

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN CZECHIA: THE CASE OF ROMA RESETTLEMENT IN THE TOWN OF VSETÍN

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss environmental injustice in relation to residential segregation in Czechia. First, we pay attention to the concepts of environmental justice, social justice and residential segregation and their mutual relations. The core of our argument revolves around the case study of a segregated Roma community that was resettled by the municipal authority from an old dilapidated inner city block of flats to newly built housing on the industrial edge of the town and to isolated peripheral villages. We document multiple situations of environmental injustice and multiple causalities and contingencies in their production. Procedural injustices directly shaped by the public sector were central to the production of distributional injustices in terms of the quality of housing and residential environment, and socio-spatial isolation from the majority population.

Key words: environmental justice, social justice, segregation, Czechia, Roma

1. Introduction

In this paper, we contribute to the environmental justice and residential segregation debate through the investigation of a particular case of Roma segregation in a middle-sized town, Vsetín in Czechia. Procedural and distributive (in)justice is studied in the case of a ghettoized Roma community that was resettled by the municipal authority from an old dilapidated inner city tenement building to newly built housing in the least attractive peripheral area of the town and, in the case of some families, to remote municipalities in a peripheral region in October 2006. We specifically discuss the quality of the residential environment showing the contrast between a run-down property in a prime urban location versus better quality housing located in a segregated, peripheral and, in terms of quality of life, an undesirable area.

Residential segregation involves strong elements of environmental injustice. Therefore, we can benefit from the integration of segregation and environmental justice studies. Hence, we first discuss the concepts of environmental justice, social justice and residential segregation and their mutual relations to establish a conceptual framework from which we approach the interpretation of the residential segregation of Roma in Czechia. In the case study of Roma segregation and environmental injustice in Vsetín, we pay attention to the mode of governance in the town and how Roma ghettos were established. We point to chains of nested injustices constructed around the removal of Roma away from the centre of the town to its industrial outskirts, and to peripheral isolated villages.

Finally, we discuss the prospect of a socially and spatially excluded place and its socially vulnerable citizens.

2. Environmental justice, social justice and residential segregation

2.1 Environmental justice

Environmental justice concerns complex and varied patterns of human-environmental relations, their quality and distribution across various social groups defined by class, ethnicity, age, etc. (Lucas et al. 2004). The term was coined in the USA to reflect environmental injustices understood as situations in which certain social groups are disproportionately affected by negative environmental impacts such as pollution, waste dumps, highways, etc. (Holifield 2001). Initially, it was often referred to as environmental racism because of the disproportionately negative environmental impacts on ethnic minorities. A number of studies documented that minorities, and African Americans in particular, are more likely to live in close proximity to environmental hazards (e.g. Pulido 2000; Bullard 2004) and that lower income members of all racial and ethnic groups are more negatively affected (Bowen 2002). Environmental injustice has also been documented in other countries (Fairburn et al. 2005; Omer, Or 2005).

Environmental justice has positive and critical meanings in the sense that the phenomena of socially-uneven environmental impacts exist and that we perceive some of them as negative, problematic, unjust and unacceptable.

It also has a normative dimension in the sense that environmental justice has become an important criterion for the assessment of policies and decision-making practices. The pioneer in the normative use of environmental justice is the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):

Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this Nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work. (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, <http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/index.html>).

The normative concerns with the cases of environmental injustice that require social action and legal protection should not, however, limit our concerns to the so-called *negative freedom* (Berlin 2005) defined as protection against situations recognized and institutionalized as socially unjust such as the higher exposure of socially vulnerable groups to environmental hazards. Many environmental justice studies focus on the protection of communities against toxic waste, studying the distribution of population by race and/or income according to the distance from toxic waste deposits (Bowen 2002). Such an approach directs our attention to cases where, for instance, pollution or other environmental hazards reach levels that are currently seen as unacceptable or to actions that create additional inequality such as the more likely construction of an incinerator in proximity to communities with lower social status.

Environmental justice should also be considered in the light of *positive freedom* that gives everybody the right to certain qualities of life. In terms of social justice, this concerns for instance, rights to education, health care and decent housing. Environmental justice therefore also encompasses environmental qualities in the places where our everyday lives occur. The attention shifts from prevention against major risks and hazards to the right to live in an environment of certain basic qualities and to the role of the public sector in assuring these minimal qualities. Environmental justice issues thus overlap with the quality of life debate (Pacione 2003).

The study of distributive injustices that monitors the quality of the environment and the socially unequal use of these qualities has to be related to procedural justice, which means equal access to the decision-making process. Outcome equity is largely dependent on process equity (Harvey 1973). There are procedural injustices that create, fix and strengthen distributional injustices. Distributional injustices usually reflect inequalities among social groups concerning their rights and power to shape their life (Helfand, Peyton 1999; Mitchell 2003). Existing

social injustices are constitutive to the formation of environmental injustices. The procedural social justice shall assure equal rights and allow full and effective participation in decision-making for all social groups with special attention given to the disadvantaged populations. As Harvey (1996) noted, social justice is the necessary condition for achieving environmental justice.

