

COMMAND OF THE POLISH LANGUAGE AND THE INTEGRATION OF THE ROMA IN POLAND: AN OUTLINE

The Roma community is considered to be the least educated, most neglected and misunderstood ethnic minority in Poland. According to the census data from 2011, out of 38.5 million Poles there are 17 thousand who identify themselves as Roma, of which 10 thousand declared that this was their only identity; 7 thousand combined it with their Polish identity (Central Statistical Office). However, the high mobility of the community and their reluctance to take part in surveys should be taken into account when reporting statistics related to the Roma community. In previous reports, taking into account the above considerations, it was pointed out that this group in Poland may number as many as tens of thousands (Ethnologue. Languages of the World).

The Roma minority in Poland – although the average Pole perceives it as monolithic – is in fact ethnically diverse. The four largest groups within the Republic of Poland are as follows: Polska Roma, Kełderasze, Lowarzy, and the Bergitka Roma, which differ in their social structure, customs, approach to the traditional Roma Code and, above all, the degree of integration with Poles (which depends, among others, on historical and cultural factors, such as non-Roma marriage bans). It seems that Polska Roma is the most conservative Roma ethnic group, which mainly inhabits the following voivodships:

Zachodniopomorskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Wielkopolskie, and Lubuskie. Representatives of this ethnic group living in north-western Poland are much better off than the dominant population in southern Poland, the Carpathian Roma, which does not mean that the problem of high unemployment and poor education does not concern them. This is evidenced by the fact that at present in Wielkopolska there is only one person belonging to the Roma community with a tertiary education diploma¹. Interestingly, sociological research shows that, compared with other Central European countries, Poles show a dislike towards the Roma minority comparable to that of Hungarians, Bulgarians, Slovaks, and Romanians (based on data from 2016 – 67%). The Roma, besides the Arabs, are the most unpopular ethnic group in Poland (CBOS), but, unlike in the above countries, there are very few cases of Roma graduating from universities (Szoska-Różycka, Weigl). This demonstrates the low level of integration of the Roma community in Poland and the ineffective use of EU funds. For this reason, teachers in contact with Roma students can count on at best the incidental support of pedagogically savvy Roma assistants, and therefore the need for further education lies with school principals and the teachers themselves.

Although the Roma have lived among Poles for hundreds of years, they continue to remain „aliens and strangers” and their insistence to maintain exclusivity and cultural ethnocentrism makes their origin, history and customs unknown to the Polish public (Paleczny). The evidently negative stereotype of the Roma and their acculturation problems throughout Central Europe do not improve the situation of those representatives of the community who decide to send their children to Polish schools or express the intention to educate their offspring beyond primary school. Contrary to popular opinion, there are a lot of such parents. A field study in the teaching environment indicates moreover that frequent and long trips abroad taken by Roma families adversely affect the education of the Roma in Poland. A question arises how – inasmuch as this is a matter of modifying the content of the curricula and the attitudes of the teaching profession rather than the characteristics of the social system – to encourage Roma parents to send children to Polish schools, which they often abandon for the sake of multicultural schools outside Poland.

¹ Based on the studies mentioned below.

The situation in which the Roma minority is inclined to educate their children, at least at the elementary level, makes one scrutinise school curricula and teacher competences and verify the extent to which teachers themselves are prepared to care for and educate children from a different culture, bilingual or monolingual at that. The common problems faced by Roma children in Polish schools include creating separate Roma-only classes, organizing extra-curricular activities exclusively for the Roma and sending them to special schools because of their poor command of the Polish language (Kwadrans 2008: 202)².

Following in the footsteps of Fredrik Barth and his typology of contemporary ethnic group status change, the strategy of the Roma minority in Poland should be defined as the most conservative (Barth). Roma culture is not subject to the „assimilation of the minority culture to the majority one” (Dołowy-Rybińska), which exposes this culture to exclusion and, as a consequence, full assimilation. Therefore, in the Roma minority, as in any culture at risk of disappearing, we observe an intensification of measures taken with a view to strengthen ethnic identity. This is even more difficult since small nations need an elite class capable of creating a national (ethnic) discourse that differs from the state one. Such a group would primarily have to engage in activities of a symbolic nature. The concept of the „Romani people”, promoted by the leaders of local Roma associations in Poland, is often in contradiction with the clan and ethnic divisions they propagate, which results in internal conflicts and stems from a growing sense of threat:

The Roma seek ethnic self-determination; however, as they are disadvantaged due to the lack of favourable conditions for cultivating their tradition and culture through education, these matters are primarily dealt with by associations and organizations. National identity usually emerges only among the Roma elites; it arises instead of pre-existing forms of ethnic awareness in the long-term process of cultural integration (Kwadrans 2004: 28).

