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Voices from the Ghetto: Stories of Loneliness, Stigma, and Belonging in Six Bulgarian Cities

Abstract: *This paper examines experiences of loneliness, stigma, and belonging among residents of Roma ghettoized neighborhoods in six Bulgarian cities – Lom, Dobrich, Ruse, Asenovgrad, Kyustendil, and Straldzha. The analysis is based on qualitative research methods: 36 in-depth interviews (six in each city) conducted with different members of the Roma community – men and women of various age groups, informal Roma leaders, educational and health mediators. This approach provides in-depth insights into the social realities of ghettoized neighborhoods, moving beyond superficial public perceptions. The study traces how spatial isolation and institutional stigma shape the sense of the "ghetto" – simultaneously as a place of social exclusion and of collective identity. At the center of the analysis are personal narratives of silence and fear, but also of faith and hope. Theoretically, the article builds on the concepts of social stigma, moral boundaries, and territorial marginalization. Its aim is to demonstrate how "voices from below" articulate their lived experiences and to give visibility to a frequently neglected social world.*
Keywords: *Roma; stigma; marginalization; belonging; ghetto; Bulgaria.*

Introduction

In recent years, urban inequalities in Bulgaria have increasingly taken on a clear spatial dimension. In a number of cities, stable ghettoized neighborhoods have emerged. These are marginalized territories, inhabited predominantly by members of the Roma community, and characterized by high levels of poverty, poor infrastructure, and symbolic exclusion. Their formation is linked not only to spontaneous processes but also to long-term institutional inaction. In the context of deepening social polarization, climate transformations, and digital transition, ghettoized neighborhoods are becoming increasingly visible markers of unsustainable urban development and structural vulnerability. Although they are part of the urban fabric, they often remain invisible to institutions, while their inhabitants remain unheard in public debate (Picker, 2017; Powell & Lever, 2017).

The study of ghettoized neighborhoods and life within them is particularly relevant in the context of efforts toward social integration, just transition, and the implementation of policies aimed at reducing inequalities. Nevertheless, the voices of residents of these neighborhoods rarely reach public attention and even more rarely are truly heard. The present article seeks to give voice to these residents by focusing on their experiences, narratives, and perceptions related to loneliness, stigma, and belonging. The research was conducted in six Bulgarian cities – Lom, Dobrich, Ruse, Asenovgrad, Kyustendil, and Straldzha – and approaches ghettoized neighborhoods not merely as territorial units but as social worlds with their own internal structure, boundaries, and identity (Wacquant, 2007). At the center of the analysis are the personal accounts of neighborhood residents and representatives of local government, who share what it means to live "in the ghetto" – in material, emotional, and moral terms. Their perspectives provide insights into the ways in which social exclusion is experienced, articulated, and at times overcome (Goffman, 1963; Yuval-Davis, 2011). In the text, the terms "ghetto" and "Roma neighborhood" are used interchangeably. The term "ghetto" refers not only to a geographic space but also to a socially constructed zone of isolation and stigma.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the social processes unfolding in Roma ghettos and the lived experiences of their residents, the article draws on a theoretical framework that integrates concepts and methods from urban sociology, studies of marginalization, stigma theory, and research on belonging and identity. The aim is to demonstrate how spatial positioning within the city, public perceptions, and institutional practices jointly shape the status of the ghetto neighborhood and influence the way its inhabitants are perceived.

Central to this framework is the concept of the "ghetto," which has undergone significant historical and theoretical transformations. The term originated in sixteenth-century Venice as a designated place of compulsory residence for Jews. Later, it became established in sociology as a category denoting isolation, ethnic concentration, poverty, and stigma (Marcuse, 1997). In contemporary critical urban studies, the ghetto is seen not only as a geographic territory but also as a socially, politically, and morally constructed zone, where racial relations, institutional inaction, and social hierarchy intersect (Wacquant, 2007; Duneier, 2016).

In the Bulgarian context, Roma ghettoized neighborhoods function as double markers: on the one hand, of exclusion, danger, and "otherness," and on the other, of shared identity, local community, and mutual support. This dual meaning makes them specific social spaces in which the tension between stigmatization and resilience, between alienation and belonging, becomes particularly visible (Picker, 2017; Vincze, 2013).

