

# Horizontal Redistribution and Roma Inclusion in the Western Balkans: The “Exclusion Amid Inclusion” Dilemma

Aleksandra Zdeb <sup>1</sup>  and Peter Vermeersch <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Security and Information Technology, University of the National Education Commission, Poland

<sup>2</sup> Leuven International and European Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium

**Correspondence:** Aleksandra Zdeb ([aleksandra.zdeb@up.krakow.pl](mailto:aleksandra.zdeb@up.krakow.pl))

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## Abstract

Many Roma across Europe continue to face a range of social problems, including ethnic discrimination, marginalisation, residential segregation, socio-economic inequality, and extremist violence. The lack of effective policies to address these issues has reinforced a climate of hatred against Roma, further isolating many of them. It has also affected their position in the political arena, where Roma remain severely underrepresented. In this article, we analyse the situation of Roma in three Western Balkan countries and the policies developed to support them. We discuss the institutional structures for managing and improving the socio-economic conditions of identity-based communities and examine the position of the Roma within these institutional contexts. We also explore attitudes towards Roma-related policies and how Roma citizens themselves in these three countries perceive their position.

## Keywords

horizontal redistribution; identity-based communities; inclusion dilemma; Roma; Western Balkans

## 1. Introduction

Many Roma across Europe continue to face an alarming array of social problems, including ethnic discrimination, marginalisation, residential segregation, socio-economic inequality, and extremist violence. While their plight was once seen as a by-product of the political and economic transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after the end of communism, it is now clear that more fundamental forms of structural exclusion have occurred and persist across Europe. Today, a disproportionate number of Roma (including those who use other ethnic names to identify themselves but are still considered to be part of the same

group by scholars, activists, politicians, Roma representatives, or the wider society) are forced to live in substandard housing, suffer from segregated education, and continue to face high levels of unemployment, especially in remote areas where labour market opportunities are not available. Inadequate health services and reliance on social benefits further exacerbate reduced employability and increase poverty levels among Roma, resulting in increased physical and mental health needs (Guerrero et al., 2023). The lack of effective policies to address this situation has reinforced a climate of hatred against Roma, further isolating them. It has also affected their position in the political arena, where Roma remain severely underrepresented.

In the Western Balkans, the situation of the Roma people has been shaped by two additional variables. First, the post-Yugoslav succession wars of the 1990s created a difficult situation for those who did not identify with the warring parties (i.e., the so-called majority ethnic groups), not only triggering outbreaks of violence and revenge by the dominant communities against these other groups but also aggravating their exclusion. Second, the consociational systems created as part of the post-war conflict management architecture were intended to improve their status in the political and socio-economic sphere but largely failed to do so. While these structures were supposed to work for the benefit of all ethnic groups, Roma were still treated as second-class citizens, and their dependence on (international) non-state support remained high. In the eyes of many Roma, the power-sharing systems that were supposed to allow for a more equitable horizontal distribution of socio-economic and political power are nothing more than Potemkin villages.

This article delves deeper into this question in three countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter shortened to “Bosnia”), Kosovo, and North Macedonia (hereafter shortened to “Macedonia”). In each of these countries, Roma are part of a horizontal redistributive arrangement but remain the most excluded and impoverished of all ethnic communities. We explore this problem of “exclusion amid inclusion” (often referred to as a dilemma because of the perceived tension between policies that seek to promote inclusion and those that seek to strengthen ethnic institutions) and examine how it is related to general attitudes towards horizontal redistribution.

Our discussion pertains to Roma, Ashkali, as well as Egyptian communities in these three countries. For practical reasons, however, we use the single term Roma as a shorthand for all three of these groups throughout most of the article, except where the distinction between the communities is essential for our analysis. It should be noted that in most South-Eastern European countries only the term Roma is widely used, except in Kosovo, where all three terms—Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians (the abbreviation RAE is also used)—are common. Ashkali and Egyptians largely speak Albanian as their first language, while this is not necessarily the case for Roma people in Kosovo (Trubeta, 2005, p. 71; Visoka, 2008, p. 157).

The article is divided into four parts. First, we provide a background sketch of existing policies aimed at responding to the situation of Roma in South-Eastern Europe. Second, we explore the current state of research on attitudes towards Roma-related redistributive policies. Third, we examine the ethnic power-sharing structures and minority protection mechanisms intended to promote horizontal equality in the three countries in focus. Fourth, we examine how Roma in these three cases perceive the structures and mechanisms in place to support their inclusion.

