

## **ROMA COMMUNITY IN ALBANIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE PERIOD OF COMMUNISM**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to provide information about living, economic level, place of living and the education of the Rome ethnic minority in Albania. In fact, Rome population have lived in poor conditions, even though in communist period were followed different policies, the priorities of those policies were the raise of education services and living conditions. Based on their origin they used to wander through different places without having a permanent residence for a long period of time. There are several hypotheses for their origin and their language. They were supposed to move to west in XI century and settled in Balkan in XIV century, as well as were supposed that they were placed in Albania in XV/XVI century.

In different documents and archives there are no exact data on the number of Rome but it is thought to be around 30,000 - 120,000 people in total minority. The lack of accurate statistics has been and it is a major obstacle for studying and analyzing the situation of the community. During the communist policies was supposed that citizens should have equal rights, be educated, to vote, to have permanent residence and better living conditions. Also at that time education was obligatory for the whole population, without exception, and during this time the number of Roma population attending compulsory education was almost the same as the rest of the population and the number of illiterates among Roma was low. Instead, after 90 years, the policies pursued by the state are critical and does not support this minority and not recognized as minimum rights Convention on Human Rights, to which so much discussed in international higher instances. Nobody cares about their economy, the right to vote or the right legitimate to education.

Roma are themselves wanting to win their rights have set up organizations that protect their existence by force and send their voice internationally.

Roma are isolated throughout Albania, few of them live in good conditions, most live in very difficult conditions, being forced to do hard work to make a living and have no opportunity to attend school or education.

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**Keywords:** Roma community, communism, social development, education

### **Main Text**

In Albania, beside the natives are living ethnic minorities for example Macedonian, Romanian etc. One of these minorities is also the Roma Community (this community is considered a linguistic community because they do not have a state), located in our country from more than 600 years before the Ottoman occupation. From the studies result that they came from India then through the Balkans are located in almost all European countries. Their origin is not due to historical evidence, but mainly from linguistic analysis. Although the coexistence of the Roma Community has always been peaceful with the Albanians, this community lives in unfavorable position in the Albanian society. For a long time Roma Community coexists with a lot of problems in their lives and nobody has given them a solution. Although Albania 20 years ago entered on the development path, Roma community do not find themselves. This segment of society is always exposed to marginalization and social exclusion.

### **The historical data and features of this community**

Many hypotheses have been thrown on the origin of Rome and only inherited linguistic facts prove their Indian origin. In fact even today there are unknown reasons of Rome predecessor's removal from their settlements in north-western India. They begin moving westward in XI century and set in the Balkans in the fourteenth century.

Different stories and legends speak of various events such as:

- Rome were residents of Atlantis and when the country was flooded they were forced to leave and being spread around the world over time.

- Other Rome indicates that their ancestors lived in a vast kingdom where their king was very cruel to the peoples of neighboring countries who came together and opened the war. After winning the war, they decided to kill the king to pardon his people provided the latter to flee as far away as possible from their homes<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ringold D., Orenstein A. M., Wilkens E., Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle, A World Bank Study, Washington D.C., 2003

- And other Rome show that India was attacked by a great Muslim king. The Indians then came together and created a large army with different peoples and tribes Indians and non-Indians. This huge army fought many centuries against Muslim forces by pushing them more and more towards the West, but also leaving themselves more and more from India. This battle occurred during the century. XI is in fact known from the history.

After perennial wars for independence of India from Muslim invaders in near Traimesë, Rome predecessors, an aristocratic caste suffered defeat and was forced to flee from their country. Rome in the Balkans was placed in separate groups or was brought by Turkish armies which form separate units for the manufacture of gunpowder and arms.

For the arrival of Rome in Albania exist some data by an Ottoman census of the year 1523 there were about 374 families, but it is thought that they have been 200 - 300 years before this census.

In the fourteenth century the Rome began to appear in the Balkans and began to unite with Egyptian community. Many Rome presented themselves as refugees fled from Egypt, who were later joined by stray- Gypsy groups<sup>19</sup>.

From this moment begins the uncertainty, which would later appear in historical sources, but also in the daily lives which can also be seen with synonymy "Gypsy" for Rome. Later, Rome will derive even a legend that originates from Egypt that can be written in many cases. Science by the end of the century XIX thought that the Rome originated from Egypt. However, through studies found and turned out they originate from Penxhapi (land of five rivers) in India, while the Egyptians have their origin from Egypt.

