

THE PERCEPTION OF THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE ROMA MINORITY IN THE FIELD MEĐIMURJE COUNTY

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Abstract

In the Republic of Croatia many important issues depend on the perception of the public including the issue of national minorities. The aim of the research is to determine the perception of the Croatian public about the Roma minority in the Međimurje County in which concerning the census of 2011, the third of Croatian Roma reside. The study was conducted by creating online surveys, voluntary type. For the purpose of the study author's questionnaire is made, and is distributed by e-mail and posted on Facebook significant groups of tens of thousands of members within Croatia. An interesting fact is that within 24 hours the questionnaire approached 500 people, which is evidence of the great interest of the population of Međimurje County in the subject of the Roma minority. The results indicate that there is a gap in the relations between Croats and Roma in Međimurje County. However, also indicate that this gap is not insurmountable with mutual understanding and acceptance of cultural differences and acceptance of basic cultural norms and Croatian law. Furthermore, the results suggest the absence of discrimination on ethnic grounds. With their specific cultural elements Roma build and maintain the ethnic border towards the Croats, complicating and reducing the possibility of their own integration. The largest obstacle to the integration of the Roma is a significant spatial segregation at the local level. Although the results suggest that the majority of respondents believe that relations between the two groups will not improve, they are willing to co-existence and common action in order to improve relations.

Key words

Roma, Croats, Međimurje, public perception, culture, diversity

INTRODUCTION

Roma originate from north-west India (Dardistan, Karfiristan), the area around the river Ganges, while the migration of Roma have been carried out for centuries from India, through Afghanistan and Persia. Some of the tribes of the southern group moved in the direction of Syria, Egypt (probably through north-west Africa and over Gibraltar into Spain - Gitani), while most of the Roma tribes crossed Turkey and Bosphorus and thus came to Europe (in time from X to XIV. century Roma stayed Turkey and Greece).

Roma migrating was an essential part of life and a way of surviving. Upon coming to Europe and encountering different cultures, no change occurred and the migration process continues, although there were attempts to prevent or at least limit movement. The Roma have been given a variety

of names in Europe and have also encountered varying degrees of acceptance. The Roma name derives from the term "Gipsy" meaning - man. They are very unusual, adapt quickly and are visually recognizable ethnic communities. Their country of origin has not yet been fully defined. With all the great movement in the distant and recent past, in spite of all the influences and parallels given them, they succeed in preserving their identity, cultural heritage, language and specific way of life, the only mention of the moral sense of belonging to an ancient living tongues. Two characteristic forms of coexistence have determined the situation of Roma in the world. Those Roma who lived isolated and in separate rural village, have preserved the ethnic-cultural self-awareness of their Roma group, but at the cost of permanent backwardness and poverty in relation to their environment. In cases where they lived together or

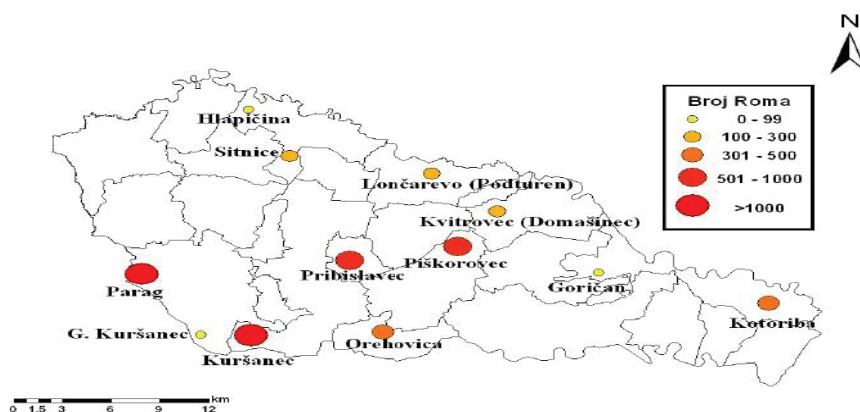
mixed with a majority local population, the Roma lost the peculiarities of their national identity. In some places they live completely assimilated, and in some cases, accepting the social norms of the environment, even surpass the standard of living of other inhabitants. The administrative and legal situation of Roma in Europe is such that they are trying to match their status with other ethnic minorities, but still have not managed to stop the process of camouflaging discrimination and segregation.

