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OLDER PEOPLE IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS A DIFFERENT KIND OF ELDERNESS**

Informal settlements, colloquially referred by many pejorative names and associated with Roma people, represent a peculiar socio-spatial phenomena. While being very noticeable by a majority of population, many aspects of social life inside them remain to be invisible. Lives of their older inhabitants, as well as the very concept of “elderness” is one of the least know among these features. Poverty and everyday-life hardships, together with specific beginnings of individual’s life stages and circles (employment from an early age and entering into marriage) cause distinct definitions of “being old” – someone can be perceived to be “an elder-one” as early as in their 40s. This is only the beginning of numerous discrepancies felt by these people in their communities and in broader society, especially in legal sphere.

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1. Old people on the margin of society

Roma people, unlike other ethnic groups, tend to be stereotypically portrayed by surrounding population in both genders, as well as in all three major phases of life. We have particular stereotypes, ethnic slurs and jokes not only for “Gypsies” in general, but also for “Gypsy child(ren)”, “Gypsies (adult males)” and “Gypsy women”. Romantic benign depictions may summon images of old Roma grandpa (“stari ciga”), who tries to play his violin with his trembling hands, or an old grandma looking at her cards and giving wise advises and telling fortune to (non-Roma) audience. Social reality and individual experiences of elderly Roma are actually unknown to wider population. While family life and generational-forming process (ageing) of Roma is more visible to non-Roma, since traditional Roma professions were practised in public (petty trading, crafts and services) and by quite often by whole families (women and children acted as apprentices to the head of the family, who would often take role of the master artisan) (Soulis, 1961; Mujić, 1953). Paradoxically, spatial closeness and lack of visible barriers between Roma’s family lives and wider society went together with strong symbolic barriers, which formed and intertwined together during the last few centuries (Kubiček, 2017).

Article explores peculiar case in which social factors, namely, family structure, economic activity and ethnic marginalization deeply affected by racism are deeply intertwined with biological process of ageing. As one should bear in mind, ageing is not only chronological and physiological process, but also a mater of individual experience as well, depending from person’s genetics, environment, living conditions and lifestyle (Batrićević, 2022: 464). All cited factors, except genetics, actually form experiences which go beyond individual biographies, and can be specific for ethnic groups such as Roma. Reason for this is that belonging to an ethnic group is also generator of shared experiences, which is often compatible with generational common experience.

Our understanding of ageing can be interpreted in Elias’ broader theoretical context of the process of civilization. In the Middle ages, live was precarious and threatened by illnesses and sudden, violent death. In his study, *The Loneliness of the Dying* (first time published in 1985), Elias underlines that in the 13th century among feudal elite man of 40 years was considered an old individual, while in industrial societies, especially among higher classes, person of same age is considered almost young (Elias, 201: 7). By postponing death in modern societies, its members become more detached from it, while the sense of one’s own control over his fate and life grew stronger. Other persons death, as well as aging, reminds ourselves about our own inevitable fate, which

makes very disturbing experience for modern men, unacquainted with these facts (op.cit: 10).

Elias claims that frailty of ageing individual separates them from the rest of society. This seems even trivial, if one considers that older people may more often be limited by physical barriers, but famous sociologist – 88 years old at the time – had more in his mind. He argues that ageing people grow less sociable, and that their mutual feelings with people with whom they were close become less warm than they used to be (Elias, 2001: 2). His theory is very relevant for understanding of Roma elderness for two reasons. Firstly, his concept of different attitudes towards old and dying people in different classes is important, because most Roma tend to occupied lower social strata. Second, his analyses of different modes of social interactions in family and expected length of life and their effect on older people will be vital for the topic of this article.

2. Historical perspective

Historical sources from the past show that demographic structure of Roma and non-Roma (Serb) families were in fact, quite similar. Contrary to stereotypical depictions, both Roma and Serbian nuclear families were similar in number. In 1860. for example, Serbian family had 5.2 members by average, while Roma one had 5.18 (Vuletić, 2002: 52). City-dwelling Roma families were even smaller, In Belgrade in 1856 they had 3.8 members by average, while in Smederevo in 1862 average number of family members for Roma was 4.28 (op.cit.).

On the other hand, striking difference between Roma and Serbian families which is relevant for the theme of this article is that Roma families were, without exception, nuclear. This means that they only included parents and their unmarried (young) children, while in Serbian households, especially in the rural areas families were still extended, although this practice was fading away as the 19th century was ending. This extended family type was called “*zadruga*” and included parents, their children, as well as families of their married sons. For Roma, custom that married son splits from his father as soon as he enters marriage (daughters also left their primary family and formed new ones with their husbands) was strictly observed (Janković, 2018: 56-57). On the other hand, it is also notable that nomadic lifestyle caused some kind of temporary group formation between families who could be related, or not. Main reason for these groupings was better security on the road and entrepreneurial chances.