As will become clear from our discussion, the challenges to adequate protection of Roma revolve around the relevance and enforcement of protection mechanisms as well as the limitations of political representation

mechanisms, particularly for smaller groups (Bieber, 2005, pp. 240, 242). While protection policies, mechanisms, and institutions clearly do not tell the whole story—deeply rooted patterns of anti-Roma racism and stigmatisation persist in society and constitute a crucial barrier to political and socio-economic inclusion (see Powell & Lever, 2017)—it is nevertheless worth examining what protection policies, special representation mechanisms, and ethnic institutions can and cannot achieve. With our discussion, we aim to contribute to the ongoing debate on power-sharing systems in diverse societies. The three countries we focus on have implemented consociational systems that differ in the way they organise political inclusion, but in all three they have not significantly improved the socio-economic situation of the Roma. Attitudes clearly play a crucial role, requiring more positive citizen support for horizontal redistribution and cultural equality between ethnic groups. However, the potential and limitations of the consociational systems themselves, which were designed to achieve horizontal redistribution of power and resources, also need to be reconsidered.

## 2. Current Policies Addressing the Plight of Roma People Across Europe

Roma constitute a significant minority across Europe—estimated at between 8 and 12 million people—and include many citizens who find themselves in extremely vulnerable socio-economic circumstances. Many Roma are citizens of EU member states, or reside in the EU, while at least one million Roma live in the Western Balkans. Across the EU, policies have been developed to combat discrimination and promote the inclusion of Roma in society, mostly at the instigation of European institutions (see, e.g., Vermeersch, 2017a). In October 2020, a European Commission communication outlined the EU's strategic framework for promoting equality, inclusion, and participation of Roma, with the aim of achieving significant improvements by 2030 (European Commission, 2020). As part of this framework, EU member states have to report every two years on the implementation of policies in these domains. In 2021 and 2022, the countries of the Western Balkan adopted their own Roma inclusion policies to align with the EU's strategic framework. The EU, in turn, has supported the Western Balkans' efforts to achieve this alignment through funding under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021–2027.

However, despite these policy efforts at the national and European level, the situation on the ground remains problematic. Socio-economic problems are compounded by persistent negative public attitudes towards Roma and Roma-related policies. How Roma are portrayed in politics and the media continues to reinforce misguided old romantic and stereotypical notions of Roma as perpetual outsiders. In the context of current regulatory practices aimed at mitigating (or at least controlling) the situation—i.e., settlement policies, targeted education policies and health campaigns, as well as the creation of overarching European instruments to stimulate national Roma inclusion policies—new ways of problematizing Roma have emerged (Van Baar & Vermeersch, 2017). The extent of prejudice and stereotyping faced by Roma underlines the urgent need for more and better comprehensive efforts to address these deep-rooted societal problems and to work towards the promotion of redistributive policies.

What are the main trends in current research on policies to promote Roma inclusion that involve horizontal redistribution? A large part of the literature on Roma focuses on problems rather than solutions: It describes and examines the social processes that push Roma into positions of exclusion (e.g., A. McGarry, 2017; Van Baar, 2012; Vermeersch, 2017b). Another important body of literature examines the tensions inherent in policy-making efforts to promote Roma inclusion. Policymakers tend to frame Roma in ethnic terms, but as

programmes often fail to produce tangible improvements in Roma's lives, they also risk perpetuating rather than overcoming stereotypical views of the target group. Conversely, generalised policies, i.e., non-ethnically defined social inclusion programmes, have also proved inadequate precisely because such policies do not reach the group or are unable to address the specific "ethnic challenges" faced by Roma (Rostas, 2019).

Several authors have argued that the absence of redistributive policies capable of adequately addressing both the socio-economic and ethnic dimensions of Roma exclusion is due to a general lack of political will, combined with shortcomings in institutional design (for a discussion see Kóczé & Van Baar, 2020; Van Baar & Vermeersch, 2017). A number of recent papers, for example, argue that existing EU-initiated policies have proved ineffective because they divide responsibility for these policies between the EU and national member-state levels, allowing national governments to shift the burden to the supranational level (see Lusmen, 2018).

