, infrastructure and materials of the educational institutions should be secured, and its accessibility should be for everyone without discrimination, both physically and economically (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 2). The freedom of choice is given to parents or legal guardians to decide whether their children will attend schools that are provided by the public authorities or other actors, while the others still have to satisfy the minimum standards that the State has set. Individuals are allowed to open and manage the educational institutions privately, if they respect the minimum standards that are set by the State (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 4).

The Content and Quality of Education should strengthen human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as promote understanding, tolerance, friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic and religious groups (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 4). The equitable education should be achieved by providing equal educational opportunities for everyone, without discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origins, property, birth or other (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 1). There is an obligation for States Parties to take individual or joint steps between each other to achieve the full realization of the right to education, progressively, to the maximum available resources (United Nations 1966, art. 13, para. 2). Progressive realization should not mean that there are no immediate obligations, which are the non-discrimination and free and compulsory primary education for everyone. The Article 14 foresees that the states that join the Covenant, but still have not secured the free and compulsory primary education, has the obligation to make a two detailed plan in two years after the ratification, that will provide the steps which they will take to ensure free and compulsory primary

education for everyone (United Nations 1966, art. 14, para. 1). This should be implemented progressively within a reasonable time.

The problem with every social right is the one that it depends on context, meaning that the enjoyment of one right depends on the means of the country. Lee cites Orend “We do not know the full scope of our human rights until we know that the duties correlative to them can be performed at a reasonable cost”, as stated before, providing education for children is less affordable for some states than the others (Lee, 2013, p.2, Orend, 2002, p 139).

Finally, to assure every child has the opportunity to have a minimum of protection and support in their development is done mainly by advocating for their right to education. It is important to acknowledge the fundamental, instrumental and intrinsic value of this right (Lee, 2013).

Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights is stipulating the right to education in the Article 2, however it is determined as “No person shall be denied the right to education”, which is only related to a person’s access to education, however it states that there could be restrictions regarding the age and if students are not behaving in accordance with rules. Also, it stresses the right of parents to choose the child’s education in accordance with their religious and philosophical views, although only if the curriculum is still pluralistic (Protocol No. 1 to the ECHR).

### **1.3. Convention of the Rights of the Child**

Adopted by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of the United Nations, on 20 November 1989, The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) represents the main international document that protects the rights of children. In accordance with article 49, it entered into force on 2 September 1990 (CRC). It is ratified by the 196 State Parties, while the United States has only signed it without ratifying. The Republic of Serbia ratified it on 12 March 2001. The right to education as a moral ideal in CRC is supposed to be aligned with the ideals in the UDHR and is viewing education as something that should be “child-centered, child friendly, and empowering educational environment” (Lee, 2013, p.3). The CRC and General Comments to article 13 of the ICESCR (1999) provide a more comprehensive explanation of the right to education (McCowan, 2010).

The right to education is stipulated in Articles 28 and 29. Article 28 is leaning on the provisions from the ICESCR (Lee, 2013). It assigns the states parties with the responsibility to guarantee free and compulsory primary education. While secondary education should be encouraged and accessible, tertiary education should be accessible as well. States are also ordered to take measures to encourage regular

attendance of students as well as to reduce drop-out rates (CRC art 28, para 1,2,3). Further, the guidance for educational and vocational information should be accessible, discipline should be ensured by the appropriate measures that align with human dignity and are in conformity with the Convention, international cooperation in the context of education is encouraged (CRC, Art 29, para 4,5,6). This confirms the inalienability of human rights and dignity, requiring that the context should be stimulating for the child's development, balanced between its abilities, familial and cultural identities and the socioeconomic circumstances (Lee, 2013).

The Article 29 determines the goals of education, which are: development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (CRC, Art 29, para 1), respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, "principles enshrined in the founding Charter of the United Nations" (CRC, Art 29, para 2), respect for the child's parents, cultural identity, language, values, the values of the country where the child is receiving education, as well as of their origins, and the "civilizations different from their own" (CRC, Art 29, para 3). The education is supposed to have the aim to prepare the child to live in a free society responsibly, with values of peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin (CRC, Art 29, para 4). Finally, it should foster respect for the natural environment (CRC, Art 29, para 5). This article also stresses human dignity (Lee, 2013).

From the listed goals and values, the goals of the right to education as stated in the CRC, are not only for ensuring the access of education, but also for striving for the quality as well as the nurturing of human rights as universal values.

Besides these two articles, other articles from the CRC are interconnected with the right to education. Article 2 of the CRC stresses the importance of respecting the rights of all children without the exception, which is especially important when talking about inclusion of girls in education, as well as the racial and ethnic minorities (Lee, 2013). Further, Article 3, the best interest of the child is always of primary concern in decisions related to them. Lee is of the opinion that for this right to be applied in the context of education, children need to take part in the decision-making processes, certainly in accordance with their age (Lee, 2013). Article 5 considers the influence of the parents in a child's development thus their positive contributions should be encouraged, while Article 6 stipulates the child's right to life and healthy environment. The four mentioned articles relate to the holistic approach to child's development and family environment with the goal to ensure at least a "minimally decent life" (Lee, 2013, p.3). Other closely related articles are 12 and 17. Article 12 stipulates children's participation, their right to form personal opinions and expressing them when the decisions affecting them are being made,

the right to, in accordance with their age of maturity "participate in school life" by joining "student councils, peer-mentoring programs" and contribute to making the material for the curriculum that is meaningful for them. The right to access the information is determined in Article 17(a). Encouragement to better the understanding and communication between different cultures, is stated in Article 17(b). The interconnectedness between the parent's role and the role of the public authorities of the state in child's upbringing and protection of rights, in the context of public order and national security is prescribed in Article 17(e), this is to establish and maintain the peace in the society (Lee, 2013, p.3).

Quality of education is, however, not precisely defined. While access to school is the basis of the right, the learning outcomes are not that much. However, some, for example the World Bank pay huge amounts of attention to the learning outcomes and see it as the indicator of the quality of education (McCowan, 2010, Hanushek & Woessmann 2007; Vegas & Petrow 2008; World Bank 2006). Over time, the outcome-based approach has received attention, though it has mostly been focusing on the assessment of students in mathematics, language and science. There is no guarantee that these measures are adequate to the broader sense of the meaning of the outcome, though some skills are recognized to be desirable in order for one to have a fulfilling life, those are literacy, analytical thinking and communication skills (McCowan 2010).

#### **1.4. Minorities and the Right to Education**

In the 2000s there were many efforts to establish a rights-based approach to development and thus a lot of attention was paid to human rights in education, thus many violations of human rights were noticed in schools. Such are the discrimination against the national minorities, degrading treatment of children and neglecting the rights of teachers (McCowan, 2010).

National minorities are guaranteed the right to education in several international documents, the main ones are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the right to education in Article 26, it emphasizes that education should be for everyone and that it should strive to develop everyone's personality with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the context of the International Covenant on

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), minorities are also covered in the aforementioned Articles 13 and 14, especially in paragraph 7, regarding the content and the quality of education, as well as 8, the rights to equal educational opportunities. Minorities are also protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), in Article 27, that secures the protection of the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture, practice their own religion and use their own language. The aforementioned Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in the article 29, emphasizes that the education of the child should be with respect of their parents cultural identity, language and values, while the article 30 is stating that the child who belongs to minority or indigenous group should be free to enjoy their culture, practice their religion and use the language. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), touches upon the right to education for minorities in Articles 12 and 14, where the first one is promoting the equal access to education for national minorities and advocates for measure to nurture the knowledge about culture, history, language and religion of both national minorities and the rest of the population, while the second mentioned article is stating the right of minorities to receive education in their native language. Further, UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), in the Article 1, prohibits any discrimination in education and calls for equal opportunities and treatment in education for everyone, including the national minorities. Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), guarantees the right to education in Article 4, where education about history, traditions, language and culture of minorities is emphasized as essential. While in the Article 5 of this Declaration the measures for providing the adequate opportunities to learn the native language for the national minorities are encouraged. Lastly, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992), Is addressing education for minorities in the Article 8, where the importances is emphasized as well as assuring the possibility to learn in their language, thus the state should take measures to make this possibility available at all levels of education.

### **1.5. The Right to Education in the Constitution and the Laws of The Republic of Serbia**

The Right to Education in the Republic of Serbia is addressed in Article 71 of the Constitution of Serbia adopted in 2006. The Article states that every citizen has the right to education under equal conditions, that the primary education is mandatory and free, that secondary and tertiary education can be free, in accordance with the assessment of the student as well as the conditions set by the law. Universities have the autonomy to independently decide on the issues of their internal organization and

management. The State should ensure equal conditions for everyone to access education. The national minorities have the right to attend education in their own language, in accordance with the law (Official Gazette, 48/94 and 11/98).

Furthermore, several Laws of the Republic of Serbia currently determine the right to education in more details. First one is the Law on the Basics of the Education System, that regulates the goals, levels of education, the rights and obligations of students, parents and the staff, as well as the management of the institutions (Official Gazette, 88/2017, 10/2'19, 27/2018, 6/2020, 129/2021, 92/2023). Secondly, the Law on Primary Education that regulates the organization of the education, duration, curriculum, assessment of primary school students, their rights and obligations, as well as those of the parents and teachers (Official Gazette, 55/2013, 101/2017, 10/2019, 27, 2018, 129/2021, 92/2023). Further, the Law on Secondary Education is determining all different types of high schools, curriculums, organization of classes, the rights and obligation of the students as well as the teaching staff, conditions of enrollment and completing high school (Official Gazette, 55/2013, 101/2017, 10/2019, 27, 2018, 129/2021, 92/2023). The Law of Tertiary Education regulates the system of the higher education, both for colleges and universities, the autonomy of tertiary education institutions, accreditation, programmes, conditions of enrollments, the rights and the obligations of students as well as the teaching staff (Official Gazette, 88/2017, 73/2018, State Law, 27/2018, 67/2019, 6/2020, 11/2021, authentic interpretation, 67/2021, State Law 67/2021, 76/2023). The Law on Textbooks regulates the criteria for textbooks and other tools for teaching, publishing, distribution and their usage (Official Gazette, 27/2018, 92/2023). The Law on Adult Education determines the education of adults in terms of different kinds of programmes, types of financing, the rights and obligations of the students as well as the institutions of adult education (Official Gazette, 55/2013, 88/2017, State Law 27/2018, 6/2020). The Law on National Councils of National Minorities determines the right to education of national minorities in their native language, as well as the rights to have education aligned with the uniqueness of their own cultures and traditions (Official Gazette, 72/2009, 20/2014, Decision of the US, 55/2014, 47/2018).

As Lee explained, all democratic countries which have the right to education with the provision of the basic schooling in their constitutions, are responsible to provide all citizens with it (Lee, 2013).

## **1.6. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)**

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was adopted on 21 December 1965 and entered into force on 4 January 1969. Serbia signed this treaty on the 12th of March, 2001 (OHCHR), while this Convention was already signed by the former Yugoslavia on 21 December 1965 (OHCHR). The main objective of the ICERD is the “eradication of racial discrimination”, in all its forms, with the goal of promoting understanding among all races (ICERD). The Key Provisions of this Convention are the definitions of racial discrimination, which is “any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin that impairs the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms”(United Nations 1965, art. 1). The States that are parties to this Convention should condemn all forms of racial discrimination and set policies to eliminate them, by preventing, prohibiting and eradicating. The Policy Measures that should be taken are legislative and judicial, with first being enforcing the laws that prohibit racial discrimination and the second being the establishment of prosecution and sanctions for potential discrimination. The promotion of understanding, tolerance and friendship among different nations, racial or ethnic groups should be promoted by the state by education and training, which also includes information campaigns to combat prejudices which further lead to racial discrimination. The rights before the state law should be secured to everyone, in particular the equal treatment before tribunals and other organs of justice, the right to security should be protected by the State against violence or bodily harm, the political and civil rights should be secured, including participation in elections and public affairs, freedom of movement, residence, nationality. Economic, social and cultural rights as well, particularly employment, housing, health care, education and training. The special measure that aims at accelerating de facto equality among groups and creating equal opportunities for the groups that are considered disadvantaged, should not lead to one specific group having special rights among others (United Nations 1965, art. 1(4)). The monitoring should be done by regular reporting and reviewing by states to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the individual complaints can be made to CERD. One of the important stances is that in order to achieve elimination of racial discrimination globally, efforts are needed especially in research and education.

In the context of universality of education, some of the critique is that even though the access to education should be secured it may result in violation of their other rights and deepen the inequalities. Such a setting

is the racial discrimination happens to children who are not part of the majority in that country. Education can for example have a nationalistic indoctrination, as well as result in racial segregation, as well as deepen the inequalities of social classes. This is one more critique to the UDHR and its definition of the rights to education, while it is said that education should promote friendship and tolerance among different nations, racial or religious groups, there is no concrete tool suggested for which methods and characteristics of teaching could achieve that, not in the morals nor the consistency in context of education (McCowan, 2010).

## CHAPTER 2: Roma Minority in Serbia

This chapter aims to bring closer the understanding of the Roma minority and the multidimensional realities of their lives in Serbia with all the specifics accompanying them.

Serbia has 24 official national minorities which all have their National Councils (RS Gov, 2024). The Roma was officially recognized as a national minority in 2002, with Romanes as their official mother tongue (Open Society Institute, 2007). From all nationalities in Serbia, Roma belongs among the “most marginalized, misinterpreted and misread cultural and ethnic groups”. They are repressed not only compared to the Serbian nationals, but as well in relation to other national minorities (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015). To this day, Roma children remain highly marginalized in Europe, leading to international calls, such as those from the European Commission (2020), for a more targeted approach that recognizes the diversity within the Roma community and addresses their specific needs (UNICEF, 2022).

The obstacles that Roma people face in Serbia are common in all ex-socialist countries and have developed in the 1990s with the start of the transition period. The four key segments that shape their lives, and more broadly influence their right to education, will be highlighted and elaborated in this chapter. The aforementioned segments are the Roma settlements, often characterized as substandard, their (under)representation in media and public life, poverty and readmission from the Western Europe and life of repatriates after their return to Serbia.