In order to understand the specifics of contemporary Roma culture, it is worthwhile to trace its twentieth-century history (Mirga, Mróz). The trauma of the Polish Roma in the past century was not

² BBC journalist Hanna Szmunesówna, began a discussion on sending back Roma children to special schools in Poland. The footage was called „Some children are not fully white” (Szmunesówna).

only concerned with the Holocaust (Ficowski). A watershed moment was what began in 1964 (in the so-called „soft” version as early as the 1950s); it went by the name of productivisation and forced settlement, which forced a part of the Roma community to abandon their traditional traveling lifestyle, which destroyed their internal economic system based on nomadic service provision. Data from the Polish population and household census of 2002, however, plainly demonstrate that the abandonment by Roma of a life „on the road” had not improved their living conditions and social status. Still only ca. 10% of Roma living in Poland have paid work and regularly pay taxes (Klima, Paszko).

The “Education for Integration” project was carried out at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in the years 2010–2012. The program was to improve the language command of Roma children and young people. It involved two stages. The first phase included a research study among the Roma. It was conducted in the form of tests and written questionnaires, oral interviews, as well as participatory observations of 1,500 Roma minority representatives. Participants in the study declared that they belonged to the following Roma groups: Polska Roma (76%), Lowarowie (21%), Kelderaszce (1.5%), and Sinti (0.5%).

The interviewers were provided with a conversation scenario and a language test for children and adults, on the basis of which they asked questions about the level of command of the Polish language, knowledge of culture and the socialization aspect related to education.

School-related questions asked about the degree of satisfaction connected with attending school, potential problems with peers and pedagogical staff, and – if the child did not attend school – the reasons for absenteeism and the child’s attitude to school education, possible cultural interference that could affect the child’s dissatisfaction in the school context, and the degree of integration with non-Roma students. In the case of parents and grandparents of pre-school and school children, the questions asked concerned the following: parents’ motivation for enrolling the child in a school-based education as well as their own negative school experiences (with particular emphasis on ethnic discrimination) and their impact on the above motivation. Parents of school age children were asked about the level of involvement in the education of their children and in school life, the level of security related to their child being at school, cultural interferences leading to

discrepancies between school and the home environment. Other questions concerned expected changes regarding the organization of school work and the form and content of the knowledge transferred and the level of motivation for educating children beyond primary school.

The questionnaires, moreover, sought information on the history of the Roma minority, with particular emphasis on the cultural determinants of negative attitudes toward institutional education and a positive approach to education in terms of adaptation to traditional roles in Roma society (organization and course of education before the mass forced resettlement of the Roma). Other questionnaire items related to cultural rituals of the Roma minority to be factored in in the process of educating Roma children, taboos, the organization of the Roma society (especially the role of elders), basic cultural prohibitions, choice of specific professions, acquisition of knowledge in specific fields, and information concerning conflicts between Roma ethnic groups.

The results of the study allowed us to formulate the following conclusions: generations born in the 1930s, 40s and 50s are almost 100% illiterate. Their institutional education was either erratic or non-existent. Talking about their life on the road, the Roma stress that they went to school only in winter, when the wagons left the „forests” and the people moved to periodically rented apartments. They longingly remember the times when „they went to school dressed the Roma way” and the lessons consisted primarily in learning Polish. The respondents are of the opinion that today’s Roma youth and children are „well educated”, which leads us to conclude that the command of the Polish language is a yardstick of education for the oldest generation of the Roma.

Generations born in the 1960s, 70s and 80s are to a large extent (45%) generations of secondary illiterates. They have bad memories from school and mostly attended it for 2-3 years. Their school experience is definitely negative. They saw education as yet another act of oppression by state institutions, after forced settlement. Representatives of generations of today’s 50-, 40- and 30-year-olds have repeatedly experienced discrimination on the part of teachers and educators, their peers and their parents. The communist assimilation policy led to a belief that school is an institution that can strip one of their Roma identity; therefore, one has to leave it after acquiring the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.

The generation born in the late 1980s and 1990s is a generation struggling with the consequences of systemic transformation. The education of this age cohort was influenced primarily by the opening up of Poland's national borders and access to social welfare in Western countries. The Roma, forced over the years to settle down, in the 1980s and 1990s, when the geopolitical reality allowed them to, began to migrate, primarily to Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. In some regions of Poland, the rapidly growing Roma community was affected by the social mechanism of the „scapegoat”, which led to pogroms in Konin and Oświęcim (1981) and Mława (1991). At the same time, the stereotype of a Roma as a thief, scammer and exploiter resurfaced. To avoid such stigmatization of Roma children, inimical to intercultural education, given the income of their parents, it is important to point out that the communist system, which ordered the Roma to settle down, totally disrupted their traditional economic system. As a settled community, the Roma lost the main source of income, i.e. itinerant trade. Like most of the societies lagging behind in the modernization process, they have also suffered from the consequences of industrialization and globalization, which made their work – craftsmanship of products such as boilers, horseshoes and frying pans – dispensable in the general public. Although they attempted to „modernize” their traditional professions, replacing horses by cars and fabrics by second-hand clothes, in the first years of operation of market economy in Poland it turned out that the Roma community in communist Poland made a living primarily working in state enterprises (e.g. Nowa Huta ironworks) and receiving social welfare. After the transformation of the political and economic system, a large part of the Roma was in a difficult financial situation, which forced them, just like many of their non-Roma compatriots, to seek better living conditions outside Poland.