The first written document which indicates the presence of Roma Koritar in Medjimurje, is found in the register of Births, Deaths and Marriages department in Podturen. It is written that in 1866 a child born was registered having the nationality of zingarus. So, after the abolition of slavery in Romania, Roma settled in the area where Međimurja start a sedentary lifestyle and remain to this day. The period during World War II, for the Roma in Croatia, was a time of mass killings based on Nazi ideology which the former Independent Croatian state followed, and large numbers of Roma perished in concentration camps. Međimurski Roma, however, were not exposed to such events as Međimurje at the time was under Hungarian occupation. As there were no mass killings of Roma in the mentioned area, these two areas

are now parts of Croatia where the greatest number of Roma reside.

Roma in Međimurje County belong to a specific group of Roma who speak the language *ljimba d bjaš* which differ from the majority of Roma in Croatia who speak one of the official versions of the Romani language *Romani Chib*. Members of this group are named Bajas because of the language they speak. The language spoken by Roma Beashi in Croatia, but also abroad, is not the Roma language, but it is an archaic Romanian language which, thanks to the spatial and temporal separation from the mother tongue, developed some peculiarities. The language of the Roma Beashi was adopted during the period of slavery in Romania and was brought to places where they live today. Some historical data show the brutality of the then Romanian slave owners, who threatened Roma with promising the physical removal of the tongue as an organ of speech, hence forcing Rome to speak Romanian. In such circumstances Beashi Roma were forced to leave their own, Roma language and use the Romanian language, which retained and transferred to younger generations. According to the last census in 2011 a third of all Roma living in the Republic of Croatia, live in the Međimurje county, about 5107. This accounts for about 5% of the total population of Medjimurje.

Figure 1. Roma settlements in Međimurje County



Source: Atlas of Roma settlements Međimurje, UNDP project "Platform for Roma in Međimurje County, 2014.

In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights, after the proceedings before the Grand Chamber of the court (17 judges), announced the verdict of the case Oršuš and Others vs. The Republic of Croatia. It was ruled that 14 students were denied the right to primary education in two primary schools (Macinec and Podturen) and that they were dis-

criminated against in the freedom to enjoy their right to education because of their Roma origin. This was argued because during primary education they had been for a particular period, or during their entire stay, put into so-called. "Roma classes". The court also found that the Republic of Croatia is putting great efforts in to the integrati-

on and education of Roma children. Despite the verdict, there are great difficulties in the education of Roma children. They do not understand the Croatian language upon enrollment in the school as well as other problems arising from isolation in Roma settlements. Non-Roma children are also dissatisfied because they claim to be at a disadvantage if they are in a class with first grade Romas, as a pose to their peers who are not in mixed classes.

According to the annual report on the work of the Centre for Social Welfare Čakovec for the year 2014 on the total number of users, all members of households and single people, allowance support and guaranteed minimum fees the Roma population accounts for 80% of users (relative data based on addresses). Total assets in 2014 paid on behalf of the support allowance and the guaranteed minimum compensation amounts to HRK 25,791,697.00. A great number of benefit claimers, appear to be fit for the workforce. Of the total amount of claimers who are fit for the workforce, the highest number refers to the Roma population. In addition Roma use maternity and child benefits, which favors the high birth rate of the Roma population, and although it is not the cause, it does play part to very early, even teen pregnancies. It should be noted that the current situation, helps stimulate users to not find employment because their social benefits are higher than their paycheques should they find a job. Problems arise once the children reach the age of 15 lose social rights. These children then take to the road and depend on themselves for survival and this often introduces them to the world of crime. The spending of social assistance is also a problem because this aid does not go towards real life needs, but to a large extent buys alcohol and feeds gambling urges. The Centre for Social Welfare recently provides social assistance in food and household necessities, and not in cash.