The official number of Roma living in Serbia is never correct and throughout the year the estimated data is in reality at least double as given data. Another obstacle in conducting the most accurate data lies in the lack of official reports regarding socio-economic life, such as the poverty reports during the pandemic of covid-19, or the prevalent negative light in which media most often reports about this community.

### 2.1. Roma Settlements in Serbia

As aforementioned, limitations of research done on the Roma population lie in the fact that the official number of Roma inhabitants in Serbia was never correct. For example, in 2002, the official number was 108.400 Roma citizens, but the unofficial number was 800.000. Thus, the consolidated estimation was between 450.000 and 500.000, which was 6,2% of the overall population (Roma education Fund, 2007). In 2011, the official number was 147.000, which was 2.05% of the population,

while the estimated number was, as highlighted above, at least double that number (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015).

Roma people have been living in Serbia since the 15th century. Until the late 19th century, the traditional Ottoman neighborhoods, mahala's were homes to both Roma and Non-Roma population. Over time, the majority Serbian population ceased to include these neighborhoods in the urban planning. However, Roma communities continued to live in these areas that are now called Roma Settlements. Unfortunately, these neighborhoods are often labeled with pejorative terms such as "slums", "Gypsy mahalla", "cardboard city" etc. (Vuksanović-Macura, 2012). Attention was not given at all to these neighborhoods until the beginning of the 21st century, mostly which was eventually done under the pressure of NGOs and International Organizations. Many of these settlements are built informally and are not recognized on maps. Approximately 80 percent of the overall Roma population live in the poorest areas and settlements (Roma Education Fund 2007).

Distribution of Roma settlements is widely spread across Serbia. OSCE has published data that there are over 700 substandard Roma Settlements (OSCE, 2016). According to another mapping project, there are 583 settlements, the number of municipalities where the settlements were found was 120, which is 70.01% of all (Živković & Đorđević, 2015, 16). These settlements often lack formal recognition and sufficient infrastructure. Most of these do not have a sewage system, access to water, electricity and not all roads are adequate (Živković & Đorđević, 2015).

The settlements are located on peripheries of cities and in rural areas, which indicates the pattern of marginalization and segregation from socio-economic opportunities (OSCE, 2016). There are slightly more settlements in urban areas than the rural areas. The positions of these can be categorized in three types: integrated into formal settlements, on the outskirts of the settlements and outside from a formal settlement (Živković & Đorđević, 2015).

In Serbia, settlements are smaller in number of inhabitants than those in the neighboring countries such as Bulgaria and Romania (Vuksanović-Macura, 2012). Obstacles in urban areas differ to those in rural areas, while urban ones are most often located in the abandoned parts of the cities and close to industrial zones and consist of dilapidated houses. Further, these areas are more exposed to environmental pollution, especially those in proximity to the industrial zones, which has severe consequences to the health of inhabitants. The biggest challenges in the rural areas lie in the fact that they are situated far away from healthcare, education and working opportunities. The effect of this is intensified social exclusion and limited economic opportunities. Therefore, many families are engaged in agricultural seasonal jobs that perpetuate their poverty.

Poor living conditions in these settlements consist of lack of water or clean water, sanitation, electricity etc (Živković & Đorđević, 2015). OSCE highlights the effects on health and safety that the inadequate living conditions cause (OSCE, 2016). Furthermore, the impact on children and their health and development is worrisome as well. Malnutrition is concerningly present, the study which was part of Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), reported that 20.1% children are stunted, 4.3% wasted and 8.0% underweight. The level of wasting is higher in urban areas than in rural areas (Serbia MICS, 2005 in Janevic et al, 2010). Another relevant piece of information was the fact that children are often left in care of other children, which increases the risks of malnutrition. The most severe effect of this was during the pandemic, when approximately 5000 families did not have access to drinking water (Tim za socijalno uključivanje, 2020).

The Roma settlements are very often not included in the urban planning, nor recognized officially. This furthers the exclusion and demonstrates broader societal and institutional discrimination. Very few initiatives took a participatory approach, which involved the Roma community in land-use planning and decision-making. The project “We are here together - European support for the inclusion of Roma ” was technically supported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe throughout the years 2013-2016 in order to help the Roma minority access their basic rights and civic participation, labor market, education, health, social welfare, adequate housing and job creation (OSCE, 2016). Legalization of settlements can significantly improve the overall quality of infrastructure, connections and quality of life of Roma residents. In the projects that were taken until 2016, it was highlighted that the needs of residents should be addressed when planning with a participatory approach (OSCE, 2016).

Later, between 2018 and 2020, the project “For Roma - With Roma”, as well by the OSCE, included 11 municipalities across the country who were assigned to take participatory urban planning approach and work together with members of the Roma community on improving the living conditions of their neighborhoods (Vuksanović-Macura & Mišćević, 2021). However, more efforts need to be put forward for this to become the mainstream approach.

Some risks that people from the settlements face are no birth registration, child marriage of a mother or being left and taken care of by another child. Stunting and wasting among children constitute the biggest signs that are caused by the socioeconomic circumstances of children who live in Roma settlements (Janevic et al, 2010).

The Council of Europe estimates that a total number of Roma who live in Europe is between 10 and 12 million, majority in Eastern Europe (Vuksanović-Macura & Mišćević, 2021). The phenomenon

of Roma settlements occurs in both middle and least economically developed countries. In all Eastern European countries Children who live in Roma face exclusion and poverty (Janević et al, 2010).

## 2.2. Poverty

The transition period since the disintegration of Yugoslavia brought many economic challenges to Serbia. A never-ending cycle happens with the poorest population not having the same opportunities to complete even elementary school, while education is one of the key elements for every person to overcome poverty. Roma minority members are usually engaged in underpaid jobs that do not require qualifications, where they are exploited. Some of these jobs are cleaning, carriers, warehouse persons, construction workers etc (Roma Education Fund, 2007). The noticed observation by two sources is that the common self-sustaining mechanism of the marginalized communities is to keep themselves in poverty (UNICEF, 2017, Komatina, 2016).

The first goal in the Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) by the United Nations, that should be reached by 2030, is to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" (A/RES/70/1, p.15). Placing it as the first of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations, speaks for itself for the importance of this goal for the UN. Other sub-goals from the Agenda for Sustainable Development are ending hunger and malnutrition caused by poverty, make healthcare more accessible, fight against violence against women and girls, make water, sanitary, hygienic products and energy more accessible, as well as access and protection at work. Further, the protection of workers, equality, accessible transport and securing personal documents for everyone in order to have access to social services (EAPN, 2017).

Poverty is further related to the health and wellbeing of children; thus, they were more prone to chronic illnesses and disease, the mortality rate of infants was 26 per 1000 and children under 5 years old were 19 per 1000 according to UNICEF in 2006 (UNICEF, 2006). The poverty and its effects intensified during covid19, when those who were already the most vulnerable just became even more. The settlements in which Roma minority members were living during the times of crisis like this had more difficulties than the others, 38% of these did not have a direct access to the water, while in 30% of neighborhoods, 30% of houses were not part of the plumbing system. This means that they were at higher risk of getting sick as well as not receiving adequate treatment, since the water was the most important for sustaining hygiene, especially for hands, and combating the virus (Mitić et al, 2022).

The European Anti-Poverty Network is an umbrella organization of Anti-Poverty Networks from 32 countries, among which is the Serbian Network that counts 24 civil-society organizations that are

combating poverty and social exclusion. Since 2017, this network has made 5 ‘Poverty Watch Reports’ each year except for 2022 (EAPN, 2023).

These reports are good indicators of the latest developments regarding the economy in Serbia. The first year examined, 2017, shows that the Serbian government has not implemented a single policy or a document to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (EAPN, 2017). In that year, EUROSTAT showed that Serbia was the country with the most population at risk of poverty among countries that were monitored, as well as that the level of poverty in Serbia had been stagnating in the years prior to 2017, having the absolute poverty at the rate above 7%, due to recovering from the economic crisis (EAPN, 2017).

Recommendations from EAPN for 2017 were for the government to develop a national strategy and create goals that were aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, including forming a body responsible for implementing these goals, improve and make more accessible the social protection measures, improve access to education and reduce dropout rates, promote work in dignity, continue working on gender equality, gather the civil society organizations and those who experienced poverty to assist with defining and applying measures for reducing poverty and social exclusion (EAPN, 2017). In 2018, the recommendations were to give more attention to protect employed persons who are at risk of poverty, elderly people, and generally improve strategy for promotion and protection from poverty and social exclusion, again including the involvement of civil society sector and experts (EAPN, 2018).

Those who are at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion in reports by EAPN are families with single parents, children, the Roma minority members, especially those who live in substandard settlements. However, the working population and the self-employed entrepreneurs were also gradually becoming more at risk of poverty (EAPN, 2017, 2018, 2020,2021,2023).

Besides the elderly people, the group that was introduced as the one of highest risk of financial poverty are unemployed people, which to the greatest extent affects young population, especially young women, those with lower education, vulnerable groups such as Roma, persons with disabilities etc (EAPN, 2018, 4).

Reports from 2020 and 2021 show the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on poverty in Serbia. The main feature which, once again, was demonstrated by these reports is that the most negatively affected by this crisis were those who were already the most vulnerable. As it was stated in the report, the pandemic had “altered” realities around the whole globe and brought to surface all the shortcomings of the social systems and institutions, especially in a country like Serbia, that has “long and strong legacy of authoritarian regimes, political clientelism, and party patronage” (EAPN, 2020, p. 2).

During the pandemic there was no official data on poverty rates, thus monitoring was more challenging and relying on reports of international and civil society organizations. Women were again more negatively affected by the crisis when it comes to socio-economic and employment status (EAPN, 2020). Furthermore, women from the Roma community were noted to be the least employed among all citizens in Serbia (EAPN, 2021). Families with higher numbers of children were also negatively affected as their income started declining, while a quarter of families had unexpected expenses during the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020).

Some policies that the government applied resulted in positive results regarding the poverty rate. Those were the increase in pensions and social benefits, as well as the one time aid (34 euros for those in retirement and 100 for those over 18), besides that NGOs were also giving support to certain citizens. Even though the measures that the state took were described as the most generous among the Western Balkans, they were also criticized as discriminatory. Reason for that is that vulnerable groups were not adequately included, being vulnerable workers, children and families with more children as the financial aid was only sent to those who reached the age of majority, people who do not own the Identification Document, as many Roma who live in substandard settlements and especially those who were internally displaced or forced to migrate in the past, homeless, refugees and asylum seekers and persons with mental disabilities. In addition, Roma population that lived in substandard settlements faced risk during the pandemic due to the nature of their jobs, which they were not able to perform during the periods of restrictions, those jobs are often “collecting secondary raw materials, selling goods at green markets or playing music” (EAPN, 2020, P. 7-8). The problems of these vulnerable groups were specifically addressed at the “conference on poverty during and after the crisis” by the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit in May 2020 (EAPN, 2020, p.8).

The Report from 2021 was done in collaboration with SeConS Development Initiative Group, an independent think-tank organization that strives to improve the socio-economic development and living conditions in Serbia and the region, founded in 2005. This report focuses on analysis of the impact on the most vulnerable groups who were at risk prior to the pandemic, as well. The research conducted was qualitative, since, as it was aforementioned, the official data on poverty was still not published by the government and only few surveys and conversations with representatives of vulnerable groups from Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš were included in focus group discussions and interviews. Another focus was the obstacles of digital education that also affected Roma children from the most vulnerable households (EAPN, 2021). Additional information that half of the Roma population was struggling to meet their

basic needs in the times of a full lockdown and they were experiencing inequality in healthcare (EAPN, 2021).

Civil society organizations in Serbia, which focus on promoting and protecting the rights of Roma and took part in a study on the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In June 2020 assessed the government measures impact on the Roma population as negative, as a percentage of 47.37% in a percentage of positive, in a percentage of 26.31%, or having no impact 26.32% (EAPN, 2021). Additionally, almost 80% among these organizations reported that the restrictive measures increased the already high risk of poverty among Roma individuals, causing them further uncertainty. The financial aid, as well as supply, was organized by the Roma Association of Citizens and it was considered as extremely helpful and necessary (EAPN, 2021).

Children and young Roma were identified as a particularly vulnerable group during the full lockdown. Challenges that they faced were in education, access to work, electricity, Internet, television, and other means of communication. The biggest obstacle in education were online classes as the children from vulnerable families were not provided with adequate and necessary digital equipment that would enable them to follow those classes. Besides these obstacles, everyone expressed that the classes were not organized in a high quality and the online classes that were followed by the classes on television were not a good solution and were difficult to follow as the schedule was not aligned (EAPN, 2021).

One more topic was mental health, as the fear that accompanied daily life of each citizen of Serbia was particularly intense during the initial state of emergency (EAPN, 2021). Not only Roma minority members, but also around 60% of all groups of young people in Serbia that were interviewed had a negative impression on the impact of the pandemic on their education, while only 6.1% expressed that they had all necessary equipment (EAPN, 2021). The last information on absolute poverty rate was from 2020 and indicated that this type of poverty is declining considerably slower and almost half million citizens “cannot meet basic life needs” (EAPN, 2023).

Serbia has a social protection for the financially deprived persons that implies “social assistance program for individuals or families and child allowance”, but the World Bank Report from 2015 shows that only 0.5% of GDP is allocated for these purposes (EAPN, 2023). In comparison to other Western Balkan and European Union countries, the Serbian level of social protection benefits are average. On a less favorable note, the funding for the social protection system has been decreasing during the recent years and less people have been supported by it (EAPN, 2023).

While more than 70% of social protection funds are allocated to pensions, distributions for financially deprived households are very limited. Furthermore, in the last few years there has been a

decline in the number of recipients of social support; in 2022, from all the persons living in poverty, only less than half have been supported by the social assistance programme, from children living in poverty, only 60% were included in the aforesaid programme (EAPN, 2023). The inadequacy of the inclusion of financially deprived persons lies in the restrictive and often biased criteria for the new receivers of social support, along with the intricate administrative procedure (EAPN, 2023).

