

The Urban Book Series

Valentin Mihaylov *Editor*

Spatial Conflicts and Divisions in Post-socialist Cities

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Chapter 12

Spatial Segregation of Roma Settlements Within Serbian Cities. Examples from Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Kruševac



Zlata Vuksanović-Macura

In the Balkans, racism is not measured by the attitude to black people – as there are no black people here. It is measured by the attitude to our brothers – the Roma. How many Roma do you know personally? How many of them are your friends?

Antonije Pušić *alias* Rambo Amadeus, musician from Belgrade
www.facebook.com/antonije.pusic.7/posts/3381925411826404.
Accessed: 2020.06.03

Abstract This chapter focuses on the spatial segregation of Roma settlements within Serbian cities, shaped by the long-standing ethnic distance and social exclusion. In order to understand the broader context, the historical background against which Roma settlements emerged in Serbia, as well as their current demographic, legislative, and urban characteristics, are briefly presented. Several forms of segregation of Roma settlements are analysed, including segregation as a consequence of racist hostility, institutional discrimination by city administration, and development-based conflicts. Examples of setting up a wall enclosing a Roma settlement in Kruševac, racist pressures that prevent the construction of housing for Roma in Belgrade and the reluctance to improve and legalise Roma settlements in Novi Sad, illustrate the various manifestations of segregation and division of urban space in Serbia.

Keywords Roma settlements · Residential segregation · Urban planning · Serbia · Belgrade · Novi Sad · Kruševac

12.1 Introduction: A Glimpse of Reality

This chapter deals with urban planning aspects of the spatial segregation of Roma settlements in Serbian cities. Segregation has mainly been studied through the attitude of society towards the Roma (Petrović 1992; Várady and Bašić 2019), while its spatial and urban planning aspects have rarely been the focus of research (Macura

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2016). Roma are the second largest ethnic group among the twenty national minorities in Serbia. Recent research shows that about 250 thousand people live in Roma settlements, while about 150 thousand Roma live scattered within the urban fabric (Jakšić and Bašić 2005: 43). This makes a total of about 400 thousand Roma, which is in line with earlier international estimates (Liegeois and Gherghe 1995: 7). It is estimated that Roma account for approximately 6% of Serbia's population and more than 60% of them live in Roma settlements. Such a high concentration of a national minority in segregated parts of cities indicates the complexity of the ethnic and socio-spatial inequality faced by Roma. Anyway, this chapter will discuss neither the phenomenon of self-segregation, nor the issue of spatial segregation of the poor non-Roma settlements. Furthermore, the general term Roma used in this study covers various Roma groups that have some specific features, which may also be reflected in their housing and lifestyle (Ashkali, Balkan Egyptians, and so on).

Not all Roma settlements have the same characteristics, and their typologies usually rely on three criteria: demographic, legislative, and urban planning. Roma settlements in Serbia are small in terms of size and population, compared to the neighbouring countries, such as Bulgaria or North Macedonia (Vuksanović-Macura and Macura 2007). A research conducted in 2002 enumerated 593 Roma settlements in Serbia (not including Kosovo; Jakšić and Bašić 2005) (Fig. 12.1). Another study, conducted a decade later, mapped almost the same number of the so-called substandard Roma settlements—583 (Živković and Đorđević 2015). According to the mentioned research, Roma settlements had about 420 inhabitants on average. Most settlements, 314 (53%), had up to 200 inhabitants; 179 (30%) of settlements had up to 300 inhabitants (Jakšić and Bašić 2005). According to the legislative criteria, Roma settlements are divided into spontaneous, planned, and illegal. Spontaneous settlements are located in rural and suburban areas where, at the time of their formation, there was no obligation to obtain a building permit to build a house. Planned and illegal settlements emerged on locations covered by urban plans, where a construction permit is required. The 2002 study identified about 220 spontaneous Roma settlements (37%), and 166 (28%) settlements developed according to a plan. There were 207 illegal settlements, which accounted for 35% of all Roma settlements. The typology from an urban planning perspective is determined based on the settlement morphology, the quality of houses, streets, and infrastructure. Out of a total of 593 settlements, only 65 (11%) had the characteristics of a standard settlement, because houses were solidly built and the settlements had a standard infrastructure and streets. There were 409 (69%) unserved settlements—where houses were relatively solid, but the settlements were partly lacking communal infrastructure and road pavement. In 119 (20%) slum-type settlements, living conditions were extremely difficult; houses were built of non-building materials and conventional streets and infrastructure did not exist (Vuksanović-Macura 2012).