Socio-economic reasons for practice of nuclear family formation are clear since Roma were mostly engaged in non-agrarian trades, so that accumulation of workforce necessary for cultivation of fields and animal husbandry on larger scale was irrel-

evant. Furthermore, in the 19th century sizeable number of nomadic Roma lived in improvised housing (tents) during the spring and summer, and in pit-houses (known as *zemunica*, or *bordei* in Vlach/Romanian) in autumn and winter. Makeshift nature of households made much more easier for new-formed couples to separate from their parents.

This socio-spatial arrangement saw much change in the following century. Roma families, first in urban areas, and then in rural settlements, started to live in more permanent houses, which become more costly to build and maintain. As Aleksandra Mitrović and Gradimir Zajić noted, most Roma by the end of the 20th century lived in extended families, together with their parents (Mitrović & Zajić, 1998: 58-59). Young age of brides and grooms makes them unable to provide separate housing in most cases, which cemented this (paradoxically quite recent!) patriarchal structure. Same trend was also noted by Tatomir Vukanović, who interpreted this process of expanding of nuclear families as an outcome of material poverty, as well as Milutin Prokić, who shared the same opinion (Vukanović, 1983: 134-135; Prokić, 1991: 102-103).

3. Formational social experiences of contemporary elder Roma

Generation of elderly Roma (those over 65 years old, born approximately between 1920s and 1960s) have witnessed many historical events and process which form common experience with all other ethnic groups all across former Yugoslavia. Generation of their parents had unprecedented chance to be integrated in socialist society, with an opportunity to be employed, educated and socially protected. In practice, most Roma after the II World War occupied lower positions in production, but it still offered then large degree of security and chances to advance further – or, at least better then ever before, and sadly, better then ever after. As Milutin Prokić noted, already in 1948 56.3 percent of economically active Roma was engaged as working force in industry, while 24% worked in agriculture, 9.1% were craftsman and 6.8% had private businesses (*nota bene*, only 0.1% of Roma received pensions in the same period, while percent of pensioners in general Yugoslav society at the time was 1.1%) (Prokić, 1991: 103). In the following decades, number of economically active Roma in Yugoslavia was 28% in 1961 (45% in general population); 26% in 1971 (43% in general population) and 26.85% in 1981 (43.43% in general population) (op.cit: 105). Number of Roma with personal income – at the time mostly pensions – has risen from 1.94% in 1961 to 4.32% in 1971 and to 5.04% in 1981 (in general population percentage of people belonging to this category moved from 3.69%, to 6.05% and was 8.68% and 1981) (op.cit.). Prokić

also notes that, although number of economically independent Roma was lower than national average, it was much higher than in some other comparable ethnic groups. For example, Albanians who shared similar demographic and educational structure with Roma had only 24% of economically independent individuals, while the percentage of Roma with personal income was 32%. Data about concrete occupations of those Roma who were active in production shows unfavourable picture, since 41.57% of Roma worked as miners and industrial workers, 20.62 in agriculture, 13.33% were unqualified workers (compared to 1.93% of workers without qualifications in general population) (op.cit: 106).

Milutin Prokić interpreted these findings in very pessimistic tones in 1991. Yet, social changes which were about to happen brought new, even worse reality. Generation of their children were affected by economic crises of 1980s, Yugoslav wars and sanctions in 1990s and period of social and economic transformation after 2000s, which profoundly lacked ethnically egalitarian bases. Roma born from 1970s couldn't find employment in formal economy, which couldn't offer employment even to privileged ethnic majority. They would typically ensure living provisions by informal work, as self-employed petty traders, or as wage workers. In addition, those most vulnerable Roma – especially those who were displaced from their place of birth – were forced into begging, collecting communal waste and other dire strategies of survival. This stark contrast between different life experiences of generations of Roma leads to very peculiar picture in present time (Mitrović, 1990; Jakšić & Bašić, 2005; Simpson-Herbert et.al, 2006; Macura-Vuksanović & Macura, 2007).

4. Statistical data

According to results of the latest Census in Serbia (2022), Roma population – or at least respondents who identified themselves as Roma in current moment – is different in many aspects than non-Roma population, even than most of other ethnic minorities. Age structure of this ethnic group show many peculiarities relevant to this paper topic. Nationwide, 131.936 people declared themselves as Roma, among whom 67.459 are male, and 64.477 female. Among men, only 72 are older than 85 years, while 90 Roma women belongs to this category (162 in total). In the age group that also counts as elderly by most standards, 65-84 years, there are 8204 Roma in total, 3843 men and 4361 women.