The new Law on Social Cards was introduced in Serbia in March 2022, as part of the Economic Reform Program, and was rendered as a significant step for improving the system of social protection. This law introduced automation and algorithms when deciding who is going to be a beneficiary of a social center by collecting data about them. By this way, the social card would be created solely on the data given officially. This implies that if at a certain moment an individual has an amount of income that exceeds the one to which they are entitled to social assistance, they will lose this right. The problem is that these incomes are not stable and are sometimes the results of occasional or even informal work. Additionally, these incomes are not enough to cover the needs of a household even with the help from social assistance (EAPN, 2023). Prior to the introduction of the Social Card Register, the biggest obstacle was the large amount of documentation that applicants needed to collect in order to apply. Additionally, only those families who would meet very strict conditions were provided with social assistance, and in many cases these were extremely strict and thus many people in need of the assistance would not receive it. To illustrate, the monthly social assistance in 2023 was around 11,445 dinars, 97 euros, while the minimum monthly salary was 53,000 dinars, 460 euros (Amnesty International, 2023). Some civil society organizations stand with the opinion that this will deepen the problems of economically disadvantaged people as it will decrease the current number of those who receive assistance. Another issue is that the administrative poverty line is also not adequate, and some people even need double the amount of social assistance to meet the basic existential needs and reach the relative poverty line. Further problems arise when the regressive tax system in Serbia burdens more people who work for minimum wage than those who earn multiple times more (EAPN, 2023).

Amnesty International has published a report in which individuals with children who have not even had a bank account were rejected by this programme because of false data processing. According to this study, thousands of people in Serbia have lost the right to social assistance due to this new eligibility criteria (Amnesty International, 2023). The official intention of the government was completely opposite: it was supposed to make the distribution in a fairer manner. In comparison to August 2022, in March 2023, 35,000 less individuals were beneficiaries of the social assistance. The influence is not solely of the Law on Social Cards; however, it did have an effect. (Amnesty International, 2023).

Almost all children that were part of a study about malnutrition in Roma settlements were shown to be in the “lowest quintile of wealth” among all citizens of Serbia (Janević et al, 2010).

Poverty is severely influencing education on the very surface levels of having access to it, thus children from low-income families face numerous obstacles in enjoying their right to education. By this, the cycle of marginalization continues and is transmitted from generation to generation.

### **2.3. (Under)Representation of Roma in Media and Public Life**

Social exclusion discourse of Roma in Serbia is influenced by many systemic and societal shortcomings and discrimination. Two factors that influence the exclusion are social welfare sector and media coverage, which mostly work in a way to contribute to their deprivation in education, labor market, health care, housing (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015). Mainstream media continuously contributes to maintaining the adverse situation of the Roma community in Serbia as it has the agency to foster the ethnic and racial intolerance among citizens. This is done by continuing the reconstruction of hegemonic ideologies. General conditions of their lives, status, possibility to express culturally and take part in political life was generally estimated to be of higher quality in the former Yugoslavia compared to other countries in Eastern Europe as well as contemporary Serbia (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015). Throughout history, Roma were represented as the romanticized “other”, nomadic and bohemian (“symbolically privileged, and socially marginalized”) (Schneeweis, 2009), which is rooted in the manner of representation in the romanticism, era when they were depicted as “musicians, artists, free spirited, romantic and of bohemian character”, which still remained in the socialist era, but was in transition (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015). However, cultural contributions and successful individuals from the Roma community have often been neglected (Kleut, Drašković, & Prodanović, 2012).

General attitudes towards Roma are substantially influenced by the media. The research from 2013 shows that over 60% of citizens of Serbia receive sources about the Roma minority solely through the media. While it was shown that Roma was perceived as the most discriminated against group, citizens were on the other hand not aware of the severity of their living conditions (CESID, 2013). Even when the discrimination, prejudice and hate speech are not directly presented in the media, there are strategies, such as stereotyping that are often used to preserve the power dynamics, as stereotypes are “never neutral” and always have an interest behind. They attribute certain images of a specific social group and claim that they are true for the whole group (Mek Kvin, 2003, p. 183, in Kleut et al., 2012). Stereotypes

are usually oversimplified and divergent from the social norms and are followed by more extreme images, so that they isolate a certain group (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015).

The representation of Roma in the media has changed since the early 2000s, but the stereotypes and sensationalization are still very present in reporting about this minority. What is visible is the very negative stereotyping in the media in the early 2000s as either criminals or beggars for the purpose of gaining more audience. Stories about Roma used to be reported most often by non-Roma, in a very stereotypical way (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015). These kinds of representations usually dehumanize them in the eyes of the public.

The mass media has the power to depict the world according to their own criteria, and influence of portraying different social groups by constructing images of individuals, events or relationships by simplifying elements that portray specific meanings (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015 from: Kleut, Drašković, & Prodanović, 2012).

The most common depiction of Roma are as the poor, however there are two influential representations, symbolic marginalization as the group and symbolic normalization in a broader societal context. Depicting them as poor in totality, gives an image that they are not able to express their problems on their own, they are not given voices to tell their own stories. These representations are usually “deprivation, determinism and victimization”, usually repetitive and ethnically determined. Poverty is, as symbolic normalization, the characteristic that is assigned to the whole population of Serbia, as many citizens subjectively feel that Serbian society is poor (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015, p.145).

International organizations and the civil society network started influencing changes in the general attitude towards Roma, and journalists are receiving more education on how to present them in an inclusive way and show positive examples. Roma also became not only the topic in the news, but also the journalists. As the 2010s were approaching, civil society in Serbia started having more and more impact on society by promoting and protecting human rights. Media literacy became a generally valuable topic, and education on it has increased, both in formal and informal settings, including reporting on national minorities. The situation has especially changed lately with the new role that social media took in informing the public. This had a good impact by giving Roma activists the ability to create their own content. On the other hand, social media can enhance hate speech and fake news.

In Serbia, there are 18 registered Roma political parties, with Unija Roma Srbije and Romska Partija being active. Historically, Roma parties were not represented in parliament or government until 2007. In that year's parliamentary elections, Unija Roma Srbije and Romska Partija each secured one seat, facilitated by Article 81 of the Electoral Law exempting minorities from the 5 percent vote

threshold. This milestone reflects growing Roma political participation and support within the community, marking a shift towards voting for their own representatives. Additionally, Roma are now represented in various municipal councils across Serbia (Roma Education Fund, 2007).

Some of the consequences of the aforementioned treatment of Roma by media and public discourse are also that they avoid declaring themselves as ethnically Roma; this further deepens their discrimination as they become “legally invisible”, they then tend to assimilate into the broader community and lose their cultural identity (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015).

There is an urgent change in the dominant discourse about Roma needed in society (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015).

When cases of violence against Roma occur, the media are usually not interested, unless it is an extreme case of violence. These cases are often underreported or the level of severity of a crime is not clearly emphasized. The lack of reporting results in maintaining the lack of awareness among the general public about the existence of violence and discrimination that the Roma minority faces (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015).

Good examples of the shift in the discourse were media reporting of two murders of Roma individuals, one from 1997 and the other from 2007. After the first one, the murder of Duško Jovanović, the reporting was rated to be adequate; this was the first official racial hate driven murder in Serbia, publicly presented by the media. Ten years after this case, another Roma boy, Branko Jovanović, was murdered, however the media was not said to be reporting sufficiently, nor had they given much attention to this second case. Different initial reports even confused his name, thus there were two different names in different reports, while the report on three minors who committed the murder was sensationalist (Simeunović-Bajić, 2011). This kind of (under)reporting is particularly dangerous, as it creates the notion of normalized violence and lack of empathy in the public.

As much as the way the media portrays Roma in a negative light can exacerbate their marginalization and cause prejudice and even violence against them, the shift in representation of Roma in a positive light has the power to significantly improve their perception of the broader society, reduce prejudice while promoting intercultural understanding. Some civil society organizations have been actively raising awareness about issues and discrimination against Roma (Kleut, Drašković, & Prodanović, 2012).

The problem of stereotyping is that the mass audience is not able to identify and thus empathize with the marginalized group. For example, poverty is represented as households situated by the containers for garbage or landfills etc, without contextualisation; stereotyping in this way is also described as “poverty

porn”. Consequently, the problems of poverty are not brought out in a constructive way in order to introduce the discussion about the roots of poverty and its eradication (Vidojević & Perišić, 2015). The importance of representation also lies in the fact that many Roma, due to fear of discrimination, reject declaring themselves as Roma on the national census (Jovanović et al, 2013).

#### **2.4. Readmission of Roma individuals to Serbia**

The readmission of Roma to Serbia, as well as other states in the Balkans, is related to the recent historical and political developments. Many Roma migrated to the West during the Wars in the 90s in the former Yugoslavia and in Kosovo at the end of the 90s. During that period, many Roma left the Western Balkans and applied for asylum in Western Europe, in search of a more stable life (Vuković, 2009). Among many consequences of the wars was also the intensified discrimination and marginalization of Roma, which influenced their decisions to leave and search for the protection and security in Western European countries. Another issue that appeared after the wars that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the war in Kosovo was the widespread internal displacement of people, among which many were Roma. According to UNHCR, Serbia is in the top 20 countries in the number of IDPs worldwide (Vujadinović et al, 2013). The Agreement on Readmission was signed in 2001, which institutionalized the process of returning individuals who entered EU countries illegally or had lost their right to protection and their asylum applications were rejected. This agreement was an important development in the legalization of migration between Serbia and the EU, that was supposed to regulate migrations and respect the principles of international law. According to this agreement, the citizens from Serbia, including Roma, were repatriated (Vujadinović et al, 2013).

Since the Agreement came to power, “tens of thousands” of them were repatriated (Roma Education Fund, 2007). The main question for the education system was how ready it was to accept these children (Arsenović-Pavlović et al, 2008). Finally, the exact number of people deported or voluntarily returned to Serbia from Western European countries remains unknown and it has been increasing over the years. In February 2009, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Strategy for the Reintegration of Returnees, which anticipated the establishment of several regional reception centers for returnees (Jelinčić i Đurović, 2016).

Conditions of lives of Roma repatriates are very unenviable. Roma repatriates often face numerous challenges upon their return to Serbia. Many of them lack stable housing, employment and social support, which aggravates their vulnerability and curtails their return into Serbian society. Among

their problems, the biggest ones are unresolved citizenship status and limited or no access to health and education (Mandić-Kelijašević, 2023). Many difficulties that follow the reintegration process of Roma repatriates, find them relying on an informal and community support to meet the basic needs.

Children from this group are among the most socially excluded and vulnerable members of society. Throughout the years, Serbia has been implementing strategies for inclusion of repatriates, in relation to access to work, education, healthcare and housing. However, many gaps in implementation are present. What caused these gaps, and the inadequate support of Roma repatriates is usually limited resources, as well as restricted capacity of institutions and the systemic challenges (Mandić-Kelijašević, 2023).

Finally, efforts from different sides are needed in order for the implementation of these strategies to be effective. The human rights approach is crucial for successful implementation and overcoming all the challenges.

The position of the Roma minority in Serbia is complex and unenviable. Many obstacles that they face regarding the settlements where they live, media representation, poverty or the problems regarding migrations and readmission influence the quality of their lives on every level and prevent children from developing to their full potential. Some policies have been introduced to improve the inclusion of Roma in Serbia, however the words from the paper were not always implemented, while at times the mechanisms are not efficient and deepens the discrimination instead of reducing it. Enhancement of educational opportunities for Roma children is one of the crucial steps in overcoming marginalization.

### CHAPTER 3: Roma children in education system of Serbia

Even though many countries are parties to international conventions regarding education, it is crucial to acknowledge the fact that education as a human right goes beyond the legal instruments and it is essential to apply the provisions of children's rights by taking public actions and actively supporting and maintaining the rights of children (Lee, 2013).

One of the rare Roma women who have obtained a PhD in Serbia Slavica Denić, promotes widespread formal education of Roma and a professional approach to Roma culture, as the most effective path to the emancipation of the Roma population, as well as preserving and strengthening their national identity (Komatina, 2016). The absolutely accurate data of Roma inclusion in the Serbian education system is sparse, as it is the case in many countries (Open Society Institute, 2007). For example, the EAPN Poverty Watch Report from 2023 indicates that approximately 33.33% of Roma children complete primary education, 11.54% complete secondary and circa 1% complete tertiary (EAPN, 2023).

In 2009, The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System in Serbia has brought significant changes in prescribing children's right to quality and inclusive education. Several concrete educational policy measures were introduced as part of the legal framework, aimed at enhancing the quality of education for everyone, while emphasizing for those from vulnerable backgrounds, such as Roma children (Jovanović et al, 2013).

Changes were made in line with international recommendations, as well as respecting analyses by domestic experts on the state and needs of the Serbian educational system. The very first strategic document summarizing these analyses and introducing the inclusive principles into the educational system of Serbia is "Quality Education for All - Path to a Developed Society," adopted in 2002. The directions and goals of educational development defined in this document remain equally relevant today. The first comprehensive education law which regulates preschool, primary, and secondary education in a unified manner is the Law on the Foundations of the Education System and Upbringing, adopted in 2003 (Komatina, 2016).

The education system in Serbia is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Sports, with additional governance responsibilities held by the Provincial Secretariat for Education of Vojvodina since 2002. Recent institutions like the Institute for the Development of Education and the Institute for Evaluation also contribute to educational development. The Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina plays a crucial role in minority education, including for Roma, often cooperating with National Minority Councils. However, central institutions lack specific departments or advisors for minority or Roma

education. The National Council for Education, established in 2006, includes one representative jointly selected by all national minorities. Efforts to address the inefficiencies related to education of Roma began with the Education Management Information System (EMIS) in 2002, which now covers various educational aspects, though plans for per-student financing have been delayed (Lebedinski et al, 2013). In most activities related to the Roma national minority, the educational system is criticized for its slow pace, poor coordination, and inconsistencies in legal documents, where regulations do not consistently highlight specific content (Jovanović et al, 2013).

### **3.1. Barriers of Roma Children in education system in Serbia**

Roma children face many difficulties and are marginalized wherever they live in Europe. Furthermore, they are often viewed as disadvantaged groups in social contexts, even though different members experience different kinds of problems and results in education (UNICEF, 2022). In Serbia, the country that was described as the one that's going through transition both in 2007 and 2022 (Roma Education Fund, 2007, Mitić et al, 2022).