The concept of social stigma, formulated by Erving Goffman (1963), is key to understanding processes of symbolic exclusion. Stigma denotes a characteristic that devalues a person in the eyes of others and excludes them from accepted notions of normality. In the case of Roma neighborhoods, stigma is multidimensional: it is simultaneously ethnic (Roma origin), social (poverty, low education), territorial (address and neighborhood), and institutional (disparaging treatment by administration and public services). Stigma is sustained through moral boundaries – symbolic lines that separate "us" from "them," the "acceptable" from the "deviant" (Lamont, 2000). These moral boundaries are not merely cultural perceptions but social mechanisms that maintain distance, hierarchy, and control. In this sense, the ghetto represents a boundary through which society legitimizes the rejection and silencing of its inhabitants. It is both a symbol of social problems and a concrete space where inequalities are clearly visible.

The study also draws on the concepts of territorial marginalization and advanced marginality, introduced by Loïc Wacquant (2007), according to whom spatial separation is not a side effect but a central mechanism of social exclusion. Ghettoized neighborhoods are formed and reproduced through a combination of residential segregation, institutional neglect, and unequal access to basic public resources such as healthcare, education, transportation, and cultural infrastructure. As a result, peripheral social worlds are created within otherwise central urban territories – worlds with limited horizons and high barriers to social mobility.

As a counterpoint to this logic of exclusion, the study introduces the notion of belonging, understood not as a fixed identity but as a dynamic process of rootedness, recognition, and participation (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Belonging does not always imply equality, but it provides a sense of being part of a community, that one's place has meaning, and that one's presence has value. In Roma neighborhoods, belonging is built through trust and mutual support, enabling residents to construct an identity that resists stigma.

Methods

The study is based on the application of qualitative methods aimed at gaining an in-depth interviews understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and sense of belonging among residents of Roma ghettoized neighborhoods in six Bulgarian cities: Lom, Dobrich, Ruse, Asenovgrad, Kyustendil, and Straldzha. In each city, six in-depth interviews were conducted, resulting in a total of 36 interviews. Participant selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, with the aim of capturing diverse perspectives on life in Roma neighborhoods and the ways in which belonging, loneliness, and social stigma are experienced.

The respondents included:

- Roma residents of ghettoized neighborhoods– men and women from different age groups (youth, women, men), with varied social status, education, and employment. They shared personal stories, emotions, and coping strategies related to isolation.
- Educational and health mediators, often members of the same neighborhoods. They provided insights into the internal dynamics of the community and the institutional barriers faced.
- Informal Roma leaders, who offered critical interpretations of living conditions in the neighborhoods and of social inclusion policies.

All interviews were in-depth and conducted with open-ended questions, allowing participants to speak freely about their life experiences, perceptions of (non) belonging, discrimination, and intra-community relations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face between June and October 2023, with participants' informed consent, and were transcribed verbatim. The analysis was carried out using qualitative thematic coding, in line with theoretical concepts of stigma, moral boundaries, ghettoization, belonging, and social visibility. All interviews were anonymized, following ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The interpretation of the data does not aim at representativeness, but rather at a deeper understanding of the meanings that respondents themselves attribute to the spaces they inhabit.

Limitations of the Study

Due to its qualitative nature and purposive sampling, the findings cannot be generalized to all Roma ghettoized neighborhoods in the country. The analysis focuses on six specific cases, with the aim of providing contextualized insights into social realities. The geographical

and cultural diversity of such neighborhoods suggests that different forms of belonging and stigma may exist in other contexts. The study centers on the perspectives of members of the Roma community in the selected neighborhoods, along with the views of local authorities. As the analysis is based on narratives, it is shaped by subjectivity, yet this subjectivity is precisely what makes it valuable for understanding the mechanisms of social exclusion. In interpreting the data, efforts were made to conduct a critical analysis that takes into account the broader social and cultural context.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted in six different cities reveal a multilayered picture of the social reality in Roma ghetto-ized neighborhoods. Despite differences in geographic location, settlement size, religious affiliation, and local policies, the narratives of respondents highlight similar experiences and social attitudes. Loneliness, social isolation, stigma, institutional neglect, and spatial marginalization emerge as recurring themes in the lives of ghetto residents. At the same time, the interviews also reveal countervailing patterns – forms of belonging, local networks of support, mediation efforts, and social resilience built in spite of systemic exclusion.