At a press conference in 2012, the Minister of Internal Affairs announced the fact that 50% of property crimes committed in Međimurje County were committed by persons of Roma nationality. That statement caused the attack on the minister by the civil society and the media, which accused him of discrimination, while at the same time justifying County residents who daily feel the consequences of theft, regardless of nationality. Occasionally, due to citizen revolt, an initiative for

the establishment and guarding of rural property and land are mentioned to prevent stealing. Initiatives are not achieved, and usually after media exposure, the Ministry of Internal Affairs intensify its patrols in these areas in order to reduce theft.³

Also, in early 2014, there was a rebellion in a Čakovec high school due to many years of mental and physical abuse and looting by Roma groups outside the school premises and as well as on the way to school, so that the Ministry of the Interior would have increased patrols who took in a child safety.

PERCEPTION OF THE ROMA IN THE EUROPEAN UNION.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014, the majority of respondents expressed negative attitudes about minority groups in their country. In Italy and France, countries where the policy towards Roma communities in recent years generated controversy, the vast majority have an unfavorable opinion of Roma living in their country, 85% of Italians and 66% of French. In Greece, the UK and Poland, about half the population of these countries gives Roma a negative assessment, and at least forty percent in Germany and Spain. There is a strong link between ideology and attitudes towards Roma.

People who are at the right side of the political spectrum have a negative view of people who are left-leaning.

At the summit of Roma in 2008 the then President of the EU Commission Joseph Barroso, said that the Roma themselves should demonstrate civic responsibility, but that this can only happen if they have access to all the possibilities. It is clear that Roma can move from their current state to become productive members of society and to gain the confidence of other nations. There is a lack of trust towards the Roma, and gaining trust should be their long-term interests. In order to create social opportunities for the Roma and the interaction between all nations, the European Commission is to facilitate dialogue between groups addressing mutual distrust. An international standard that should be set up between the two groups that operate under deep distrust and hostility towards each other, is not so much the realization of minority rights and non-

discrimination, but a basic social construction and social dialogue, as well as mutual cooperation.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This study was carried out with the purpose of its results making a contribution to the understanding of the problems of the majority population in Međimurje County which arise in coexistence with the Roma minority. Also to deny common perception that segregation of Roma in Međimurje County exists if one belongs to a national minority. Certainly, the greatest contribution of this study is to demonstrate the possibilities of achieving a better coexistence.

The overall objective is to show the public's perception in Međimurje County towards the Roma minority.

Specific objectives of the research:

- To determine the degree of satisfaction of the majority of the population living together with the Roma in Međimurje County.
- Identify the degree of satisfaction felt by the majority of people in Međimurje County towards legal regulations related to the rights and obligations of Roma
- Show possible solutions to improve the process of integration of the Roma minority in the Croatian society in Međimurje County.

Hypotheses:

- The level of dissatisfaction is higher for those who are in direct contact with the Roma community, but lower for people who have no contact with members of the Roma minority.
- Persons who have expressed dissatisfaction against the Roma minority, are willing to co-exist and integrate Roma in the Međimurje County.

SAMPLE AND INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire consists of three parts: the socio-demographic data of respondents, the opinions and attitudes of the majority population in the Republic of Croatia in relation to the Roma