On the national state level, the limitations of institutional design are particularly evident in those countries that rely on some form of cultural or ethnic autonomy or a type of consociational arrangement in which ethnic groups are given a previously negotiated share of the power. Although cultural autonomy and power-sharing in theory offer both institutional guarantees and equal cultural status to a host of ethnically defined groups who would otherwise remain disadvantaged, Roma often fall through the cracks of the system. This may be due to their demographic weakness per country or to the fact that Roma often do not belong to one of the main ethnic segments of a power-sharing arrangement and therefore miss out on the institutional benefits that the system offers to other ethnic groups. Moreover, in systems where there is (non-territorial) cultural autonomy for ethnic groups, Roma also seem to miss out. While in theory, such systems could enforce the protection of some special linguistic, educational, or other cultural rights, concrete cases show that such policies do not provide a clear path to economic equality and more equal political participation (e.g., Sansum & Dobos, 2020).

### 3. Attitudes Towards Roma-Related Redistribution Policies: State of the Field

While a limited level of government commitment and lack of political will is often cited as a key reason for the failure to achieve better policies for Roma (e.g., Matache & Oehlke, 2017, p. 103), it should be assumed that such political will is in part also dependent on whether it is nurtured. Because of a lack of awareness and a limited understanding of the problem, citizens may be unwilling to support horizontal redistribution, which in turn could lead to a stalling of the situation on the ground.

Survey results from the Pew Research Center (Wike et al., 2019) show that among the minority groups surveyed in Europe, Roma stand out for the prevalence of negative attitudes towards them. In 10 of the 16 countries surveyed, half or more of respondents have an unfavourable opinion of Roma. These findings are consistent with what many Roma themselves have reported about their experiences of problems preventing them from enjoying their fundamental rights to employment, education, health care, and housing. Regular surveys conducted by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency since 2008 have consistently shown that efforts by the EU and its member states have resulted in limited and uneven progress for Roma. In addition, Romaphobia and related forms of discrimination persist (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

There is a paucity of research on citizens' attitudes and views towards policies aimed at reducing group differences in countries with significantly poor Roma communities. However, there is a growing body of literature examining the dynamics of interactions between Roma and non-Roma in different sociological and political settings. Some of the findings from this latter strand of empirical work can serve as a proxy for the study of more general attitudes towards horizontal redistributive policies in cases involving Roma populations. For example, Bracic (2020) argues that many Roma individuals tend to develop survival strategies in response to discriminatory actions by the majority population. Conversely, the majority population tends to resent these survival strategies, often attributing them to what they see as inherent characteristics of the minority group, rather than acknowledging their own discriminatory behaviour as the root cause. Negative views of the group discourage redistributive welfare and poverty reduction policies.

Moreover, positive attitudes towards horizontal redistributive policies may be hampered by majority beliefs about the nature of EU funding and the populist idea that Roma are the main beneficiaries of support programmes. While it is true that EU funds are intended to support Roma inclusion, the problematic narrative that is sometimes promoted about such support is that Roma are "privileged" recipients. Several authors have pointed out that EU funding has been politicised: There has been a far-right populist-nationalist backlash against EU-promoted Roma rights or national minority rights (Vermeersch, 2012). However, various studies show that financial support from the EU level does not necessarily lead to real improvements on the ground (e.g., Sobotka & Vermeersch, 2012).

Research on how to reduce ethnocentric bias in redistributive policies targeting marginalised minority groups is rather scarce. Experimental research in Slovakia by Findor et al. (2023) found that when Roma were mentioned as recipients or co-recipients of a policy, there was a significant decrease in majority support. Yet arguments emphasising the principle of reciprocity had the effect of strengthening majority support for redistributive transfers to "out-groups," these researchers found. The implications are relevant not only for national and local policies towards Roma but also for the development of policy frameworks at the EU level that effectively encourage the creation of policies targeted at an "out-group." The emphasis on reciprocity is likely to increase the willingness of majorities to support Roma assistance programmes, but, as Findor et al. (2023) caution, it is far from a panacea. Reciprocity has been at the heart of certain "Roma activation" policies that have emerged in Central Europe in recent years. These policies have sometimes been punitive in nature, forcing Roma to accept low-paid (or sometimes unpaid) and substandard jobs (Grill, 2018; Škobla & Filčák, 2020; Van Baar, 2012), thereby perpetuating their marginal position.

