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# RELATIONS WITH ROMA COMMUNITY IN THE CITY OF MOST

## Vztahy ve městě Most s romskými spoluobčany

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**Annotation**

Treating the subject of Romanies living in Most, the theoretical section of the paper describes the arrival of the people to the Most region in the wake of Second World War. The experimental section, heeding particularly disparities, aims to reveal relations established between Romanies and the majority population in the city. The research relied on the quantitative method and the technique of questionnaire, through which the author tried to depict the current coexistence with Romanies in Most. Using the discussion section, the author presents facts, articulates arguments and, considering the research results and their social context, she seeks answers. The results are employed to come up with practical recommendations formulated in conjunction with a Focus group.

**Key words**

coexistence, majority, Romanies, the city of Most

**Anotace**

Autorka představuje téma Romové ve městě Most. V teoretické části pojednává autorka o příchod Romů na Mostecko po druhé světové válce. Ve výzkumné části zjišťuje, v kontextu disparity, jaký je vztah majoritní společnosti k Romům ve městě Most. Při výzkumu je využito kvantitativní metody a techniky dotazníku. Cílem výzkumu je představit aktuální soužití s Romy ve městě Most. V diskuzní části společně s účastníky focus group pojednává o faktech a hledají nad výsledky výzkumu odpovědi v kontextu sociálním. Doporučení do praxe jsou na základě výsledků stanované za pomoci focus group.

**Klíčová slova**

majorita, město Most, romové, soužití

**JEL classification:** D63, I39, J17

## Introduction

The concept of disparities discussed as a complex social phenomenon requires that any one-sided approaches to the issue be abandoned and the problem be addressed multidimensionally. Such multidimensional approach has to rely particularly on the holistic (i.e. systemic) view of the research topic. The traditional approaches focused typically on a single aspect, typically the economic dimension, will have to be broadened to cover also other dimensions: social, territorial, historical, institutional, political & administrative, environmental & ecological, civilization & infrastructural and the like (Gajdoš, Pašiak 2006). The multidimensional approach thus developed has been adopted, mostly implicitly, by also other authors e.g. (Molle, 2007), (Nijkamp, 2007), (Wishlade, Yuill, 1997) and others. This paper will tackle the historical and social aspects of the disparities. Pursuing the matter, the author had to proceed in a culturally sensitive and community friendly way.

## 1. Romanies coming to the region of Most

When WW2 ended, the German population of Sudetenlands (the near-border regions) was expelled from the country and the Most region was no exception. With the war over and the Germans out, the region had to be reconstructed and repopulated.

Beckoning with job opportunities, the now depopulated region attracted a not inconsiderable number of Romanies from Slovakia, coming sometimes on their own, sometimes in organized campaigns. While Slovakia was then very poor and starved of job vacancies, here the new arrivals could find work instantaneously. Romanies thus started to come to the Most region as early as 1946, and just a year later the authorities registered 1792 persons of this ethnicity (Krajinou příběhů, 2017).

Presumably, the first greater waves of Roma migration were at least partially spontaneous - the near-border and other regions then empty of their German population became the destination for the mostly nomadic groups (Pavelčíková, 2004). The incoming Romanies were offered jobs especially in cooperatives raising cattle in mountainous areas and later on also on state-owned farms and in forestry organizations. They were also involved in reconstructing the war damaged economy - building roads, renewing factories, ... (Mann, 2001).

During 1950s, the organized migration of Romanies from Slovakia was gaining momentum. Regrettably, industrial plants were often unable to provide the new workforce with suitable lodging and the situation was progressively deteriorating. Romanies lived in crowded dormitories or houses marked down for demolition. The gradually worsening living conditions translated themselves into troubled relationships with other inhabitants. The lives of locals were also aggravated by the ever-increasing coal mining activities affecting the entire north Bohemian lignite field. Pushed forward by the communist government, the coal output of the region expanded five times between 1945 and 1957.