As a result of the frequent trips abroad of the Roma in search of work and a social paradise, another generation of secondary illiterates (67%) emerged, today in their twenties. What is new, as compared to older generations, is their multi-lingual illiteracy: they neither read nor write, do not speak properly any language other than the Romani, but they are often able to communicate in three or four languages (depending on their travel destinations). A reluctance to acquire formal education, instilled in their parents by the communist school system, prevented parents from taking care of their children receiving

basic education in one of the languages of the literary culture. Most of them have gone to school periodically, at the time when their parents were staying in Poland. A large part of them are openly dissatisfied with the erratic course of their education, which inspires hope that this generation of their children will be the first Roma generation in Poland to obtain at least primary school education.

The tests and interviews conducted were also aimed at determining the level of command of the Polish language among the Roma groups studied. Based on the analyses carried out, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. There is no way to conduct surveys concerning the level of trust of children and adults in educational institutions by means of a questionnaire. Only in-depth interviews can provide information on the examples of discrimination against Roma children in schools. The completed questionnaires show the full satisfaction of Roma children and parents with the functioning of the schools. The interviews show that at the moment children and parents do not encounter any unwillingness on the part of teachers and administrators, but rather indicate discriminatory behaviour of other children, not countered by an appropriate response of the educators. A burning issue is the educators' inability to respond; despite their good intentions, they are unable to create in classroom environments an atmosphere conducive to integration. It seems that the way to solve this problem is primarily to increase teachers' knowledge of Roma culture and the attendant constraints. Adult Roma mention mostly a lack of understanding for cultural differences as the reasons for their reluctance to Polish educational institutions. A recurrent problem was that girls cannot use shared locker rooms before Physical Education classes, wear shorts or trousers, be on duty in toilets. There is an additional issue, calling for a wider public debate, for further education received by girls. The interviewees noted that most parents of school-age girls want them only to complete primary school. This reluctance of the daughters to take up further education results from, among other factors, the still common problem of so-called Roma abductions, to which adolescent girls are subjected. In such situations, parents and employees of Roma NGOs used to apply for individual teaching for the girls, whose requests would not always gain the understanding and acceptance of educators. A similar problem concerns school trips: Roma children do not participate in them, not only for financial reasons but also because

their parents are concerned that during the trip there might be circumstances prohibited by the Romani cultural code. Another problem is the public discussion during Biology lessons of topics related to human anatomy and physiology. In addition to the necessary training of teachers in the field of Roma culture and intercultural communication, there must be a will to discuss and present the relevant issues during lessons with class tutors and extracurricular activities.

2. In the language section of the survey, containing multiple-choice questions, the overall score indicates the level of writing and reading as A1-A2 (89%), while the open or non-open answers show a blatant disparity between speaking and comprehension skills (75% – B1-B2) and writing and reading. The majority of adult Roma's writings is on the verge of dysgraphia.

3. Questions in the field of cultural studies were not difficult for the respondents, which confirms the view expressed in the literature on the subject that Polska Roma is a culturally well-integrated and the most conservative Roma group.

4. In the Romani language there are no style variations, which affects the inability to use style differences in the Polish language, especially the official style. It seems that glottodidactic exercises conducted with Roma children and young people should primarily concern these issues.

5. Moreover, linguistic etiquette requires numerous glottodidactic corrections. Roma children come to Polish schools with a negligible command of Polish, limited to constructions and vocabulary necessary to communicate with their peers. That is why they often cannot linguistically cope in the official communication situation with a teacher or other educator.

6. The results of the research show that the Roma are still not positively perceived in schools, although the stereotypical perception of the Roma minority students is gradually on the wane and is actually limited solely to peer groups. It is disturbing to recognize the signals testifying to a lack of acceptance of the cultural rules that are part of the Roma cultural code.