Roma minority members are among the poorest and the most vulnerable in the margins of society (Mitić et al, 2022). Barriers that they face are social, economic and cultural, some of the most mentioned are poverty, language, traveling/mobility as well as non-understanding and disrespect behavior towards them from other members of the society (UNICEF, 2022). The most common barriers that they face during education will be mentioned in this sequence.

Oftentimes barriers that Roma children faced were at the enrollment level, by the lack of documents, as they were not registered at the municipality level (Roma Education Fund, 2007). This was especially the case before the affirmative action measures, which will be discussed in further text, took place. At times, children at the age of 16 or even 12 or 13 would be enrolled in schools for adult education, which would hinder their education even more (Jovanović et al, 2013).

As mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, poverty is another huge obstacle that Roma children face to enter and during their education, especially those who were living in Roma settlements. Children who grow up economically deprived, most often do not have the adequate and intellectually stimulating interaction with their parents if they are not educated, this further impacts the cognitive development of children. Further, in some cases the lack of basic resources of the Roma households for education was identified as the reason for dropping out of schools. (Jovanović et al, 2013). For many

Roma families expenses such as school supplies, clothing, transport of extracurricular activities for children are economically out of reach (Open Society Institute, 2007).

Child labour as the consequence of poverty is another problem that children in Roma communities face, poverty is the main cause for parents of Roma children to send them to work. According to research supported by UNICEF, in which they compared the percentage of children engaged with child labor abuse, in years of 2014 and 2019, the percentage of children from 5 to 11 years old who were engaged in child labor increased from 4.1% to 5.3%, those in the age group of 12 to 14 years old, from 0.6% to 2.3% and those in the age group of 15 to 17, from 0.5% to 4.5%. (Bradaš et al, 2020).

According to a MICS study (2019), (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey) only 24,6% of women in the age range of 15-49 years old were employed. One of the main reasons for girls to leave education are early marriages, that are defined as gender-based violence in the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. Early marriage further impacts the qualities of their lives and lowers their chances of being socially engaged. According to the study, 16% of girls have entered a child marriage before they turned 15, while 56% of them did it before they turned 18 (MICS, 2020). Globally, rates of child marriages tend to be the highest around the regions where girls do not attend schools, girls who leave schools usually do it because of inaccessible schools, bad infrastructure, gender-based violence, lack of resources etc. (UNICEF, 2016). The phenomenon of child marriages has been assigned to the Roma community to the extent that their culture is being blamed for it, all in the light of the negative representation of their characteristics. It is problematic to attribute child marriages practice to the Roma community as then it is understood as closed practice within their group and, even though it represents a serious violation of human rights, is not addressed (UNICEF, 2016). This is also addressed in the work of Komatina (2016). Even though it is common for girls to leave school and dedicate themselves to households after getting married, at times, boys who enter early marriages also drop out of school so they can undertake jobs to provide for the family (UNICEF, 2016). The research that UNICEF supported and published has conducted by Ethnographic Institute of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) in cooperation with Roma Women's Bibija on child marriages in Serbia has shown that there are various practices of early marriages in different communities, which proves the complexity of the causes that lead to them (UNICEF, 2017). This report is also confirming the marginalization rooted in the attitude of a great difference between the societies as well as that the government of Serbia does not have adequate mechanisms to combat these practices, both affirmative action measures and sanctions were mentioned as possibilities (UNICEF, 2017). This further confirms

the need of the non-Roma members of society to educate themselves on the attitudes, practices and values of the Roma minority (UNICEF, 2017).

Women who were not given the right education and are not economically empowered enough, do not have the opportunity to plan their family life freely, which affects their sexual and reproductive health (Mitić et al, 2022). Similarly to the findings of a large number of previous studies, child marriage was found to be associated with a number of socio-economic characteristics, including household wealth, education, and urban/rural status (Hotchkiss et al, 2016).

Another main problem in the inclusion of Roma children in education is providing the citizenship proof of some Roma children, who lack a birth certificate or any document that proves their relationship with their parents. To address this issue, the Ministry of Education has sent a letter to primary schools in Serbia instructing them to enroll Roma children without necessary documents without obstacles (Jelinčić i Đurović, 2016). However, some sources show that enrollment of children without complete documentation often depends on the good will of the school's administration (Open Society Institute, 2007).

Despite the challenges, data from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (MPNTR) indicated an increase of 9.8% in the number of Roma children enrolled in primary schools in the first year of implementing these legislative changes related to enrollment procedure (Čekić-Marković 2016).

Segregation of the Roma children into separate classes or improper placements in schools for children with intellectual disabilities, or even adult education which had the reduced curriculum, was prevalent practice (Open Society Institute, 2007). At times Roma parents would agree to send their children to special school, partially because these schools alleviate economic burdens of education by providing students with school supplies, transport, meals etc (Open Society Institute, 2007). According to the study of Center for Interactive Pedagogy in Belgrade, more than 30% of students who were attending special primary and secondary schools were from the Roma community, while in some cases the number is more than 50% of the student population (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016).

They often find themselves in segregated schools and classrooms (UNICEF, 2022). Special schools were also “means of segregation” in Serbia (Roma Education Fund, 2007). The European community has advocated for the ban of sending Roma children to these schools (Arsenović-Pavlović et al, 2008). There are different sources on the percentage of Roma students who attended special schools before the Decade of Roma inclusion. The education system data shows that there are 30% (on the sample of 85% of special schools in 2007-8), while UNICEF (2007) shows 50% (Jovanović et al, 2013). Despite

clear evidence on segregation, the Serbian government was not acknowledging its existence and had not addressed it (Open Society Institute, 2007).

Publications from 2007 (Open Society Institute) acknowledge that Roma frequently experience discrimination from school administrations, teachers, other children, and non-Roma parents in Serbia. As for segregation, Serbia lacked a specific and comprehensive anti-discrimination law or monitoring body dedicated to addressing these issues. Furthermore, teachers were usually referred to as indifferent towards racist bullying and discrimination of Roma Students.

Furthermore, there are indications that teachers often overlook bullying and harassment directed at Roma students by their non-Roma peers and parents and even themselves. Jerončić (2016), strongly argues that the case of Roma in schools aligns with Bourdieu's concept of class, where classes are formed through everyday practices that categorize individuals in an discriminatory way (Jerončić, 2016).

Combating poverty is additionally difficult for the parents of Roma children since they come across discrimination at many levels such as employment, receiving health insurance, as well as education, while they are oftentimes the victims of hate speech. Prejudices about Roma are ingrained in the whole society (Mitić et al, 2022). Sometimes the fact that Roma are a minority that does not have their own state, makes them face attitudes that they are not “serious” minority, but the “wandering people”, while the Roma community, on the other hand, is not always able to address their problems and advocate for their own political interests (Mitić et al, 2022).

Some authors are of the opinion that the whole education system is taking part in reproducing social inequalities and that the discrimination is systemic (Jerončić, 2016). Keeping education for Roma children low in quality, keeps them in the lower socio-economic environment, as education is one of the crucial channels of vertical social mobility (Jerončić, 2016).

In Serbia, Native Roma typically speak Romanes and/or Serbian, and in some cases Hungarian. Refugees and internally displaced persons often speak Romanes and/or Serbo-Croatian, while a considerable amount also speak Albanian. Repatriates in most cases speak Romanes and/or languages from the European Union states, predominantly German (Roma Education Fund, 2007). The problem with the Romani language is that there was no one written language in which Roma children could learn. There were some tendencies, and some alphabet primer was made by Trifun Dimić (Arsenović-Pavlović et al, 2017).

### 3.2. School attendance and assessment of Roma children in Serbia

In 2007, only 2% of the Roma children in the relevant age group were attending preschool (Open Society Institute, 2007). The preschool preparation of Roma children was fairly inadequate as the preschool facilities in Serbia were generally insufficient. This further led to lack of preparation for primary school, poor performance and then higher dropout rates (Open Society Institute, 2007). Pre-school preparatory education is generally assessed as highly beneficial and productive for the successful development of Roma children. According to teachers and school professionals, Roma children who complete PPP, arrive in schools more prepared and are better socialized (Jovanović et al, 2013). Educational gaps begin from the very beginning of childhood. The first indicator for that is the fact that, according to statistics from 2012, only 4-8% of Roma children attend preschool education, which is ten times less than non-Roma (Baucal, 2012).

There is no precise number regarding the overall enrollment of Roma students in primary education (Čekić-Marković, 2016). Some information from 2007 is that less than 40% of Roma children were enrolled (Open Society Institute, 2007). Comparative data from the Living Standards Survey for the period 2002-2007 indicate an increase in the enrollment of Roma children from 56% to 73%, noting that this survey covered only the integrated Roma population. During the same period, the enrollment trend of Roma children in special schools/classes decreased from 8% to 6%, which is seen as a positive shift towards integrating Roma children into the education system (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

Most Roma children also entering school one or two years later than their non-Roma peers. Other information shows that 70-80% of them would leave elementary education, which in Serbia lasts 8 years, most often from the third, fifth and sixth grade, while from the rest 20-30% that continue, only few enter secondary school (one in ten) and most often the one with 3 grades and not 4, which, despite giving them practical knowledge, does not really guarantee the employment (Baucal, 2012). While Serbian students usually show results below average on PISA tests, Roma students in Serbia show even lower results than their peers from Serbia. Baucal states how based on these data, Roma students should be given two additional years in education (Baucal, 2012).

Roma students show significantly lower achievements, higher absenteeism and dropout rates than the non-Roma students, and in some cases, low social isolation in higher grades of the primary school (last four/eight). Some assumptions are that the cause of this is very low individualization of teaching in higher grades of primary school, as well as lower expectations from teachers towards Roma students (Jovanović et al, 2013).

The dropout rates of Roma children from primary school used to be 70 to 90%. While the official censuses were estimating that more than 60% of Roma had not completed primary school (Open Society Institute, 2007). Other surveys show that among Roma children from deprived backgrounds 7% drop out and 7.3% repeat a grade (Kurčubić, 2012). According to a study by the Center for Educational Policy, schools are unaware of the reasons for Roma student's dropout (Jovanović, 2013).

In schools where Roma children are the majority, the reduced expectations and quality of instructions is considerable. The phenomenon of “white flight” - non-Roma parents avoid enrolling their children in these schools. This leads to poorer academic outcomes of Roma pupils in general and in standardized test scores. Significant number of Roma children struggle with basic mathematical and Serbian language skills by the third grade of primary school (Open Society Institute, 2007, 488).

The disparity between Roma and non-Roma students in schools is presented in the Research from the Center for the Rights of the Child, which indicated that 5% of Roma children who were attending primary school up to the 3rd grade had to repeat a year due to academic difficulties, in contrast with 0.2% among the general population. (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016).

In the primary education system, in the school year of 2002–2003, around 40% of Roma pupils failed to advance beyond the first two grades, and only 30% completed primary school. Despite a comprehensive education reform initiated since the 2001–2002 school year, aimed at enhancing Roma enrollment, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains uncertain due to a lack of accompanying resources, teacher training, and monitoring. Roma students consistently exhibited lower academic performance in comparison with their non-Roma peers, with a majority achieving the lowest passing marks (2/5) in both mathematics and Serbian language. Statistically, between 7% and 11% of Roma students received a failing mark (1/5) in Serbian, and between 10% and 14% in mathematics, while less than 1% of non-Roma students received failing marks in these subjects. Gender disparities also influence academic outcomes, as Roma and non-Roma girls tended to outperform boys. The average achievement of Roma students in mathematics was 366 points, which was 134 points below the national average, and in Serbian language, it was 346 points, which was 154 points below the national average. International studies estimate that Roma students are significantly behind their peers by approximately 2.2 school years in mathematics and 2.6 school years in Serbian language, despite spending an average of three years in school (Open Society Institute, 2007).

Slightly later study of MICS (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey by UNICEF), in 2010, based on a sample of 1,711 Roma households, has shown that 68.3% of fathers had primary education, 23.1% had

secondary education, and only 1% had higher education, while 7.6% of fathers had no formal education at all (MICS, 2010). Around 78% of Roma women aged 15 to 24 were literate, and about 81% of men in the same age group are literate. Approximately 85% of Roma girls who enrolled in primary school would complete it, compared to 95% of Roma boys (including those who repeat grades or have interruptions in their education). Additionally, about 77% of Roma students who enrolled in the first grade of primary school had attended the mandatory preparatory preschool program the previous year (MICS, 2010).

Notable improvements are shown in the information from the 2009/10 to 2014/15 school years in Serbian primary schools, with an increase in the number of Roma students achieving very good and excellent grades compared to previous years. However, Roma students still generally achieve lower academic results compared to their peers (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

In the report on education inclusion of Roma students (Jovanović et al, 2013), parents of Roma children who participated in focus groups generally expressed a great interest in their children's education. The biggest obstacle perceived by them was their inability to assist children with homework, which they themselves found too difficult and incomprehensible.

A supportive school environment is a crucial factor for the success of teachers in their work with children and for the academic success of children themselves. In some schools, teachers feel penalized if they teach Roma children, thinking that it will lower the standard of teaching and cause non-Roma parents to avoid enrolling students in these schools (Komatina, 2016).

Official data on teachers who work in schools with the majority of Roma students was not provided (Open Society Institute, 2007). Training for teachers on inclusive education was introduced to assist them in identifying the difficulties that students who need extra educational support encounter, which also includes remedial classes (Jovanović et al, 2013).

Inclusive education training for teachers was designed to help educators identify the specific challenges faced by students who need additional support. As per the Law on Foundations of the Education System and relevant regulations, teachers must continually enhance their skills to improve educational practices and acquire necessary competencies for their roles, particularly when working with Roma children. Despite this requirement, teachers often prioritize training related to their own disciplines (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

### 3.3. Institutional Support of Roma Education

In the Decade for Roma inclusion, several Serbian municipalities have created local strategies and action plans to enhance Roma access to education (Open Society Institute, 2007). The Roma community was given a status of a national minority in Serbia in 2002. While the first initiative regarding their rights was the Decade of Roma Inclusion took place from 2005 to 2015, which was an international initiative that brought together the governments, intergovernmental bodies and non-governmental organizations of 12 countries, mainly in the Central and Southeastern Europe (Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Spain) with the aim of carrying out activities related to inclusion of Roma and the improvement of their socio-economic position, including decision-making processes, it was financially supported by the international organizations (Komatina, 2016). Headquarters of the Secretary of Decade was in Budapest and Serbia took the chairmanship from June in 2008. to July 2009 (Komatina, 2016). In that year the Serbian government adopted the Strategy for Improving The Position Of The Roma In The Republic Of Serbia for 2009-2015 (Official Gazette, 27/2009).