The thriving coal industry put an end to many smaller villages of the Most region, while others took on a vastly different complexion (Krajinou příběhů, 2017). Insofar as the resident Romanies were represented by just several dozens families from Bohemia and/or Moravia, those newly coming during the period indicated above changed the ethnic group structure. The postwar Czechoslovakia was a home to Romanies primarily from Slovakia, with smaller communities of the people from Hungary, Germany (Sinti) and Romania - a specific group were Vlachike Roma from Wallachia, then nomadic people (Davidová, 2004).

The second wave of Romani migration reached the Most region also in the 1950s, when Slovakian gypsies were recruited to work in the regional industrial centers. Those leaving their villages in Slovakia were mainly the better educated individuals with a history of working. A part of them were just seasonal workers who spent the wintertime with their families back home in Slovakia, but quite a few were given company apartments wherein they and their families found a permanent home. Problems could frequently be attributed to suddenly switching to a completely different way of life. While staying in their very basic settlements, Romanies lived from day to day, unable to properly manage their income and unused to pay the rent, water, gas, electricity... When confronted with the new reality, many simply could not come to grips with it (Mann, 2001).

Just like other regions, the Most region endeavored to integrate Romanies socially through ethnical assimilation seen as a prerequisite for social integration. The assimilation policy, intended to dissipate their ethnic enclaves, clans and families, was legally regulated by Government Ruling 502 / 1965.

The Ruling, among other things, stipulated that the share of Romanies in a village population was not to exceed five percent. Distributing the people throughout certain regions of the then Czechoslovak Republic (ČSR) was expected to remedy the shortage of skilled labor in the regions and to provide jobs for Romanies primarily from the east of Slovakia. Though neither the distribution nor the assimilation resulted in full integration, they did have some beneficial effects, e.g. better schooling of Roma children (Hübschmannová, 1975). The main cause behind the effort being just a partial success can be seen in the fact that Romanies were only passive recipients of the solution, not actively involved in it. A contributory cause laid in the relevant decisions being made without knowing the people, their ethnic group and their social & cultural system.

To address the issues of Roma population, the individual districts established specialized Councils of District National Committees devoted to the task and associated with a gradually emerging network of field social workers - welfare officers. These persons were to act as intermediaries between the Roma population of villages and government agencies. Yearly reports that the workers submitted specified the numbers of Roma population and diagnosed their problems concerning housing, employment and school attendance of their children (Mann, 2001). As the open-pit mining encroached on the land, the Old Town of Most was pulled down bit by bit, and the same fate awaited some villages. The part of Most to be demolished last was the one inhabited prevalingly by Romanies. In 1978 the people were moved to a new housing estate named Chánov. The moving improved their living conditions - they were given modern apartments; could access health-care services; their children were able to attend pre-school and school facilities, and more... Regrettably, these desirable changes were accompanied by some unwelcome: the houses, especially their shared areas and lifts, were soon devastated, and the same happened

to the apartments. The overdue rentals began to grow and damages could not be collected. Whereas maintaining apartments in other parts of the city cost the municipality on average 1600 CZK (then Kčs) a year, the sum spent on Roma flats was 3800 CZK a year (Hübschmannová, 1975).

The overall situation was aggravated by large families who came visiting from Slovakia and were inclined to stay unlawfully with their relations for prolonged periods. The apartments were overcrowded and some occupied without any title - consequently, living conditions on the estate began to deteriorate, the families started to quarrel and criminality flourished. Moreover, Roma families scattered to live in non-Romani neighborhoods proved to be better integrated than those gathered intentionally in Roma-only communities. The National Committee of the Most Municipality strived to move the well adapted families from the notorious housing estate and distribute them among non-Romani inhabitants living in other parts of the city. Despite existing for over 40 years, the Chánov estate remains a sore spot having all the attributes of an excluded community and the municipality does not seem to have a clue.

## 2 Empirical section

Majority population as related to Roma community in the city of Most. The research was designed to explore relations existing between Romanies and the majority population in the region of Most. The method of choice was quantitative and the technique was a questionnaire inquiry. The number of respondents was 198. The Most region was selected after careful deliberation, given that it encompasses marginalized enclaves and the coexistence with Romanies is a problem of long standing there.