2.2 Uneven access to a differentiated environment and residential segregation

Environmental justice can be considered as a subset of social justice. It is shaped by complex relations between the environment and social groups in the places where their everyday lives occur. Environmental injustices contribute to social injustices and should now be considered in any attempt at the complex treatment of social justice. As Mitchell (2004) notes, social justice is impossible without the production of a socially-just landscape.

Studies of environmental justice should uncover and understand the uneven consequences of geographically differentiated environmental impacts on the lives of social groups that are unevenly distributed in the space of our cities, metropolitan areas and regions (Schweitzer, Stephenson 2007). Even more importantly, attention should be given to issues regarding the socially uneven use of the environment or access to a quality environment by different social groups. Due to the fact that environmental qualities differ between places, and people differ in their capabilities to enjoy these qualities in their everyday life, there are important socio-environmental differences. As many of these differences stem from the differentiated monetary and political powers of individuals and social groups, they shall be seen as socio-environmental inequalities. Most of these inequalities are generally accepted in society (although not necessarily by the disadvantaged social groups). However, some of these inequalities reach levels that call for the issue of socio-environmental justice to be viewed as a specific subset of social justice.

In such instances, the environment itself requires broader conceptualization than is usual in environmental justice studies. It shall move beyond physical landscapes and also include "human landscape of cultivation and built forms" (Beaumont, Philo 2004, p. 94). The human landscape does not consist of only man-made physical forms. The other people, social groups, institutions, cultures, values and symbols form a social milieu that shall be considered as an integral part of the environment as well. This calls for the mutual integration of social justice and residential segregation studies.

People with different characteristics such as ethnicity, income, life-style etc. have different patterns of co-presence in time-space in their daily life. Social differentiation is reflected in the uneven spatial distribution of populations with different characteristics. Some patterns of socio-spatial (residential) *differentiation* of population

reflect various life priorities. However, many aspects and forms of residential differentiation are outcomes of uneven social relations stemming from the uneven division of roles in society, which have been shaped by unequal possibilities, opportunities, positions and power relations. In such cases, we speak about residential *segregation*. Many aspects and forms of residential segregation are accepted in society as natural and functional. However, some socio-spatial inequalities are perceived as unfair. This usually involves high levels of segregation of disadvantaged social groups and the existence of localities in which the disadvantaged population is involuntarily segregated.

Residential segregation is usually considered to be a state of environmental injustice. Segregated populations have unequal access to basic amenities and they are usually excluded from equal participation in the benefits created within the whole society (Holt-Jensen 2002). The neighborhood effect further fosters the state of inequality and exclusion. Environmental injustice related to the areas of disadvantaged social groups can further reinforce the continuity in their spatial concentration and segregation to levels seen as problematic, unacceptable and inherently unjust. The complexities of social processes combined with the complexities of the spatially uneven distribution of environmental qualities present major challenges for achieving environmental justice based on the concepts of both negative and positive freedom.

Policies and programs have been applied to decrease the level of segregation and mitigate the negative impact of living in spatial concentrations of disadvantaged social groups. In particular, the focus has been on the betterment of living conditions in such areas containing the disadvantaged population. A specific role was given to public housing and urban regeneration projects to provide satisfactory housing and living conditions to this population. Governments have intervened in this area as a response to market failures. However, the government as the housing developer and landlord is itself involved in the production of socio-spatial inequalities due to the fact that the concentration of government owned, controlled or supported social housing is spatially concentrated and therefore the social groups that occupy it. Furthermore, there are many cases of discriminatory practices involved in public housing allocation. Residential segregation-related environmental injustices are outcomes of a complex web of uneven environmental conditions, unequal social relations and discriminatory decision-making practices.

3. Residential segregation of Roma in Czechia

Despite the application of egalitarian principles and the eradication of market mechanisms as the main source of housing inequalities and segregation, socio-spatial inequalities existed under socialism. While some were

outcomes of historically formed settlement structures that could not have been fully alleviated under socialism, new inequalities were formed through specifically socialist principles of housing allocation (Szelenyi 1983). Nevertheless, residential differentiation was lower in comparison with capitalist cities. Under socialism, everybody had a right to housing which was provided by the state through municipal authorities, corporations or by subsidized cooperative housing.

Post-socialist transformation caused important changes in housing provision. It was generally accepted that people shall be individually responsible for the provision of housing within the established market and that the state would diminish its role, using policies focused only on disadvantaged groups, who could not afford to buy or rent housing under market conditions. As part of the general strategies of privatization and decentralization, i.e. the devolution of powers from the central government to actors in the market place and to local governments, municipalities became owners of formerly state owned housing (Sýkora 1996). Large parts of public housing stock were privatized (Sýkora 2003) and in most municipalities only a small segment of social housing remained under the ownership and management of local authorities. Those who did not participate in privatization were moved within municipal housing stock to apartment buildings that remained as social housing. There are social groups that disproportionately occupy present day municipal social housing, in particular, the Roma population.