This section examines how these experiences manifest in different local contexts, not by seeking mechanical generalizations, but by closely engaging with the voices of the respondents. The themes presented – loneliness and social isolation, stigma and institutional neglect, the role of mediators, the invisibility of the ghetto within the urban structure, and lived experiences of belonging – are not only analytical categories but also carriers of concrete social experience. They allow for a deeper understanding of Roma ghettoized neighborhoods not simply as confined spaces, but as complex social worlds where vulnerability and dignity, loss and meaning, rejection and resilience are intertwined.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Loneliness and social isolation are among the most frequently reported experiences in Roma ghettoized urban neighborhoods, regardless of their location or the size of the city. Despite differences in local infrastructure, social services, and municipal policies, the feeling of being excluded – from the city, from institutions, and sometimes even from the community itself – recurs across all the analyzed cities. The

results, however, reveal certain variations. For instance, in Dobrich, social isolation appears mainly through limited inter-neighborhood contacts and physical distance. According to the words of an informal Roma leader, the "Izgrev" neighborhood is often perceived as a "dark zone" on the city map, where institutional presence is minimal and public services are reduced to mere formalities. A common attitude among residents is that this neighborhood is not considered part of the "real city":

> *"No one wants to deal with the problems of the neighborhood; we seek support from the institutions, but unfortunately our problems receive no public attention. We want a cleaner neighborhood, better streets, but there is no one to pay attention to us. Most of the young people look for salvation abroad, and when they save some money, they come back and want to invest it in their homes. But how can you invest when the streets are in terrible condition? How can you build a nice house when there are problems with the sewage system?" (Informal Roma leader, Dobrich).*

Similar views were expressed in Ruse. According to a resident of the *Selemetya* neighborhood, there is a prevailing sense of lost connection with institutions and a feeling that the problems of the neighborhood are not treated with sufficient seriousness. Loneliness is experienced most acutely by women and elderly people, who are often excluded from the labor market and live in conditions of extreme poverty and isolation from the rest of the city. Many describe a sense of symbolic "invisibility":

> *"We are here, but no one sees us... they only come before the elections" (Roma resident, Ruse).*

According to an educational mediator from Ruse, there is a pronounced form of structural vulnerability affecting mainly women in some of the ghettoized communities, such as *Druzhba 2* and *Trite Galaba*.

> *"The mothers here are alone with their children. There are no jobs and no one to help them. They are just trying to survive. There is discrimination in the labor market, and it is very difficult to find someone willing to hire them, especially when they have small children" (Educational mediator, Ruse).*

This perspective draws attention to several interconnected deficits: lack of access to the labor market, absence of social and institutional support, and isolation within the community itself. In this context, the loneliness of Roma women does not necessarily mean the absence of a partner, but stems from social isolation – they often bear almost the entire responsibility for childcare and household work without

institutional support, while their opportunities to participate in social and economic life are severely limited due to discrimination, low levels of education, and lack of access to services. The expression *"they are just trying to survive"* reveals the everyday struggle for survival, where the horizon of the future is overshadowed by the immediate effort to cope with scarcity and isolation. This is not merely poverty, but a condition of prolonged exclusion in which loneliness becomes a social norm rather than a deviation.

A profound sense of institutional estrangement and symbolic rejection is also shared by an unemployed Roma woman from the Trite Galaba neighborhood in Ruse:

> *"When you go to the municipality, they look at you as if you are a problem. There is no one you can talk to normally, and asking for help is even harder. I was registered at the labor office for quite a while, but they didn't manage to find me a job, and I remain unemployed" (Roma resident, Ruse).*

The quotation reflects two clearly distinguishable yet interrelated levels of experienced marginalization. The first is stigmatizing treatment – the informal but recognizable language of body posture, gaze, and tone, through which institutional representatives mark the Roma visitor as "annoying," "guilty," or "superfluous." The second level is actual institutional silence – the lack of access to understanding, dialogue, and real support, particularly for someone who has been long-term unemployed and economically inactive. The phrase *"there is no one you can talk to normally"* shows that the barrier is not only administrative, but also communicative, cultural, and even human. Ultimately, the quotation testifies not only to the denial of assistance but also to an experience of complete institutional distance, where the very act of seeking support becomes a humiliating effort.