Hypothesis 1: The younger generation up to 25 years of age (25-) perceives coexistence with Romanies as less difficult than the older generation (60+).

Hypothesis 2: Negative personal experience shapes a disapproving attitude to Romanies at workplace.

Hypothesis 1: Asked to assess the coexistence with Romanies at the place of residence, 62% of respondents considered it bad. Having analyzed answers returned to the questionnaire inquiries, the negative attitude to Romanies was strongest in the 60+ age bracket, while the 25- persons expressed such attitude in 48%.

Generally speaking, the research results lead us to believe that the majority population of the Most region perceives Romanies as troublesome. The less negative attitude to Romanies at the place of residence was adopted by the younger generation up to 25 years of age. The hypothesis has thus been confirmed to be true.

Hypothesis 2: 25% of respondents had their own negative experience of physical or verbal assault. Out of this number 91.5% of respondents reported intolerant attitude.

Hypothesis 2 has also been confirmed to be true - negative personal experience induced a disapproving and intolerant attitude to Romanies.

### 2.1 Discussion

The discussion summarizes facts, seeks answers to the social and psychosocial issues addressed in the research and supports the answers with arguments. The research was planned to explore relations between the local Roma community and the majority population.

To make the discussion possible and to develop practical recommendations, the author formed a Focus Group consisting of 6 persons who worked in Most: a municipality official, a social worker, a cultural mediator, a policeman, a teacher and a staff member of the House of Ethnic Minorities.

The research has found that the local Romanies are often unaware of which Roma group they belong to. Surprisingly, this ignorance is unrelated to the level of education. The nationality and ethnicity of Czech Republic inhabitants can only be identified through statutory Census. Unfortunately, no one knows how many Romanies can distinguish between nationality and ethnicity and whether their historical experiences do not scare them into hiding their Roma origins. The identity thus lost can affect the mentality of this target group and result in disruptive behavior. When the Focus Group called attention to the loss of identity, the House of Ethnic Minorities stepped in and organized several cultural events in the city, intended to increase the awareness of Roma culture and history. We believe that the job done by crime prevention workers, cultural mediators, intercultural workers and community workers is very useful, just like any other activity easing tensions between Romanies and the majority group. The City Hall and the Social Inclusion Agency try jointly to bring the majority and the minority closer together. They attempt to involve in their activities the Romanies themselves, positioned as municipal constables and cultural mediators. The Focus Group concluded that decisions concerning Romanies could not be made without Romanies and, in consequence, the approach had to be community-oriented and culturally-sensitive.

Should the people feel excluded from the decision making process, they would be very unlikely to accept any interventions into their lives. This fact may then translate itself into a negative personal experience of the majority. Most population with Romanies and, by extension, it may boost intolerance and lead to rejection of the Roma minority.

Another factor of importance is education. The Focus Group believed that education was essential, the Romanies should be educated and their ethnic awareness heightened. Roma families and children should be taught to appreciate education as an investment into the future. On the other hand, even the majority group should properly appreciate that the education of Romanies is worth assistance because all the city dwellers may benefit from it. A positive development was found in the gypsy kids attending low-threshold clubs in the city of Most. Unfortunately, there are just three facilities of this kind and, therefore, overcrowded. The Focus Group members should like to see the capacity of the clubs increased. Any progress in this area, however, is hindered by modest salaries (approximating the minimal income) and low social prestige of the club staff.

A crucial factor causing social distress is the unemployment rate of Romanies. Typical of the situation is the long time for which Romanies remain registered as unemployed. In fact 75% of the Roma population of the city are kept on files as long-time unemployed.