minority, and the respondents proposals to achieve better coexistence. This type of questionnaire design is in line with its objectives of research. The questionnaire was sent to the social network Facebook with instructions for completion and specifically noted that this was an anonymous survey. The study had been planned to be carried out over a period of 10 days, but because of great interest (the survey was completed by 507 respondents in the time frame of 24 hours), it was locked and the research survey was completed. We can conclude that the survey sample was specific, though in structure, to a greater extent tends to be a representative sample (according to data on the structure of the population of Međimurje County) talking about the demographics of the sample: the questionnaire was completed by 52% of men and 48% women. The age structure occurred 45% of people under 30 years of age, 43% of those aged 31-45 year olds, and 12% of those aged over 46 years of age. Elders participated the least because they used social networks to a lesser extent compared to the youngest populations. According to the work experience of those who approached the questionnaire - 20% students, 68% of employees and 10% of the unemployed and 12% of retirees. According to the education level of those who had approached- 50% of people had secondary education, 20% had a college education and 30% were with college degrees. This part of the sample differs from the real population, because it is the Međimurje County in Croatia, which has the lowest rate of highly educated people (below 10%), according to the Statistical Yearbook of Croatia.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Here we provide a review of the most interesting results of the survey by quoting questions from the questionnaire, otherwise the work was too big for publication.

First, an interesting question was: where respondents experience gained during contact with the Roma?

Table 1. Displays the structure of respondents PEMA way of involvement in coexistence with members of the Roma minority

Realisation of the contact of Roma and Croats	N	%
Neighborhood	196	39
Schooling	38	7
Working environment	71	14
I have had no personal experience or contact, my perception has grounds on others experience or what I am presented through the media	169	33
Other	33	7
Summary	506	100

The table shows that a large number of survey respondents, 39% reside in neighborhoods with Roma, while 33% are not included directly in coexistence with the Roma, but their perception has been influenced by the media and others having contact Roma

Public perception of the Međimurje County in relation to the Roma minority is that 90% of respondents believe that the Roma have more rights than the majority population. The data implies that the indicated groups of respondents were of the opinion that Roma were positively discriminated against.

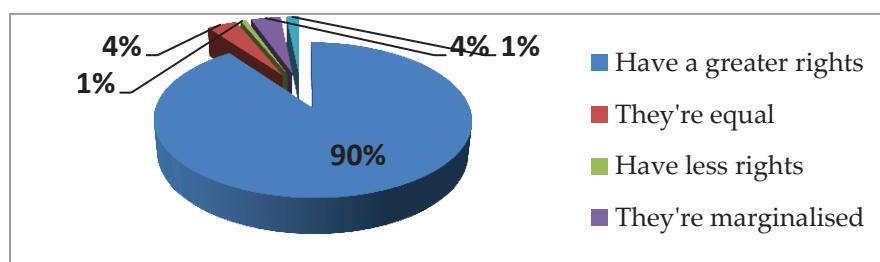


Figure 2. The respondents' opinions on the rights of the Roma minority and the majority population

The dominant feelings felt by respondents in the Međimurje County during a close encounter with Roma were fear, unease and uncertainty. This was the result of personal negative experiences had by

the respondents, and indicate that this was not about discrimination because they belonged to a minority (Figure 3).