In many of the cases studied, the experience of cultural and social isolation is dominant, especially among older members of the Roma community. For example, in Kyustendil, in the *Iztok* neighborhood, some Roma residents describe the absence of close interethnic relations as well as isolation within the neighborhood itself, which continues to expand. Its inhabitants feel not only physically separated but also emotionally and symbolically excluded:

> *"The older people from the neighborhood don't feel like part of the city. They only go as far as the neighborhood center and that's it. And we think that we are not very welcome" (Roma resident, Kyustendil).*

A similar situation exists in Asenovgrad, where interviewees speak of barriers between the community and the majority that hinder

participation in the local economy, educational institutions, and public spaces. These boundaries are transmitted across generations, resulting in intergenerational loneliness – among the elderly who remain on their own, and among young people who see no prospects for realization.

In Lom, isolation manifests itself on several levels – both in terms of the city's position within the region and internally within the Roma community itself. The division between different neighborhoods leads to a lack of trust and interaction, while social services often fail to reach all areas equally. One of the interview participants, a long-standing educational mediator, noted:

> *"In the city there are several Roma neighborhoods, and each is its own separate world. Each neighborhood is specific, since in the three neighborhoods people speak differently. In Mladenovo and Khumata one dialect is spoken, while in Stadiona another dialect is used, different from the other two neighborhoods" (Educational mediator, Lom).*

The overarching framework of these experiences outlines not merely physical isolation, but a structural loneliness stemming from poverty, segregation, institutional neglect, and the absence of prospects for change. In these urban peripheries, loneliness is not only a personal emotion – it is a socially structured reality, whose consequences are reflected in the lack of trust, social withdrawal, anxiety, and the sense of living "outside society."

Stigma and Institutional Passivity

Stigma and institutional passivity manifest not only as a sense of discrimination but also as an accumulated social experience of being ignored, excluded, and left without commitment on the part of state and local authorities. In the narratives of respondents from the six studied cities, very similar views emerge: institutions are not simply absent but are often perceived as inaccessible and hostile. In Lom, a Roma activist shared:

> *"People don't trust institutions. They tell me: You'll write a complaint, you'll go around, and what will happen? When there is a flood, we are the first to be forgotten. And yet, we are still here" (Informal Roma leader, Lom).*

This distrust is structurally embedded – it is not accidental but rooted in years of inaction, insufficient infrastructure, unequal treatment, and limited access to services. In Straldzha, a local Roma leader emphasized:

> *"They make promises before the elections, and afterwards nothing. They come here, shake hands, smile, take pictures with the children, promise they*

will listen to our needs and that things will change. And then, once again, we are left alone" (Informal Roma leader, Straldzha).

Here is another similar opinion:

"While I was deputy mayor, on my initiative we created a framework for the whole region – each municipality had to identify what was needed and then submit projects or specific requests. For example, which street needed asphalt, or which school needed renovation. We called it the Framework Program for the Integration of Roma in the Montana region. We focused on 7–8 areas, including media. That was during the King's administration. At that time, there were many deputy mayors from the minority. After the change of government, everything was cleared out, and for many years there were no people from the minority in such positions. You have to know the root of the problem, not just its fruit. Because you can taste the fruit, but you won't understand where it came from. To do this, you need to go to the people who planted the problem. Right now there is only a strategy on paper. Nothing is actually being done" (Informal Roma leader, Lom).

In some cases, space itself becomes an indicator of social status, and infrastructure a language of belonging or exclusion. A resident of the *Izgrev* neighborhood in Dobrich shared the following view:

"We ask: why are most of the streets in the neighborhood in this condition, and the answer is silence. But if the neighborhood were in another part of the city, the next week there would already be asphalt and new lighting" (Roma resident, Dobrich).