On global level, as well as in Serbia, number of older people is growing, both in absolute number, and in proportion to younger segments of population (Tilovska-Kechedji, 2022: 440). Demographic projections are predicting that older people will

make up one third of population in Serbia, while they are closing to one quarter right now (Ljubičić & Ignjatović, 2022: 446). Roma population in Serbia, on the other hand, although showing the same trend at much slower pace, offers starkly different picture at the present. For example, on Serbia's national average level, oldest category of population (85 years plus) is at around 1.77% (117.651 in total), while citizens who are aged between 65 and 84 years make up 20.32% (135.1204 in total). Among Roma, people over 85 constitute less only 0.12% (162 out of 131.936 in total), while those between 65 and 84 are more are only 6.21% (Serbia 2022 Census, Population by nationality, age and sex)¹. Last Census still shows that even Roma population is ageing, and that percentage of elderly Roma is slowly growing, although it is still small comparing to national average. Census from 2011 detected only 3.96% of Roma older them 65 years (Jakobi et. al, 2021: 32), and 6.34% in 2022 is considerable increase in number².

Still, it is important to bear in mind that statistical data offers only citizens' subjective and manifest answers. In practice, this means that real number of Roma is typically larger than reported in census reports. Some of them tend to present themselves as part of ethnic (Serb) majority, while others identify as members of other, less stigmatized minority groups which are culturally and linguistically close to them (Romanians, Hungarians, Bosniaks...), alter their identity in some new form (Ashkali, Egyptians), or put forward their religious identity (Muslims), or simply don't report their ethnic identity at all (Kubiček, 2018). It is reasonable to assume that number of elderly Roma who don't identify as such is even larger than in middle aged or young segments of this population. Ruža Petrović underlines that statistics and demography treat ethnic identification as *personal affiliation*. In this sense, researcher can only introduce new category, *ethnic origin*, as a objective belonging to one group, which sometimes doesn't match with subjective identification. The relationship between these to concepts is dynamic in social reality, because subjective identification tends to become objective label at some point in time (Petrović, 1991: 116). This temporal nature of one's identity is crucial for the topic of this article, because older Roma had both more time to integrate and to be accepted into ethnic majority and to be acknowledged by its members.

First reason for this is that those older Roma who have been formally employed for whole or most of their carriers, and who have earned pensions and apartments or houses outside Roma neighborhoods doesn't identify whit their ethnic group

¹ Population by nationality, age and sex: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3104020303?languageCode=sr-Cyrl&displayMode=table> retrived : 12.06.2023.

² Total number of Roma between two Censuses was also decreased by 15.668, from 147.604 to 131.936, making this finding even more relevant.

any more. They may be integrated in their communities and accepted as part of ethnic majority, making the process of assimilation completed.

Second reason for this phenomena is that elder Roma may have severed, or limited their social relations with younger Roma, or with their children and cousins. This process, together with limited chances to form new bonds with Roma belonging to their own generation, could also be realistic reason for this rapid assimilation of elderly Roma. Many relevant institutions: pension funds, medical and social care institutions and so on are not only unable, but also strictly prohibited to have produce or keep any data concerning subjective ethnic identity or objective ethnic provenance concerning their beneficiaries.

This phenomena was already described by Aleksandra Mitrović in her study *The Roma in Serbia* (Mitrović, 1998). In it, she clearly noted that segments of Roma population who are most prone to ethnic mimicry are Roma who are native to local community and *the elderly Roma* (Mitrović, 1990; Mitrović, 1998: 21). Author claims that around 10% of older Roma respondents tend to change their ethnic identification, which is also typical for Roma who are employed in agriculture or who are qualified craftsman.

Aside from assimilation, there is another group of factors that affect smaller numbers of Roma people in Serbia. These factors affect quality of life of poor communities Roma for their whole life. Vladimir Stanković brought forth some striking evidence which proves that Roma had higher mortality rates in Yugoslavia in period between 1971 and 1986 (period in which contemporary elder Roma were still young or middle-aged). Most disturbing finding is mortality rate of newborn children (less then 1 year old), which is the best indicator of quality if health of whole community. While percentage on the national level of newborn children mortality in SFRJ was 6.8%, for Roma it was 26.1%. In other age categories, mortality of Roma was also noticeably higher then Non-Roma: 3.3% for age 1-4 (1% in general population); 1.2% for age 5-9 (0.4% in general population); 1.7% for age 10-19 (1% in general population); 4% for age 20-34 (3% in general population); 10.9% for age 35-49 (7.4% in general population); 6.5% for age 50-54 (4.8% in general population); 7.8% in age 55-59 (5.7% in general population); 8% in age 60-64 (7.4% in general population) and 30.4% among those older then 65 (62.4% in general population) (Stanković, 1991: 173-174).