In the early 2000s, the newly established Educational Supervision Service had the potential to systematically monitor barriers to quality Roma education. However, some school inspectors on a local level seemed unaware of these educational policies aimed at enhancing Roma access to education (Open Society Institute, 2007). Further shortcomings of schools were that only 10% of all schools in Serbia had plans for social inclusion and addressing the needs of Roma (Jovanović et al, 2013). The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina has the Provincial Secretariat for Education as of 2002, as well as the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina which specifically focuses on minority education, including Roma education, often in cooperation with National Minority Councils (Roma Education Fund, 2007).

Affirmative action measures imply policies aimed at enhancing the participation of marginalized groups in political, economic, and social life, from which they have historically been excluded. Also known as positive discrimination measures, they were initiated in the 1960s in the United States following the civil rights movement, particularly addressing the African American community's struggle for equality. President John F. Kennedy's decision in 1961 marked the formal introduction of affirmative action, directing government officials and institutions to employ minorities and improve their inclusion (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2010).

International organizations, such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe, recognized the need for special policies to achieve meaningful equality among member states, emphasizing that such measures do not constitute discrimination (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2010).

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006) allows for special measures to achieve full equality for disadvantaged individuals or groups. These measures are not considered discriminatory. Specific regulations and temporary measures can be introduced in various aspects of life to ensure equality between national minorities and the majority population. Serbia has implemented legal acts and policies to protect national minority rights and promote equality. Affirmative action measures, recommended by various laws, aim to empower vulnerable groups, including the Roma community (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016). Serbia's approach to affirmative measures includes strategic documents such as the National Strategy for EU Accession and the National Program for Integration into the European Union, which prioritize addressing the challenges that the Roma community comes across. To coordinate the efforts made with the above-mentioned strivings the government has formed a Secretariat for Roma National Strategy within the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016).

In the education system, Serbia has introduced affirmative action measures since 2003 to increase access to education of Roma students at all levels. Despite undeniable progress since the implementation of these measures, challenges and doubts about the effectiveness of these measures remain (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016).

In the school year of 2005/06, Serbia implemented affirmative action measures to facilitate the enrollment of Roma students in secondary schools. This policy was formally introduced into the educational system with the introduction of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System and Upbringing in 2009. After Roma students complete the qualification exam for secondary school enrollment, the Republic Enrollment Commission of the Ministry of Education places them in schools based on their exam scores and school preferences, ensuring that they are admitted if their scores are within 30 points below the average for the chosen educational profile in the school of their primary choice (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

In Serbia, affirmative actions for the enrollment of Roma candidates in secondary schools are facilitated through initiatives led by the Secretariat for Roma National Strategy. The Ministry of Education communicates with school district leaders to notify primary schools about these measures. Schools are instructed to collaborate with local Roma non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to identify Roma students interested in continuing their education. Data collected from primary schools and

local Roma NGOs are then submitted to the National Council of the Roma National Minority and the Secretariat for Roma National Strategy.

Some critiques are that the affirmative measures are reintroduced each year, but without prior analysis of local Roma community needs, monitoring of their implementation or evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures of admissions into secondary schools and universities, as well as the support for Roma students in primary schools (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016).

As for addressing the challenges of Roma returnees, the Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Roma from 2009 dedicates explicit attention to recommendations concerning education, proposing concrete measures to facilitate the integration of Roma returnees of school age, including the recognition of their previously acquired education, issuance of necessary enrollment documents, and language support (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2016).

A study assessing the implementation of affirmative action measures for Roma enrollment in secondary education indicates a positive trend, although the data for some school years is missing. The number of Roma students enrolled in secondary schools through affirmative action has been steadily increasing, from 67 in 2005/06 to 422 in 2015/16. Also, there is a slightly higher representation of female students. Challenges include the unwritten rule in the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (MPNTR), which is limiting one Roma student per educational profile. Affirmative actions have not closely considered the needs of Roma students (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

The Roma Teaching Assistants Programme was initially launched as a pilot project by several NGOs in 2002. In 2007, the OSCE took over responsibility for coordinating and funding the program. By 2009, the initiative expanded to cover the entire nation. During the 2009-2010 school year, 58 primary schools had Roma assistants, and by November 2010, this number increased to 77 (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

Piloting projects of teaching assistants in schools have come across significant obstacles as they were sometimes viewed as outsiders by the teaching staff that did not give them much to do in the classroom since general education lacked interactive methods (Open Society Institute, 2007). Some limitations were noticed in the beginning, being that the position of "Roma Assistant" was not formally integrated into the education system. Instead, the law only allows for the employment of pedagogical assistants on a fixed-term basis of 12 months, without the possibility to transition into permanent employment (Jelinčić i Đurović, 2016).

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the OSCE Mission to Serbia, 54 Roma-speaking educational assistants with appropriate qualifications and experience were selected through a

public competition. They were employed in primary schools across numerous school administrations. Additional training was provided in partnership with the Center for Interactive Pedagogy, along with the development of job descriptions. Despite interruptions in their work due to governmental decisions in 2007 and early 2008, many assistants continued voluntarily. By 2012, their role was officially recognized within the education system, supported financially by the state budget, following efforts to regulate their status through sublegal acts (Čekić-Marković, 2016). A certain number of teachers expressed their opinion that teaching assistants are incompetent in the area of education (Jovanović et al, 2013).

The Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2009) allows institutions to employ teaching assistants and assistant teachers under specific regulations aimed at providing additional educational, health, and social support to children and students. Teaching assistant works closely with students individually, providing tailored educational support, participates in the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEP), and collaborates extensively with parents, relevant institutions, and local authorities. They also maintain records and report on students' progress and well-being. This support is particularly crucial for Roma students who face learning challenges due to linguistic, cultural, and social differences, as well as issues of peer and teacher rejection (Čekić-Marković, 2016). The fact that teaching assistants were Roma was described as advantageous that the assistants are Roma because they share the same background, which enhances mutual understanding (Lebedinski et al, 2015).

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is one of the instruments that supports inclusive education. This measure aims to develop the best possible learning support for anyone who needs additional educational assistance. The Plan includes an individualized curriculum by subjects and a personalized approach adjusted to the type of additional support needed by each student. The Ministry of Education issued a special Regulation providing detailed instructions for determining the right to an Individualized Education Plan (2010) (Čekić-Marković, 2016). Individualized Education Plans for Roma students are most developed for subjects such as Serbian language and mathematics, with basic literacy and numeracy identified as priority areas (Jovanović et al, 2013).

Affirmative actions imply various support measures, such as accommodation, meals, scholarships, and loans for students at secondary or tertiary levels (Čekić-Marković, 2016). The DILS project is aimed to support inclusive education for Roma by offering financial aid to schools, improving infrastructure, supplying educational materials, ensuring child safety, and providing free meals, school supplies, transportation, and extended stay programs (Jovanović et al, 2013).

Schools participating in the DILS program had more Roma students from vulnerable families, suggesting that high quality inclusive practices in lower grades help improve transition to subject

teaching from first to eighth grade. The DILS program positively impacted Roma students, who, despite coming from poorer, rural backgrounds and families with lower formal employment, achieved better academically, had lower dropout rates and fewer absences (Jovanović et al, 2013).

Interculturality is particularly significant in the context of Roma, since for centuries they have lived in interaction with various ethnic groups and cultures. Thus, it is essential to incorporate basic elements of Roma culture into the educational system, understand their values and customs, in order to achieve better intercultural exchange and understanding within the broader community (Komatina, 2016).

Analysis of various models of inclusive educational practices and strategies of inclusive policies can imply that there is no universal model of inclusive education and that specific solutions need to be tailored to the specific countries (Komatina, 2016). Komatina cites Daniel-Henri Pageaux who highlighted interculturality as a new quality in interactions between cultures, emphasizing the importance of open dialogue among them. He views cultural relations as dynamic and constantly evolving through social interactions. Interculturality involves interaction and inclusion of different cultural discourses and their representatives in shared spaces. It enables confrontation, communication, mutual understanding, valuation, and exchange of values and lifestyles among cultures. The prefix 'inter' underscores key aspects such as exchange, reciprocity, interdependence (Komatina, 2016).

Providing support for economic empowerment of families and improving inhumane living conditions for the majority of Roma in Serbia are urgent and necessary educational efforts, because without them, inclusive education cannot achieve good outcomes in educating the Roma population (Komatina, 2016). These efforts collectively strive to integrate marginalized groups more effectively into the educational system in Serbia.

In the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008), the Council of Europe emphasized the importance of equal and dignified communication between different groups as a response to the growing cultural diversity in Europe, which is a consequence of historical development and globalization. Key elements of this document are European values are respect for common heritage, cultural diversity, the rights and dignity of every individual. The role of the educational system is to transmit the intercultural competences, and intercultural dialogue is promoted as a process in which everyone participates, and which takes place at all levels of society, contributing to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In UNESCO's guideline for Intercultural Education there are three main (2006) principles: to respect the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all, to provide every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills

necessary to achieve and active and full participation in society, to provide all learners with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills, that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations (UNESCO, 2006).

The project "Promotion of Democratic Culture in Schools," which was part of the EU and Council of Europe's Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey, aims to enhance education quality in Serbia by fostering democratic values in the formal education system. It involves anti-discriminatory practices aligned with Council of Europe standards. The initiative began with 20 pilot schools addressing prejudices and violence, expanding to 60 schools in a mentoring role. Activities included integrating culture, tradition, and Roma history into teaching and extracurriculars to develop competences for democratic culture among students and communities (ERIAC, 2023).

In schoolbooks, most of the time Roma are mostly referenced in relation to World War II and the Holocaust, or portrayed in stereotypical and negative terms (Open Society Institute, 2007). Earlier literature finds the lack of sensitivity towards different cultures and identities of national minorities in the curriculum. Learning the Romanes language used to be possible only in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina since 1995. The changes to include the class of language with elements of history and culture were proposed (Open Society Institute, 2007).

Following recommendations from the Council of Europe, the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture Serbia and the Roma Education Fund have initiated a project to integrate Roma history and culture into educational programs. The goal is to enhance visibility and recognition of the Roma minority's rights, identity, and contributions to Serbian and European society within education. This initiative aims to foster social inclusion, advance anti-discrimination practices, and promote intercultural values (Jovanović et al, 2013).

The Recommendation CM/Rec (2020)2 provides clear guidelines for integrating Roma history and culture into existing mandatory and elective subjects and extracurricular activities without increasing teaching hours. It defines key terms like anti-Gypsyism and the Romani Holocaust, emphasizing the integration of Roma history and culture across various educational subjects and activities. This integration necessitates the revision of textbooks, development of new teaching materials, and training of teachers to enhance their understanding of Roma history and competencies in contemporary pedagogical practices, competency-based learning, intercultural education/dialogue, and respect for diversity. The Romanes language with elements of national culture has been implemented in schools in the territory of Vojvodina since 1995, and from 2025 in schools throughout the territory of the Republic of Serbia (ERIAC, 2023).

The document "Regulation on the National Framework for Education and Upbringing." ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", number 98/2017) outlines educational reforms geared towards interdisciplinary approaches and individual progress. It introduces elective subjects in primary schools, where students choose between Religious Education and Civil Education. Additionally, students from national minorities can opt for Mother Tongue/Language with Elements of National Culture. The curriculum includes the Romani Language with Elements of National Culture, initially implemented in Vojvodina since 1995, expanding nationwide by 2025. The elective Romani Language program spans both cycles of primary education. It incorporates Romani cultural heritage, oral literature, and traditions enriched by interactions with other cultures where Roma have lived for centuries. The curriculum includes Romani language grammar, acknowledging its over 600 dialects worldwide. It is designed not only to educate in Romani language but also to enrich other subjects like environmental studies, music culture, fine arts, history, and Serbian language.

To support teachers, a month-long course was developed in collaboration with the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Philology and the National Council of the Roma National Minority. The National Institute for the Improvement of Education designed a training program for teachers of Romani Language with Elements of National Culture. In the 2023/24 school year, there were 60 teachers engaged in this program. The National Council of the Roma National Minority initiated the publication of approved textbooks for Romani language education, included in the Catalog of Textbooks in Minority Languages for the 2023/24 school year. These textbooks cover the first six grades of primary school, providing foundational education in Romani language and culture. Furthermore, upcoming reforms present an opportunity to integrate Roma history, culture, and traditions into school programs and teaching materials, aligning with the Council of Europe's recommendations (Recommendation CM/Rec 2020). This aims to address historical underrepresentation of Roma and Travelers in European cultural heritage and combat their ongoing marginalization, promoting equality in accessing social and other rights.

Guidelines for the appropriate representation of national minorities in curricula and textbook content in the Republic of Serbia, emerged within the framework of a joint project of the European Union and the Council of Europe Strengthening the protection of national minorities in Serbia, are another document that supports the introduction of Roma history and culture content into curricula. The guidelines further operationalize the implementation of Recommendations and assist decision-makers and authors of future educational programs "to consider concepts, terms, and content that would make the position, rights, participation, and identity of members of national minorities visible and recognizable to all participants in education, regardless of ethnicity or role in the educational process." The guidelines

and recommendations are grouped according to key stakeholders (Institutes, publishers, National Education Council, educational institutions, and schools), organized to encompass all elements of the school curriculum (content, standards, outcomes, methodological and didactic guidance), and include a proposed list of selected key content concepts aimed at enhancing society's democratic capacity and affirming the position of national minorities in educational programs (ERIAC, 2023).