Another matter of consideration are bars, casinos, pawnshops and gambling clubs, all typical for excluded localities. The question arises as to whether it is a good idea to permit a gambling club where the greater part of inhabitants are on the dole and a substantial part of their income is swallowed by one-armed bandits. Just like in other CR places, in the Most region the debtors are advised by social workers on how settle their debts. Such services are typically included in field programs and/or provided under the umbrella of professional social counseling. The author believes that prevention is of paramount importance. As follows from a research undertaken by the Social Inclusion Agency, the Most region has 1 debt advisor per approx. 1000 persons currently having their property confiscated under a writ of execution. As obvious, the situation is alarming and prevention emerges as highly desirable.

Indebtedness is wedded to usury. The Focus Group reported that lending and borrowing money at a high rate is a widespread practice, often even perceived as an act of solidarity.

On January 2018 the city registered 673 video-lottery machines permitted by the Ministry of Finance, i.e. 1 machine per 100 city dwellers. The municipality still does not operate a specialized social service that would provide consultations to addicted gamblers (CR Government Report, 2017).

## 2.2 Practical recommendations

The House of Ethnic Minorities, the Municipal Museum and schools teaching the basics of social sciences should encourage Romanies to draw their family trees and, in so doing, to become better aware of their family history and identity.

The 60+ generation was found to adopt less conciliatory attitudes towards their Roma neighbors than what was observed in the 25- persons. That is why the elderly should be offered social occasions during which they could come into friendly contact with the Roma minority, e.g. cultural events held directly in the retirement homes, nursing homes, day care centers, etc. In addition, Romanies themselves could be involved in volunteering and providing social services to senior citizens.

Another practical hint might rest in increasing the numbers of volunteers from among the seniors proper and from the students of secondary schools based in the city. The volunteers could run regular remedial courses offered to Roma kids. Voluntary attendance at such courses would bring the people closer together and foster mutual tolerance.

The low-threshold clubs, being frequented particularly by Roma youth seeking a quality use of their leisure, should be made more abundant. Such effort would require sufficient staffing by specialized social workers who are now in short supply... Their deficiency could be alleviated by students having already taken their relevant baccalaureate degree and still studying for the master's degree.

Also the numbers of caring workers, intercultural workers, community staff and drug prevention specialists should be increased.

Intolerance and belligerent attitudes that the majority takes toward the poor and/or the unemployed are often inspired by behavior typical of the people, i.e. frequenting gambling rooms and losing welfare benefits to lottery

machines. The gamblers should be proactively identified, provided intensive (also psychological) assistance, offered field counsel in financial literacy and helped to find the best way out. The city fathers should reduce the number of gambling operations and lottery machines.

As regards job opportunities in Most, some new ones could also be expected of tourism. The abandoned coal pits and devastated areas are currently being reclaimed and the entire Most region landscape is treated to a comprehensive remake. The effort is supposed to create what is known as the "lake landscape" - it will emerge after the excavated pits are filled with water. The region could then be attractive enough to compete with German Lusatia where such reconstruction has already been completed and the place turned into a leisure complex. This project can also be expected to generate well paid jobs and other opportunities to supplement one's income, but firstly and most importantly it would cut the unemployment figure, now at 5.1%.

## Conclusion

The paper outlines both history and the present situation in the city of Most. The research was planned to explore relations between the local Roma community and the majority population. The research results, first discussed between the author and the Focus Group, yielded some practical recommendations. The paper mentions also the social causes of intolerance and disapproving attitudes.

Coexistence with Roma community in the city of Most appears to be a social problem of long record. The research showed that a large section of the majority population maintains a negative attitude to Romanies. The relations between the two groups of inhabitants could be described as troubled. To ease the situation, the individual people will have to change their views and attitudes - on both sides. A major stumbling block on the road to improving the coexistence seems to be insufficient appreciation of cultural differences. It is a difficulty of long standing whose solving has long been overdue - it was neglected totally or treated just marginally by an inadequate group of community, prevention and intercultural workers.

With the above-mentioned observations in mind, we should endeavor to find out why the Roma minority is a perennial problem of the city and what can be improved on the majority side. If we make a sincere attempt at appreciating the cultural differences and try to see Romanies otherwise than just troublesome, it certainly shall not rid us of the problem, but it may facilitate the quest of effective intercultural dialogue.

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