Under socialism, most Roma lived in flats provided by their employers (state-owned corporations) or by the municipality. However, the situation radically changed during the transition to capitalism. The restructuring of the economy brought a decline in jobs for low-qualified workers, which low-educated Roma had occupied before 1989. Furthermore, many Roma of Slovak origin became foreigners in the newly-formed Czech Republic as they did not apply for Czech citizenship in time, after the breakdown of former Czechoslovakia, thus losing the right to receive social benefits. Poorly educated and discriminated Roma became unemployed and due to being considered "foreigners", they often did not even have the right to receive social support while large segments of the younger generation never even entered the labor market. Casual jobs providing little or no security, illegal work and criminal activities have become the major sources of income for the Roma in this category. The majority of Roma, however, have become dependent on social benefits. On the other hand, some Roma used the new opportunities that emerged in the market economy. An example of this entrepreneurship is the Roma who have their own businesses and agencies providing jobs for other Roma in labor intensive areas such as construction, road works or waste disposal services.

The long-term unemployment of a high proportion of the Roma population has devastating social

consequences. Some authors argue that a culture of poverty (Lewis 1966) is being established in some Roma communities in Czechia (Hirt, Jakoubek 2006). The unemployment of Roma further contributes to the majority perception of Roma as free-riders abusing the social security system. These attitudes close the circle as many companies are unwilling to employ Roma.

The discriminatory practices towards Roma also developed in the area of housing provision, leading to residential segregation and environmental injustice. The practices involve the allocation of housing in the worst conditions and the least attractive locations to Roma households as well as the removal of Roma from larger municipalities to other usually small and peripherally located municipalities. Residential segregation is formed and fostered through the concentration of Roma in certain areas. Environmental injustice is created through the intentional formation of these concentrations in locations with low environmental qualities in terms of housing, problematic access to services and jobs, a poor physical environment and social milieu. A large share of the Roma population live in housing which does not meet basic hygienic criteria and consequently “many inhabitants of socially excluded Roma localities suffer from health problems” (Gabal Analysis & Consulting 2006, p. 85). Social exclusion, residential segregation and environmental injustice go hand in hand with the outcomes (sometimes even as an explicit strategy) of local government housing policies (Vašečka 2002). These developments are reflected in government, NGO and some local government efforts to fight discrimination and help to provide more decent living conditions (Lux 2003).

Czechia (together with other Central and Eastern European countries) is criticized for discriminating against the Roma population. In 2010, Amnesty International, the NGO known for defending human rights worldwide, in its annual report stated that “Roma faced increasingly overt public hostility, as well as segregation in schools and housing and discrimination in employment” (Amnesty International 2010). Social exclusion and socio-spatial segregation of Roma have become very dynamic during the last decade (Gabal Analysis & Consulting 2006) producing major social tensions in several localities. Roma segregation is conditioned not only by the operation of market forces, but also by the passivity of the public sector and even the active involvement of some local governments in creating segregation. Some local governments concentrate “problematic” citizens in areas with poorly equipped housing and generally worse living conditions. Cases of social and environmental injustice to Roma have been documented in most of the CEE countries (Hurrle 2006; Steger 2007).

The last comprehensive survey of Roma in Czechia by local governments took place in 1989 and recorded their population as 146,000. More recent estimates of the total population with Roma ethnicity are 250,000 with around 30,000 living in socially excluded Roma communities/

localities (Úřad vlády 2005). In the population Census, most Roma chose to identify themselves as Czech, Moravian or Slovakian, therefore the Census data show only a fragment of the actual Roma population. There were 32,903 Roma in the 1991 Census and 11,716 in the 2001 one that identified themselves as having Roma nationality.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs commissioned research on socially excluded Roma localities, which revealed 310 localities of excluded Roma in 167 municipalities (Gabal Analysis & Consulting 2006) from over 6 thousand municipalities in Czechia. The total population in these localities (which does not include only Roma) is estimated at between 60 and 80 thousand (data provided by Gabal Analysis & Consulting), i.e. nearly 30% of all Roma. The localities are in inner city neighbourhoods consisting of old tenement housing often dating back to the 19th century, in some socialist housing estates as well as in villages in the countryside (Musil, Müller 2008; Sýkora 2009). Some localities of socially excluded Roma have evolved into spatially excluded ghettos. Although their size is not comparable with the ethnic concentrations in the United States and Western Europe, their existence is a result of exclusionary closure (Wacquant 2008) based on ethnic/racial biases between the majority population and Roma, and institutionalised in discriminatory practices in housing markets. Using the case study of the segregation of the Roma in Vsetín, we provide an example of the practices and mechanisms of residential segregation and environmental injustice in Czechia.

4. Environmental injustice and segregation of Roma in Vsetín

This section presents the case of Roma segregation and environmental injustice in a middle-sized town, Vsetín, which includes a complex web of evolving situations. It began with the concentration of Roma in a dilapidated inner city municipal housing block during the 1990s. This situation was later perceived as problematic by towns councillors and the majority of inhabitants leading to a decision to relocate the Roma to new housing in a peripheral remote location. Employing the environmental justice perspective, we present a story of discriminatory practices in housing allocation leading to multiple situations, causalities and contingencies in residential segregation.

