Nonreligion among Roma

Different perception, different context

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RELIROMA

Research of Religiosity, Spirituality and Non-religiosity among the Roma

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Why Roma religiosity (spirituality, nonreligiosity)?

1

A specific ethnic group

within Central and Eastern Europe (several hundred thousand people)

2

Years of exclusion

and discrimination that influenced their life, culture and faith

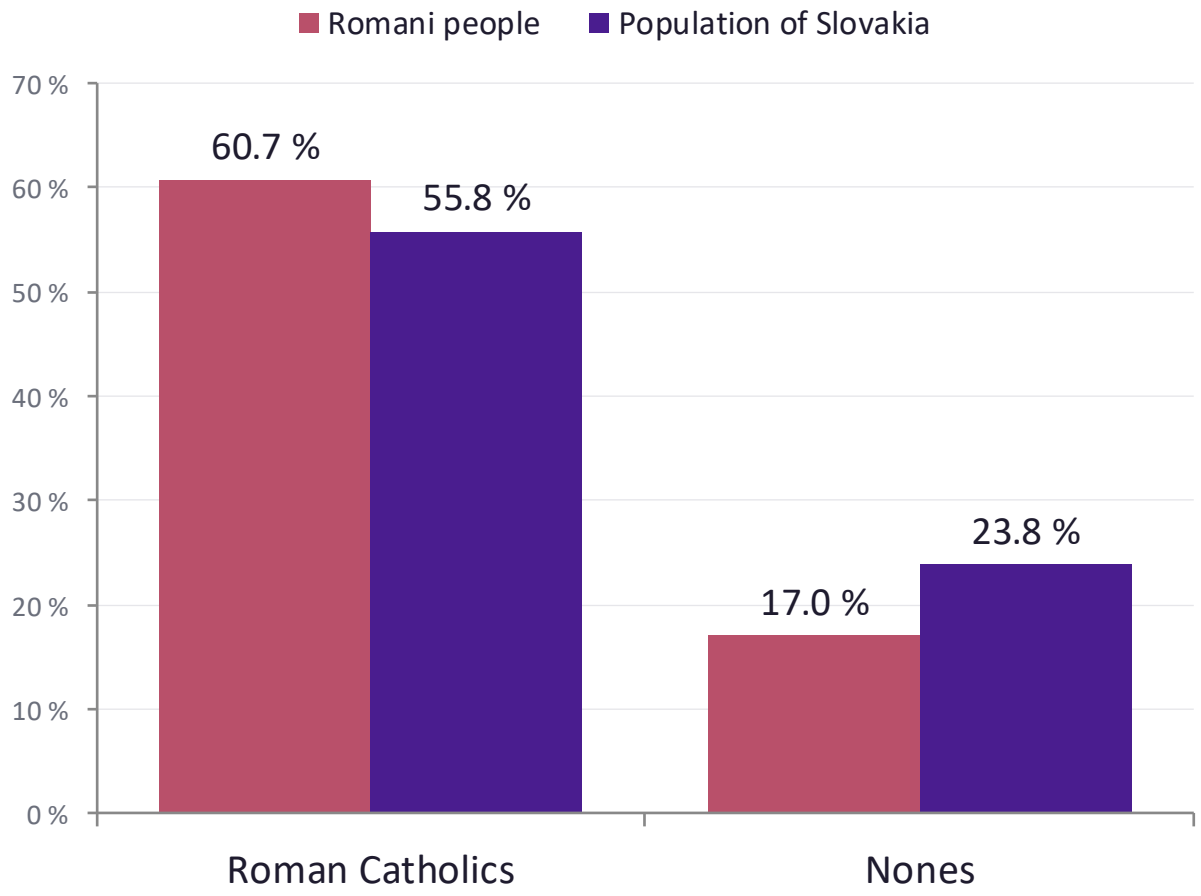
3

RELIROMA

research project of the Slovak Research and Development Agency (SRDA)

No specific denominational profile

Census 2021, in %



Majority affiliation

At the level of communities, Roma mostly declare the affiliation of the majority population (historical evidence).