It is a platitude to observe that the Polish education system differs from the systems of multi-ethnic societies. It is much more difficult to formulate a constructive solution to this problem, given the local ethnic and national proportions. Out of 38.5 million Poles, approx. 597,000 represent national and ethnic minorities, accounting for 1.5%

of the total population. There are two initiatives to tackle the discrimination of the Roma on the Polish labour market and in education: local and EU projects. In 2003, the Polish Government adopted a resolution establishing a multiannual Program for the Roma Community, coordinated by the Ministry of Interior and Administration. A Joint Commission of the Government and National Ethnic Minorities, affiliated at the above Ministry, is the coordinating body subsidizing minority organizations (approximately € 4 million allocated for this purpose in 2017). Since 2007, Poland has taken advantage of EU programs, one of which is dedicated to the employment and social integration of the Roma. In the years 2007–2013, the Human Capital Operational Program amounted to EUR 22 million (including the contribution of the state at the level of 3.3 million), in the years 2014–2020 – within the framework of the Knowledge Education Development Program – PLN 20 million (EUR 5 million).

The issue of Roma discrimination is constantly monitored by sociological research, but because of constitutional provisions, the data on the number of Roma children attending school in Poland are not complete. Although the assumptions of the Roma Community Program carried out by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration indicate that 70% of Polish Roma children are in regular education (Interior Ministry), information provided by school superintendents shows that there is a disproportion between the number of children at the schooling age and those who actually go to school. This is confirmed by the results of the research study conducted at the Adam Mickiewicz University. According to them, 33% of Roma children fulfil their compulsory schooling obligation in Poland, 46% of the children go to school in their country of residence and 21% of the children do not attend compulsory education at all. The unwillingness of the Roma towards the educational system does not undermine one of the important hypotheses of negligible interest in education:

Educational systems are still unprepared to work in the context of cultural uniqueness of Roma children, who often have problems understanding the language used in the classroom. As a result, many Roma end their education in elementary schools, oftentimes in special schools (Kwadrans 2004: 16).

One of the reasons for this is the poor command of the Polish language among the Roma. The conclusions drawn from the interviews conducted among members of the Roma community confirm the

view that pre-school and school children often do not know the Polish language.

The problem – as it seems – is also the improper methodological preparation of teachers providing education in the first years of primary school, above all Polish language teachers. Polish higher education institutions do not offer courses in language teaching methodologies for conducting classes for bilinguals or members of ethnic minorities. Teachers consciously or unconsciously discriminate against their Roma students because of their cultural differences and unwillingness to adapt to some common rules present in Polish schools. Roma children are commonly perceived as causing „educational problems”. The program introduced in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, introducing the so-called Roma assistants, supposed to be „cultural translators” for teachers and pupils in the education process, has not always proved successful in Poland. Since Roma assistants are recruited from the Roma community, their presence in the school classroom assures both the Roma students and their parents that no violation of the cultural code will take place.

Although there are many valuable texts about the culture and history of the Roma in Poland, specialist teaching aids allowing teachers to teach Polish to Roma students have not yet been created. Teachers themselves point out deficiencies in their preparation but do not have a chance to receive adequate relevant assistance. It should be emphasized that for Roma children, teachers are the main and often the only source of knowledge about Polish language and culture. This professional group has a major impact on the degree of command of the Polish language among members of the Roma minority.

In 2011 and 2012, the second phase of the study was carried out at AMU. This time the research addressed a group of 150 teachers and other employees of educational institutions dealing with members of the Roma community. They were Polish language and elementary education teachers, school principals, educators, psychologists, tutors of day-care centres, and other teachers (of foreign languages or history). All of them took part in training programmes held at the AMU Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology concerning the education of Roma children and young people. The study included consultations, interviews, surveys, and observations in schools.

About 85% of the teachers had very little knowledge of Roma culture and did not know the rules of the Roma Code which could have

an impact on school communication. For example, many of them believed that problems with physical education were due to the students' laziness or aversion to sport. Another problem was the lack of awareness of the high level of illiteracy among the Roma. Teachers attempted to communicate with the parents through comments in the students' logs or penalized the students for a lack of written excuses from their parents.

95% of the teachers did not have any knowledge of the theory or practice of teaching Polish as a foreign language. The educators did not know how to lead supplementary classes with children and how to test the children's language command.

45% of the teachers were unaware of the Roma children's bilingualism. Some teachers were unaware that in their home environment the Roma use the Romani language and that, therefore, the child who starts school may not know the Polish language or may know it insufficiently. Many teachers put down the poor communication skills of their students to their low intelligence or even developmental impairments.

Most of the teachers did not have intercultural communication competences, i.e. they had never attended intercultural training programmes and were not aware of the problems or risks of communication in multicultural groups. The respondents observed that they were unable to talk to the students' parents, did not know how to communicate with the child who did not understand them and could not resolve ethnic conflicts.

The conclusions arising from the tests and interviews make it possible to formulate a demand for awareness-raising campaigns targeting Roma parents, showing them the importance of education beyond the child's being able to read and write. In addition, it seems that the non-adaptation of the Polish education system to the conditions of a multicultural society makes Romani parents send their children to schools abroad. Hopefully, raising educators' awareness will have a positive impact on the level of education of Roma children and young people.

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