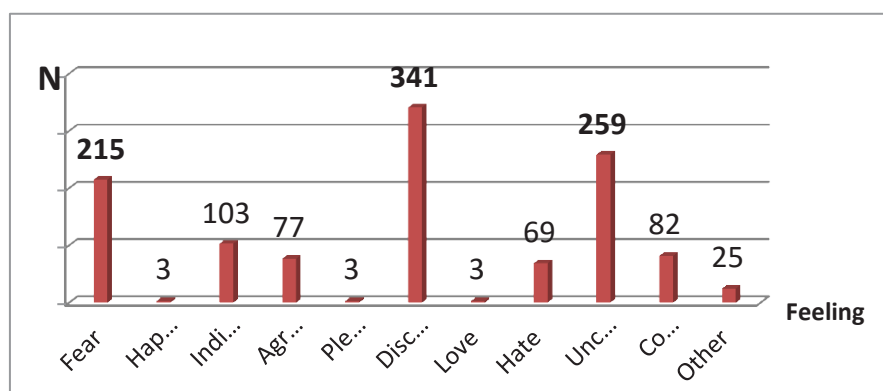


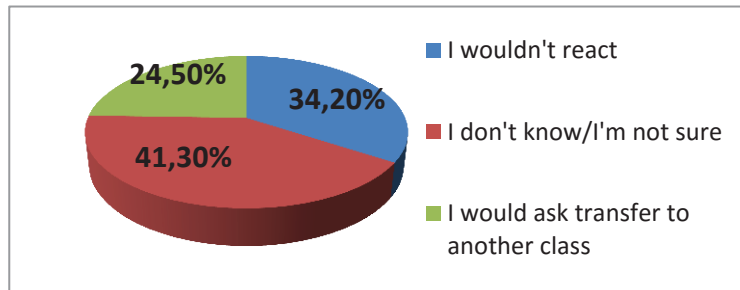
Figure 3. Feelings that occur in respondants during a close encounter with a member of the Roma minority

The attitude of the majority of the Croatian population in Medjimurje County in the event that their children attend school with Roma children is

interesting. Only one fourth of them would react negatively, seeking transfer of their children into a different class where there were no Roma pupils.

And one third expressed a positive attitude, not to respond at all. The rest are undecided.

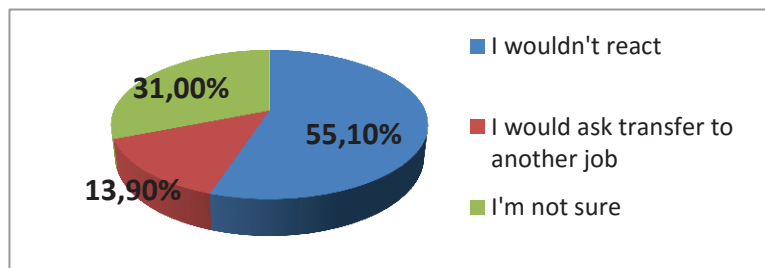
Figure 4. Opinions of respondents on how they would react in the event that their child was in a class with a few Roma children



It is also interesting to note the opinion of respondents on the theme of coexistence with the Roma in the working environment. 55.10% of them have a positive attitude towards fellow Roma at work, one-third are not sure about their re

actions, while only 13.90% have extremely negative attitudes and would sought to transfer to another position where there are no Roma and would even seek a new job just to not have to work with members of the Roma minority.

Figure 5. Reactions and attitudes of respondents if there were Roma members working with them in the work environment



The following was to question the attitude of the respondents of the Međimurje County, as the majority of the population, and how they would react if a Roma family moved into their neighborhood. The attitude was very similar to the previous question about meeting Roma in the

workplace. One-third have a positive view on Roma neighbors (36.40%), while 16.20% had an explicit negative attitude. Others were not sure because they did not have experience with Roma neighbours.

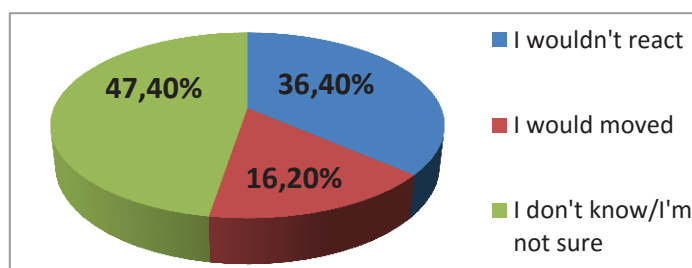


Figure 6. Attitude of respondents reactions if a Roma family bought a house or apartment near their properties and moved into the neighborhood

Other attitudes and opinions (perceptions) of the Croatian majority population in Međimurje County towards members of the Roma minority is as follows (short presentation of results): 57.5% of respondents (Croats) agree that Roma are regulated by law in the field of social welfare. In real terms, of all those using social welfare benefits who do not work in the Republic of Croatia, 56% belong to the Roma national minority. Because of the poor quality of spending social assistance (in cash), social welfare centers provide them with assistance in goods. 67.8% of respondents believe that Roma are not a marginalised group because of poverty, but because of not accepting the cultural and social norms of life in Croatia. 81.6% of respondents do not agree that Roma are trying to respect the culture and customs of the majority population. 86.7% of respondents did not agree that the Roma do not recognize the civil and political rights, but they have too few obligations in relation to the rights guaranteed to them. They are given assistance, but nothing is asked of them in return, the aid is unconditional. Facilities have been built in Roma settlements in the last ten years, but because of non payment of fees for the same services, the same were later abolished. 86.7% of respondents claimed that the Roma received health care in the same way as the majority of the Croatian population. 87.9% of respondents are of the opinion that the Roma are in most cases prone to criminal activities, far more than the majority Croatian population.