4.1 The town of Vsetín

Vsetín is a middle-sized town (population about 30,000 inhabitants) in the eastern part of Czechia (Figure 1). The town has not faced any major social hardships stemming from economic decline such as that which affected urban and regional development in the old industrial areas of Ostrava agglomeration and Northern Bohemia (Sýkora 2006). On the other hand,

it also has not experienced economic growth comparable with major metropolitan areas and towns and regions with a major inflow of foreign direct investments. It can be considered as a typical example of a mid-size town in this country.

The local government in Vsetín has been active in the implementation of progressive policies and governance practices that reflect principles of sustainable development. For instance, Vsetín applies Local Agenda 21 to the strategic planning of municipal development, support for local non-governmental organizations and the participation of citizens in decision-making processes. Vsetín is a member of a voluntary nation-wide network of NGOs and towns and cities called TIMUR – Team Initiative for Local Sustainable Development, whose members are committed to the application of sustainable development principles and monitoring sustainability indicators. Vsetín was the first Czech municipal authority which received certificate ISO 9001 for the implementation of quality management systems in local government in 2003. In the same year, the Union of Towns and Municipalities (SMO) awarded Vsetín the “Prize for Fostering Local Democracy and Co-operation with NGOs”. In 2004, the mayor of Vsetín, Jiří Čunek, received the “Prize of the Minister for Environment” for the implementation of Local Agenda 21. Vsetín was a town paving the way of progressive development towards open and inclusive municipal practices and policies.

However, what appears, on first glance, to be progressive positive development has not been equally applied to everyone. In particular, the Roma minority seems to have been excluded from the application of these open democracy and open society practices. The emphasis on sustainability and open management was governed by the majority population for their own interests.

In autumn 2006, municipal policies towards Roma minority and the issue of Roma housing in Vsetín were criticized in national media (Křížková 2006). The striking contrast between the progressive and participatory municipal governance applied in some fields of local development on the one hand side and practices of socio-spatial exclusion of Roma on the other hand side presents a specific case within the context of Roma segregation in Czechia (see the comprehensive overview of socially excluded localities in Mapa ... 2006).

We will present the case of Roma relocation that severely violated the commitment of Vsetín local government towards open governance and social cohesion as important aspects of local sustainable development. In particular, we will employ the perspective of environmental and social justice investigating issues of distributive and procedural injustices in relation to Roma segregation in Vsetín.

The narrative and discussion draws on various sources of data and information (reflecting basic principles of triangulation – Hay 2006). Our interpretation is based on