#### 4. Redistribution Questions and the Structures of Inclusion in the Western Balkans

In what follows we zoom in on three cases in the Western Balkans: Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. In all three cases, armed conflict has occurred and the international community has used consociationalist governance strategies to resolve it, although each country has implemented them in a different way. In Bosnia, the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement—the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia—created a pluralist, corporatist consociational arrangement mixed with asymmetric federalism (Bose, 2002, p. 216; Chandler, 2000, p. 67). In Kosovo, a hybrid (mostly corporate) consociational arrangement was first imposed by the UN administration in 2001 and later extended in the 2008 constitution and the Ahtisaari Plan (Baliqi, 2018, p. 56; Visoka, 2017, p. 14). The Ohrid Framework Agreement in Macedonia

created a constitutional system that has been described as a “minimalist consociational system” (Bieber, 2011, p. 14).

Each case has different institutional structures for managing identity-based communities and views identities in different ways. The Bosnian model recognises both constituent nations and minorities but places the former in a privileged position. Therefore, anyone who does not belong to the three constituent peoples operates on the margins or even outside the system (F. Cordoba, interview, 2019). On the other hand, both Kosovo and Macedonia have based their systems on multiethnicity. They recognise the dominant nations, while all minorities—or rather “non-majority communities”—are lumped into one basket (including the parties to the conflict) following the assumption that “smaller communities are not supposed to be a factor in the overall structure of power-sharing arrangements” (Andeva, 2015, p. 16). The former warring groups, Serbs and Albanians respectively, are in a dominant position. In Kosovo, Serbs have corporate guarantees of their status, while in Macedonia, Albanians are de facto the only group able to take full advantage of the special provisions hidden behind the 20% threshold.

In all these cases Roma belong to the so-called non-dominant group of “others” that refers to “all those citizens who live in a consociational system but do not belong to any of the ‘significant’ segments of the society” (Stojanović, 2018, p. 7). “Others” has served as a catch-all category for those who do not align with the dominant social cleavage (Agarin et al., 2018, pp. 301–303). Only in Bosnia, however, the word “others” is incorporated in legal documents; in Kosovo and Macedonia the term “non-majority communities” is used. Stojanović (2018, p. 9) claims that the “challenge of others” primarily concerns corporate consociations, thus, there are also calls to liberalise power-sharing institutions in order to improve the status of micro-minorities. J. McGarry (2017, p. 282) goes even further, arguing that liberal consociations “need not privilege ethnic identities, and are more likely to create political space for previously weak and marginalised identity groups than conventional majoritarian systems.” Therefore, based on the theoretical literature, we should expect that the more liberal the system, the better the situation for minorities. However, the case of Roma people does not necessarily confirm this. Their political inclusion looks formally better in Macedonia than in Bosnia, but in practice, this does not translate into more horizontal equality and a better socio-economic or political position (see Table 1). We explore whether the lack of effectiveness means that the pervasive climate of hatred and stigmatisation overshadows the available governance mechanisms and thus thwarts more positive attitudes towards better horizontal equality policies.

#### **4.1. Minority Protection Mechanisms**

It is important to bear in mind that the consociational systems in our three cases were initially created to address the pre-war tensions that led to armed ethnicised conflict; it is only over the years that they have been mixed with minority protection mechanisms. To some extent, Bosnia is the outlier here—state-level institutions still completely ignore the non-constituent nations and in some cases are openly ethnically discriminatory (Bochsler, 2012, p. 66). Those who fall into the category of “others” are institutionally discriminated against and unable to fully participate in the political processes of the country (Council of Europe, 2017). It is the sub-federal level that offers them at least some token recognition, but there is no doubt that the three titular nations are the main “owners” of the state. In Kosovo and Macedonia, on the other hand, all levels of government treat the groups involved in the conflict as part of a larger set of non-majority communities. Here, consociational mechanisms are granted to all non-majority communities

(although in Kosovo the self-government provisions are still disputed and granted only to Serb-majority municipalities), but this arrangement translates to a very limited extent into the position of other minorities. Despite their ostensible multi-ethnicity, both countries are seen as bi-national states in which “other ethnic communities are largely relegated to the fringes of political life” (Engström, 2002, p. 3).