Roma settlements were marked by the low quality of the spatial and physical environment in the past, as well (Vuksanović-Macura and Macura 2018). The Roma emancipation movement in Serbia emerged at the turn of the twentieth centuries, and its primary goals were to ensure elementary education and preserve the Roma tradition and customs. The idea of helping the Roma population overcome poverty

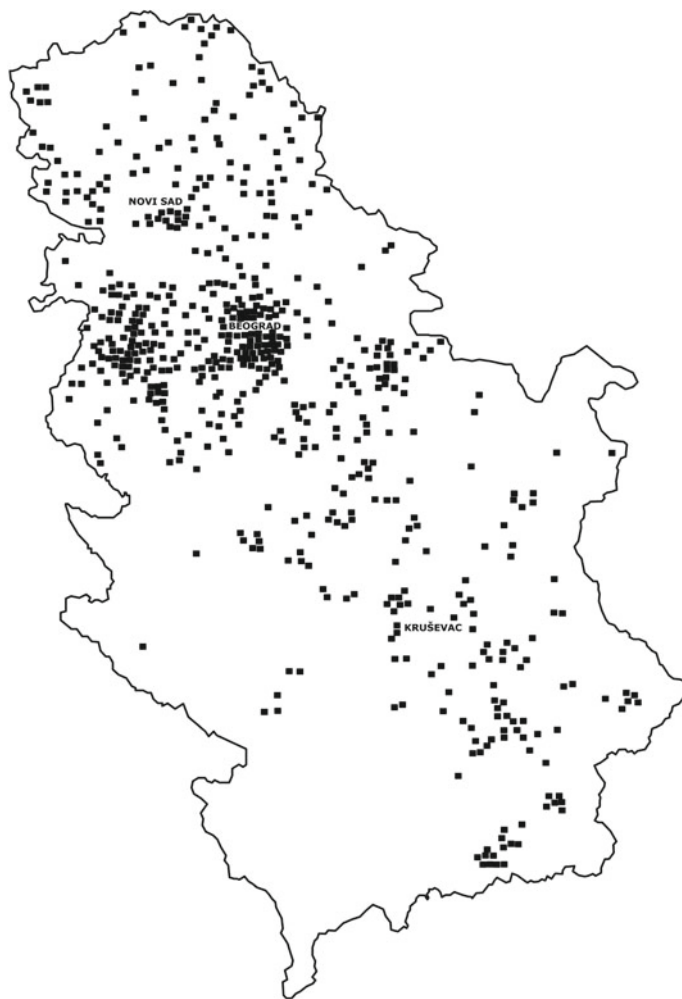


Fig. 12.1 Spatial distribution of Roma settlements in Serbia. *Source* Adapted from Jakšić and Bašić (2005: 38)

was first and foremost advocated by Roma intellectuals (Acković 2009). Socialist Yugoslavia, guided by the principle of equality and equity, improved the economically difficult position of a small part of the Roma population (Rakić-Vodinelić 1998). The socialist government was primarily focused on the education of Roma and the related acquisition of occupational competencies (Mitrović and Zajić 1998). However, the national government and municipalities completely neglected the issue of housing, Roma settlements and living conditions in those settlements. Until the early 1980s, these issues were shunned, only to be raised as a problem of illegal construction, and not as the housing problem of a vulnerable minority (Bobić and

Vujović 1985). As far as the housing policy is concerned, a system of mass housing was developed, where each ‘self-managed enterprise’ was obliged to provide housing to the employees. This housing option was available to a small number of Roma families due to their under-representation in formal employment (Vujović 2017). During the 1990s, more than 98% of housing units in Serbia were privatised through extremely cheap purchase. The opportunities for Roma to use this scheme were limited as the majority of them were not accommodated in socially owned housing (Macura 2010). In the early 1990s, some Roma leaders and NGOs launched various actions to address Roma housing, which unfortunately remained in the realm of failed attempts.