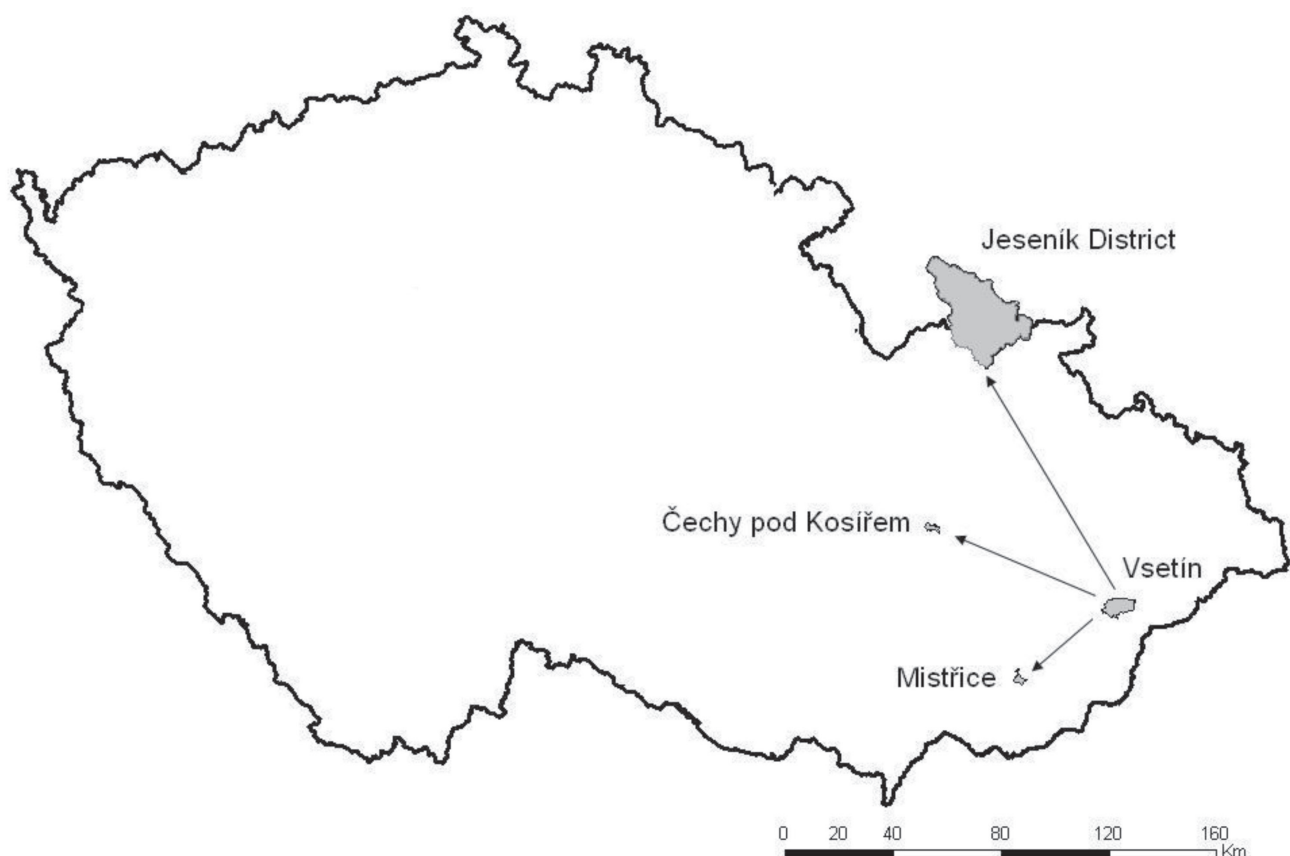


Fig. 1 Removal of Roma from Vsetín. Author: Roman Matoušek

the experience and knowledge gained from field research in the locality. It constituted interviews with key stakeholders including municipal administrators and employees responsible for social policies and social work, a quasi government organization in charge of community planning and Local Agenda 21, a school principal and teachers, municipal police, relocated Roma and residents of localities neighboring Roma concentrations. The field work was supported by desk research of available published material. Our investigation was informed by previous research studies of this case (Grygar, Stöckelová 2007; Ombudsman 2007). In terms of media analysis, we paid special attention to the Vsetín municipal newspaper as well as the review of numerous articles published about the case in the nation-wide press. Inspiration also came from public debates on the issue of Roma segregation with particular reference to the situation in Vsetín.

4.2 Building the ghetto

The history of the Roma population in Vsetín dates back to the 1950s (Grygar, Stöckelová 2007) when Roma were prohibited their traditional life style of itinerancy and forced to settle permanently (Davidová 2000). During

the 1960s and 1970s, the Roma population in Vsetín significantly increased due to the migration of Roma from the eastern parts of Czechoslovakia. Migration was the result of government policy toward Roma which aimed to disperse Roma equally in different regions of Czechoslovakia and integrate them into labour markets in these areas. The Roma population in Vsetín increased to several hundred people. Under the state socialist economy, which required full employment and offered a large amount of low and unskilled occupations, Roma were employed in large machinery factories. Socialist industrial companies provided them with housing. At that time, Roma families lived in different localities of the town. No large concentrations which could form a Roma “ghetto” existed. However, occasional conflicts between the majority population and Roma occurred due to the different lifestyle of Roma, who came from poor rural conditions.

In 1990, the municipal government of Vsetín took over housing previously owned by the state. The reconstruction of municipal housing in the late 1990s and 2000s involved the relocation of residents. It involved especially Roma households. When Roma-occupied flats and houses were reconstructed or demolished, Roma were moved to flats in an old and dilapidating building



Fig. 2 The old house (Pavlačový dům) in inner Vsetín. Source: Municipality of Vsetín (www.mestovsetin.cz)

from the 1930s, which was located in the vicinity of the town centre (Figure 2). Roma families with rent debts in municipal housing were also moved to this block of flats. Other Roma moved there voluntarily. They exchanged their flats in other parts of the town with non-Roma occupants of flats in the old building, who paid an extra sum of money on top of the exchange in order to be able to leave the emerging ghetto. The Municipality as the landlord approved such transfers despite being well informed about the growing Roma concentration in this building. Roma did not have much choice on the housing market due to their dependence on social benefits. The money received as compensation for exchanging flats represented a rare opportunity for extra income. While the previous inhabitants of the block of flats moved to better housing in other parts of the town, the physically deteriorating building contained a concentration of a socially excluded population (Grygar, Stöckelová 2007). A social and at the same time ethnic “micro-ghetto” was formed through the practices of the municipality and the voluntary choice of Roma, which was in turn shaped by their economic situation.

Besides residential segregation, the concentration of Roma in the building was unfair from the environmental

justice point of view. The municipal government as landlord was well-informed about the poor housing conditions in the building and intentionally related the poor state of housing to a particular ethnic group. The concentration of Roma in this building-ghetto did not solve what was perceived as “the Roma problem” by the majority. Through socio-spatial encapsulation in a particular locale, it rather sharpened relations between the majority population and Roma.

The tenement building was located in one of the busiest localities of the town, next to a large health center and near the main bus station. Almost every citizen of Vsetín (and surrounding region) uses some of these functions and visits this place. The permanent residence of about two hundred Roma in this locality led to social conflicts. Neighbors and especially employees and patients of the neighboring hospital complained about the noisy behavior of the Roma. Municipal police often had to solve conflicts and deal with small crimes in the area. There were no playgrounds in the proximity of the building and Roma children thus used the parking lot for visitors and employees of the health centre for their games.