Since affirmative action measures were implemented for Roma students' enrollment in secondary schools, a total of 12,427 students have been enrolled, with 55% being girls. Scholarships were provided to 1,213 students in the 2020/2021 academic year, and 1,114 scholarships were approved for the 2021/2022 school year. Mentorship support from 200 teacher-mentors has been crucial in encouraging students to remain in the secondary education system. Additionally, 281 educational assistants were employed in the 2021/2022 academic year across primary and preschool institutions, with one new assistant in a secondary school. Moreover, 2,467 students participated in the elective program "Roma Language with Elements of National Culture" during the 2020/2021 school year. These initiatives aim to enhance educational opportunities and support for Roma students in Serbia. (ERIAC, 2023).

### **3.4. Impact of the Civil Society Organizations**

Reliable data on CSO activities in Serbia is limited due to the lack of a unified registry (Škorić, 2020). The impact of CSOs is recognized and, when interpreting their work, the stress is most often on their project activities, local actions plans and strategies as well as the unbalanced relations with the government, while the theoretical foundation and “deeper analysis” is left behind (Škorić, 2020, 114-115).

A considerable number of projects have focused on raising awareness and knowledge of human rights and combating discrimination, resulting in the organization of various courses, seminars, workshops, etc. Members of different CSOs agree that many of these projects were good models and initiatives, but often lacked sustainability. Some challenges they faced include financial difficulties, underdeveloped collaboration networks, poor targeting of different services, lack of coordination with various other sectors, such as governmental, private, etc (Škorić, 2020).

It is necessary to note that Roma students must have a certificate from the National Council of the Roma National Minority or from relevant NGOs as proof of Roma origin. Collaboration between school administrations and local non-governmental organizations dealing with Roma issues is particularly important (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

In September 2010, the Roma Education Fund (REF) had approved 40 project proposals around Serbia. Some initiatives that had been supported were participative research in Vojvodina to investigate obstacles of Roma in education, by NGOs Roma Students Union and Novi Sad Humanitarian Center. This research led to the development of Local Action Plans for Roma and creation of a database of relevant information, fostering cooperation between Vojvodina's educational authorities and local municipalities (Roma Education Fund, 2010). Additionally, REF developed a model for teaching Serbian as a second language to the Roma community, in partnership with civil organization Forum of Roma IDPs and language experts and advocating to the Ministry of Education. In 10 towns, another REF supported project, implemented by the Roma Information Center project, focused on including Roma culture and tradition in the primary school curriculum. This project was well attended and one of the final outcomes was "The Golden Carriage," a published handbook on Roma history, tradition, and culture, further distributed across elementary schools throughout Serbia. In the city of Niš, REF supported a program by the Roma Education Center to improve Roma students' access to secondary schools. This project was implemented in 10 primary schools, providing 250 students of the last years of primary school with extra classes and mentorship. Final outcomes were 70-80% entrance exam pass rate, up from the previous 50% (Roma Education Fund, 2010). In 2006, REF supported an initiative to increase Roma children's access to pre-school education in 24 municipalities through a small-grant program (Roma Education Fund, 2010). Another programme aimed at raising awareness about the importance of preschool preparatory education for Roma children implemented by REF with the support of UNICEF, and the OSCE and the campaign included designing and distributing posters and leaflets across all Roma communities nationwide. The project ended in 2010 (Roma Education Fund, 2010).

The impact of REF can be additionally demonstrated in an increased availability of quality preschool education for Roma children, with 597 Roma children enrolled in a preschool program that year. Additionally, 94% of Roma children were enrolled in mainstream primary schools. The improvement is also seen in the reduction in dropout rates among Roma children, along with increased participation from their parents in the educational process. Communication between local Roma communities and local institutions was noted to have improved (Roma Education Fund, 2010).

The largest REF program in Serbia was implemented in Vojvodina, in collaboration with the Autonomous Province Secretary, encompassing four generations of Roma students from the 2007-2008 to 2010-2011 academic years. This initiative included providing 860 scholarships to Roma students in 77 out of 131 secondary schools in Vojvodina. Besides monthly stipends, the project included systematic monitoring and evaluation of student education progress.

Another project in Vojvodina was the four-year project "Inclusion of Roma Pupils in High Schools in Vojvodina" where over 860 annual scholarships were provided, the most significant result was the reduction of dropout rate from approximately 25% before the project to 2.95% by the end of the 2009-2010 school year. For this project, Local Roma organizations played a crucial role in spreading information about secondary school enrollment requirements, accommodation options, and REF scholarships. The project received support from the regional Labour, Employment and Gender Equality Secretariat. The Ministry of Education accredited teacher training for mentors and enforced affirmative action measures for student enrollment. Additionally, Roma and non-Roma media contributed positively to public perceptions of the project. Starting from the 2010-2011 academic year, REF expanded its initiatives with the launch of the Roma Health Scholarship Programme (RHSP) in Serbia, furthering its commitment to enhancing educational opportunities and outcomes for Roma communities.

REF developed a database to monitor enrollment rates, a consultancy team which provides training and support to the implementing Roma NGO, support program for preschool staff etc. The efforts of collaborating with different stakeholders and advocating for preparatory primary education prior to 2011, led to the IPA project "Improvement of preschool education in Serbia," scheduled for implementation in early 2011 (Roma Education Fund, 2010).

The Education for All project from 2010 to 2012 focused on improving access and quality of education for marginalized groups, particularly Roma children, through training and deployment of pedagogical/Roma assistants in schools. The Equal Opportunities in Secondary Education program, led by the Open Society Fund and the Pestalozzi Foundation, supported Roma students in secondary schools through various educational aids and mentoring. The Ministry of Education established the Inclusive Education Support Network to assist schools in adopting inclusive practices, involving educators and specialists in training and support roles. Furthermore, projects like the OSCE's initiative on Roma assistants and regional programs in Vojvodina aimed to increase Roma student enrollment and success in secondary education through scholarships, mentoring, and community engagement (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

The Roma Health Scholarship Program (RHSP), operated by the Open Society Foundations in Serbia and Hungary in collaboration with the Roma Education Fund, supported Roma students aiming to pursue education in health-related fields from high school through to doctoral studies (Čekić-Marković, 2016).

Tracking and evaluating the work of various civil society organizations (CSOs) remains at a low level (Škorić, 2020). In her study, Škorić has presented several of them on the right to education of Roma students in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

The aforementioned CSOs are: EHO, which is conducting a project on assessing living conditions and infrastructure in Roma settlements across 20 pilot municipalities in Serbia, CPZV in Novi Sad, which focuses on early education and childcare to prevent dropout rates and enhance educational achievements among Roma children. Additionally, Charity Center of Novi Sad (Novosadski humanitarni centar), supports Roma children through leading a children's center in Novi Sad, while their shortcomings are that they rely on volunteer support and occasional donor funding after project completion, which proved highly effective.

Another notable CSO, Educational Center of Roma (Edukativni centar Roma) from Subotica, monitors laws, public policies, and institutional practices while providing continuous support to Roma families to keep them within the educational system. Further, Cultural and artistic society Romanian, (KUD Rumunka) in Sombor promotes Roma integration through cultural dialogues, sports activities, and educational and economic empowerment programs. Similarly, Multicultural Banat (Multikulturni Banat) in Kikinda focuses on inclusive education for Roma, emphasizing cultural identity preservation and fostering understanding between Roma and non-Roma children (Škorić, 2020).

Some shortcomings of the cooperation between the state and the non-governmental sector are seen in the fact that the Ministry of Education cannot fully rely on non-governmental organizations in informing local Roma communities about the existence of affirmative action measures. This is mainly due to uneven development of the Roma non-governmental sector across the territory of the Republic of Serbia (Jelinčić & Đurović, 2010).

Škorić concludes that despite the differences in structures, scopes, roles, and funding mechanisms, their contributions to the inclusion of Roma children in the educational system are invaluable and must not be overlooked. They are closely connected to Roma communities and their specific needs and play a crucial role in generating social capital, fostering trust between different stakeholders, and promoting mutual support, which are prerequisites for democracy, social equality, and overall social development (Škorić, 2020).

Even though some strategies and programmes have shown some good results and individual examples, there is still a long path that needs to be completed in order for the effect to be noticeable (Jerončić, 2016). What the weak results of all the national policies show is that capacities for inclusion and non-discrimination need to be built in a more robust manner (Mitić et al, 2022). While Roma are

being segregated from education for many years, as well as facing many prejudices, the plans that the government makes related to their employment is only a good will on paper and the tools for implementation of these still need to be provided (Mitić et al, 2022). Most definitely the efforts to improve the conditions of the life of Roma need to be made by both Roma and non-Roma actors in society.

As explained above how affirmative action measures are meant for the students enrolling in high schools or universities, by adding 30 points on their admission test score, it is noticeable that, while the affirmative action measures are needed in education of Roma, they are used more as a remedy for already neglected children in their previous education. Thus, teaching assistants are those who are helping children from primary education and the emphasis should be more in establishing the most efficient and sustainable system of teaching assistants, so that Roma children, when entering the university with or without the affirmative action measures, would not be lagging their peers.

Acknowledging the aforementioned lack of research on the deeper impact of civil society on the education of Roma children in Serbia, four interviews with different actors in civil society were conducted with the goal to give them voices, make the issue of Roma education more comprehensive and to serve as an added value of this work. The results of the interviews and the analysis will be presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: Interviews

### **Methodology:**

Interviews were semi-structured, and the analysis was qualitative. Four people with different profiles were interviewed, all of whom were of Roma nationality. All of them were asked three general questions, corresponding to the main research of the questions. The rest of the interview questions were asked according to their work, engagement and background and aim at complementing the data towards answering the research question.

### **Profiles of the interviewees**

The first interviewee is one of the leading actors in the civil society organization that is covering two cities in South-East Serbia. The CSO is active in organizing different projects in order to empower the Roma community as well as Roma repatriates.

The second interviewee is a student and activist, active in different organizations and has an experience of a pedagogical assistant for children in primary schools.

The third interviewee is one of the leading actors in Roma Education Fund, has many experience in project managing and working with many different professionals from the field, he was previously professionally engaged in other organizations related to minorities.

The fourth interviewee is an activist and journalist, she is mostly engaged with the artistic projects within the civil society organizations in order to advocate for Roma women's rights.

## **Results**

### **Results on questions that directly answer the research question**

**The first general question was What do you see as the main obstacles in the education of Roma children today and do you think that something has changed since the beginning of the 2000s?**

Interviewee 1: expressed that once, at the beginning of his involvement, the problem was the lack of attendance of Roma children in schools, mostly caused by the lack of interest of parents and lack of recognition of the importance of education for children's development. While, according to the interviewee, the educational system treated Roma children without discrimination, just the way it treated

all other children. However, while answering another question, he mentioned the “possibility of hidden discrimination”, in his opinion, such as placing a Roma child at the last desk in the classroom. He mentioned poverty as one of the two main obstacles, which consequently caused children to work seasonally, which further prevented them from attending classes, especially in the summer months. Poverty further caused prejudices, and especially because of personal hygiene, which according to the interviewee distinguished a Roma child from a non-Roma child. The interviewee expressed an opinion that this does not happen anymore in his local community. Another mentioned problem was the lack of knowledge of the Serbian language, which hindered their overall education. In addition to the lack of interest, parents' lack of education and therefore their inability to help children with their homework. As positive changes that have taken place since 2005, he cites the work of the organization he is engaged with, which organized various educational courses for children and parents that showed them the importance of education and hygiene.

Interviewee 2 answered with poverty, isolation in informal settlements where Roma do not have access to electricity, water and other necessities as one of the biggest obstacles. She also mentioned, like interviewee 1, that children experience discrimination from both children and teachers, also due to unhygienic clothing. She also stated that as a consequence of poverty, children are preoccupied with basic necessities, such as food, which does not leave much space for them to devote themselves to learning. As positive changes, she cited affirmative action measures, or positive discrimination measures introduced by the Republic of Serbia in 2005. Which, according to the interviewee, had a positive effect on many Roma completing not only primary and secondary school, but also primary, master's and doctoral academic studies.

Interviewee 3: He thinks that the obstacles are smaller today than they were before, he also stated that according to the data at his disposal, it can be observed that student dropouts have decreased, as well as the "trend of dissatisfaction". While stereotypes and prejudices against Roma children are something that, although "reducing to some extent", he cites as a "main phenomenon" that is still present and causes intolerance towards Roma children. He also states that Roma children are not sufficiently empowered in comparison to "some other countries". In the further conversation, he mentioned how children, when enrolling in schools, face their own shortcomings in the form of lack of knowledge of the Serbian language, isolation from the "outside world" by the local environment.

Interviewee 4: As the main obstacle, she cites poverty and the "vicious circle" in which the Roma population is. After poverty, discrimination is an obstacle, which, according to the respondent, has been happening since long ago to the present day. She notices that, despite this, individuals managed to get

educated at the university level and also motivated more people. As differences, the main points were the improved general condition that activists have influenced in the last 20-30 years. Affirmative action measures were also mentioned, that were introduced for the enrollment of Roma children in secondary schools and universities. In addition, she mentioned the introduction of pedagogical assistants and health mediators in schools, but senses that further progress is needed. Another good change was the introduction of language with elements of culture, which supports Roma children to complete their education. She believes that Roma students do not have support in schools and that very often their parents do not recognize the importance of education, "they do not have support either there or at home if they do not have parents who will simply show and prove to them that education is "simply crucial" and then they give up. While the general opinion, according to the interviewee, "the reversed thesis", that says that they abandon the school system, "in fact the school system abandoned them already at the beginning". As a consequence of this, she points to the isolation and compulsion of girls to get married and drop out of school and ultimately lack financial independence.

**Second general question: How do institutions address the education of Roma children in Serbia, and how does the civil sector?**

Interviewee 1: He mentions his civil society organization that organizes "creative, educational and motivational workshops", where he motivates Roma children to first of all learn the Serbian language, prepare them for taking tests at school and to regularly attend preschools, primary and secondary schools. Additionally, he mentions UNDP projects and a youth center where consultations are held regarding professional careers. He cites the increase in the average grade of Roma children as a positive outcome.