5. Fieldwork data

Sociological fieldwork offers readers more qualitative insights into life of elderly Roma, generated by previously described socio-historical processes. It is worth

noting here that elderly people in general suffered from unfavourable life conditions more often than younger and middle aged men and women up until very recent times. Research from the first and second decade of 21st century shows that older people were among poorest in Serbia, and that they faced exclusion, reduced access to healthcare and many other material and non-material services (Ljubičić & Ignjatović, 2022: 447). For example, one third of elderly people were unable to pay their monthly bills, one quarter needed help to prepare meals, while one in seven people couldn't maintain hygiene or even to move without someone's help (one out of ten cases) (Matković, 2012, cited in Ljubičić & Ignjatović, 2022: 447; Jovanović, 2022).

In survey on elderly Roma conducted by Tanja Jakobi, Dragan Stanojević and Dejan Marković in 2020 in Serbian larger cities on 503 respondents (Roma older than 65 years), more than 25% reported that they had experience of migration in their lifetime. These migrations include both internal migrations and external, in countries abroad. Most of these migrations were (at least declarative) voluntary and driven by better life chances in some other places (Jakobi, Stanojević & Marković, 2021: 72). Of course, "voluntary" nature of such changes of locations depends from their previous life conditions. As it was stated before, large proportion of Roma migrated from cities and municipalities located in the south of Serbia, which fell into desperate economic situation since large agricultural and industrial corporations ceased to work in the 1980s, and especially 1990'. Forceful and manifestly involuntary migrations were part of experience of around one third of Roma respondents (op.cit.). Most of them suffered from ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Metohia by Albanian terrorist groups in 1999, and sought refuge in central Serbia and Vojvodina.

Around 30% of respondents haven't been formally employed for more than 30 years, which practically means that they have never enjoyed any social insurance reserved for regular employees, including pensions (Jakobi, Stanojević & Marković, 2021: 73). This is reflected in the most crucial sense, since 38% of elderly Roma doesn't receive any pension (op.cit: 76). Around one fifth of elderly Roma lives in very bad material living conditions – most of them in informal settlements, without access to an asphalt road. One in ten lives in an improvised house (made of reed, earth, mud, sheet metal or cardboard), but quarter of all houses are in bad conditions, including those made out solid construction material (op.cit: 76-78). Percentage of elderly Roma who can't pay their monthly bills is 46%, which is much higher than in general population (18%) (op.cit: 80).

Finally, this survey sheds much light on the quality of health of older Roma. Most of them has lower access to health infrastructure than general population, and can't afford regular admission of medical therapy, but the data about their health prob-

lems is even more telling. Almost 90% of older Roma respondents had high blood pressure; 51% percent has diabetes; 49% rheumatic joint disease; 43% high level of lipids in blood; 31% suffered from myocardial infarction and 28% has asthma. A comparison with the general elderly population indicates that the frequency of more serious chronic diseases among elderly Roma is more pronounced: elderly Roma more often have high blood pressure, high blood lipids, diabetes, heart attack myocardium, stroke, malignant diseases and cataracts than general older population (op.cit: 97-98).

In an older detailed case study in Roma settlement of Mali London in vicinity of city of Pančevo, conducted in 1998 by team of sociologists and psychologists led by Anđelka Milić it was found that half of families in this particular case were nuclear families, which they described as an exception, because typical Roma households at that time were expanded and multi generational (Milić et. al, 1999: 25). Finding that is even more interesting for topic of this article is that around 10% of households were single ones, and that all of Roma living in them were elderly persons. Authors explained this phenomena with two factors. First one, family connections between single living elderly people and their families were severed, and as second, they cited that social prestige of elderly person in Roma settlement is degraded. Authors also found that households composed of couples without children counted 7% more, and that they were also mostly older persons as well (op.cit.).

6. Conclusion

Elias notes one crucial difference in his second essay from *The Loneliness of the Dying*, titled *Ageing and Dying: Some Sociological Problems*. In it, he argues that modern, industrial societies have introduced many institutional facilities which take care for elderly, unlike pre-modern societies in which elder people were in custody of their families – which had potential to be beneficial for them, as well as quite brutal at times (op.cit: 72-74). As Elias strongly underlines – dying is a act of violence, whether it is caused by humans, or by the course of nature. For those who are at risk of death, it doesn't change the brutality of this process or event (Elias, 2001: 88-89). This article shows that for Roma, elderly or not, this risk is higher than in general population. If we agree with Norbert Elias that being old means to be aware of one's possibility to die – then large part of Roma community grow old much before that arbitrary taken 65th year.

Max Weber referred to Roma as being peculiar case of an Indian caste which left caste system of their homeland, but remained to be a caste in new social surrounding (Weber, 1958). Keeping in mind that this remark has some exoticizing baggage, it

poses as question of their social reincarnation – or, their assimilation caused by social mobility, if we resist to omit this metaphor. Those Roma who have survived premature risks which are typically tied to an old age may “reincarnate” when they reach position of elder person by general standards.

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