Consociational institutions have been designed differently in each case. Only in Kosovo, there is proportional representation in the form of guaranteed parliamentary representation for non-majority communities at the central level. In Bosnia, after the 2002 constitutional reforms, the ethnic key was extended to the “others” at the entity level (Banović, 2016, pp. 26–28; Rrahmani, 2018, p. 239). The Macedonian system does not offer guaranteed seats but here the informal practice of creating pre-electoral coalitions usually gives minorities several seats (Andeva, 2015, pp. 14–15). Yet, the system of reserved seats is seen by minorities as tokenistic at best and used by majority groups to tip the balance of power (I. Kožemjakin, interview, 2019). In all three cases, the public administration also relies on guaranteed ethnic representation. In Bosnia, the system is based on the constituent peoples. In Kosovo, as the 2017 OSCE report shows, minority presence rose to 9.63% in 2015, falling just short of the required 10% (OSCE, 2021, p. 20). In Macedonia, where proportionality within the civil service is encouraged, out of the 112,164 employees in the public sector, 1.88% were Turks and 1.21% were Roma (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 7) which means that they are significantly underrepresented (Andonovski, 2018, p. 34; Lyon, 2015, p. 161; Risteska, 2013, p. 32). Inclusion in the executive arena is rather limited. Only in Kosovo, there must be at least two ministers from ethnic minorities within the government (Rrahmani, 2018, p. 239). In Bosnia, it is stipulated that one ministry should be given to a candidate from the “others,” but it was only in 2018 that it was agreed between the governing parties that the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees was to be headed by a non-partisan person who comes from the “others” group (“Kako će SNSD dobiti,” 2021). In Macedonia, only the Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations reflects the country’s foundation on the minority principle. However, in both Macedonia and Kosovo, the minority veto principle has been extended to all minority communities (Auerbach, 2011, p. 32).

All three countries have also developed minority councils, which in all cases are seen as powerless bodies. In Kosovo, the Assembly Committee on the Rights and Interests of Communities and Return has been mandated to review draft legislation, while the Consultative Council for Communities within the Office of the President is to ensure that community perspectives are included in decision-making processes (OSCE, 2021, p. 18). In Bosnia, there are councils for national minorities in the state parliamentary assembly and in the entity and local parliaments, which operate in a limited advisory capacity (Sadiković, 2011). In addition, since 2002 there has been the Roma Committee within the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an advisory and coordinating body (Galicić, 2017, p. 105). Finally, in Macedonia, the Committee for Inter-Community Relations is supposed to ensure dialogue. The Ohrid Framework Agreement also re-established committees for inter-community relations in municipalities where at least 20% of the local population belongs to a particular non-majority community (Czymmeck & Viciska, 2011, p. 83).

The most important level at which minorities can express themselves is the local level. All three cases rely on several instruments to achieve this. In Macedonia, given the 20% threshold that activates pro-minority provisions (regarding veto mechanisms, language use, emblems, etc.), there are 17 municipalities with an Albanian majority, two with a Turkish majority, and one with a Roma majority (Cekikj, 2014, p. 234). In Kosovo, in municipalities where at least 10% of the residents belong to minority communities, there are special, minority bodies guaranteeing their representation: Communities Committee, Deputy Chairperson of

the Municipal Assembly for Communities, Deputy Mayor for Communities, and Chairperson of the Municipal Assembly for Communities (Popova, 2013, p. 11). Finally, in Bosnia, reserved seats in local assemblies were introduced in 2004. Minorities are entitled to representation in municipal and city councils and assemblies in proportion to their share of the population, with a reserved seat guaranteed by law if they make up at least 3% of the local population. This has led to an increase in political mobilisation and awareness among minorities (Hodžić & Mraović, 2015, pp. 423, 430).

All three countries have also adopted laws and policies to promote equal opportunities for Roma (mainly required in the context of the EU accession process), including anti-discrimination laws and strategies and action plans for Roma inclusion. However, most of these laws and policies either remain on paper or their implementation remains very limited. As a result, their impact on the position of Roma is very limited and the authorities have become accustomed to a situation where non-implementation goes unpunished (Civil Rights Defenders, 2018, p. 10).