Interviewee 2: Affirmative action measures were specifically mentioned in the case of the Faculty of Political Sciences, where one Roma has the opportunity to enroll according to her, while the other faculties applied differently. However, it was certainly stated that "to study at the university today is a luxury, and yet the question is how accessible it is to Roma students". The interviewee also stated that although many children declare that they have not felt discrimination on their skin, they have. She also mentioned the programs of the Roma Education Fund, which organized projects to promote employability, as well as scholarships and professional internships, professional training, and language training, as positive measures. However, that project is ending. In some cases, according to respondents,

Roma have more trust in the Roma Education Fund than in the institutions themselves. It was also mentioned that other civil society organizations contributed, but it was not specified which.

Interviewee 3: On the state side, he mentions laws that guarantee the right to education, which according to him is a "fundamental human right", however, the existence of room for progress on the part of the state despite the aforementioned legal frameworks. He believes that institutions and ministries do not have enough capacity to deal with everything that minority children encounter, and there should be support at the local level. He sees the role of civil society at the local level, precisely in correcting the failures of the state and institutions. In this way, according to him, the mentioned barriers of Roma children in education are overcome.

Interviewee 4: She believes that state institutions take steps towards inclusion only because they are influenced by the entire civil society sector in Serbia. She believes that the school system is regressing instead of improving. Again, the introduction of the Romani language in schools is mentioned as a positive thing. It also emphasizes that the civil sector cannot bring about change without the help of institutions. She mentions an institution of social work that has a bad reputation among the population, however, she explains how they have long bureaucratic processes, and also sometimes everything depends on the enthusiasm of individuals. She believes that Roma women are doubly discriminated against and mentions the Roma Female Network as an organization that contributes a lot in the fields of education, employment, and solving child marriages.

**Third general question: What needs to be done in the future in order for Roma children to be fully and respectfully included in the education system of Serbia?**

Interviewee 1: His answer is donors, as the only need so that the organizations can achieve "the best possible results of the integration of Roma children ". He believes that the organizations have experience and readiness to work both with returnee families and with the domicile population.

Interviewee 2: She believes that it is the education of all "fellow citizens, friends, neighbors, relatives, families and so on", only through this can concrete foundations be laid for further goals and work, as well as monitoring the problems faced by the population, including minority and majority population.

Interviewee 3: He answers that an understanding of equal needs and equal opportunities is needed in the context of the education of Roma children. Then he stated the will of local authorities, that is, the mechanism that would recognize the importance of education. He believes that comprehensive support should be given to Roma children at the very beginning, i.e., in their early development, which according to him is a crucial period. He also believes that tools should be created to overcome all barriers in the entire society and that it would be safe and inclusive, and that education would be of high quality. Also that people have no prejudices towards each other when they enter the formal system.

Interviewee 4: She believes that legal frameworks are needed that will as well be respected. Then she claims that it is still more important that children get educated and informed on time and remain aware of their value in the system, that they be supported at the very beginning so that they can be focused in the right direction and understand the importance of education. She recognizes that many things that are needed are already being worked on, but that it is first of all important to work on the causes of the problem.

### **Analysis of answers related to the research questions**

When it comes to the first general question asked to all interviewees, regarding the biggest barrier that Roma children face in education in Serbia and the changes that have taken place since the 2000s until today, the interviewees gave in some ways different answers and perspectives, however in many points they coincide or build on each other's opinions.

The first barrier that was mentioned by interviewee 1 and interviewee 4 is the disinterest of parents. Interviewee 1 has argued that the lack of school attendance of Roma children was caused by parents not recognizing the importance of education for their children's development. An additional problem was the lack of education of the parents, when they were unable to help their children with homework. While the second interviewee emphasized that the fact is that parents themselves do not recognize the importance of education and thus are not able to explain to their children that education is crucial for their lives. These answers very much correspond with the issues highlighted in Chapter 3.

When it comes to discrimination, all four interviewees touched on that phenomenon, while interviewee 3 mentioned it in a slightly milder form - as intolerance. However, it is interesting that interviewee 1 mentioned twice during the interview how the education system itself is not discriminatory as every child is given the right to enroll in school. He only mentions "hidden discrimination" in the form

of placing a Roma child in the last seat of the classroom. Interviewee 2 stated how children experience discrimination from both teachers and students, and they concentrate on the roots of this discrimination, which, according to them, is unhygienic clothing. Interviewee 4 lists discrimination as another obstacle and states that it has been happening since a long time ago to this day. While, according to their words, individuals who are successful and serve as good examples have achieved this only despite the discrimination they experience. Interviewee 3, who used the milder word, which was "intolerance", stated that it is caused by stereotypes and prejudices. However, they still list this as the main problem that Roma children face in education. Even though it has "reduced to some extent". From the answers it can be concluded that the problem of discrimination is rather complex.

Three interviewees mentioned poverty as the main barrier, while respondent 3 did not mention it in the first question at all. The first respondent mentions it in the context of child labor, where children had to deal with seasonal jobs during the summer and early autumn school days. Interviewee 2, in the context of discrimination, mentioned that prejudices by other people are caused by poverty, again due to unhygienic dressing. Interviewee 2 mentioned poverty in the context of the lack of basic necessities in informal and isolated Roma settlements. They believe that the child's lack of interest in daily school programmes and the curricula is caused by mental preoccupation with the lack of necessities, such as food. While interviewee 4, as interviewee 2, mentions poverty as the first barrier, and emphasizes the difficulty to get out of it by using the word "vicious circle".

The language as a barrier is mentioned by two interviewees. Interviewee 1 stated that not knowing Serbian language creates difficulties during the overall education, while interviewee 3 only mentioned it, however not in the same question, that not knowing the language is a "deficiency" that Roma children have when entering schools, besides being "isolated" by the local environment.

Interviewee 3 has also addressed how Roma children are not as empowered in education as they are in "some other countries".

Regarding the second part of the first question, the changes that have happened since the early 2000s, interviewee 1 mentioned the example of their own civil society organization that has improved the general attitude towards education and "the importance of hygiene through educational courses for children and parents."

Interviewee 2 and interviewee 4 stressed the affirmative action measures, introduced in 2005, for inclusion of Roma children in education. As interviewee 2 explained, those are the "measures of positive discrimination", according to them, these measures have helped Roma students on all levels of education. While interviewee 4 only mentioned it.

The fading of trends of dropping out of schools or “objection” by Roma students was mentioned by interviewee 3 as an indicator of a positive change.

Interviewee 4 lists several more changes: impact on improving the general state of education of Roma by activists from the last “20-30” years, the introduction of pedagogy assistants and health mediators in schools, while acknowledging that there is room for improvement, as well as the introduction of language with elements of culture as means of giving support to Roma children to complete their education.

The answers for the second question varied and the only connection that can be made is the one in interview 3 and 4. Where interviewee 3 sees the impact of civil society on local level as something that should work as a remedy for the shortcomings of the state and institutions in overcoming the barriers of Roma children in education. While interviewee 4 stressed how the only reason why the institutions are taking steps in Roma inclusion is because the civil society is impacting them. Though they point out that civil society cannot contribute at all without the support of institutions. As an example, they use the institution of social work that does not have a good reputation, however, they observe the complicated bureaucratic steps that the center for social work is obliged to take before helping and that at times everything depends on the enthusiasm of an individual. The Civil Society Organization that was mentioned as an example is the Roma Female Network.

Interviewee 1 only mentioned the civil society impact, the one by his own organization. Which organizes the workshops for Roma children to “motivate them to learn Serbian language, prepare them for taking exams and regularly attending all levels of education, further they mention the UNDP and the Center for Youth, who organize career consultancies”.

Interviewee 2 mentioned the affirmative action measures as the mechanism by the state and the Roma Education Fund as the civil society impact, emphasizing that many Roma have more trust in the Fund than in institutions. It was also mentioned how more civil society organizations have also contributed.

The only one who expressed an opinion on the school system was interviewee 4 saying that it is generally regressing and once again mentioning the introduction of the language.

The third general question was what needs to be done in the future for Roma children to be fully and respectfully included in education in Serbia.

Interviewees have given different answers and only those of interviewee 3 and 4 can be understood as intertwining. Interviewee 1 has said that what is necessary to achieve good results are donors. Interviewee 2 has said that it is the continuous education of every citizen of the country. What is

connecting the answer of the interviewee 3 and 4 is their expressed need for the support of children “at the very beginning”. Further interviewee 3 stated the importance of the understanding of equal needs and equal opportunities and the will of local authorities to act on policies that are prescribed. Further what was said to be important is to create the tools for “safe and inclusive” as well as the high-quality education. Interviewee 4 adds the need for a legal framework of inclusive education that will also be respected or rather applied. Finally, the work that was and is already being done is recognized, however they state how the causes of the problems need to be addressed.

Interviewee 3 mentioned in the last question a similar point that interviewee 2 mentioned at the end of the interview, which is the need to overcome the barriers in the whole society and create one without the prejudices between people and in the education system.

### **Analysis of answers to specific questions**

Each interviewee was asked 5 or 6 specific questions in accordance with their background and involvement regarding the education of Roma.

### **Analysis of interview 1**

The questions asked about the cooperation with schools were marked as positive by him, many projects were done including those with vocational training. Another positive example that was mentioned was how the director of one primary school expressed gratitude towards his engagement. The Strategies of Roma integration in Serbia are considered to be well written “for the highest academic mark”, however he expressed great disappointment in the implementation, saying how the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights in Serbia has not implied any of it written on local levels due to a lack of budget. Additionally this was something that he has already complained about to the authorities. When it comes to repatriated Roma, it was mentioned that projects were held, but not specific, further one more project that was mentioned was the economic empowerment of Roma in agriculture. Further, the cooperation with UNDP and joint projects were mentioned. He expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that local government offices and other public institutions do not employ Roma individuals, stressing how despite the fact that the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights has mandated that Roma coordinators be appointed within local self-governments. According to the interviewee, in various public institutions, including health centers, schools, social work centers, and employment services, there are no Roma employees, despite the Roma community having qualified candidates. He stated how the private sector also shows discrimination, with only a few Roma employed, even in lower-skilled positions such as

cleaning staff. He stressed how one of the major problems is that many Roma families completely rely on social assistance, typically receiving around 100 to 200 euros per month, which is not nearly sufficient to cover basic living expenses of one family. He further stressed how Roma individuals have a significantly lower life expectancy, which is around 50 years, due to a lack of resources for preventive medical care or to afford specialist treatments. When it comes to repatriated Roma, the interviewee did not mention anything that is particularly related to them and not the domicile Roma citizens.

## **Analysis of interview 2**

### **Specific questions in relation to background**

The second respondent was asked about her personal experience as a student. The main conclusion from the results is that there is a need to work with the environment in which Roma students study. As the example of one other Roma student who was forced to change school due to “severe discrimination”, while the example of the teacher wanting her to be a character from a drama by a Serbian author to “represent how Roma would look like” was extremely uncomfortable for her. Further, the disapproval by the environment about what affirmative action measures are. Since some people have an attitude that Roma have privileges, that is additional rights, while she stressed how those are the “incentives in the absence of better mechanisms”. Finally, the personal strength that she feels that she has a “fighting spirit”, even when others think that she has a lesser value, is not something that should be necessary for any citizen to live and be successful in a society that lawfully gives her equal rights. When it comes to her experience as a pedagogy assistant it was expressed as a meaningful and impactful experience for both students and her. The two main problems of Roma children in primary school that are observed are on one hand the irregular attendance of the students, while on the other hand the lack of interest of teachers to give more attention to Roma children who then fall behind more each year. While children are described as “uncorrupted” and “eager to learn” and have also progressed very much with the attention given by the pedagogy assistant. Finally, this has positively impacted her enrollment in high schools and the ambitions for further education. The need to work with parents is expressed in this part as well. Which leads to the next question which was about the impact of the family atmosphere on education of Roma, where the similar argument was brought as from interviewee 1 and 4 in the first general question. Which is that if the family is not educated and also does not have a sense of value for the education, the one member who pursues it will be the “black sheep”, thus not understood. Her family does not fall under this description as she expressed how her parents were always supportive and of an opinion that each

generation should go a step further on the education scale. The family is understood as the pillar for “everything you bring” in school. While school is still the one that educates the most in her opinion. The first motivation for activism came from “feeling of discrimination on her own skin” around the years of 18 or 19. The first topics were advocating for the end of child marriages, later on she expanded her engagement and successfully cooperated with other organizations too, such as Roma Women Network and Roma Education Fund, while now, the Initiative of Roma Students is her organization and the environment is again mentioned as the goals that were said were “peacebuilding between the majority and Roma population”, besides other activities among which is also education. On the question on child marriages, the interviewee has stressed the personal disapproval when only Roma are correlated with them, as she says, they are characteristic for the rural, extremely poor environments. However she expressed that they are “serious human rights violations”. It is notable to mention that not only regarding her engagement, but also in the first general questions, child marriages were brought out only by the female participants. Further in the question regarding the barriers in getting employed even after completed education, the example from the family business where the customer wanted “someone a bit more white” was typical racism that as well in the opinion of the interviewee, should be reported. Another issue that was touched upon is the economical empowerment and the importance of it since economic independence is still an obstacle for many Roma women to get out of abusive relationships. Finally, the conclusion was that children often follow the models of their parents, so whatever they do, might reflect on their children’s behavior. In the last question about the possibilities to enroll and complete universities, the main stress was on poverty as the opinion of an interviewee is that those who attend university “do not have to think about basic necessities”. The need for more places by affirmative action measures is expressed. Finally the conclusion was very connected to one by interviewee 3 and 4 about the need to address and empower children

“below the margins”, but already during primary education - in the words of interviewee 3 early development.

### **Analysis of interview 3**

According to his background, the questions were of having a general overview of the education system and minorities asked firstly about poverty. However, he repeated how opportunities are the biggest problem and more needed for the Roma community to then overcome the vicious circle of poverty and come back again to early development. When it comes to school dropout rates, the mentorship program

by Roma Education Fund was mentioned, which was also meant to overcome the intolerance between Roma and non-Roma and was recognized as good system since one person would support the student throughout his education, make sure that the transition between years is successful, and additionally prepare him for careers and life. Segregation was viewed as “natural” by the interviewee, according to him, the schools that are situated next to the Roma settlements will naturally have only Roma students. However, the problem noticed about the environment is that non-Roma parents would then not want to enroll their children in those schools, which is another example of prejudices and discrimination. The shortcomings in the education system in the answer were related to the capacity and will of the Serbian school system to establish a universal system for implementing everything that the institutions have prepared regarding the classes of Roma language and culture. This is a general feeling about the Serbian system not being able to fulfill a certain strategy or programme on the local level, in the actual places where Roma people live. Finally, in the answer to the last question about the communication of the Roma Education Fund and the institutions, he replied that it is good and that with good communication all the shortcomings on the local level can be overcome. A significant example that was mentioned were the scholarship programmes that the Ministry of Education has introduced, which was completely designed by the Roma Education Fund. This is a good example of civil society organization impacting the government to make a positive change in including Roma in the education system in Serbia.