The shared account clearly illustrates the experience of structural inequality, grounded in spatial discrimination and institutional unequal treatment. This narrative does not merely point to the poor state of infrastructure – muddy and unpaved streets – but frames it in a sharp contrast: "us" and "the other part of the city," where the state reacts quickly, and needs are recognized and met. The phrase *"the answer is silence"* is particularly telling. It highlights not only administrative inaction but also a silent, institutionalized denial of the right to voice and of equal living conditions. Here, silence is symbolic – it reflects the refusal of institutions to listen, respond, or commit. The comparison with the other part of the city underscores territorial inequality, manifested in the stark difference between areas with paved streets and those without. This quotation is emblematic of how space becomes an indicator of social status, and infrastructure a language of belonging or exclusion. The problem is not only the mud itself, but the way it permanently marks the neighborhood as "second-class," as a place toward which local authorities remain passive. What emerges here is a territorial form of institutional discrimination, where the ghettoized neighborhood is not

only physically separated but also symbolically excluded from the city – from its priorities, concerns, and allocation of resources. Similar infrastructure problems are also observed in other cities under study, such as Asenovgrad and Straldzha (see *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*).

Often, the lack of additional support in the educational process is also perceived as a form of institutional neglect. In Kyustendil, one of the educational mediators shared:

> *"The school needs more assistant teachers to help Roma children who do not speak Bulgarian and who struggle to adapt to the learning process, but they are not hired. They say – there is no budget. And yet the children need support, translation, trust" (Educational mediator, Kyustendil).*

In most cases, manifestations of territorialized stigma – where the very place of residence becomes a social marker of undesirability – are especially palpable among young Roma. They often face rejection when applying for jobs, seeking rental housing, or simply trying to be treated with respect. Such cases have been reported in Ruse and Asenovgrad. Here are some of the views expressed by interviewees:

> *"It's not enough that some Roma neighborhoods are already more isolated, but when we go to the institutions, it's as if they look at us under a magnifying glass. They ask: Which neighborhood are you from? And as soon as you say Trite Galaba, their attitude immediately changes" (Roma resident, Ruse).*
>
> *"I know a boy who graduated with honors and wanted to become a teacher, but he lived in Loznitsa. They told him – 'You are not suitable to be the face of the school.' And that was only because he was from the neighborhood" (Informal Roma leader, Asenovgrad).*

These examples outline a form of institutional passivity that is expressed not only in the lack of resources but also in deeper social exclusion. Local authorities not only fail to compensate for the vulnerable position of Roma ghettoized neighborhoods but, in some cases, actively reproduce their isolation through formal, disengaged, and discriminatory practices. Stigma here is not only interpersonal – it is institutionalized. It manifests itself through bureaucracy, formal refusals, lack of flexible measures, and neglected zones in urban planning. This makes marginalization persistent and difficult to overcome.

Figure 1. **Part of the streets in the Roma neighborhood of Straldzha**
Source: Author's fieldwork, 2023.

Figure 2. **Part of the streets in the Roma neighborhood of Asenovgrad**
Source: Author's fieldwork, 2023.

Loneliness and Emotional Experiences

The loneliness described by interview participants is not simply the absence of social ties – it is a state of deep emotional estrangement that often turns into a feeling of redundancy and invisibility. This is loneliness in the context of marginalization – born of the repeatedly accumulated sense of being left outside public attention. It is particularly in larger cities that the social distance between the Roma community and the rest of the residents is most pronounced and often palpable in everyday interactions. In one case, a young woman described how shopping becomes a trial, and how urban infrastructure amplifies her sense of exclusion:

> *"They look at us as if we are not human. My skin is a little darker, and I immediately stand out. When I go into a store, they follow me. At the bus stop, people sit far away. I feel very uncomfortable, as if I am different"* *(Roma resident, Asenovgrad).*

This social distance becomes a habit, as another participant from the same locality observed:

> *"Loneliness here is a habit. We are used to being alone. We are used to the fact that there is no one to protect us or to do something to improve the conditions in some parts of the neighborhood"* *(Informal Roma leader, Asenovgrad).*

In Straldzha, an interviewed member of the Roma community spoke about the intergenerational transmission of emotional withdrawal and lack of participation in public life:

> *"My father lived like that – home to work, work to home. Never to the community center, never to meetings. He used to say, We don't exist"* *(Roma resident, Straldzha).*

The phrase *"We don't exist"* reflects a deeply rooted sense of social invisibility, passed down as a legacy.