Non-religious declaration

In many cases they declare themselves non-religious – a result of long-term social and geographical isolation (central Slovakian context).

How to approach non-religion in the Roma community?

Measurement of four aspects

Believing

Belonging

Behaving

Bonding

Emic and etic perspective

Especially from the etic perspective, many of these aspects are absent, undermined, stereotyped, etc.

Non-religion not as an absence, but as a rejection

Campbell 1971

This perspective invites us to consider irreligion not only from the standpoint of individuals who self-identify as irreligious, but also from the societal position that excludes Roma from religious participation.

Forms of exclusion

1. **Limited access to service attendance**
2. **Exclusion from parish management**
3. **Persistence of stereotypes and aversion toward Roma religious practices**

Perceptions of Roma as nonreligious are not new (1)

Such stereotypes have a long history

Lecouteux
2018

Roma spirituality reflects a deep syncretism of pagan and Christian elements. This fusion stems from their coexistence with various Christian communities, while retaining ancestral beliefs rooted in nature, celestial bodies and elemental forces.

1417
Bussel 1919, p. 116

Roma were described as pilgrims without a homeland, travelling through foreign lands and lacking a formal religion, though they permitted baptism.

G. Smith
1883

Gypsies in India and throughout their journey across European and Islamic regions professed no religion. He cited examples from Wallachia, including the anecdote that “the Gypsies’ church was built of bacon and the dogs ate it”, suggesting a lack of reverence for religious structures.

Perceptions of Roma as nonreligious are not new (2)

Moses Gaster Bussel, pp. 123–124	Roma lacked ethical principles, did not recognize the Decalogue, and were morally lax.
Leland 1873, p. 10	Gypsies had “positively no religion”, no spiritual ties, no fear of the afterlife, and only a handful of superstitions and legends that did not reflect deep-seated faith.
G. Smith 1880, p. 25	Hungarian Gypsies had no genuine religious sense, but cunningly professed the dominant faith of whichever country they inhabited.
Augustini ab Hortis 18th century (Kozubik et al. 2022)	Roma religiosity was superficial – faith was demonstrated outwardly, but theological understanding was absent. Roma baptized their children merely because they lived under Christian rule, did not teach them to pray, and their presence in church did not elevate their spirits; he alleged that they might contemplate stealing sacred objects.

Perceptions of Roma as nonreligious are not new (3)

M. Marjanovič
2003, p. 105 · Balkans

Documented religiously rooted stereotypes, such as the belief that Roma are descendants of Cain, born from the unnatural remnants of Adam, or that as blacksmiths they forged the nails used in Christ's crucifixion. These myths contributed to their exclusion from churches (Catholic and Orthodox) and mosques, reinforcing perceptions of Roma as "bad believers".

E. Horváthová
1964, p. 347

Roma often formally adhered to the religion of the surrounding population, but this affiliation was superficial. Upon relocating, they adapted to new religious environments. While official religious teachings reached Roma only partially, local superstitions were more readily absorbed and integrated into their belief systems.

Elements of religious identity of Roma

1–3

1

Critique of institutional religiosity

Roma often view church attendance as a marker of privilege, reinforcing social and physical distance due to their segregation.

2

Distrust of mediated faith

Faith is rarely mediated through clergy, as priests are often perceived with a mix of fear and reverence, attributed with magical authority rather than spiritual guidance.

3

Intimate and informal prayer

Roma spirituality is deeply personal and informal. Prayers are spontaneous and individualized, with limited attachment to formal prayers like the Lord's Prayer or Hail Mary.

Elements of religious identity of Roma

4–6

4

Emic moral framework

Moral laws are validated within the community. Transgressions against outsiders may be less sanctioned or even morally justified (e.g., stealing food for one's children).

5

Loose theological engagement

There is often indifference toward core theological dogmas such as the Holy Trinity, resurrection or the Second Coming. Belief in hell is notably weak, while figures like God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary are vividly imagined.

6

Present-oriented faith

Roma spirituality emphasizes immediate consequences – reward and punishment are seen as occurring in the present. There is strong belief in dreams, magic and revenants.

Thank you for your attention!

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