

Richard Filčák and Daniel Škobla, eds. 2022. *Odpad ako sociálny problém vo vylúčených rómskych osídleniach* [Waste as a social problem in marginalised Romani settlements]. Bratislava: Center for Social and Psychological Sciences at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology.

Book review by

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**Critical**  
Romani Studies

In Slovakia, an overwhelming majority of Romani communities live on the periphery of society. Romani settlements lack basic infrastructure such as access to water and sanitation or paved roads. They are most often confined to segregated areas, located on land unsuitable for habitation – on a steep hill, in a flood risk area, next to a waste dump or a big factory and so on. Is this a coincidence? The authors of the publication *Odpad ako sociálny problém vo vylúčených rómskych osídleniach* (Waste as a social problem in marginalized Romani settlements) published by the Centre for Social and Psychological Sciences at the Slovak Academy of Sciences think otherwise.

The book elaborates on the issue of social exclusion of marginalised Romani communities in Slovakia, and the issue of waste management and municipal waste landfills polluting the environment. It deals with the intersectionality of three theoretical areas: social exclusion, environmental justice, and social administration (governance).

The authors argue that social exclusion and the issue of environmental justice are very closely connected. Socially and ethnically marginalised groups are more likely to be housed in environmentally hazardous locations when compared to the majority of the population. This is demonstrated in Slovakia by the localities in which marginalised Romani communities have been settled.

In the past few decades, waste and waste management have been some of the most major challenges for many municipalities in Slovakia. The growing amount of waste and the resistance of the majority to the construction of new landfills near their homes has resulted in a situation where the burden of waste management has become discriminatory, as it unfairly burdens lower social classes or disadvantaged ethnic groups. The authors of the publication claim that this is due to the fact that these groups occupy a weaker bargaining position and do not have decision-making powers, lacking adequate social capital and sufficient social networks to promote their own interests.

In municipalities, there are dominant political actors and institutions which have considerable power to dictate the rules and policies within them and impose these on others. On the other hand, marginalised groups such as Romani communities are in a very weak position within municipalities, manifested, amongst other things, by a disadvantaged position when it comes to the effect of waste and municipal waste management. As the authors note, waste management in many Romani communities is reduced to the mere placement of a large container. Therefore, it is unsurprising that these places are often portrayed in the media as waste hills, while Roma themselves are portrayed as, stereotypically, too lazy to clean up their surroundings.

Two aspects of waste management in relation to Romani settlements are addressed in the book. The first concerns the encumbrance caused by waste stored near homes, for example, waste from industrial activity or landfills. The second concerns the management of waste produced by the dwellings themselves in specific conurbations of people, for example, in municipalities or parts thereof.

The book seeks to look at these aspects of waste management through the lenses of various experts. The authors are researchers and experts in the fields of law, sociology, economics, and social administration. Therefore, they offer both theoretical and practical perspectives on the subject. It is divided into five main

chapters, each written by different authors. The publication was edited by Daniel Škobla and Richard Filčák of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, who also wrote the introduction and the final chapter. The authors are researchers and experts in the fields of law, sociology, economics, and social administration, and they offer both theoretical and practical perspectives on the subject.

The first chapter, *“Management of waste and environmental justice as a human rights matter,”* was written by Maroš Matiaško and Sandra Sakolciová, lawyers from the Central European NGO “Forum for Human Rights”. They write about waste management from the perspective of the right to adequate housing and health as protected by international human rights law. The chapter summarises international mechanisms and continues with case-law from the European Court of Human Rights on the right to the protection of one’s home as well as on the disadvantaged and vulnerable position of Romani communities. Matiaško and Sakolciová also examine the domestic legal framework on waste management and the rights and duties of municipalities in that regard. They emphasise that these have to be interpreted and applied in accordance with international human rights obligations to which Slovakia is bound.

*“Waste and Romani communities in light of quantitative data”* was compiled by Dušana Dokupilová who works at the Prognostic Institute at the Centre for Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences. Dokupilová used the data from the Atlas of Romani Communities and studies by the Institute of Environmental Policy at the Ministry of Environment to analyse the situation of waste management and landfills in municipalities in Slovakia, specifically focusing on Romani communities. She found out that, overall, in 24 municipalities in Slovakia there is no waste management whatsoever in Romani communities. However, in those municipal areas where the majority population live waste management is regularly accessible. She also identified potentially risky, illegal landfills in 240 municipalities.

*“Municipal self-governance in the communal waste management system”* by Zuzana Polačková focuses on the position of municipalities in the waste management and communal waste process, in particular. Polačková focused mainly on smaller villages and analysed waste management challenges faced by municipalities in the Atlas of Romani Communities. She mentions the good practices of some municipalities with marginalised Romani communities and which managed to remove illegal landfills and introduce effective processes for collecting and sorting municipal waste.

Edita Rigová is the author of *“Waste management in municipalities with marginalised Romani communities. Qualitative analysis.”* Rigová works as a doctoral student at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences. She brought a qualitative perspective to municipalities with marginalised Romani communities and the waste management challenges they encounter. She conducted interviews with several stakeholders, including people working for municipalities, assisting professionals, and people from Romani communities. The author concluded that costs related to waste transportation and the low level of waste sorting are the main challenges for participating municipalities. The level of waste sorting is linked to state funding.

Daniel Škobla and Richard Fličák, two researchers from the Slovak Academy of Sciences with vast experience, authored the fifth chapter – *“From the city to the landfill. The case of an urban settlement where the social marginalisation of Roma is accompanied by environmental injustice.”* They brought a case study

of a segregated Romani settlement with the characteristics of an urban ghetto located in the suburbs of a town, which itself is a regional centre. The community is in an industrial area in the immediate vicinity of a landfill and lacks basic infrastructure. The authors describe the process by which the landfill was set up, and its related environmental impact assessment. They see the settlement as a prime example of a locality where social exclusion, based on ethnicity, meets environmental injustice.

*Odpad ako sociálny problém vo vylúčených rómskych osídleniach* is a complex publication which may appeal to various groups of Slovakian readers thanks to its roster of authors who come from divergent backgrounds and bring different perspectives to a single subject. The information inside can be used by NGOs in their advocacy endeavours and, potentially, for them to pursue public cases before the courts to push the state and municipalities to improve living conditions in Romani communities.

This volume is also an excellent source of information for anyone interested in the subject, as the number of resources dedicated to this particular issue is very limited. It details the grim reality of marginalised Romani communities to whom environmental justice does not apply and, by explaining the reasons behind it, tackles stereotypes many people hold.