Roma minority is located in our country for several centuries, but even still to this day is not getting a normal spirit of coexistence with the rest of the population, as a result of indifference to their situation, prejudices and differences that are frequently made to Rome, making them feel discriminated. Rome in a large population does not figure registered in the civil registry, which phenomenon is more prevalent among persons born after the 90s. Regarding the number of Roma minority in Albania has not complete and accurate statistics, but according to representatives of this minority organizations or studies conducted by independent institutes, the number ranges from 30,000 - 120,000 people in total. Lack of accurate statistics has been and is a major obstacle for studying and analyzing the situation of the community.

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<sup>19</sup> Bexholi A., Minorities in Albania, Tirana 2005

Roma minorities generally live in suburban areas of cities and in rural areas. They are mainly concentrated in the districts: Tirana, Elbasan, Durrës, Berat, Fier, Vlora, Gjirokastra, Korca, Shkodër.

Some of the main problems of the Roma community are<sup>20</sup>:

- Low level of education that is determined by the small number of enrollments in schools and prevalence of illiteracy among them;
- Most of the Roma families living in poverty, below the poverty line;
- Roma minority has a higher percentage of unemployment, compared with other groups of the population;
- Poor living conditions. Roma often do not have secure housing, lack sanitary and drinking water infrastructure,
- Inadequate health care. In some residential areas Roma are not able to address the health institutions or are not able to pay for drugs or medical services. To cope with poverty has high levels of trafficking and prostitution.

Coming to power of the Communist Party in 1945, the new Albanian government the Communist Party began to pursue the policy of assimilation and homogenization of the Albanian nation, considering minorities as part of the Albanian population. It worth mentioning that during the communist regime, the Roma have obtained employment, agrarian land reform, security for tomorrow, compulsory schooling, housing, etc., what has caused them to integrate the same as the entire population majority, despite shortcomings of that system. In accordance with the policy of full employment, then the state was obliged them secure employment to both men and women on the level of education and professional skills. However in that time there was a kind of division of work, Roma had some areas where work, and perhaps identify with this sector of work, such as cleaning, greening or handicrafts.

During the period of communism the state didn't make differences, there was no separation between the Roma and the majority. This equality was enshrined in the constitution, then, every citizen enjoyed equal rights, all rights involving culture, education, equal treatment of all persons before the law, employment, housing, etc.

Also, in that period education was obligatory for the entire population without discrimination, and during this period the number of Roma population attending obligatory education was almost the same as the rest of the population and the number of illiterates among Roma were low, those who arrived had high scores and wanted to be educated,

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<sup>20</sup> De Soto H., Gordon P., Gedeshi I., Sinoimeri Z., Poverty in Albania. A Qualitative Assessment, The World Bank Washington D.C., 2002

encouraged to pursue higher studies. The Roma minority have graduated during that period teacher, officer, agronomists, doctors etc.

Voter turnout has been another right and if we do a comparison between then Rome minority participation in elections with the participation of the minority to the polls today will decision noted that participation in the polls during the communist regime has been the highest, because the communist state of that time had created favorable conditions that the Rome population feel as equal citizens<sup>21</sup>.

### **Rom Major Localities**

Roma minority is located in almost all areas of the country; it is also closely related to elements of their culture. However, the largest number of Roma is concentrated mainly in Central and Eastern Albania: Tirana, Durres, Elbasan, Fier, Berat, and Korçë, Pogradec, Bilisht, Gjirokastër, Delvin, Krujë, Shkodra etc. Roma live or in major cities, mostly in separate neighborhoods or villages near cities. Related data that we could provide the results: in Gjirokastër, in area of Zinzhiraj, counted around 1500 people. The majority part of rome population leaves in a difficult conditions, in temporary houses, without running water and higenic standards.. Roma minority migrate every summer to work in Greece in farms etc. Others import clothing, footwear and electrical equipment and sell them with low prices in Gjirokastra market. The Azotiku neighborhood in Fier has around 500 families with an average of 8 children per family. This community lives in parallel with the main line railway that runs through Fier. This has been the main cause of a number of accidental disasters. They suffer from unemployment<sup>22</sup>. Very few children attend school which is located far away from their homes. In Levan Fier, there are around 500 families with an average of 6 persons. The majority part of these people does not attend the school and the majority of the adults are unemployed. They make a difficult life, trying to survive from farming of by making metal cooking pots.