#### **Analysis of interview 4**

She was also asked about her activist engagement and as interviewee 2, started hers at the age of 19. With the Roma Women Network, she was mostly engaged in the artistic project that was raising awareness. Topics that are brought are similar to topics of interviewee 2, which are child marriages, economic empowerment, discrimination against Roma women, who are by her words, double-discriminated. For the question about the introduction of language, the problem that was brought out is the non-understanding of the importance of this step by many Roma themselves, the main argument of interviewee 4 is connected to the argument of interviewee 3 about nurturing her culture and identity. Thus, more promotion is needed, even though the existence of standardization is a positive thing. Two questions are asked about her documentaries, the first one is “My journey”, on child marriages and the second one “Ja jesam - Me sem” (I am). Is on the importance of identification as Roma on the state census. The discomfoting fact said by the interviewee about child marriages is the fact that boys, even though they are recognized as victims of it, in most cases continue with education after entering a

marriage, while girls (who are still in 94% of the cases the victims of child marriage), stay at home and do the house chores and give birth to children. Thus again the “double” discrimination is illustrated in this case. While another discomfoting fact regarding the second documentary is the fact that since the census that was 10 years ago, by her words, the number of Roma has significantly dropped and she considers it suspicious, however the unofficial number of Roma is still around half a million. The experience of the non-Roma audience “emotionally reacting” to this movie, as stated, is a good example of the positive impact of media when used in the right way and with the goal to spread more tolerance and inclusion rather than to stigmatize a certain group. This leads to the last question, about the impact of media representation, that is by interviewees understood as the impact on the overall behavior towards Roma. She criticizes the television for only presenting Roma as in the lowest poverty and giving pictures that are usually not clean. Her real-life events of experiencing hearing this kind of stigma in the streets is just a confirmation that the representation, no matter if it is by media or informally, does matter.

The interviewees have brought out many obstacles as well as positive notes that are included in the theoretical part and show the examples from their lives. From bringing out good examples and stressing the positive attitude towards affirmative action measures, to expressing how obstacles still exist and presenting personal experiences of discrimination in everyday life. Further, the second interviewee also brought out her aspiration and engagement in overcoming barriers between Roma and non-Roma people and educating everyone with that goal, which corresponds with the values of intercultural learning. Language and the importance of learning their own language for their personal identity.

## CONCLUSION

Considering both theoretical part and the interview analysis, the conclusion that can be drawn are following:

Concerning the first research question on the issue that is how has the Serbian education system addressed the needs of Roma children? What are the policies and what is the practice?

Roma children as the lawful citizens of Serbia are given the right to education since The Republic of Serbia is party to international legal instruments that guarantee free primary education for all, which is prescribed in the Constitutions of Serbia that additionally protects the right to education of national minorities. The Roma minority still remains the most marginalized and least educated in Serbia. Even though the literature captures their relatively good social rights protection by the former socialist Yugoslavia, the wars in the 90s have deepened their vulnerability and marginalization, lowering the standard of living of the whole country and especially those most vulnerable such as Roma. The prolonged transition had a difficult task in advancing the whole system, including education in accordance with democratic values that were a new concept in Serbia. Since the early 2000s numerous actions have been taken in order to include more Roma children in the education system in Serbia. Changes in the government resulted in introducing the new Laws on Education and Minorities in education. The Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2009) was the one to prescribe the most affirmative actions that were in the state of enthusiastic ideas. The international Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 of which Serbia was the had brought many significant shifts in policies. As mentioned above, the main policies that were introduced that serve to guard the right to education of Roma by the government were the introduction of affirmative action measures. These measures were meant to improve the overall education experience and outcome of Roma children, preparing them for future jobs. Of all measures the main ones were teaching assistants and scholarship programmes. Introduction of the Romani language was also one step closer in firstly acknowledging the Romani community the value of their culture and secondly the possibility for the whole population to learn it. While acknowledging the importance of all, teaching assistants might be the most beneficial for children's progress, especially if done in early education. The importance of teaching assistants is confirmed while conducting the interviews where the interviewees considered them as some of the most important actors in change. However, all of the above-mentioned measures are difficult to monitor and estimate their quantitative impact. The literature has shown that even though pedagogical assistants are

mostly highly motivated and eager to help children, they are not allocated accordingly around the country where there are more Roma students, additionally many times the success depends on the school itself as well as the parents. Many of the measures were also implemented very slowly and different governments had different attitudes.

As regards the second research question, that is What were the mechanisms for safeguarding the right to education of Roma children since the early 2000s and by who? Does the NGO sphere have an impact on the institutions?

Civil Society Organizations have an invaluable role and impact on both the government and Roma and non-Roma population. As the literature shows the importance of CSOs for the trust building between the community and local governance. In this context, in interviews, it was mentioned how sometimes Roma have more trust in the CSOs than the institutions. One of the main actors is the Civil Society Organization Roma Education Fund and at the moment, there are many CSOs that operate on local levels. Shortcomings of their work is lack of funds, as they are usually dependent on the foreign funds and project activities are not long-term, some literature also suggest that organizations should improve the cooperation between themselves. Further limitations are that they are somewhat new to the academic sphere in Serbia and there is not much written on them from a theoretical perspective, at least in the light of the Roma education. Thus, further research should be done in order to achieve better insights and a comprehensive image of their role. After analyzing the interviews, as well as consulting the only academic work in Serbia on this topic, by Škorić (2019), it is more than clear that the Civil Society Organization play the key role in holding the institutions accountable when they are not fulfilling their side on the protection of right to education and inclusion of the Roma Children. Many actions taken by the government were results of the pressure by the civil society, such as the pressure to include the Roma community and improve the living conditions of their settlements. Further impact is seen in initiatives that were first implemented by civil society such as the programme of teaching assistants and various scholarship programmes, which later became a standard.

Regarding the last research question, what needs to be further developed and which actions are needed to be taken for Roma children from all groups to be fully and respectfully included in the education system in Serbia? What role do teachers and other students have in this goal?

The answer to this question is not an easy one and has to be drafted carefully. Literature suggests that discrimination towards the Roma is still widely spread. Some non-Roma teachers and students are

in some reports presented as, mildly speaking, intolerant towards the Roma children in classrooms. Looking back at the interviews, chapter on representation, as well as the research done by Komatina, there are still many steps that need to be taken with this regard, so that it can be said that Roma are not the victims of prejudice and systemic discrimination in Serbia. All actors of the society should take actions with this aim, however the most important thing should be that the actions on the basis of discrimination should be sanctioned with zero tolerance. This needs to be had in mind when thinking about what should be done and changed in the education system so that Roma can be fully and respectfully included. Intercultural Education is most certainly the final goal, looking back at the literature as well as what interviewees have said, especially the second interviewee emphasized the importance of educating everyone about the importance of this issue: "...the key thing is that we are all different, but those differences are bringing us together. Since we cannot all be the same, it would not be fun, this way, we still have something to talk about, we have something to look forward to, we also have something to celebrate ". Besides the mentioned interviewee, all interviewees showed both in their questions, but also their engagement in civil society the will to apply these values. Which are in accordance with the values of intercultural dialogue promoted by the Council of Europe as well as UNESCO. Besides the fact that the contemporary world is changing and states have more and more diverse ethnicities, it is important to highlight that, as literature suggested and as it was written in the second chapter, Roma community has been living among Serbian community since the 15th century, thus, striving to include them in education system and every other aspect of life is not something that should be an innovation, although it seems that steps that need to be taken are complex as the discrimination and systemic neglect is deeply ingrained in the society.

In practical terms, while on one hand Roma children that often lag behind other students in Serbia should definitely be given more attention and many more teaching assistants, language lessons and scholarships need to be secured. Additionally, teaching assistants and other workers with the goal of inclusion should be maximally supported and consulted on their experience and the suggestions for solutions. Finally, as mentioned, this should be achieved by having intercultural, emancipated and democratic society in mind. Considering the facts presented, this sounds rather a utopian idea, however these kinds of goals are necessary when approaching society through human rights lenses.

Future actions and recommendations, Serbia should:

- Focus on supporting Roma children during their early childhood development and establish absolute availability of preparatory preschool programmes for Roma children
- Establish the more sustainable affirmative action measures and monitoring programme
- Give more and higher scholarships to Roma students regardless of their achievements
- Nurturing the established system of teaching assistants and work towards yearly improvement
- Establish a sustainable and universal possibility to teach Roma and non-Roma children Romanes language with elements of culture. Promote this possibility and explain the importance to both Roma parents and non-Roma citizens
- Regulate the Law on Social Cards so that it does include everyone from the most vulnerable groups
- Give more voices to Roma to express their experience
- Human rights-based approach to education with zero tolerance towards any kind of discrimination
- Nurturing intercultural education inside and outside of classrooms

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## APPENDIX I : Guide for Interview 1

Good afternoon, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Alisa Pajtić and I am studying the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratization and writing my thesis about the right to education of Roma children in Serbia.

This interview is being recorded and will be used for the purposes of my thesis. It will take a maximum of 30 minutes and I will ask you around 10 questions.

1. What do you see as the main obstacles for the education of Roma children today, do you think that something has changed since the beginning of the 2000s?
2. How do institutions deal with the right to education of Roma children in Serbia, and which civil sector?
3. What needs to be done in the future so that Roma children are fully and respectfully included in education in Serbia?
4. Do you have any comments on the Strategy for improving the position of Roma in the Republic of Serbia in 2009, in relation to the Strategy for the social inclusion of Roma and Roma women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022-2030. year in the context of plans for Roma returnees?
5. Among the most significant projects of your Association is the Improvement of Reintegration of Roma Returnees to Serbia, which was included every year from 2017 to 2021. What were the main activities undertaken within these four years?
6. What are the biggest challenges facing Roma returnees in Serbia when it comes to education?
7. Are there any future steps to be taken on this matter, or perhaps projects?
8. Would you like to add anything yourself?

Thank you for the conversation. I will turn off the recorder.

## APPENDIX II: Guide for Interview 2

Good afternoon, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Alisa Pajtić and I am studying the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratization and writing my thesis about the right to education of Roma children in Serbia.

This interview is being recorded and will be used for the purposes of my thesis. It will take a maximum of 30 minutes and I will ask you around 10 questions.

1. What do you see as the main obstacles for the education of Roma children today, do you think that something has changed since the beginning of the 2000s?
2. How do institutions deal with the right to education of Roma children in Serbia, and which civil sector?
3. What needs to be done in the future so that Roma children are fully and respectfully included in education in Serbia?
4. Looking back on your personal experience as a student in Serbia from primary to tertiary school, what were the biggest challenges?
5. From the point of view of a teaching assistant, what are the general experiences, positive and negative, of professors in Serbia and specifically professors who teach Roma students?
6. How important is the family atmosphere for children's education?
7. Looking back on your activism, what perspective did it give you and what role does the Roma Women's Network play, in general and specifically in education?
8. Since you advocate for the abolition of child marriage in Serbia, is there still a difference between the sexes in education?
9. In one of your speeches, you mentioned women who finish school but remain unemployed. What do you think is the root cause of this, and how does it affect their decisions about their own children's education?
10. What are the main obstacles for Roma children and young adults to acquire tertiary education?
11. Would you like to add anything yourself?

Thank you for the conversation. I will turn off the recorder.

### APPENDIX III: Guide for Interview 3

Good afternoon, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Alisa Pajtić and I am studying the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratization and writing my thesis about the right to education of Roma children in Serbia.

This interview is being recorded and will be used for the purposes of my thesis. It will take a maximum of 30 minutes and I will ask you around 10 questions.

1. What do you see as the main obstacles for the education of Roma children today, do you think that something has changed since the beginning of the 2000s?
2. How do institutions deal with the right to education of Roma children in Serbia, and which civil sector?
3. What needs to be done in the future so that Roma children are fully and respectfully included in education in Serbia?
4. Given that poverty is one of the most significant problems in the lives of Roma children, what can be done to combat it?
5. What, in your opinion, are the biggest obstacles to enrollment, as well as the reasons for the high dropout rate of Roma children?
6. What is your attitude about Roma children in special schools? What are the biggest shortcomings of the education system of Serbia in the context of the education of Roma children?
7. What do you think are the obstacles not only to access but also to quality education in schools?
8. What does the communication of the Roma Education Fund look like with state educational institutions?
9. Would you like to add anything yourself?

Thank you for the conversation. I will turn off the recorder.

#### APPENDIX IV: Guide for Interview 4

Good afternoon, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Alisa Pajtić and I am studying the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratization and writing my thesis about the right to education of Roma children in Serbia.

This interview is being recorded and will be used for the purposes of my thesis. It will take a maximum of 30 minutes and I will ask you around 10 questions.

1. What do you see as the main obstacles for the education of Roma children today, do you think that something has changed since the beginning of the 2000s?
2. How do institutions deal with the right to education of Roma children in Serbia, and which civil sector?
3. What needs to be done in the future so that Roma children are fully and respectfully included in education in Serbia?
4. Looking back on your activism, what perspective did it give you and what role does the Roma Women's Network play, in general and in education in particular?
5. Can you tell me something about the introduction of teaching in the Romani language?
6. Since you made the film "My Journey" about child marriage in Serbia, is there still a difference between the sexes in education?
7. Given that you filmed the documentary "Ja jesam - Me sem" (eng. I am), about the importance of registering Roma citizens, could you elaborate on that topic? In what way, in your opinion, does media (absence) influence the inclusion of Roma in education?
8. Would you like to add anything yourself?

Thank you for the conversation. I will turn off the recorder.