The majority of Roma inhabitants of the house were unemployed, often did not pay the rent or were delayed

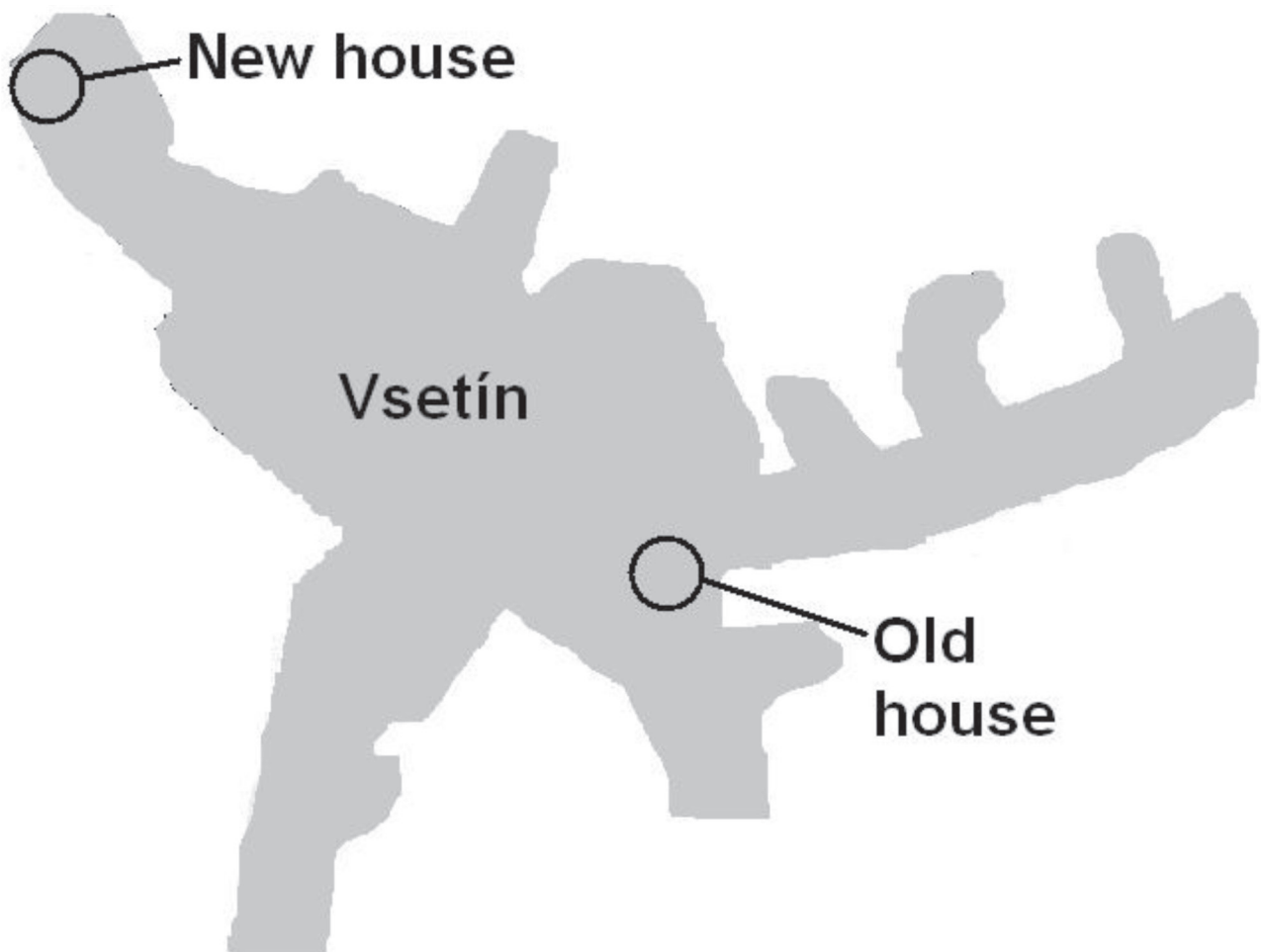


Fig. 3 Old and new Roma houses within the compact city of Vsetín. Source: adapted from www.mapy.cz

with the payments. The municipality did not invest in the maintenance and repair of the deteriorating building and the Roma inhabitants were blamed for contributing to the state of disrepair. The locality started to be perceived as “the shame of the city” (Město Vsetín – Town Vsetín 2006) and the town started to seek and justify an action that should solve “the problem”.

4.3 Building a new ghetto

The solution for “the Roma problem” was straightforward. The municipality decided to construct a new block of flats on the periphery of the town in the locality, Poschlá, which was specifically tailored for the Roma that were to be moved there from the dilapidated building in the town centre. This intention was discussed with representatives of the National Government Committee for Roma Affairs (Rada vlády pro otázky romské komunity). Despite negative reactions from the committee, the municipality pursued its plan. In 2004, a change in the master plan of Vsetín was approved by the town council. The locality of Poschlá was originally delimited to an industrial zone and had to be rezoned to allow housing construction. Vsetín also submitted an application to the

State Housing Development Fund for a subsidy that supported new housing construction for socially vulnerable groups of the population. The application was approved and the municipality, armed with this state aid, built new houses at Poschlá during the summer of 2006. Importantly, local non-governmental organizations and the Roma themselves were not involved in the decision-making process. They were only informed ex post after the plan had already been approved.