The community here is divided into two groups, those who own land and those who do not.

Let's take a look to the situation in different cities:

Roma in Shkodra consist of 27 to 50 families living in the worst conditions in Albania. All their houses are made of plastic trays and lack of running water. Most of the

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<sup>21</sup> Cahn, C., ed, "Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality" New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002; Silverman C., Prosecution and Politicization: Roma (Gypsies) of Eastern Europe. Cultural Survival 19 (2), 1995

<sup>22</sup> De Soto H., Gordon P., Gedeshi I., Sinoimeri Z., Poverty in Albania. A Qualitative Assessment, The World Bank Washington D.C., 2002

members of this community drink river water because they have no other source. Unemployment here is 100%. In Elbasan, the Roma community is located close to the stadium and the neighborhood, "May 5". The exact number is not known because there are no data. Some of them deal with the sale of old clothes and their prosperity level is quite low.

Roma community is relatively small in number, not more than 60 families. Settlements are near the main river of Portland. Community living in deep poverty, as they have neither land nor their wealth, is not even registered as local authorities to get assistance<sup>23</sup>.

Although the exact number is not known, it is assumed that the largest number of Roma population is concentrated in Tirana. Pooled their settlements are mainly located in Kinostudio, Laprakë, River Coast, Selita, Yzberisht etc. Their social problems are versatile. Evident are: unemployment, poverty, school dropout children and their chemistry traffickers, lack of housing, poor health conditions, etc<sup>24</sup>. A part of the Roma community in Tirana provides the tools necessary to living by digging through garbage bins or begging. A considerable number of families live in makeshift huts with native tools.

### **Rom Today**

After the '90, with the change of the system and the free exercise of the right of speech and association, the Roma minority was organized to protect the interests and rights in society, as with the fall of communism and the beginning of democratic changes were Roma, those who walked the most affected, being the first to lose jobs, moving quickly to the difficult living conditions of being the last of the company. Due to the lack of adequate education and training their position in society changed drastically. As a result of poverty created, with a small exception, a new generation of Roma children, to labor for their families are not able to attend schools<sup>25</sup>. Also the economic situation of Roma in Albania and standard of living is very low at this related to the high number of unemployed compared to the rest of society. Even in terms of housing conditions and health have said they are very serious evil<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Kolsti J., *Albanian Gypsies: The Silent Survivors*, in Crowe and Kolsti eds., *The Gypsies in Eastern Europe*, Armonk, New York: Sharpe, 1991

<sup>24</sup> Taho B., *Document on the Situation of Roma in Albania*, 2002

<sup>25</sup> Koinova M., *Minorities in Southeast Europe: Roma of Albania*, Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME), 2000

<sup>26</sup> Liegeois J-P., *Roms et Tsiganes, La Decouverte*, Paris 2009

## **The Education**

Historically in Albania, as well as in other European countries, the Roma community have had a very low level of education. Nomadic traditions and unique way of life, poverty and discrimination are some of the main factors that explain this situation. In the '30s of the last century, describing Roma nomads, Hasluck noted that they sometimes "settle in a city for a few months", but then reinstated again "tent life". Under these conditions, the education of children was something hard. Also Hekuran, an old person from Elbasan, expresses this assessment when he says: "Before, we did not go to school. Parents wandered from one village to another so me and my brothers cannot attend the school "<sup>27</sup>.

The educational level of Roma was significantly improved during the socialist period, as a result of measures taken to integrate them into society. Placement of Roma in stable settlements during the 60s, full and guaranteed employment, accommodation and improvement of the living standards were reflected in the growth of their educational level. Empirical evidence data shows that the illiteracy rate for Roma individuals who are 35-45 years of age today, which means that were introduced in educational institutions during 1973-1983, decreased to 30.6 percent. While average years of education for those who has attended school, was 6.6 years. 25.1 percent of this age group of Roma has primary education, 33.5 percent has eight-year education, 3.5 percent has secondary education and 0.3 percent has university degree.

During the transition of the post-communist period, educational level of Roma - as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe - has deteriorated. High unemployment and poverty, discrimination and social exclusion were reflected in lower educational level. The population is characterized by illiteracy (40.3%) completed primary education (25.9%) and incomplete (14.9 percent), while very few of them have completed the eight-year education (16.1 percent) and secondary education (2.1 percent). Average years of education are: 5.6 years for males and 5.3 for females. However, a comparison with the majority population shows that the gap is really large (Table 1). In the absence of education, the population has a lot of difficulties to integrate into the labor market and its ability, in comparison with the majority population, will decrease.