The results of the in-depth interviews show that there are numerous cases in which even within the community, loneliness is reproduced through a lack of mutual support and fear of vulnerability:

> *"People here don't help each other anymore. Everyone has shut themselves off. If someone has a problem, they don't say it because of shame. And shame is loneliness"* *(Educational mediator, Straldzha).*
>
> *"I feel alone, even when I'm with people. Because we don't talk about the real things. Everyone carries their own pain alone. Life has become hard – there's no work, it's difficult to earn money if you don't have an education and if you can't read. The only way is to go abroad and struggle there, but when you come back, you have money and can buy many things"* *(Roma resident, Dobrich).*

Although some participants in larger cities have had opportunities to take part in NGO initiatives or educational programs, emotional isolation does not disappear. One respondent described the cycle of hope and disappointment:

> *"When elections come and the politicians arrive, they all ask us about our problems. Afterwards – silence. And you are left alone with yourself again" (Roma resident, Ruse).*

The interviews from Asenovgrad add to this picture – here, loneliness is linked to religious boundaries that isolate young people even within the community. An educational mediator noted:

> *"There are young people who never leave the neighborhood. They are afraid of being insulted, and their parents don't let them out either. Everyone stays silent. And the silence becomes a wall" (Educational mediator, Asenovgrad).*

What all these accounts have in common is the sense that loneliness in Roma ghettos is not a personal issue but a consequence of social exclusion. It has become part of everyday life and is often perceived as something normal. This is why social interventions rarely succeed – they do not address the deep emotional wounds that sustain the feelings of abandonment and lack of belonging.

Local efforts and mediation: the role of mediators

In the context of limited institutional access and the systemic failure to resolve problems, educational and health mediators in Roma neighborhoods emerge as key figures of mediation between the community and local authorities. Their role goes far beyond their formal duties and often turns into a personal mission, motivated by a sense of belonging to the community and a conscious sense of responsibility:

> *"People come to me when they have no one else to turn to. I measure blood pressure, give advice, send them to the doctor. I'm like an emergency service here" (Health mediator, Dobrich);*
> *"Sometimes I feel like a translator – I explain to people what the letter from Social Services means, and to Social Services why the person didn't respond. They don't talk to each other – I'm in the middle" (Health mediator, Lom);*
> *"I'm not just a mediator, I'm also a parent for some children, and a sister for their mothers" (Educational mediator, Straldzha).*

These voices reveal the multilayered and often informal function of mediators in ghettoized neighborhoods. They are not merely a "link" between the community and the institutions but become key figures of advocacy, trust, and practical protection for vulnerable residents. In the

absence of active institutional presence, mediators take on the role of translators – not only in the linguistic sense but also in cultural and emotional terms – of the needs, fears, and realities of the neighborhood.

"They often call me to translate or to accompany them, but no one invites me when decisions are made about the neighborhood. Yet I know the problems best" (Educational mediator, Asenovgrad);

"I talk to the principals, I beg them not to expel the children. I explain that the mother is alone, that there is no one to take them to school. Sometimes I take them myself. For me this is not a job – it is a responsibility" (Educational mediator, Straldzha).

Similar testimonies from Straldzha highlight that mediators often carry the burden of social inequalities on their own shoulders – without formal status, yet with enormous importance for the community.

"There have been cases when I went from house to house to gather students because they were about to be expelled. No one wants to go into the neighborhoods, but I am there every day" (Educational mediator, Lom).

In Ruse, the figure of the health mediator also gains public visibility – through an active stance, participation in policymaking, and strategic thinking. She not only identifies the problems but also proposes solutions – from mobile fieldwork to the need for physical infrastructure for activities within the neighborhood. Her commitment is not merely professional but also value-driven. Among her proposals are:

- Organizing more discussions on human trafficking;
- Conducting health literacy trainings aimed at reducing early pregnancies;
- Carrying out mobile fieldwork with neighborhood residents;
- Holding conversations with parents and employers;
- Engaging children through activities close to their interests.

The interviewed mediator emphasized that achieving real results requires building a supportive environment for mediation – teams, facilities, logistics, and continuous institutional backing. A telling example is the social housing project in Ruse, where housing allocation is tied to conditions of social engagement – school attendance, choosing a family doctor, and participation in programs. Mediators there play a key role in implementing this model of mutual responsibility.

Despite the different contexts, one common thread stands out across all studied cities: mediators are burdened with expectations that exceed their resources. They face institutional neglect, yet at the same time, they are seen as "the visible face of the state" (respondent,

Straldzha) and are often the only ones addressing the community's urgent needs in real time. Mediators act as a social bridge between two worlds that rarely meet, but whose connection is essential for inclusion, belonging, and trust.

