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The Degree of Satisfaction of Vulnerable Social Groups with the Social Services of the Local Government: The Case of the Roma of the Municipality of Heraklia Serron †

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Abstract: During the last few years, the local government in Greece has been at the center of continuous reforms in both its political and administrative operations. In general, a systematic expansion of its responsibilities has been observed, which has also included the exercise of social policy, which is based on European and national strategies and includes programs for the social integration of the Roma, one of the largest national minorities in the European region. The aim of this article is to present the satisfaction level of vulnerable social groups with the services provided by the local government. In particular, this article examines the case of the Roma of the Municipality of Heraklia as an empirical example in order to reveal the strong and weak topics of social policy which is practiced by this particular municipality. This paper is based on a quantitative method, and the sample comprises 91 Roma people, beneficiaries of the social services of the Municipality of Heraklia. According to the results, the level of satisfaction is high, especially with the services of the Department of Social Protection, Education and Culture and the community center of the Municipality of Heraklia. However, this particular social group needs more services in more social areas.

Keywords: social policy; vulnerable social groups; welfare; Roma; community center

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1. Introduction

There is a common social perception that Roma people are marginal and transgressive, without education in life models. Indeed, Roma people live in a different way from the majority of people, and they also show adaptation difficulties in social structures.

As a result, social exclusion of Roma people is a reality, and it has its own forms in society. For instance, the FRA report also revealed that Roma people are subject to widespread poverty, inadequate living conditions, poor health, exclusion from the labor market, and harassment [1].

There is unequal access in areas such as health, nutrition, and education, which leads to a lack of possibilities to participate in society, and this is reflected in a number of dimensions, which can be identified, for example, in specific geographical areas [2].

Dealing with the Greek Roma leads to questions and concerns regarding the current situation, the responsibilities that exist, and the stereotypes associated with this particular population group that have not been removed to this day. Both the European Union and the National Strategy for Social Integration (ESKE) Roma 2021–2030 pursue integration policies aimed at social development and an equal quality of life to the wider society, as well as the participation of the Roma at the national, regional, and local levels [3].

In order to discover the subjective testimonies of Roma people and the efficiency of social services, it is necessary to examine their personal perceptions about experiences,

expectations, emotions, and opinions related to social policy, social welfare, and social services.

In other words, this paper examines the level of satisfaction of this specific population group regarding the social services of the local government of the Municipality of Heraklia, the programs, the quality of service, and the general quality of service provision in the context of the social policy adopted by the local government in question.

2. Literature Review

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority group in the EU. Out of an estimated total of 10–12 million in Europe, about 6 million live in the EU, and most of them are citizens of an EU country. The estimated population share of the Roma in 2012 ranged from 10.3% in Bulgaria, 9.1% in Slovakia, 8.3% in Romania, 7% in Hungary, 2.5% in Greece, 2% in Czechia, and 1.6% in Spain to less than 1% in most of the other EU countries. As a result, the social policy of the EU should take into deep consideration the social inclusion of Roma people in all life sectors [4].

According to the FRA, Roma groups experience conditions of housing deprivation (accommodation that is too dark and humid; no shower/bathroom or no toilet inside the dwelling) at a very high percentage (68 percent) when compared to the general population (15 percent) [5].

Furthermore, it is revealed that the high percentage of children in the Roma population is linked to the higher fertility rate and early marriages that are "very present" (88%) or "moderately present" (9%) in Roma settlements [6]. In other words, this situation is translated into an "excessive school drop" phenomenon for these children and long-term exclusion from the labor market.

One of the primary reasons for the Roma's poor implementation in the labor market is their low educational attainment and lack of vocational training and qualifications in contrast to the majority population [7].

However, the Roma community does not compare itself with the rest of the social world, and there are several studies which suggest that the definition of poverty and wealth for Roma people is reflected only from the local point of view [8,9].

Another essential area where Roma people lack opportunities and prospects is the health system and hygiene in general. Access to healthcare and the provision of services for the Roma in several countries have been burdened by limited coverage and discrimination [10].