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<sup>27</sup> Hasluck M., *The Gypsies of Albania*, Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society, 17 (2): 49-61, 1938

**Table 1.** The educational level of Roma

Nr		Roma population (8 years old)	Population of Albania (2001)*
1	Illiterate	40,3	1,6
2	Literate	41,2	14,8
3	Education 8/9 years completed	16,1	57,0
4	Secondary Education	2,1	21,7
5	University Education	0,3	4,9
6	Average years of education (male)	5,6	n.a
7	Average years of education (female)	5,3	n.a

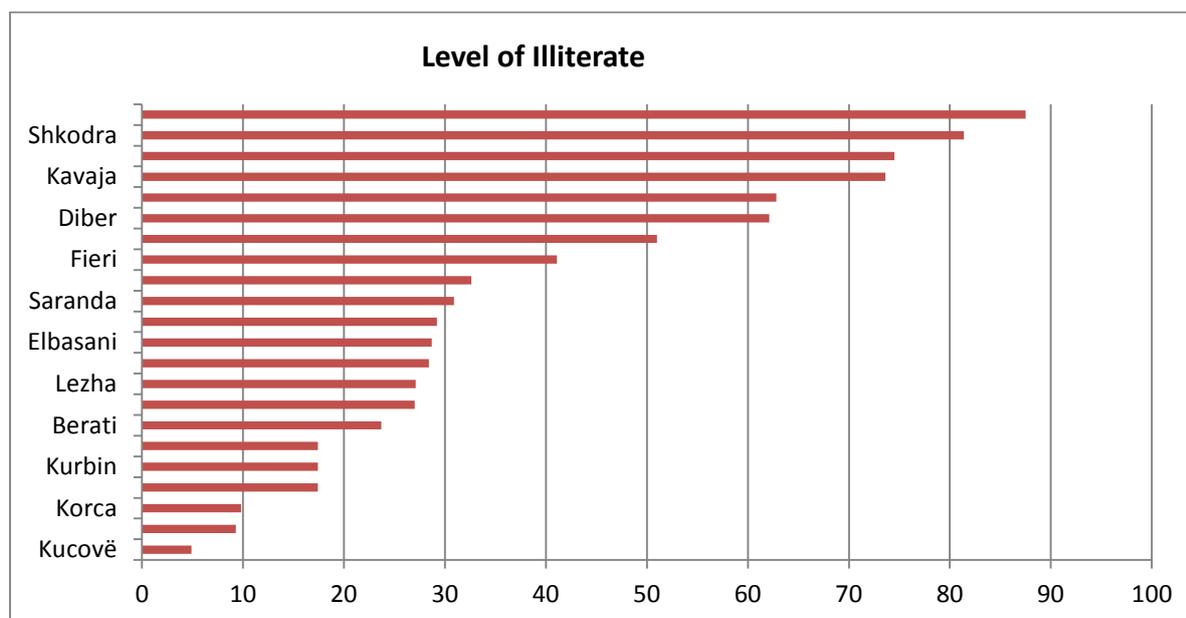
Despite an improvement in the educational level of Roma during 2000<sup>28</sup>, compared with the first decade of transition, illiteracy remains very high (Table 2). In some districts of Albania<sup>29</sup> - as Shkodra, Kukes, Bishop, Milot, etc. - the illiteracy rate for the age group 7 to 18 years is probably worse in comparison with the beginning of the 2000s (Picture 1)

**Table 2.** The Level of Illiterate and average years of education

	Period 1991-2000	Period 2001-2010
Level of Illiterate	52,4%	34,4%
Average years of education	5,5 years	4,2 years

**Picture 1.** The Level of Illiterate for Roma community, from 7 to 18 years, by district (in percentage)

This high level of illiteracy that will still reproduce poverty in the future, was spread through the domestic migration in other areas of the country, where the Roma has established areas completely isolated from the rest of the population. In Gjirokastra for example, 15 families migrated from Korca, are living for several years by the riverside cabin, in a place called “The former Wholesale market”.



<sup>28</sup> Roma families Survey, 2011

<sup>29</sup> Government of Albania., National Strategy for improving Roma living conditions, 2003

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