

## **Marginalised Roma Communities in the Context of the Green Transition:**

### **Energy Poverty at Luník IX. and The Case for New Methodologies and Interdisciplinary Approaches**

**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to contribute to addressing of the gap in the literature on bridging the challenges of the green transition with those of the marginalised Roma communities. It also aspires to open a discussion on approaching this topic via alternative frames and methodologies. The limited literature that is available is currently dominated by environmental and energy justice approaches, which although valuable in their own respect, omit many important contextual nuances and very importantly, the agency of the communities. The paper empirically draws from an ongoing action-research at Luník IX. Košice, more specifically a situational assessment of the local energy poverty. The paper subsequently provides a number of propositions to open the discussion: 1) reframing of the topic from the sustainable development and livelihoods perspective; 2) borrowing analytical frameworks from institutional literature and introducing action-research methodologies; 3) involving scholars from technical disciplines on issues that are beyond social sciences expertise.

**Keywords:** Marginalised Roma Communities, Slovakia, Green Transition

#### **I. Introduction**

The topic of green transition and sustainability constitutes one of the vital components of the Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021) as well as the new EU programming period 2021-2027. The current war in Ukraine as a result of the Russian aggression, and the associated rise in utility prices, further emphasise its importance. However, neither in academic literature nor in the relevant strategic policy documents, such as the Recovery Plan, have they been sufficiently interlinked with challenges of disadvantaged groups, particularly the marginalised Roma communities, who are commonly known as the most disadvantaged ethnic group in the European context. According to the Atlas of Roma communities (Ravasz et al., 2020), marginalised Roma communities constitute approximately half of the total of approximately 400,000 Roma living in Slovakia. These communities face significant socio-economic inequality and hardship, including long-term unemployment, unequal access to healthcare or education, but also spatial marginalisation, environmental injustice, and energy poverty.

Therefore, one of the main challenges for the upcoming decade, be it in the Slovak or European context, will be the question of inclusion of the disadvantaged groups into the process of the green transition, while taking into consideration both - improvement of their living standards and decrease in environmental burden. In other words, the key challenge will be to ensure a just green transition for the marginalised Roma communities.

The paper draws from an ongoing action-research on addressing energy poverty at Luník IX. Košice, pursued jointly by RESDI – Roma Environmental Sustainability and Development Initiative, Friends of the Earth-CEPA in collaboration with the Košice City-Ward Luník IX., which constitutes the largest urban settlement fully populated by Roma in Europe. Energy poverty was selected as one of the key and at present also one of the most acute challenges of the green transition faced by the marginalised Roma communities. This is because access to energy constitutes an important precondition for a good quality life, while its sources and usage is intertwined with the decarbonisation efforts.

It begins by highlighting the lack of attention in the academic literature dedicated to bridging of the challenges of the green transition with those of the marginalised Roma communities, and by critique of the currently dominant approaches focused on energy and environmental justice. It subsequently provides a situational assessment of Luník IX. Košice, which is used to provide empirical ground for the critique as well as for the propositions on the new frames, analytical and methodological tools as well as interdisciplinary inputs which are necessary to capture the complexity of the topic.

## **II. Literature Review: Roma and the Green Transition?**

Neither in the academic literature nor in key strategic documents have the topic of the green transition and sustainability been adequately interconnected with the challenges of the marginalised Roma communities. While there is a more a general gap in the literature in terms bridging of these two topics, the existing scholarship takes partial rather than holistic approach and is primarily grounded in the environmental or energy justice framing.

The studies published in the course of the last decade, either in Slovak or European context, approached this complex and cross-cutting theme either from the perspective of environmental (Filčák, 2009; Filčák and Ficeri, 2021; Harper et al., 2012), energy justice (Kodůusková and Bořuta, 2022) or energy poverty (Aldous, 2022). The European Environmental Bureau's report follows environmental racism framing. (Heidegger and Wiese, 2020) In contrast to these studies, Pollák and Páleník's (2021) work on the inclusion

of marginalised Roma in the local green social economy constitutes one of the rare examples of a focus on mapping of positive examples but this is rather a rare case. The topic continues to be understudied even at the policy level. For instance, the latest Atlas of Roma Communities 2019 (Ravasz et al., 2020) used environmental indicators for the very first time, whereas there is no mention of the linkage in the Slovakia's Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma up to 2030. (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