Invisibility and Marginalization in Urban Space

Across all the studied locations, Roma ghettoized neighborhoods represent spaces of social neglect, marked by a lack of infrastructural investment, zones of isolation, and minimal presence in urban policies. Although physically part of the city, these neighborhoods function as internal peripheries – materially segregated yet culturally burdened with negative stigma. In Dobrich, residents describe spatial exclusion as chronic and highly visible:

> *"No one comes here unless it's for something urgent. We are outside the city, even though we're just five minutes from the center"* (Roma resident, Dobrich).

A similar situation is observed in Asenovgrad, where, although the neighborhood is formally part of the city's territory, the sense of being peripheral remains strongly present.

> *"The sewage system in the neighborhood needs improvement. In many of the streets, dirty water runs freely, which is dangerous for our health. This is not accidental – no one thinks that we are part of the city"* (Educational mediator, Asenovgrad).

This experience reflects not so much a geographical, but rather a symbolic and infrastructural peripherality – a sense that the neighborhood lies outside the scope of institutional concern.

In Kyustendil, the "Iztok" neighborhood also carries a symbolic burden in public discourse:

> *"The moment you say you're from 'Iztok,' people look at you differently. As if you're from another country"* (Roma resident, Kyustendil).

An informal Roma leader from Kyustendil noted:

> *"The neighborhood is constantly growing, there is an old and a new part, and the problems are many. There are still many illegal houses, which are by no means small in size, and if they have to be demolished it could become a big problem, because people have invested a lot of money in them"* (Roma resident, Kyustendil).

In Straldzha, marginalization is even more direct:

"We are the last in line – if there is even a line for us at all. Here even the ambulance comes more slowly, because they know we are from Izgrev" (Roma resident, Dobrich).

The case of Ruse is indicative of institutionalized segregation. According to a health mediator, even social housing projects, which are presented as instruments of integration, contain elements of selective inclusion – only "proven" families are given the opportunity to leave the neighborhoods. This creates a new form of spatial stratification within the community itself. What is common across all the studied cities is that the space of the ghetto not only reflects social isolation but also reproduces it. Its urban morphology – the lack of connections with the city, public infrastructure, and institutions – turns isolation into a material reality and sustains the feeling that residents are in a permanent "other" position.

Belonging Despite Alienation

Despite the strong spatial and social isolation, residents of Roma ghettoized neighborhoods express a deep sense of belonging to the place where they live. This belonging is not based on recognition from the outside world but arises from emotional, kinship, and network ties with neighbors, family, relatives, and the local community. The ghetto is "their place" – marked by its deprivations, yet also by its anchors of security, predictability, and social support. In Dobrich, this attachment to the neighborhood is expressed through a sense of long-term inhabitation and mutuality:

"I don't want to live anywhere else. I was born here, my children are here, everyone knows each other here. It may be dirty, but it is ours" (Roma resident, Dobrich)

The phrasing "I was born here, my children are here, everyone knows each other here" outlines the rootedness of the connection to place. It is not based on comfort, but on shared history, intergenerational continuity, and interpersonal bonds. The neighborhood is experienced as a world of the familiar, providing security in a context of external uncertainty. The expression "but it is ours" is particularly revealing, as it does not deny poverty and isolation but reframes them through symbolic appropriation and the affirmation of space as one's own. In this sense, the ghetto is not merely a place of residence but becomes a site of social meaning and personal history. It is rejected from the outside but embraced from within – as a stage of life, dwelling, belonging,

and reciprocity. This quotation also challenges the widespread perception that residents of ghettoized neighborhoods necessarily wish to leave them. On the contrary – for many, the territory of the ghetto represents both limitation and protection, a space where ties, significance, and the sense of "home" are preserved in cultural and emotional terms. In some cases, even with a clear awareness of the poor material conditions, leaving is not perceived as an easy or desirable move:

> "*Where should we go? Even if they give us housing, it won't be the same. People there won't accept us. This is our home, just the way it is*" (Roma resident, Dobrich).

In Lom, social mutual aid in the "Humata" neighborhood forms the basis of the sense of belonging:

> "*If you don't have bread – you will get it from your neighbor. If you are sick – they will help you. This doesn't exist in the city*" (Roma resident, Lom).