Most of the inhabitants were moved to newly built houses in Poschlá in October 2006 (Figure 3). The municipality also decided to demolish the old block of flats, justifying it by the poor conditions and serious threat that the house could collapse during the oncoming winter. The municipality presented the Roma removal as an event which brought “relief to doctors and patients of the hospital and people living in the center of Vsetín” (Město Vsetín – Town Vsetín 2006). However, there was not enough room for all the inhabitants of the old building in the new housing at Poschlá. The remaining Roma were assisted by the municipality to move outside of Vsetín itself. The Mayor of Vsetín, Jiří Čunek, stated clearly who would receive flats in the new housing at the edge of Vsetín and who would go elsewhere: “The flats in Poschlá



Fig. 4 New housing in Poschlá. Photo: Roman Matoušek

will be allocated above all to those tenants who fulfill their civic obligation – meaning they send their children to school, do not coerce their children to engage in criminal activities on their behalf and pay the rent properly. We will try to get the others *out of the town*” (Město Vsetín 2006, emphasis added). Roma families were assisted to buy old houses in small villages in the isolated Jeseník district located about 200 km from Vsetín, in a small settlement in Prostějov district about 100 km from Vsetín and in a village near Uherské Hradiště about 50 km from Vsetín (Figure 1).

There were Roma households with debts on rents, and the municipality of Vsetín had court decisions in its favour, according to which they could move these households out of their flats without any obligation to provide them with other housing. Despite such verdicts, no family was left without replacement housing either in the newly-constructed housing estate in Poschlá or other villages. In this sense, the municipality supported some families more than it was obliged to do by law.

In October 2006, the issue of Roma removal from an inner city ghetto in a deteriorating building to a peripheral housing estate specifically tailored for Roma picked up national-wide public and media attention. The radical “solution of the “Roma problem” in Vsetín became part of the pre-election campaign of Vsetín’s Mayor, Jiří Čunek, who was running for a chair in the Senate, the upper-chamber of the Czech Parliament. The municipality of Vsetín, and especially Mayor Čunek, made a substantial number of strongly racist public statements about Roma in the weeks before and after the removal. Čunek presented himself, and was presented, as the leader who solved problems with the Roma minority without making any compromises (Křížková 2006). Concerning the new houses in Poschlá, he stated: “We have constructed a special kind of housing for inadaptible citizens. It is designed against vandalism” (Kroměřížský deník, October 6th, 2006). These practices and rhetoric appealed to a large share of the population who elected Čunek to become senator. Several months later, in his capacity as the president of the conservative Christian Democratic Party, he was elected to become the deputy prime-minister in the newly formed government and the minister responsible for regional development, in charge of housing policies and dealing with residential segregation. As one of the country’s leading politicians, his racist statements as well as his further proposals on how to deal with Roma issues negatively influenced public attitudes to Roma. The following debate about Roma resettlement by the Vsetín local government uncovered strongly juxtaposed normative views, one offering the socio-spatial isolation of groups seen by the majority as troublesome and another emphasizing social assistance leading to better social cohesion of the whole society. The practice of Roma resettlement in Vsetín is embedded within this general socio-cultural context of ambivalent relations between the majority and Roma in Czechia.

5. Chains of nested injustices

The case of Roma in Vsetín provides examples of procedural and distributive social and environmental injustices related to socio-ethnic residential segregation. We could observe a whole chain of injustices, one after another, following on and building upon previous ones as well as the formation of new parallel injustices. We can also see and interpret the present situation as a whole complex of nested injustices: local within national, residential within cultural, present within historic.

The initial injustice was created through the intentional concentration of Roma in the housing block in the town centre. It was significantly shaped by the discriminatory practices of the local government administration towards Roma within the context of the poor economic situation of Roma in the newly established capitalist economy. Local residential segregation and environmental injustice in Vsetín was nested in (supra)national cultural discrimination against Roma that has been especially apparent in social relations on the labour and housing markets. Interestingly, the existence of the “ghetto-building” was interpreted rather as an injustice to the town and its majority population. This perception significantly shaped the action towards the removal of the ghetto. The main aim was to move the ghetto out of the town centre. This goal was supported by the arguments about the necessity to construct new housing for the socially deprived population because state funds were available to help realize local interests. The physical slum in the town centre was thus eliminated. Yet the social ghetto was partly moved in space from the daily lens of the majority population to the town periphery and partly dispersed to locations far away from the town itself.

The initial injustice was replaced by multiple new injustices. Let us name the procedural injustice towards the former ghetto inhabitants as the decisions about their removal and new places of their homes were taken without their involvement in discussions about their future. This supports our view that the primary objective was finding a solution for the town from the perspective of the majority and not a solution for the people trapped in the ghetto. Living in a new social ghetto in Poschlá can be seen as a case of distributional territorial injustice. An already socially excluded population was spatially separated in a peripheral location. The provision of new better quality housing only masks the situation of socio-spatial injustice. Even more problematic is the distributional territorial injustice in the case of families moved far away from the town itself. This happened within an enabling context of cultural discrimination against Roma embedded in public and private sector practices and institutions on the labour and housing markets in Czechia.

5.1 Removal from the city

Let us first pay attention to the Roma who were removed from the city. The decision to move from Vsetín

was heavily influenced by a carrot and stick strategy and the practices of the Vsetín municipality. As the old building was to be demolished, the Vsetín municipality helped Roma with loans to purchase housing elsewhere, in particular in old houses in the isolated Jeseník district. The loans were provided by a municipality-owned company, which was responsible for the management of municipal real estate. Roma would not have been able to get a loan from a bank due to their dependency on social security benefits. Vsetín thus actively guided decisions to move from Vsetín.