#### **4.2. Inclusion of Roma in the Minority Structures**

In the three cases discussed, there was a tradition of power-sharing and minority rights protection. Yugoslavia was arguably one of the most progressive states in its treatment of Roma—positive attention to Roma increased in the 1970s and 1980s, with the extension of cultural and educational rights and anti-discrimination legislation, as well as the first official use of the term “Roma” in the 1971 census (Friedman, 2014, pp. 5–6). The League of Communists of Yugoslavia clearly preferred integration to assimilation, thus Roma enjoyed a more secure social status and benefited from a more tolerant state but at the same time, their situation remained a “serious basic social issue” (Barany, 2000, p. 428). It was still imperfect and marked by anti-Gypsyism, but many Roma identify this period as one of greater equality and assess it as much better than the present (Humphries, 2011, pp. 12–14). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the position of Roma communities developed differently in each case, partly due to the growing disparity in the size of their population, which affected their significance in the political arena. In Kosovo, the group has been divided into three self-identifying entities, Roma, Ashkali, and RAE (Ashkaeli and Egyptians) in an effort to reject the homogenising label “Roma” (Bhabha et al., 2014, p. 8). According to the official census, there are 8,824 Roma, with estimates ranging from 23,000 to 27,000; 15,436 Ashkali (estimated at 12,000); and 11,524 Egyptians (with varying estimates, some of which go as high as 25,000). In Bosnia, according to the 2013 census, there are 12,896 Roma (estimated at 40,000–100,000), and in Macedonia, according to the 2021 census, 2,53% of the population identifies as Roma—according to the 2002 census, there were 53,879 Roma (estimated at 110,000–260,000) and 3,843 Egyptians (estimated at 20,000; see Friedman, 2014; Popova, 2013; State Statistical Office, 2022).

Those numbers are the basis for all Roma political organisation and activity. In Bosnia, where the system is openly discriminatory, their political inclusion is almost non-existent. The first short-lived Roma political party (Democratic Party of Roma) was registered in 2003 (OSCE, 2006, p. 7), a short period in 2012 saw the emergence of the Democratic Union of Roma, and 2022 saw the rise of yet another party (“Politički aktivizam: Počeo,” 2022). The lack of credible minority parties leaves Roma with two options: to be represented by independent candidates or to join a major political party (for example, in the 2022 Bosnian general election, Dervo Sejdić ran on the list of the Social Democratic Party, but without success). In the latter case, however, they have limited opportunities to represent their community (“Romi na listama,” 2022). As a result, only one



person of Roma origin has ever been a member of the entity and cantonal parliaments (from the list of the dominant party), and around 20 Roma councillors have been elected to municipal councils—usually from the local lists of the major parties (“Romi u susret novoj vlasti,” 2023).

In Macedonia, Roma are relatively active on the political scene, but also highly divided. Since the 1990s, several Roma political parties have been in government and opposition at the national and local levels. For example, the 2013 local elections resulted in one Roma mayor, one Roma president of a local council, and 25 Roma councillors (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2014). Major Roma political parties include the Party for the Full Emancipation of Roma in Macedonia, the Union of Roma in Macedonia, the United Roma of Macedonia, and the Party for Roma Integration. As a result of the minority veto mechanism—the “Badinter principle”—they have become an important factor in pre-election coalition building and operate in the political arena in the “shadows” of their “big brothers.” In the 2002–2006 government, the party representing Roma held the position of Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, and in the 2011–2014 and 2014–2018 governments, it held the position of minister without portfolio. It created an opportunity to initiate programmes that would help the community, but the success was modest (Andeva, 2015, p. 20; Taleski, 2008, pp. 145–146).

In Kosovo, there are four RAE parties in the current parliament: the Ashkali Party for Integration, the Romani Initiative, the Progressive Movement of Kosovar Roma, and the New Democratic Initiative of Kosovo. Similarly, despite the socio-political reality of RAE groups, their parties have joined parliamentary groups formed mainly by Albanian and Serb MPs (Cocoşatu, 2012, pp. 115–116; Visoka & Beha, 2011, p. 13). In the 2021 elections, the community also became of interest to Serb politicians, who sought to control the seats guaranteed to other groups by creating new Roma and Bosniak political parties and encouraging Serb citizens to vote for them to increase their influence beyond the guaranteed 10 seats. However, the Supreme Court annulled the votes and withdrew their seats (Bochsler, 2022).