This kind of nonparticipation of Roma people in the health system is a result of their lack of trust in institutions of medical care and research as a deeper consequence of personally shaped opinions by other external factors and a lack of education, as already mentioned [11].

According to research on the Roma people who live in Thessalia, it has been shown that there are high percentages of psychopathology, periodic and permanent stress, and introverted and extroverted hostility in contrast to non-Roma people [12].

As far as it concerns poverty, research has shown that 80% of Roma participants live under the minimum poverty line, while there are Roma who live in houses with no water. Also, 50% of Roma between the ages of 6 and 24 years old do not attend school. A particular study highlights the worrying and unavoidable reality: the largest national majority in Europe still faces discrimination and unequal access in social services and health services [13].

The increasing role of community members in relation to the development of public policy can be a key to the social inclusion of vulnerable social groups such as the Roma. The challenge and the responsibility lie with social services and their effectiveness and equity, which have to be demonstrated in order to achieve policy goals. The following parties must all be parts of the social route: the government and the National Agency for Roma (NAR), line ministries, Roma nongovernmental organizations and professional associations, local public authorities, Roma leaders, and experts [14].

3. Methodology

This particular research is based on a quantitative approach as the main aim was to examine the satisfaction level of the Roma in the Municipality of Heraklia.

This research used a structured questionnaire as it enabled the opinions and attitudes of a large number of respondents to be investigated and quantified, while the analysis was based on mathematical and statistical models in order to deduce safe and reliable results. The data from the collection of the questionnaires were encoded and classified with the help of a computer and the Windows Excel 2010 program, as well as the statistical package Jasp 0.16.3.0.

The research started on 18 November 2023 and ended on 18 January 2024.

Finally, for the development of a solid two-way relationship between those involved in the research, the researchers showed their honesty and trust to the interviewees. The rules of ethics were followed by fully informing the respondents from the beginning about the use and utilization of their personal data and the results of the research. The voluntary participation and complete confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were emphasized. Furthermore, many of the participants completed the questionnaire with the assistance of the researchers as the study group did not have access to electronic media or were digitally illiterate.

Sample and Research Instrument

The sample of this research was 91 Roma people who benefit from the social services of the Municipality of Heraklia and particularly those of the community center of the municipality. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire which included 41 questions.

4. Results

The community center in Heraklia is vital for the everyday life of Roma people as it arranges bureaucratic procedures which are related to benefit policy that applies in Greece. However, it seems that Roma people are not well informed about all the services that the community center provides and runs other than the welfare benefits.

According to Table 1 and the demographic characteristics of the sample, 58.2% of the participants were female. The predominant age group comprised participants between 41 and 50 years old, with 37.3%, followed by the 31-to-40-year-old group, with 23%.

We observed that unemployment and a low educational level were characteristic of the sample. Despite the efforts, measures, and policies implemented, unequal opportunities in employment and education in the Roma community remain at high levels.

In particular, according to the results of the research, the main points which are related to the satisfaction level are as follows:

- Service: The participants stated that they are satisfied with the working hours, the waiting hours, and the operating time of a transaction.
- Staff: The participants reported a high satisfaction level regarding a sufficient number of employees and the education and the politeness of the staff. Moreover, the participants were satisfied with the attitudes of the employees who deal them without discrimination and racism.
- Reliability–Safety: The participants reported a high satisfaction level in relation to the reliability and safety of their personal data. The participants were satisfied with the privacy and the punctuality that the employees show in their work and their duties.
- Facilities: The easy access, the modern and up-to-date equipment, the cleanliness of the facilities, and the pleasant environment characterize the services of the community center, and the participants reported high satisfaction with those factors.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics.