Apart from the more general lack of studies and available data on both academic and policy level, there are a number of issues regarding the dominant approaches that are worth highlighting without undermining their value in their own right. Firstly, most of the above studies portray marginalised Roma communities primarily as victims rather than communities with agency of their own. This carries implications both in terms of academic rigour as well as policy dimension and the scholarship would thus benefit from more participatory approaches. Secondly, given the largely sectoral focus and conceptual framing, they often omit important connections with wider socio-economic or political issues, therefore intersectional and a more holistic approach is needed. Thirdly, most of the studies remain on the national or international level, with local case studies representing marginal rather than core component. However, the diversity of contextual complexities of the green transition challenges in the Roma settlement goes far beyond simple urban and rural divide, which is why in terms of the level of analysis more in-depth, locally grounded studies are needed to complement the existing ones.

### **III. Situational Assessment of Energy Poverty at Luník IX., Košice**

#### **III.I. Brief History and Socio-Economic Situation**

The Luník IX. city-ward, is located in the south-east of Košice. According the latest census, its population reaches up to seven thousand residents. (Ivan et al., 2018; SODB, 2021) Its history dates back to 1970s and is deeply interconnected with the socialist policies of integration, or rather assimilation of Roma communities and the disintegration of Roma settlements. (Ivan et al., 2018; Filčák and Ficeri, 2021) The commonly cited explanation for its creation under the acronym 'ABC' (in Slovak, the letters refer to army, security, Gypsies) never materialised. The residential area was gradually inhabited by Roma families from Košice and its surroundings, however, it was not until 1990s that it became fully Roma populated. (Holubová et al., 2021; Filčák and Ficeri, 2021) It consisted of a mix of municipal and industrial housing, with roughly half of the apartments inhabited by Roma families,

although even before 1990s Roma residents constituted a majority among the local population. (Ivan et al., 2018)

After the intervention from the City of Košice in 1990s following requests from non-Roma inhabitants from Luník IX. to be relocated elsewhere and a process of moving out of Roma inhabitants living in the centre, these two parallel processes led to the current status quo, e.g. creation of a ‘Roma ghetto’ (Ivan et al., 2018; Filčák a Ficeri, 2021; Holubová et al., 2021) On the top of that, due to the poor conditions of the some of the buildings, these were subsequently sanated, which without a provision of alternative housing for the residents led to creation of the ‘Mašličkovo’ illegal settlement that is also located in the city-ward. The following table briefly outlines the historical development of the city-ward:

*Table 1: Types of housing in Luník IX based on the year of completion; source: SODB (2021), City-Ward Luník IX.*

Type of housing	Block of flats				Building with services and apartments		Provisional housing	
Period of construction	1961-1980	1981-2000	2001-2010	2011-2015	1981-2000	2001-2010	2001-2010	Total
Number of households	136	176	84	13	1	1	44	458

In terms of the population structure, from among the total of approximately seven thousand inhabitants, 31,19% is in a pre-productive age (0-14), 66,48% in a productive age (15-64), and 2,33% in a post-productive age (65 and more). (SODB, 2021) Even though two-thirds of the population is in a productive age, the living standards are very low. Apart from the spatial marginalisation, this can be linked to low level of education and reflecting high unemployment. According to the census data, level of education was not identified in 45% cases, with the largest documented segment possessing only primary level (26,84%). (SODB, 2021) The unemployment data is similarly peculiar. In 2021, there were only 350 registered unemployed in Luník IX. in 2021, of whom 218 long-term unemployed. (Holubová et al., 2021) The real data is not available, but the mayor suggested that the rate is around 65%. These factors combined lead to low income and purchasing power of the

inhabitants in relation to daily goods and services, including payment for basic utilities (water, electricity and gas), and thus a ground for energy poverty.

