

Affordability of energy for specific groups of people (Roma community) in Slovakia

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Perspective on affordability of energy for Roma community in the policy debate of Slovakia

The change of the system (rejection of communism) in 1989 broke the set up the Roma were used to. Before 1989 employment was mandatory: each citizen of active age in the country had to work – the Roma too. After the revolution and transformation of the economy, including the breakup of many factories, the majority of the Roma lost their jobs. They found themselves in the situation with no money and in poverty. Now, more than 30 years after change of the system from communist one, the majority of Roma live on social benefits with no permanent job (Filčák,2020).

Since 200, there is a special state organisation dedicated to supporting the Roma community – the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Communities (Urad), part of the Ministry of the Interior. This Office is interested and involved in most government actions connected to Roma community. It analyses the situation of these communities, supports actions (even financially), and solves problem situations. Two of the biggest problems the Roma face are access to sanitation and to electricity (Filcak, 2020).

The majority of the Slovak population blame Roma for laziness and unwillingness to work. The overall attitude toward the Roma community is very negative especially because most Roma are not working, but instead living from social benefits coming from state budget.

Research perspective on affordability of energy for Roma community in Slovakia

Roma is a special community in Slovakia. The number of Roma inhabitants is not clear. On the basis of the last extensive survey Atlas Rómskych komunít prepared in 2019 (Atlas 2019) they form almost 8% of Slovak population. But the number is expected to be even higher because in surveys, a lot of the Roma do not indicate themselves as being members of Roma community but change it to something else like Slovak or Hungarian nationality (Atlas 2019).

The biggest problem with affordability of energy for Roma community is based on the location of their dwellings. In many cases these dwellings are built on land they do not own and without the approval of the landowner. In such a case their dwellings cannot be officially proclaimed to be suitable for living, since an agreement with the landowner is necessary for this status. Without this documentation, the building cannot be connected to the electric network (Filčák, 2020).

A second cause is the situation when the dwellings are built far from the nearest villages with no existing electricity connections. In this case, even if the dwelling were built with the landowner's approval, the household cannot afford to connect to electricity network. The costs for connecting far away dwelling to electric network is extremely high and is not paid by the distribution companies. For Roma - usually living from social benefits - it is thus impossible to connect to electricity because the initial costs for new build long distance connections are extremely high.

The third and the most common cause for why Roma are not connected to electricity is shortage of money for regular payments for electricity supply. This is the case even for the communities living in the areas where an electrical network is available (Dokupilova,2020). Many distribution companies offer pre-paid usage of electricity which helps to solve the problems of affordability of energy and energy poverty.

These three causes form the gap between the availability of electricity and the real use among Roma. Due to the last survey (Atlas 2019) 97% of Roma have electricity available but only 83% really use it.

Further data can be drawn from the special EU SILC (EU SILC MRK) statistical survey, which was carried out only in marginalized Roma communities in 2018. Based on the analysis of EU SILC MRK data, the following key findings can be formulated (Dokupilová, 2020):

- 25% of marginalised Roma communities (MRC) households cannot afford to maintain a reasonable temperature in their home – whether sufficiently warm in winter or sufficiently cool in summer. Of these, 48% of households live in detached, mostly brick, family houses and 23% in shacks.
- 11.8% of MRC households report housing costs higher than 40% of net disposable income.
- 16.8% of MRC households repeatedly had arrears for services – electricity, gas, water.
- 34% of MRC households are dwellings that are not suitable for healthy living – they show signs of humidity. Of these, 45% are detached houses, while 45% of their inhabitants are also their owners. In 21% of cases, they live in rented premises and in 30% of cases the accommodation is provided free of charge.
- 45.7% of MRC households are in material need.
- The problem is also the poor quality of electrical installation, which is declared by 12.7% of households from MRC, while 7% of households do not even have any electricity distribution.
- The source of heating is mostly an oven or stove – in 83% of households. This is despite the fact that most live in brick houses. Similarly, stoves or ovens are also a source of hot water. More than 50% of households from MRC use this option. Only 33% of households use an electric heater to heat hot water.

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Source: EP-pedia Website

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