A local educational mediator emphasizes that this form of "social security in insecurity" is paradoxically resilient:

> "*They are poor, but they are not alone. The system abandons them, but the neighborhood holds them together*" (Educational mediator, Lom).

In Kyustendil, the sense of identity is even more directly tied to the space of the ghetto:

> "*The neighborhood is nasty, but at least there you know who you are. Outside you are nobody*" (Roma resident, Kyustendil).

At the same time, the stigma that comes with the neighborhood's name is a painful reminder of external rejection:

> "*When you say you are from there, they immediately put you under the same label. But they don't know what life inside is like*" (Roma resident, Asenovgrad)

In Straldzha, belonging is built on shared experience, common celebrations, and a different rhythm of life:

> "*We have our own holidays, our own order, our own way. Here no one looks at the clock*" (Roma resident, Straldzha).

Some respondents expressed their sense of belonging with open pride, even when it is marked by marginalization:

> "*Yes, I am from the ghetto. So what? I work, I take care of my children, I am no worse than anyone else*" (Roma resident, Straldzha).

In Ruse, despite the absence of basic infrastructure, in some neighborhoods such as "Druzhba 2," people find meaning in cohabitation and support networks:

> *"There is no sewerage, but here we are our own people. We have our people, there is someone to listen to you, we support each other when needed" (Roma resident, Ruse).*

In Asenovgrad, the neighborhood may appear dangerous and forgotten to outsiders, but for those who live there, it is home – a place of identity and family history:

> *"They think we are bad just because we are from the neighborhood. But our roots are here. My mother was born here, I was too. How can I leave it?" (Roma resident, Asenovgrad).*

For younger respondents, the neighborhood is sometimes the only space where they feel secure – not because of physical safety, but because of the familiarity of social ties:

> *"Outside I feel lost. In the neighborhood at least I know who my neighbor is, who my relative is, who will help me" (Roma resident, Asenovgrad).*

These quotations portray the neighborhoods as both marginalized and protective spaces – deprived of institutional care, yet rich in social ties and a sense of "one's own." Belonging here is not a product of external recognition but of everyday resilience – of rhythm, reciprocity, and inner orientation that provide a sense of identity. For many members of the Roma community, this is the only place where they feel belonging and security, despite the constant external rejection.

Conclusion

The results of the in-depth interviews demonstrate that Roma ghettoized neighborhoods in the studied cities cannot be understood solely through the lens of deficits, poverty, or problematics. On the contrary, they emerge as complex social territories where marginalization and resilience, stigma and belonging, fear and hope coexist. The analysis of 36 in-depth interviews conducted in six cities reveals the multi-layered nature of social experiences, shaped not only by spatial isolation but also by the ethical and moral boundaries reproduced by institutions and society. The interviewees shared experiences of living in invisibility – manifested both through the lack of adequate infrastructure and social services and through the dismissive attitudes encountered in interactions with local authorities. The ghetto is perceived as an "other territory" – often excluded from the normal rhythm of urban life,

marked by fear, shame, and distance from outsiders. And yet, for many respondents, this territory is a place of social belonging – of family and neighborly ties, of mutual aid, traditions, and a sense of home. Despite the hardships, life in these neighborhoods is bearable and comprehensible, while the outside world often appears hostile, distant, and unpredictable.

Particularly important is the role of local intermediaries in the form of Roma mediators, activists, and informal leaders, who not only connect institutions with the community but also often represent, defend, and support it in encounters with bureaucracy, discrimination, and institutional indifference. Their voices are a source of knowledge, understanding, and local expertise, without which integration policies would hardly succeed.

The stories from the ghetto reveal that loneliness is not only social or physical. It is also symbolic, tied to the feeling of being "beyond the boundary of significance. In this sense, Roma neighborhoods function not merely as places of deprivation but as spaces where members of the Roma community are denied recognition. And yet, within these very spaces forms of resilience, solidarity, and hope are born.

Therefore, to understand Roma neighborhoods, we must move beyond simplified representations and listen to the people who live there. Their stories reveal a world that is at once difficult and filled with humanity. Recognizing this presence is not merely a matter of empathy but the first step toward a more just and inclusive society. In the context of growing social inequalities in Europe, the voices from the ghetto remind us that the future of cities depends on visibility, respect, and the right of every community to be heard.

Acknowledgements

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