Although there are formal channels to express their interests—the more institutions there are, the more politically active they become—they still lack real opportunities to influence their position (Calu, 2020, p. 191). Their exclusion from meaningful participation in political life and decision-making processes in all three countries is aggravated by several factors: low status because of low levels of education, poor health conditions hindering social mobility, lack of civil registration and basic legal documentation, discrimination, political pawn status, and lack of a kin state (Visoka, 2008, p. 154). In all three cases, they face similar obstacles in obtaining formal registration and documents, housing, education, health care, and employment. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, despite a visibly higher level of inclusion in the more liberal consociations (Macedonia and, to some extent, Kosovo), the extent of these problems remains quite similar. Looking for reasons for this unchanged situation, some authors point to the isolation of Roma issues from mainstream public policy, budgeting, services and administration, and a number of provisions designed to change this have had limited success. While some achievements can be noted, such as a growing number of Roma activists, increasing numbers of Roma attending and graduating from secondary schools and universities, and progress in preventing statelessness, systemic change has not been achieved (Civil Rights Defenders, 2018, p. 5). It is clear that the problems of political inclusion faced by Roma are strongly linked to the social exclusion, discrimination, segregation, and marginalisation they face (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d.).

What matters beyond the power-sharing systems are the attitudes of majorities. The failure of Western Balkan governments to recognise the phenomenon of anti-Gypsyism—“a social and political construction reproduced

**Table 1.** Roma inclusion indicators in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia.

Indicator	Bosnia	Kosovo	Macedonia
School enrolment (ages 7–15)*	61%	75%	74%
School enrolment (ages 16–19)*	15%	30%	27%
Education enrolment rate (% of population, ages 7–15)**	70%	72%	78%
Completion rate in compulsory education**	43%	60%	69%
Completion rate in upper secondary education (% of population, ages 22–25)**	21%	20%	31%
Unemployment*	54% (56%**) 58% (49%**) 53% (49%**)		
Access to medicines (essential drugs out of financial reach)*	68%	86%	68%
Health insurance coverage (% of population aged 16+)**	72%	10%	94%
Insecure housing*	35%	—	25%

Sources: \* United Nations Development Programme, as cited in Friedman (2014, pp. 17–19); \*\* United Nations Development Programme (2019).

in society through processes of racialisation” (Fejzula & Fernández, 2022, p. 395)—helps explain why their strategies for inclusion of Roma have had such a limited impact. As a result, the notion of danger was combined with a vision of Roma as fundamentally uncivilised and associated with relationships based on violence (Fejzula, 2022). In the 2022 Balkan Barometer, only 17% of the respondents in Bosnia, 35% in Kosovo, and 11% in Macedonia said they would feel comfortable or somewhat comfortable marrying someone from the Roma community or if their child had a Roma spouse. However, other responses were to some extent more promising. When asked whether they would be comfortable working with Roma, 70% of respondents in Bosnia, 66% in Kosovo, and 77% in Macedonia answered in the affirmative. Surprisingly, respondents were also comfortable with their children going to school with Roma children (Bosnia, 70%; Kosovo, 64%; and Macedonia, 72%) and with having friends who are Roma (Bosnia, 64%; Kosovo, 63%; and Macedonia, 76%; see Balkan Public Barometer, n.d.).

As a race-based system of domination and “the most tolerated form of racism in Europe” (Fejzula, 2019, p. 2106; A. McGarry, 2017), at the policy level, Romaphobia is expressed in the way policies or laws that should promote horizontal redistribution and inclusion remain unimplemented, or in the way discrimination against Roma is denied, reinforcing their exclusion. In all these countries, negative or racist attitudes dominate public and sometimes even political discourse on Roma. For example, public perception and discourse do not recognise Roma as victims of war. Crimes against Roma are often ignored by the judicial system. War crimes committed against Roma in Bosnia and Kosovo are not prosecuted, so Roma are either ignored as victims (Bosnia) or perceived as perpetrators (Kosovo). The (often forced) collaboration of some Roma with the former Serb-dominated regime in Kosovo has been used to impose collective guilt on all Roma and as a pretext to ignore post-war crimes against Roma (Civil Rights Defenders, 2018, p. 6).

## 5. Perceptions of Roma

While there are differences between countries, the overall picture in our three cases seems to be that Roma people often do not see their political representatives as effective agents working on behalf of their communities—regardless of the institutional set-up. Roma often assume that their representatives are

involved in nepotism and patronage, a perception that may be linked to a general lack of trust among citizens in the political class.