12.2 Segregation and Urban Space

The term *Roma settlement*, which designates a neighbourhood predominantly inhabited by Roma, has emerged fairly recently, and it is used in academic literature and administrative practice in Serbia. The terms most commonly used in informal everyday conversation are *ciganmala* or *ciganska mahala* (Mitrović and Zajić 1998). They reflect the specific socio-spatial features of Roma settlements, which are clearly distinguished in the image of the city. How did the terms *mahala* or *mala* come to designate a Roma settlement? The Ottoman organisation of the city, which was present in the territory of today’s Serbia between the *fifteenth* and nineteenth centuries, was based on the *mahala* (Turkish: *mahalle*) as the basic housing, ethnic and confessional unit (Kojić 1976). Just like in other areas throughout the Ottoman Empire, there were Turkish, Greek, Jewish, Armenian, Serbian and other *mahalas* (neighbourhoods) in large cities in the Balkans. *Mahalas* disappeared in the process of Europeanisation in Serbia, in the nineteenth century (Maksimović 1978; Macura 1983). The only ethnic group who retained or were forced to keep a *mahala* way of life, were the Roma (Fig. 12.2). According to late *nineteenth*-century travel writers, Roma neighbourhoods were segregated in Serbian towns (Kanic 1986).

The spatial segregation inherited from the Ottoman period persisted during the modernisation of Serbia only in the case of *ciganmala*. This Ottoman residue did not have the same characteristics as during Ottoman rule. Namely, Serbia, which aspired to Europe, pursued a population policy of accepting all those who were willing to settle down in its territory. Members of the new multiethnic population accepted each other as equals, basing this relationship on similar social statuses, the same religion, and similar occupations. The Roma did not fit into that context; although a part of them were Orthodox Christians, they did not share the other characteristics typical of the non-Roma population. They were different in terms of occupation, education, culture, customs, language, material status, and the lifestyle (Đorđević 1933). Segregation, exclusion, physical dislocation of the homes of those who were visibly different was the “Gypsy destiny” (Đurić 1988: 18).

In the current academic and professional idiom, the terms *ghetto* (Berescu 2011), *enclave* (Vujović 2017) or *slum* (Vuksanović-Macura and Macura 2007), which

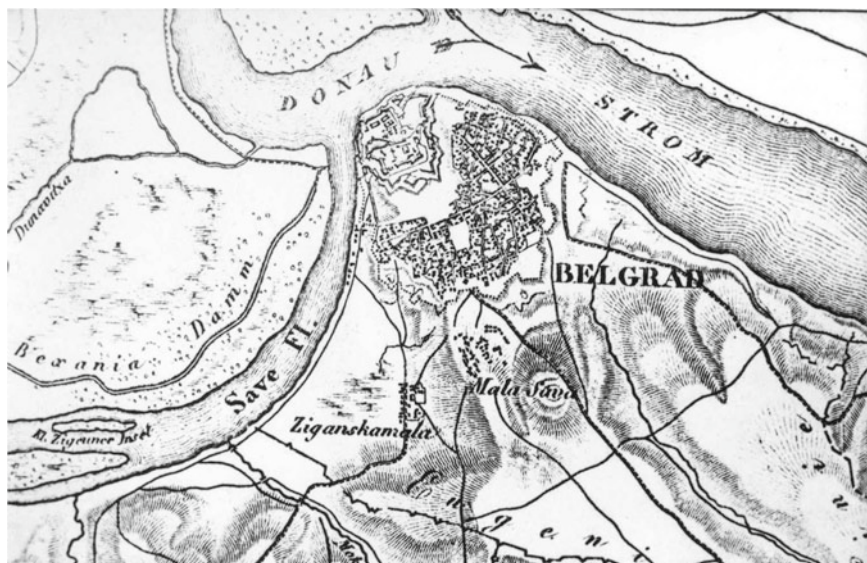


Fig. 12.2 *Ziganskamala* (Roma settlement) on the 1827 map of Belgrade. *Source* Macura (1983: 36)

emphasize socio-economic and ethnic segregation as a feature, are also used to designate Roma settlements. Generally speaking, segregation is an act or practice of spatial separation or isolation of different social groups. “One of the most distinct and most apparent disjunctive processes is residential (spatial) segregation. [...] This situation is marked by the existence of a dominant majority and a subordinate minority.” (Mitrović and Zajić 1998: 61). Spatial isolation may negatively affect the access of minorities or disadvantaged populations to the labour market, adequate housing conditions, and other cultural and social resources (Musterd 2005).

