

Comparative perspectives on the transferability of Aviles project for the Czech Republic

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1. Comparative similarity

According to a latest survey, more than 330 sites with dominant Roma population in the Czech Republic show features of interlinked social and geographical marginalization and exclusion (for more details see below).¹ As an instance of a larger process of *ethnization of poverty*, these sites are continually developing into urban as well as rural “ghettos”. This reversal in participation of Roma in the wider society since the regime change in 1989 comprises various elements, spreading from economic impoverishment following labour market liberalization, through forced concentration in highly stigmatized areas of inadequate housing, to diffuse emergence of socially pathological features such as drug abuse, usury, widespread criminality etc.

The program of shanty-town eradication in Aviles thus might be helpful in assessing possible schemes of public intervention to facilitate the integration of Roma into the larger Czech society. Specifically, the program emphasizes the **point of no return**² in the case of structural and long term solution to the question of housing of poor Roma if realized through concerted action. This complies with the desired goals expressed in both the *Roma Integration Policy Concept* (since 2004 annually supported by the *Report on the state of affairs of the Romany community in the Czech Republic*) and the subsequently adopted *National Action Plan on Social Integration for the years 2004-2006*. However, no regional or local initiatives of this scale are known in the Czech Republic where projects targeting poor Roma, and particularly the problem of their housing, have been limited to individual initiatives or underfinanced campaigns. The most instructive thus seems the Aviles project’s appeal to **concerted action that brings together central as well as local and regional authorities in cooperation with the beneficiary population**.

1.2. Similarities and differences

Recent research commissioned by the Czech Ministry of labour and social affairs marks a significant shift in the capacity of central authorities to target parts of the population imperilled by social exclusion, especially with emphasis on what has been defined as “socially excluded Roma localities”.³ For the first time it offers a comprehensive picture of the extent and spread of locations characterized by:

¹ *Analýza sociálně vyloučených romských lokalit a absorpční kapacita subjektů působících v této oblasti* (Analysis of Socially Excluded Roma Localities and Communities and the Absorption Capacity of Subjects Operating in the Field). Prague, August 2006.

² José Manuel Fresno. 2006. *Provisional Document: Municipal Programme for the Eradication of Shanty-Towns in Aviles (Principality of Asturias)*. Host Country Report, p. 4.

³ *Analýza*, p. 106. For a definition of the term see pp. 9-11.

- a. “natural” movement of Roma into places with tolerable rental costs, or by
- b. expulsion of Roma from advantageous areas and their assignment to provisional housing in areas with high proportion of Roma, or by
- c. deliberate displacement of Roma rent debtors and other “non-adaptive” people by local authorities into hostels or provisional housing.⁴

This more supple and variable definition of the mechanics of social exclusion reveals the extent of the phenomenon, especially in comparison with previously accepted opinions. The research concludes that whereas “some of the contemporary socially excluded Roma localities developed in places with a continuous high proportion of Roma inhabitants prior to 1989... a vast majority of [localities] have developed during the 1990’s as a consequence of post-communist transformation.”⁵ More than 65% of the localities under investigation exist longer than 10 years and 35% of them have developed in the last 10 years. The approximately 310 localities comprise up to 80.000 Roma inhabitants. To make sure that we are really dealing with the *ethnization of poverty*, it is worth mentioning that 66% of these localities comprise more than 75% of Roma inhabitants and 27% of them are purely Roma.⁶ The reasons for this escalation of social exclusion should be therefore detected in processes rooted in the transformative period after 1989. The research identifies policies and measures that contributed to social exclusion most significantly. In the domain of housing these could be characterized as “poverty blind”: the demise of state-funded system of housing allocation, the restitution of property, the endless privatization of publicly owned housing and the gentrification of historical neighbourhoods (i.e. expulsion of the poor and transformation of housing into residence areas for wealthy clients or business offices).⁷ Since most of the Roma lived before 1989 in state-owned housing (or in houses owned by companies run by the state) these policies inevitably lead to the most salient change in Roma living conditions after 1989: the shift from protective rental housing to vulnerable habitation. Moreover, the spread of socially excluded Roma localities is not limited to previously identified areas. This is highlighted in some surprising figures. Whereas communist policies dragged Roma into new large neighbourhoods in industrial areas, contemporarily 63% of the socially excluded Roma localities comprise less than 100 Roma people. This signals that the process of social exclusion of Roma in the Czech Republic is more diffuse and atomized. As it was mentioned above, it is a consequence of application of identical measures by many local authorities. 42% of socially excluded localities are part of communities with less than 5.000 inhabitants.