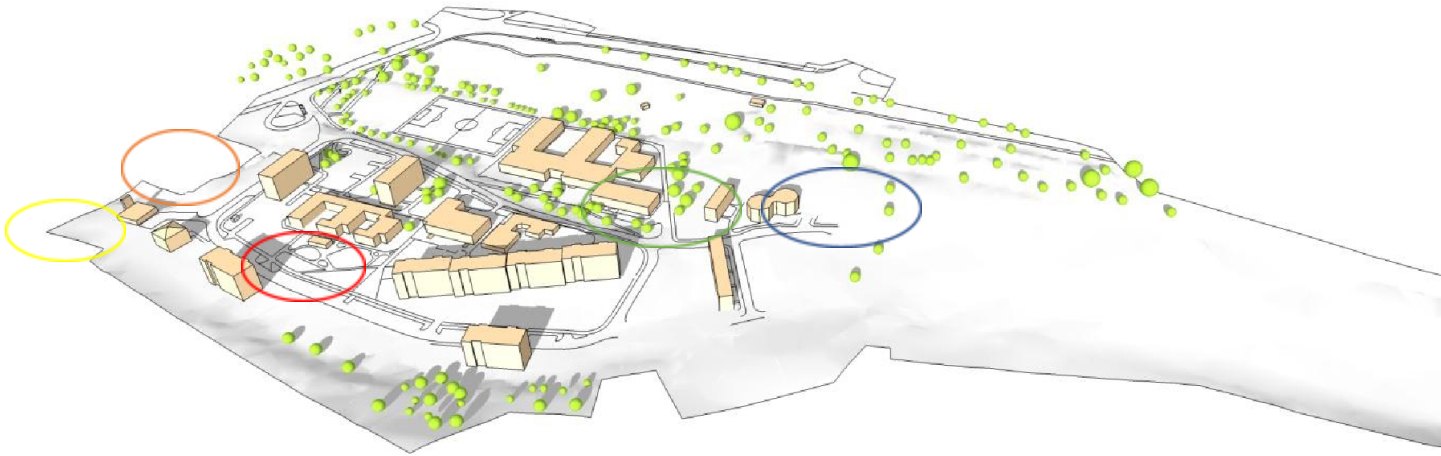
### **III.II. Energy Poverty and Local Institutional Complexity**

According to the Atlas of Roma Communities 2019, 100% of households have access to basic utilities, e.g. electricity, water and gas, with 100% also making use of the electricity and water and 70% making use of the gas. (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2019) The field visit and the interview with the mayor suggest much lower numbers. Below is a summary of different types of housing in Luník IX. (see figure 1) with varying access to utilities as well as ownership and administration structure.

1. Social housing
  - A) The City of Košice owns and administers the majority of the apartments located in Luník IX. There is no access to water and electricity. Provisional source of water to the residents is delivered by the City-Ward twice a day.
  - B) The City-Ward Luník IX. administers 110 appartements (Kukurice and Krčméryho 13-15). and owns 48 apartments (Hrebendova 1-3). A credit-based system of water and electricity provision as a public-private partnership project between the city-ward, the distribution company and the government was successfully implemented. There is an access to gas, although majority of the residents use improvised forms of heating, which carry greater energy and environmental burden.
  - C) EU-funded housing project, Hrebendová 2A, built and administered by the City of Košice in 2015. There are 12 households paying a rent 200 Euros per month, with a full access to all utilities
2. The illegal settlement of Mašličkovo contains 55 provisional settlements with approximately 255 residents who had previously resided in the sanated housing. Provisional source of water to the residents is delivered by the city-ward.
3. Ongoing projects
  - A) Transitional housing is an approved project by the city-ward with a total allocated funding of 2,4 million Euros to build three blocks with the total of 48 apartments.

These are all intended to possess all utilities. The project had been suspended due to the pandemic.

- B) Self-help housing construction is a project pursued by an NGO, ETP Slovakia, which supports families in financial planning and construction of their household. The project had been successful in other localities but in Luník IX., there is only one family currently involved.



The above summary of the situation at Luník IX. underlines a number of issues related to energy poverty and institutional complexity as challenges faced by the marginalised Roma communities in the green transition process. First, it suggests that the energy poverty situation is much graver than recorded in the official statistics which might be the result of both data collection process. The inhabitants simply do not have access to basic utilities with the gravest example being the Mašličkovo settlement. This also shows that most commonly used income-based indicators of energy poverty are of no use in this context given the socio-economic situation as well as the state of the infrastructure. Therefore, more context appropriate methodology for energy poverty is needed. Second, the assessment demonstrates that any intervention will need to take into consideration not only the sustainability dimension based on the use of more renewable resources, but most importantly the social aspect. In other words, whether this is something the residents and municipality can afford and how. Finally, the institutional complexity needs to be considered in any analytical or policy framework. The assessment showed that even despite a proactive attitude from the city-ward and on many occasions even a synergy with the City, the government and other actors, such as the distribution company, the city-ward itself currently lacks sufficient

resources, capacities and remit to address the challenges. The complicated ownership structure outlined above constitutes only one of these elements.

#### **IV. Analysis: Bridging the Field with Approaches and Methods**

Where do the above-described challenges leave us? This paper argues that the academic community and scholarship need to move beyond traditional approaches and disciplinary boundaries in order to address these at the level of conceptual framing and level of analysis as well as analytical and methodological approaches.