Monitoring reports on Kosovo, for example, suggest that RAE leaders are not seen as actors with strong political influence who can effectively address RAE issues at the national level (European Commission, 2019, p. 37). It was clear from our interviews in Bosnia that Roma communities are often seen as groups that can be easily manipulated in the context of a wider game of ethnicised politics. Roma politicians are often seen as “extra hands”—producers of votes that can be easily bought. This means that they are often not seen as advocates for Roma, and there remains a significant gap between the community and its leaders (“Romi na listama,” 2022). In a pre-election survey conducted by AKSIOM in Bosnia in 2022, 95.3% of Roma said that they did not believe that any politician or political party in Bosnia had stood up for their interests and that many of them have positioned themselves as the legitimate voice of the community despite having little to do with it. As a result, Roma people rarely vote for Roma politicians, even at the local level (European Roma Rights Centre, 2022).

While the consociational system in Macedonia is generally seen as working better for Roma, it still requires strong political will and majority support to “make it work” (EU Delegation, Macedonia, interview, 2019). Indeed, there is better political representation and participation of Roma in Macedonia than in the other cases, but this does not translate into a better socio-economic position for Roma. Many people do not seem to trust mainstream Roma political leaders, dismissing them as being in the service of the ruling party and pursuing personal interests at the expense of the community. Roma political parties work as satellites around larger, dominant parties or are seen as “puppets” in their hands (S. Kacarska, interview, 2019). In this sense, political decisions favourable to Roma are the result of a calculated effort by dominant parties to balance the will of the country’s ethnic Albanian minority (Sudetić, 2013). Moreover, as in Kosovo, despite the supposed multi-ethnicity, the systems in place appear to remain a smokescreen for bi-national (or, in the case of Bosnia, tri-national) politics. Among the Roma, the feeling of being second-class citizens is still prevalent in all three cases—and consociationalism is only one of the variables influencing their difficult position.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, our analysis of the position of Roma within the power-sharing systems of three Western Balkan countries has highlighted a significant and recurring theme—the dilemma of “exclusion amidst inclusion.” Despite the ostensibly inclusive principles underpinning these complex systems, a significant proportion of the population continues to experience exclusion. This exclusion is not just an unintended consequence of an otherwise genuine attempt to create a just system that guarantees equal socio-economic opportunities and political rights for all. To a considerable extent, it is also the result of the design and operation of these post-conflict power-sharing mechanisms in a context where public attitudes towards some groups remain extremely negative. While there have been ambitious efforts to promote inclusiveness through these systems, our analysis suggests that these attempts have so far fallen short of their goals. The challenge of reconciling the need for ethnic representation with the imperative of achieving equitable socio-economic outcomes for all citizens remains. Therefore, we argue that public attitudes towards horizontal redistributive policies will be crucial to making these power-sharing systems work in favour of more horizontal equality. Indeed, more favourable attitudes of citizens towards horizontal redistribution and the establishment of cultural equality for all ethnic groups is an essential prerequisite for addressing the marginalised status of

Roma in our three case study countries. However, improving public attitudes should not be pursued in isolation from a thorough reassessment of existing power-sharing systems. There continues to be a need to review and possibly reform these systems to make them more responsive to the goals of equity and inclusion. Only by simultaneously fostering positive public attitudes towards equality and revising the structures and mechanisms of these systems to ensure that they serve as effective instruments of inclusion can we begin to address the persistent challenges faced by marginalised communities in the Western Balkans.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Aleksandra Zdeb** is an assistant professor at the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków and a lecturer at Jagiellonian University. She holds a PhD in law and politics from the University of Graz and spent two years as a post-doc at the Queen's University Belfast. She has published articles on post-conflict reconstruction and state-building processes in journals like *Ethnopolitics*, *Nationalities Papers*, *New Eastern Europe*, *Representation*, and the *Swiss Political Science Review*.



**Peter Vermeersch** is a professor of politics and Central and Eastern European studies at the Faculty of Social Science of the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), in Belgium, where he is also connected to the research group LINES (Leuven International and European Studies) and the Forum on Central and Eastern Europe. He has published widely about post-conflict processes and the politics of memory in South-Eastern Europe and the plight of the Roma in Central Europe. For more on his work, visit his personal website (<http://www.petervermeersch.net>).