Finally the positively surprising attitude of the respondents to the possible improvement of relations between the Roma and the majority population in Međimurje County. 41.70% of them have a very positive attitude towards coexistence, while 58.30% have a negative attitude. If we compare these data with data from Europe, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014, 85% of Italians and 66% of the French have extremely negative attitudes towards the Roma, while the percentage of Englishmen, Germans and Poles about 50% with a negative attitude. The population of Međimurje County, where a third of the Roma in Croatia live, in their negative attitudes towards the Roma, are amongst the lowest percentages when compared to other European countries.

At the end of the questionnaire respondents were asked to give some suggestions on how to im-

prove the perception of the majority Croatian population towards Roma and is summarized as follows:

- It is never a good thing to put someone in a ghetto, nor is this a good thing for the Roma
- Ghettos should be abolished as should Roma settlements and schools/classes as these will never achieve coexistence.
- The community needs to assist those Roma who want to learn, work, because it is the path to acceptance of cultural and social norms of the state where they live.
- Social services and police should punish the disregard and non-care of Roma children, the abuse of Roma women, and abolish and penalise underage marriages.
- Police, health services and other legal regulations must be applied equally to the majority and the minority people (Roma are in a better position).

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The first aim of this study was to show the degree of satisfaction of the majority of the population living together with the Roma minority. 90% of respondents noted the negative feelings and discomfort, insecurity or fear as a feeling that occurs when meeting with members of ethnic minorities. 80% of all social help in the Međimurje County is received by members of the Roma minority, which is largely spent on alcohol and gambling, forcing the Social Welfare Centre in Čakovcu to socially assist Roma families by ways of giving goods and household necessities. In 2012 50% of all property crimes were committed by members of the Roma minority. From the given, we can conclude that the majority of the population is dissatisfied with the current situation of coexistence with the Roma minority in the Međimurje County.

The second goal of the study was to show the satisfaction with legal regulations related to the rights and duties of the Roma minority.

Over 80% are of the opinion that the Roma are not marginalized under any grounds, because they are treated equally in health care benefits. For the majority of the population in the Međimurje County, the prevailing opinion that the Roma have too many rights with too few obligations resides. Because, for example, communal infrastruc-

ture was built for the Roma, and was later sabotaged by the Roma themselves through lack of payment of utility fees as well as not caring about the given -therefore devastation. Despite all the efforts of the state and local communities, there seems to be no progress in the integration of Roma into society.

The third objective of the study was to show possible solutions to improve the process of integration of the Roma minority in the Croatian society. As a possible solution on how to improve the process of integration of the Roma minority in the Croatian society the idea of humanitarian resettlement outside of Roma settlements, and perhaps even beyond the borders of the Međimurje County, which is the most densely populated region in Croatia. By moving, impact of the Roma community is reduced in the Roma settlements, which often limits the efforts of individuals in these neighborhoods to create normal living conditions. Secondly, it can be stated that Roma children should be included in the education system earlier- from pre-school age. Specifically, in this way the child will come to the first grade of primary school with the knowledge of the Croatian language and basic hygiene habits. The opinion which was also expressed was that the education of children should be conditioned with the threat of the abolishment of social rights of parents.

The first hypothesis is: the degree of dissatisfaction with the Roma is higher in people who are in direct contact, but for people who have no contact with members of the Roma minority, results have not been confirmed. Results of the research indicate that respondents equally perceive Roma regardless of the type of contact with them (did they have personal experiences or will learn about co-existence from others or the media.).