This picture is in palpable contrast with the optimistic tone of the NAPSI appraisal of “Access to housing” in the Czech Republic.⁸ It pays attention to the gradual improvement of access to housing and its quality in the Czech Republic. It also identifies some problems (financial barriers to housing access for young families, uneven distribution of apartments in respect to distribution of vacant jobs, shortcomings in the maintenance of housing fund), however these do not consider the phenomenon of Roma social exclusion in the domain of housing. Nevertheless, the NAPSI in its Strategic Approach chapter recognizes that “access to adequate housing is one of the most important factors influencing social inclusion and refers to the Government’s Housing Policy Strategy that declared that “efforts to provide a more marked support for selected population groups” should be adopted. In this sense it acknowledges the need to provide support for the construction of “social housing,

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁸ *National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004-2006*. Ministry of labour and social affairs 2005, pp. 19-20.

thereby meeting the needs of people who are not in a position to purchase their own home”, among them Roma.⁹

1.3. Potential transferability

In both countries, Spain and the Czech Republic, Roma live scattered in various areas. This was in both cases the result of rural-urban migration in the second half of the 20th century that led to the prevailing pattern of Roma settlement in industrial areas. Communist policies attempted to control and direct the migration of Roma from rural areas in Slovakia into the Czech lands through additional measures; however these always succumbed to the need for cheap labour force in the developing industrial areas that brought Roma into newly constructed complexes of housing estates. After regime change in 1989 the residential pattern of Roma was modified by new factors, the most significant among them in the case of the Czech Republic being the change in property relations. After the privatization and restitution of real estate properties Roma started to face unforeseen problems: instability of contractual/rental housing and under-finance of publicly owned property. This led to another wave of displacement of Roma, this time without any migratory logic and often responding to immediate opportunities. As a result, we find islands of Roma concentration in derelict areas, out of reach of state attention and its social services. It is necessary to mention at this point that if there were similar projects for amelioration of Roma housing, these often reflected the publicly mediated stigmatization of large urban settings. To my knowledge, the case of displaced small units of Roma in out-of-reach settings, that is becoming a phenomenon of its own, has not been prioritized.

Since 2000 the Czech Government has annually adopted the *Roma Integration Policy Concept* that assigns the ultimate goal of the elimination of external and internal barriers that preclude socially marginalized Roma from integration into the wider Czech society. The *Concept* operates on three interlinked axes – human rights, national identity and socio-cultural context – and envisages strategic approaches set forth in NAPS. However, the primary goals of the *Concept* have been set up already in its original version in 2000. Among these we find “... the social elevation of members of Roma communities as a priority..., reduction in unemployment, an improvement in their housing, improvement of their state of health, prevention of social exclusion” as well as “halting the spread of ghettoization.”¹⁰ The account of the housing problem of poor Roma in the latest issue of the *Concept* confirms that some of the systemic contours have been identified. In view of the assessment of the transferability of Aviles project the most important among the systemic features seems to be “the absence of a global concept and system of provision of ‘social housing’ at the national level”, which affects most vulnerable groups like Roma. The Czech Government has implemented a scheme that could be possibly applied to address the housing problem of poor Roma (Program of Construction of Rental Flats for Low-income Persons),¹¹ nevertheless the local authorities “apply for projects that do not affect the Roma communities in any way whatsoever”¹² and therefore omit any systematic solution of the problem and apply policies that lead to ousting high-risk groups of tenants from rental housing. The *Concept* thus suggests that more intensive social work with individual families and analysis of their particular social situation should be the focus of future policies, leaving any precision over the advantages of such approach without commentary.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *The Roma Integration Policy Concept*, Approved by the Czech Government 4 May 2005, p. 6 (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, Prague 2005).

¹¹ Czech Government decree No. 146/2003.

¹² *Concept*, p. 25.