Frequency			
Gender		**Professional situation**	
Female	53 (58.2)	Unemployed	64 (70.3)
Male	38 (41.7)	Full-time job	8 (8.7)
Age		Informal work	12 (13.1)
18–30	19 (20.9)	Hourly work	6 (6.5)
31–40	21 (23.0)	**Residence**	
41–50	31 (37.3)	Camp	31 (34.0)
>51	17 (18.7)	Owner	39 (42.8)
Marital status		Rent	11 (12.0)
Married	41 (45.0)	Guest	10 (10.9)
Single	35 (38.4)	**Educational level**	
Divorced	8 (8.7)	Illiterate	24 (26.3)
Widowed	7 (7.6)	Attending some Primary School classes	30 (32.9)
Income		Primary school	31 (34.0)
Low	87 (95.6)	High School	5 (5.4)
Medium	3 (3.2)		
High	1 (1.0)		

One of the most important findings seems to relate to the employees and their attitudes towards Roma people: The vast majority of Roma people recognized the efficiency (Table 2) and the kindness (Table 3) that employees show towards them. Also, 73.6% of the participants claimed that they have never experienced racism or any kind of discrimination (Table 4).

Table 2. Qualified employees.

	Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Enough	3	3.297	3.297	3.297
Very	24	26.374	26.374	29.670
Very much	64	70.330	70.330	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	91	100.000		

Table 3. Employees' kindness.

	Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Enough	1	1.099	1.099	1.099
Very	16	17.582	17.582	18.681
Very much	74	81.319	81.319	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	91	100.000		

Table 4. Have you ever experiences racism or any kind of discrimination during your service.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Any	67	73.626	73.626	73.626
Little	14	15.385	15.385	89.011
Enough	4	4.396	4.396	93.407
Very	3	3.297	3.297	96.703
Very much	3	3.297	3.297	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	91	100.000		

In conclusion, the general level of satisfaction of the participants in the survey with the social services of the community center is high (Table 5).

Table 5. How satisfied are you overall with the community center of the Municipality of Heraklia?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Any	1	1.099	1.099	1.099
Little	5	5.495	5.495	6.593
Enough	7	7.692	7.692	14.286
Very	48	52.747	52.747	67.033
Very much	30	32.967	32.967	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	91	100.000		

Furthermore, another important finding of this study is the fact that 25.2% of the sample claimed that the sector which needs to be upgraded in social services is the sector of job search and employment, while 14.2% suggested the provision of seminars for computer learning. Last but not least, there is a need for psychological support as another service of the community center for issues that Roma people may face in their everyday lives.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the results of the beliefs and attitudes of the sample regarding the services and social policies of this specific municipality. Concretely, demand was expressed for the expansion of social programs and additional services as the needs and demands of the specific group are increased (Table 6).

Table 6. Do you think that the Department of Social Protection, Education and Culture and the community center of the Municipality of Heraklia meet the modern requirements and needs of the citizens?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Little	9	9.890	9.890	9.890
Enough	19	20.879	20.879	30.769
Very	45	49.451	49.451	80.220
Very much	18	19.780	19.780	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	91	100.000		

5. Conclusions

Reducing the social exclusion of vulnerable social groups such as Roma people is one of the main goals of the European Union. Research on this specific area is necessary and important as it helps to understand the reasons for and the consequences of social phenomena such as poverty and social exclusion, but also the effects that social programs and social actions may have. This is one of the few studies that show how vital and dynamic social services are in the wide frame of social policy. The participants in this research face a positive change and a small everyday step in their lives.

In addition, this article shows the benefits of the social services that the community center may offer to its members as a positive accomplishment of the European Union in the frame of a positive social policy for vulnerable social groups such as the Roma. At the same time, this article shows the need and the desire for more initiatives that will lead vulnerable social groups towards social inclusion. Education, health, and mental health seem to be areas that Roma people lack in terms of services, and they are willing to be an equal part of them.

Social services are part of a wide strategy of local governments and the main government and can also become an opportunity and an effective resource of change for vulnerable social groups. However, equal access to the above institutions should be taken into account by the main and local governments, and by the European Union too.

These policies must be based on cooperation with the Roma community and take into account their different needs and specificities. In addition, it is important that there is a continuous evaluation of these programs and policies to ensure their effectiveness and the continuous improvement of the living conditions of the Roma.

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