12.3 The Types of Segregation of Roma Settlements

The insight into the existing cases of segregation reveals its dimensions and various manifestations. They range from covert non-acceptance of Roma settlements as part of the urban system to overt forms of ghettoisation, such as the construction of walls separating Roma settlements from the rest of the city. Furthermore, the study presents the typical forms of segregation of Roma settlements and the related manifestations and consequences that adversely affect the life of Roma. The analysed cases show the situation in Serbia, but such and similar phenomena can also be found in the other countries in Europe with Roma populations (FRA 2009; Suditu and Vâlceanu 2013). We discuss the forms of segregation of Roma settlements in Serbia, resulting from the specific attitude and behaviour of various stakeholders and parts of the majority

community towards them. These are: persistent institutional threats of demolition; racist pressures and preventing the construction of settlements for Roma; building a fence around a Roma settlement; and avoiding the obligation to maintain and improve settlements.

12.3.1 Persistent Institutional Threats of Demolition

Mali Beograd—Veliki Rit is an illegal Roma settlement in Novi Sad, Vojvodina, in the northern part of Serbia (Krišanović 2009). According to Roma leaders, there currently live between 2500 and 3000 inhabitants (Fig. 12.3). It was established in the *mid-twentieth century* on an uninhabited terrain on the northern outskirts of the city, close to the main road to the town of Temerin. Over time, the urban fabric of Novi Sad expanded to incorporate the settlement of Mali Beograd—Veliki Rit. The growth of the total, primarily non-Roma population of the area was accompanied by a growing need for healthcare, educational, recreational, service, and other amenities. The initial step taken by the city authorities was to develop urban plans that provided for the construction of the required services. According to the authorities, the site of the Roma settlement was identified as a convenient location, because the authorities



Fig. 12.3 Roma settlement in Novi Sad. *Photo V. Macura*

treated it as an empty plot, as Roma houses had been built illegally. From a bureaucratic point of view, they did not even exist. Several master plans of Novi Sad and detailed regulation plans covering the Roma settlement were adopted in 1963, 1972, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2006, 2009, 2010, and 2016. None of these plans envisaged that the site of the existing Roma settlement should remain a Roma settlement, but something else was planned. For example, the plan from 2010 envisaged the demolition of the settlement and the construction of a hospital complex, a library, a healthcare centre, sports grounds, and a park on this site. This ambitious undertaking was passed from one term to another, without initiating the planned construction. While the Roma settlement was growing (in 2004 it had 140 houses, and 347 in 2009), the urban planning service continued to design plans as if the site had been undeveloped land. The 2016 Masterplan reduced the ambitious programme to services of local importance (Macura 2016). Anyhow, the subsequent detailed regulation plan, adopted in 2018, foresees the construction of educational facilities and public utilities buildings over the existing Roma settlement (PDR 2018) (Fig. 12.4). Simultaneously, this plan has recognised surrounding illegal houses built by non-Roma as single-family residential zoning. Now, the questions arise: Why the city authorities, from socialist to post-socialist, for more than half a century, harass Roma families with threats of demolition? How long and how many generations of Roma will have to fight for fundamental human rights, for a roof over their heads?



Fig. 12.4 Planned public utilities and educational facilities covering the Roma settlement in Novi Sad. *Source* Adapted from *Official Gazette of the City of Novi Sad*, 43/2018

12.3.2 Racist Pressures and Preventing the Construction of Settlements for Roma

Since the end of the 1990s, racist outbursts occurred almost regularly when local authorities in Serbia announced the relocation of a group of Roma families from one site to another. The reaction of the potential host community was usually turbulent. Mass demonstrations in 2005 halted the construction of a settlement consisting of prefabricated housing units intended for the relocation of Roma from one part of New Belgrade to another, from the slum near the Gazela Bridge to the block close to Dr. Ivana Ribara Street. The reason for the relocation was the reconstruction of the bridge in the vicinity of the illegal Roma settlement. The implementation of the project had just been announced and protests organised by a part of the majority population escalated to prevent it. The protest leaders told the Belgrade authorities that they were ready to use weapons to stop the planned construction (Divjak 2017). Despite the international recommendations for local governments regarding the handling of such actions (UN-Habitat 2005), the measures taken by the Belgrade authorities to calm down the protests were inadequate in all these cases, suggesting to the opponents of the Roma settlement schemes that “there was an understanding for their dissent” (Ilić 2012: 398). This “dissent” reflected a much deeper gap, and the city authorities gave up the intended relocation. In 2007, there was another plan to relocate Roma from the settlement under the Gazela Bridge, this time to a new site close to the Belgrade neighbourhood of Ovča. Extensive resettlement preparations, which reached the stage of obtaining a permit to build new houses, were again interrupted by protests by the non-Roma population “based on prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination and racism” (Divjak 2017: 131) and disguised behind common demands to ensure an overall communal infrastructure for the entire area. The Roma settled near the Gazela Bridge were displaced in 2009. Part of the families were moved to non-residential metal containers (with 20–30 families in one container group) on several peripheral sites in Belgrade, while the others were dislocated to those municipalities in Serbia from which they had come to Belgrade. Over the following several years, the Belgrade authorities, exposed to pressure from international and local human rights organisations, built social housing for the Roma from the newly established “container settlements” or purchased houses for them in the countryside, where they were eventually relocated. Under the circumstances, Roma usually do not have the opportunity to choose the locations, the settlements or the flats to move in, and they often do not have the opportunity to improve their living conditions by moving (Praxis 2013).