I find the Aviles project particularly suitable exactly to the small settings, the reasons being as follows:

1. at the moment no central action plan has been adopted as to funding and designing the housing problem of the poor in general and Roma in particular (as mentioned above, the concept of “social housing” does not refer in the case of the Czech Republic to publicly funded schemes for people in need); in view of the costs of eradication of large scale urban “ghettos” (in some cases they comprise 10.000 inhabitants) this is a missing precondition
2. it is in these small setting that a local, grass-root initiative may arise and as the Aviles project confirms, this is a *sin qua non* for any long term solution
3. it is also in these small settings that one can envisage the accompaniments mentioned in the Aviles project (translating the housing problem into other social spheres like employment, education and health care)

By this suggestion I do not mean to circumscribe the general inspiration of the Aviles project to a small testing ground of small communities. On the contrary, as I mentioned above, small “ghettos” seem to represent the future of Roma social exclusion in the Czech Republic as has been confirmed in latest surveys. It is exactly in these cases where some of the mistakes apparent from the earlier phases of Aviles project are being reproduced in the Czech Republic. “Transition villages” in the form of low cost housing are being constructed by many communities and thus only removing the problem from public gaze and time (most recently it has been “applied” in the town of Vsetín). Stepping in with a well established case should thus detour the attention of local authorities from desperate solutions to more viable plans of integration.

1.4. Policy issues debated in the Czech Republic

In contrast to the situation in Spain, in the Czech Republic the cultural singularity of Roma has been questioned by some social scientists as well as by important actors participating at the “Roma question”. It seems that a “culture of poverty” discourse is gaining the ground and thus imposing a particular policy methodology and rationale. In the “culture of poverty” discourse Roma are seen as victims of life conditions incapable of anticipating any life strategy that would divert the course of life from the actual experience. Social intervention is thus necessarily reduced to the generosity of the social assistance of which Roma people are the objects. This discourse has objectionable impact on policy debates since it often leads to conflicts of authority and the building of insurmountable cleavages among the parties.

I find highly fecund the Aviles project’s explicit reflexive methodology and rationale. Although it was not possible to confirm the success of its overarching objective – “to eradicate shanty-towns in Aviles by facilitating access to standard housing, *with measures supporting socio-labour market integration of the Roma population and fostering intercultural co-existence*”¹³ – the course of its implementation and reference to its various stages show that the logic of replacing shanty-towns by other housing projects concentrating socially vulnerable people only temporarily removes the problem from public sight for to reappear again in the future, which is the common practice of many local authorities in the Czech Republic. After the collapse of the second phase of the project (1996-2000), the local Social Welfare Committee in Aviles turned to “partnership work methodology” and established an ethnic minority working group comprising a variety of different social players, Roma families among them, as equal partners and agreed upon the relocation of shanty-town dwellers in standard flats

¹³ Fresno, p. 21 (my emphasis).

accompanied by the implementation of a new home rental programme.¹⁴ The most characteristic and inspirational however seems to be the fact that the initiative and leadership have always come from the city government throughout the entire process. Here we note a major difference and at the same time a possible lieu of intervention in the Czech Republic. Whereas in Aviles it is the grass-root, bottom-up policy initiative that assured its long-term feasibility, in the Czech Republic it is exactly the absence of such enthusiasm and reluctance on the local level that may prevent from implementing such policies. After the adoption of the Law on national minorities in 2000, the main competences on Roma integration are assigned to local authorities (mostly the municipalities). In practice it means that the central authority can not interfere with any legal actions in any area of social inclusion without the participation of local authorities.

2. Potential contribution of the policy to the objectives and strategy of the Czech Republic

In respect to the policy debate in the Czech Republic, the Aviles project may, if providing a more detailed description of the actual interactions among partners, help in shaping a more consensual policy strategy that would **take into account the various social experiences and cultural constrains of participants**. Such a consensual policy is the only guarantee for the achievement of the well acknowledged political objective to mark a definitive end of the policies attempting at assimilating Roma into the wider society or at their marginalisation at the fringes of society instead of developing a favourable environment for their integration. It is however important to note a major objection to the transferability of the Aviles project, not only to the Czech Republic but anywhere. As it was highlighted on many occasions during the peer-review, the success of the social integration of former shanty-town dwellers is not resolved by their relocation among the rest of the population. The success should be assured by the inscription of Roma in all the domains of social life. The evaluation of the Aviles project could not confirm that this was the case, the reason certainly being the fact that the process of relocation has been launched only in 2003. Failure in the achievement of the overarching objective mentioned above and thus in any of the particular aspects of social integration may in fact produce a situation that is even more stigmatizing for Roma. In the case that Roma were relocated but suffered from unemployment, education failure etc. they would find themselves in a potentially hostile environment that questions the implementation of special programmes for Roma social integration. The social logic of shanty-towns, ghettos and other social formations of this kind is exactly in escaping these accusations and in providing an alternative social world were unattainable values of the wider society are “put to rest”. Unsuccessful relocation therefore always runs the risk that the need to live with people of “one’s sort” reappears.

¹⁴ Fresno, p. 22-23.