The second hypothesis is: persons who expressed discontent with the Roma minority, are more willing to co-existence and integration of the Roma minority, than those who are satisfied with relations with members of the Roma minority. Making a descriptive analysis of the answers, we were not able to determine whether there is a correlation between dissatisfaction against the Roma minority and readiness to co-exist and integrate ethnic minorities and a more detailed analysis related to such matters needs to be examined.

Despite dissatisfaction with the current co-existence, the majority of the population is aware of sharing life with the Roma minority, and are willing to sacrifice some things in order to develop a quality coexistence, but it is also expected from Roma to respect the fundamental legal and cultural norms as it may be an escalation of the conflict and the revolt of the Croats.

CONCLUSION

Many important issues in Croatia depend on the perception of the public including the issue of national minorities. Many previous studies in Croatia, dealt with the rights of the Roma, their discrimination, segregation, life and customs, their history and language. But no exploration (we did not find any in the Republic of Croatia) of the public's (the majority Croatian people) perception of coexistence with the Roma, which problems arise and if and how to overcome them to achieve a better coexistence in mutual satisfaction.

It is evident that there is a gap between the relations of Croats and Roma in Međimurje County, but also that the gap is not insurmountable with mutual understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity. Co-existence can be a good quality with the adoption of the basic cultural norms and Croatian law, as can be seen from this study, for which there are tendencies of good will on both sides, of the members of both peoples, majority and minority.

The research also shows that the majority of the population accepts coexistence with the Roma and the conscious barriers and challenges. The question remains how to encourage the Roma to accept coexistence, if there is a resistance towards the acceptance of legal and cultural norms. That is, how to enable the integration and coexistence of someone who does not want to change? This remains an open question which this study did not answer, and the challenge remains for future similar research.

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PERCEPCIJA JAVNOSTI O ROMSKOJ MANJINI U MEĐIMURSKOJ ŽUPANIJU

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Sažetak

Mnoga bitna pitanja u Republici Hrvatskoj zavise od percepcije javnosti pa tako i pitanja nacionalnih manjina. Cilj istraživanja je utvrditi percepciju hrvatske javnosti o Romskoj manjini s područja Međimurske županije u kojoj prema popisu stanovništva iz 2011. godine prebiva trećina hrvatskih Roma. Istraživanje je provedeno izradom on-line ankete na dobrovoljnoj bazi. Za potrebe istraživanja izrađen je autorski anketni upitnik, te je distribuiran e-mailom i postavljen na značajnije facebook grupe od po nekoliko desetaka tisuća članova u Međimurskoj županiji. Zanimljiva je činjenica da je u roku od 24 sata anketnom upitniku pristupilo 500 osoba, što svjedoči o velikoj zainteresiranosti stanovnika Međimurske županije za tematiku romske nacionalne manjine. Dobiveni rezultati ukazuju da postoji jaz u odnosima između Hrvata i Roma u Međimurskoj županiji, međutim, isto tako ukazuju da taj jaz nije nepremostiv uz obostrano razumijevanje i prihvaćanje kulturoloških različitosti, te prihvaćanju osnovnih kulturnih normi i zakona Republike Hrvatske. Nadalje, rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na nepostojanje diskriminacije po nacionalnoj osnovi. Romi svojim specifičnim kulturnim elementima izgrađuju i održavaju etničku granicu spram Hrvata, te otežavaju i umanjuju mogućnosti vlastite integracije. Ponajveća prepreka značajnijoj integraciji Roma je prostorna segregacija na lokalnoj razini. Iako rezultati ukazuju na to da većina ispitanika smatra kako se odnosi između dviju skupina neće poboljšati, isti su spremni na zajednički suživot i djelovanje kako bi se odnosi poboljšali.

Ključne riječi

Romi, Hrvati, Međimurska županija, percepcija javnosti, kultura, različitosti