12.3.3 Building a Wall Around a Roma Settlement

In the city of Kruševac, in central Serbia, in the autumn of 2016, the construction of a wall along the street side of the Marko Orlović Roma settlement was undertaken



Fig. 12.5 Construction of the wall around Roma settlement Marko Orlović in Kruševac (left) (Photo TV N1) and anti-racist protests by NGOs (right) (Photo Beta News Agency/Jelena Božović)

and completed. This is an old settlement, established in 1860–1870 on land allocated by the then authorities to Roma (Vuksanović-Macura and Macura 2007). During the twentieth century, its inhabitants were exposed to various threats of demolition. Numerous urban plans relevant for the territory of the Roma settlement envisaged land uses or urban planning parameters that completely disregarded the situation on the site. Just before the end of the twentieth century, the settlement included about 315 houses with approximately 1800 inhabitants. At that time, a new urban plan was adopted, which accepted and legalised the existing Roma settlement. However, a new shock for its inhabitants was the construction of a two-metre high concrete wall enclosing a part of the settlement. “The Roads of Serbia Company claims that the wall is there to protect the settlement from traffic noise, and part of the Kruševac’s citizens believe that it was built to hide the Roma settlement from the investors across the road” (TV N1) (Fig. 12.5). The protests which put forward the slogans “Stop racism”, “Racism is a crime”, “Prevent fascism” clearly expressed the reactions some of the citizens of Kruševac—not only Roma. Representatives of a local NGO highlighted that it was the only such wall in Kruševac, and it was built in such a way as to conceal the Roma settlement. A Roma woman living in the settlement expressed her perception of the situation as follows: “We feel like living in a cemetery; we are isolated, the children are scared and they feel rejected by all other residents of this city [...] now, they feel different in school because they come from behind a wall, as if they were from another planet” (Barjaktarević 2016). Despite protests by the residents, local and other NGOs, part of the citizens of Kruševac, the Committee for the Study of Roma Life and Customs of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the two-metre-high and more than one-hundred-metre-long wall encloses the settlement along Blagoja Parovića Street and side buildings and passages. The Roma settlement that has existed in Kruševac for more than 150 years is now hidden behind the wall. On the other side of the street, opposite the wall, there is a newly built shopping centre, which has created a social and, above all, a sharp ethnic divide in the urban space of Kruševac.

12.3.4 Avoiding the Obligation to Maintain and Improve Settlements

The Roma settlements where living conditions are the worst (slums) are usually located on peripheral sites, but close to the places where their inhabitants work, or within the city, on previously unoccupied land where development is planned. In 2002, 29 slum-type Roma settlements were mapped in Belgrade, i.e. 23% of the total of 125 settlements. Over the following 15 years, seven slums with a population of about 1200 were displaced, and only a small number of their inhabitants were provided with alternative housing (Macura 2016). The slums Antena and Čukatička šuma, formed in the late 1990s, were not among the displaced settlements. Together they have about 90 households and 460 people. Mud instead of streets, water canisters instead of water pipes, cardboard, plastic, and rotten planks instead of brick walls, leaking canopies instead of roof tiles, and almost 90% of households with less than 10 m² per person (Vuksanović-Macura and Čolić Damjanović 2016). The residents are involved in the informal collection of secondary raw materials, which are often stored next to their homes. The aforementioned facts contribute to an air of deprivation that marks the entire settlement's environment, which clearly distinguishes, separates, and stigmatizes it with respect to the surrounding residential fabric inhabited by the majority population. The city authorities usually close their eyes to the fact that the worst type of housing is built and present in the territory under their jurisdiction. At the same time, the authorities do not take any measures to improve, at least temporarily, the communal and housing conditions of the inhabitants. It is assumed that the "helpless" group of Roma will be displaced by the investor who purchases the plot on which the settlement is located.