At the level of conceptual framing and level of analysis, the literature covering green transition challenges of marginalised Roma communities is dominated by macro-level level approaches, meaning the level of analysis is most commonly national, and framed as environmental or energy injustice. (Filčák, 2009; Filčák and Ficeri, 2021; Harper et al., 2012; Kod'ousková and Bořuta, 2022; Heidegger and Wiese, 2020) As previously shown, they are valuable in their own right, particularly in terms of pinpointing to the grave picture of the status quo and often calling for legal and policy action by the state actors at the national level. However, there is a need for more locally grounded holistic studies, which would allow to include the local context and agency into the formula. The case of Luník IX. clearly shows that each locality needs to be understood within its own socio-economic, communal, institutional and infrastructural context and specificities, which, as the Atlas of Roma Communities shows (Ravasz, 2020), differ from other marginalised Roma settlements located in a relative proximity, be it urban or rural. In this regard, it is in a way striking that sustainable development or sustainable livelihoods framing have not been sufficiently explored and utilised in the context of marginalised Roma communities in Central and Eastern Europe, unlike outside of Europe. Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 do not apply only to outside of Europe (United Nations, 2015), not least because it is referred to in almost every policy document, including Slovakia's Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma up to 2030. (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2021) This would allow for bridging of the energy poverty in the context of the green transition with other important dimensions necessary for a holistic development, such as employment and education. Application of such framings would not only allow to account for what is missing

in the literature, but at the same time, if complemented by appropriate methodological and analytical tools, it is to offer a practical advice for local policymaking.

Taking into consideration the complexity of the challenges of the green transition with those of the marginalised Roma communities, one needs to go beyond traditional analytical and methodological tools that are most commonly used by scholars of Romani studies within the boundaries of social sciences disciplines. Firstly, given the multi-dimensional institutional set up marginalised Roma communities are operating in vis-à-vis both public and private sector actors, as shown in context of Luník IX., one could consider borrowing analytical approaches from other disciplines, such as Political Economy, in order to trace and gain understanding of these complex institutional relationships, formal or informal. One of the relevant examples that has not yet been applied to the context of marginalised Roma communities is Ostrom's (1990) Institutional Analysis and Development Framework, which she had originally developed as multi-level analytical framework from the context of collective action and management of common-pool resources, and thus it is very much relevant for bridging of the marginalised Roma communities and the green transition nexus. Secondly, to account for the need of more locally grounded studies that would include the voices and agency of the communities themselves and in light of the acute lack of expert capacities at the local level, participatory action research methodologies might constitute the appropriate way forward. For example, as a part of the energy poverty project at Luník IX., we have conducted an energy audit on a selected building and produced a feasibility study for the municipality, and currently working on development of the municipality's sustainable development strategy as well as a business plan for establishing of a communal energy enterprise. While the risk associated with and primacy of ethical considerations when pursuing such methodologies carries outmost importance, the benefits are multi-fold for both the researchers as well as the communities. On the one hand, such approach gives the researchers invaluable access to relevant data, and on the other, the research outputs are used for the design and delivery local evidence-based policymaking. Thirdly, as the situational assessment from Luník IX. demonstrates, many aspects of the green transition challenges and policies require technical expertise that is beyond the knowledge of social science disciplines, which are nevertheless of crucial important to the communities. For instance, energy auditing of buildings or selection of the most energy- and cost-effective source of renewable energy constitute skills from technical sciences, involving of which in the scholarship would provide invaluable input both to the research itself as well as the communities.



## **V. Conclusion**

This paper attempted to open a discussion on alternative ways of bridging the green transition processes with the challenges of the marginalised Roma communities. It first highlighted the general lack of scholarship on the topic and critiqued the dominant energy and environmental justice approaches, which often omit the local context and agency. It subsequently outlined the situational assessment of energy poverty at Luník IX. Košice to provide the empirical grounds for the critique as well as the conceptual, analytical and methodological propositions that followed. The paper proposes that scholars studying the challenges of Roma communities in the context of the green transition should consider, at the conceptual level, reframing of the topic from the sustainable development and livelihoods perspective. At the analytical and methodological level, they should be open to analytical frameworks and methodological approaches from other disciplines, such as institutional literature and action-research methodologies. Finally, the complexity of some of the issue might require them to involve colleagues from technical disciplines on issues that are beyond social sciences expertise.

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