12.4 Discussion and Conclusions

Segregation begins with prejudice rooted in the belief that people are different—that some are worse than others. Prejudice and segregation are usually associated with the situation in poor Roma settlements. In reality, there is also a segregation of standard settlements inhabited by wealthier Roma. Roma settlements facing such problems can be found in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis, Požarevac, Vranjska Banja, Leskovac, in Vojvodina, where local authorities have been refusing to undertake interventions on the communal infrastructure for decades, as reflected in the proverbial situation of "an asphalt road stopping where a Roma settlement begins" (Turudić 2007). The ethnic distance research has shown that Serbs, Hungarians, Roma, and Albanians are statistically relevant ethnic communities in Serbia. In general, there is a high aversion of Serbs towards the Roma, but antipathy to Roma is also present among the other three ethnic minorities in Serbia. According to some interpretations, this aversion is associated with the fact that the Roma came with the conquering troops of the Ottoman Empire and that this was imprinted in the memory of the Balkan peoples

(Đurović 2002). However, segregation exists throughout Europe, and it can certainly be found in the countries that the Ottoman armies did not reach. Accordingly, it may be assumed that it is underlain by other, primarily racist reasons disguised by various pretexts (Liegeois and Gherghe 1995), tied with elaborate ways of harassing the Roma population. As a consequence, “the housing situation for Roma in many participating States continues to be characterised by a lack of secure tenure and access to basic infrastructure, discrimination in social-housing schemes, residential segregation, high vulnerability to forced eviction, and conditions that pose health risks” (OSCE/ODIHR 2013: 9).

Segregation, as well as discrimination, becomes multi-layered when it infiltrates into the formal institutions of a society, whose employees, at different hierarchical levels, implement their own informal segregationist and discriminatory practices, regardless of the fact that they are prohibited by law in Serbia (Petrušić 2014). “Though discrimination takes place in institutions, in public or private life, only a few court proceedings have been initiated. This does not only lead to a sense of impunity, but also to the acceptance of discrimination of Roma by Roma and non-Roma alike” (Civil Rights Defenders 2018: 6). Among other things, this attitude prevents Roma from exercising their rights provided by the social system, including the right to personal documents, qualitative education, employment opportunities, health and social insurance, and adequate housing.

The study shows how the behaviour of various stakeholders in urban space—residents, authorities, and urban planning services—leads to the spatial segregation of Roma settlements. The analysed examples show that the behaviour of individual groups of stakeholders is very similar, regardless of the city, and that the final outcome, as a rule, has negative consequences for the inhabitants of Roma settlements. The strategy of long-standing threats of demolition, used by the city authorities in Novi Sad, as well as the avoidance of Belgrade’s authorities to maintain and improve the poorest settlements in its territory, has had as an effect the gradual expansion, in terms of space and population, of slums, which are clearly distinguished in urban areas, whereas their residents are stigmatised as “undesirable”. It has also been observed that both overt and covert institutional discrimination and segregation towards Roma settlements foster overt and covert racist behaviour of a part of the general population towards Roma. In this way, an “ethno-spatial distance is established [...] due to prejudice, distrust towards members of other ethnic groups and races and their way of life. This is an expression of the unwillingness to live together or of the rejection of the Other and Different, who is not understood as a human being but rather as a representative of an ethnic group that is considered undesirable.” (Vujović 2009).

Residential segregation leads to discrimination, which further leads to growing poverty; poverty leads to new and more pronounced prejudices that underlie an even more profound division. The connection between these phenomena can be presented as a circular series of negative states and practical actions which begins with prejudices (Đurović 2002) fostering segregation (Vujović 2017), which gives rise to discrimination in resource use (Petrušić 2014), ending up in poverty (Mitrović 1990), which is, in a nutshell, a life below the average possibilities of a society. Poverty

encourages new prejudices against Roma, initiating a new cycle of rejection. Furthermore, poverty initiates another unfavourable cycle. Due to poverty, Roma suffer from homelessness (Feantsa 2005). Homelessness forces them into self-building that is not regulated by Serbian laws (Ferenčak 2006), which further leads to the *illegal status* of their homes and the adjacent structures (Davinić 2016). This set of circumstances is based on the non-acceptance of Roma by the general society because “they” are not “us”.

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