Using this strategy, the municipality of Vsetín disposed of any social responsibility for resettled families since they would then have their official permanent residency within the territory of other municipalities. This approach to “the solution” of the “Roma problem” through its export to other jurisdictions had already been used by other municipalities and developed into a common strategy towards Roma in Czechia (Hirt, Jakoubek 2006; Křížková 2006). It was the town of Vsetín in which the situation of socio-spatial exclusion initially developed and it was again the town of Vsetín that helped to establish new socially excluded localities, this time in territories under the jurisdiction of other local governments. These municipalities then became responsible for the state of socio-spatial exclusion of the Roma population initiated by another municipality. The Vsetín municipality moved the cost of social work and the provision of some social benefits to other municipalities. The mayors of villages affected by the Roma removal from Vsetín to their territory protested against the activity of Vsetín’s municipality calling it “dirty tricks” (Křížková 2006). The ombudsman criticized this approach of Vsetín for its violation of the rights of citizens: “There are serious doubts if the aim of the removal conforms to basic principles of local self-government and its attitude towards the citizens” (Ombudsman 2007).

Let us pay special attention to the Roma moved to villages in the Jeseník district. This is one of the most peripheral and backward areas in Czechia. It suffers from a weak economy, high and long-term unemployment and the outmigration of its population. Prices of real estate are low, however, properties are usually in bad condition. The opportunity to buy cheap houses influenced the selection of this choice for the Roma from Vsetín. Living in an area with nearly no chance of obtaining a job means that people are dependent on social benefits and support from the central state and local governments. The villages of Vlčice and Stará Červená Voda, where Roma from Vsetín moved, are very small settlements with the population of each village below 500 inhabitants. These small municipalities in peripheral regions are poor and can not provide assistance to a socially excluded population that would be available in towns and cities. Furthermore, there are no educational and health care facilities in these villages and residents have to commute long distances.

Due to low settlement density, public transport is provided only with very infrequent connections. The population is largely dependent on the private car as a means of transport, which is not affordable for the poorest. What is more, the houses purchased were not in good condition. Without employment, people do not have the resources to repair this real estate. Cut off from friends and relatives within the former wider community, the majority of which remained in Vsetín, these families lost the possibility of accessing their usual support system of informal ties and networks.

From the distributive environmental justice point of view, people were moved from an urban setting with the proximity of jobs and basic facilities such as schools, medical services, retail etc. to areas where the provision of jobs and services is worse. The former inhabitants of the urban ghetto were shifted to a geographic setting in which there is even less chance to struggle against social exclusion. Furthermore, they were cut off from former social bonds existing in Vsetín as a result of the distance (and poor transport services). Within the local context, they were concentrated in new localities of social exclusion, called “mini-ghettos” by local governments in the Jeseník region. We can speak about the inter-regional export of poverty and social exclusion, and its macro-regional peripheralization materialized in several small but severely socially and spatially excluded localities.

5.2 Bad house/good location, good house/bad location

Most Roma were relocated within Vsetín from the old dilapidated block of flats in the town centre to new social housing at the town periphery in Poschlá. The newly constructed housing provides accommodation of a higher quality. Households are substantially better-off in regards to amenities provided in the new dwellings (for instance, there was only one shower for eight flats in the old building). The municipality of Vsetín presents this achievement as a major improvement in the quality of life of the Roma on the town’s web pages, representing the case in photographs showing the ugly old building contrasted with the nice-looking new housing. Certainly, the quality of the new flats is much higher and the inhabitants are not threatened with the risk of the physical collapse of the building that could have had fatal consequences. Very strict rules are applied to the tenants of the new apartment buildings. They have only one-month rental contracts which will not be prolonged if they do not pay their rent on time.

The quality of housing and especially the quality of life involves a wide variety of issues such as the residential environment and access to jobs and services. Poschlá is located at the edge of the town, about 2 kms from the town centre, within an industrial zone. The place is separated from the town by the railway and main road (Figure 4). There are no services in the locality so inhabitants

have to walk to the town centre for shopping and other services. On the other hand, the municipality provides a school bus which takes children from Poschlá to the primary school every morning. However, after heavy rains, people can not use the only road connection due to a deep, unpassable puddle that appears on the road under the railway bridge.

Prior to the construction of the new social housing, there were two shelter houses (so called “holobyty”) for people with rent debts, adjacent to the sewage and waste water treatment plant and town rubbish dump/waste disposal site. The new Roma residential ghetto was formed in an environment that would not be considered as suitable for residential purposes by the majority of the population. Waste deposits are sources of environmental hazards and the relocation of a disadvantaged group to such a place is an explicit demonstration of environmental injustice. Yet, permission for construction of the new housing was conditional on clearing the waste deposit and the new houses met environmental standards required by Czech laws. The present quality of the environment in the locality Poschlá

is improving. A children’s playground was constructed along with the new housing and another was added later. Non-governmental organizations provide their services to the socially vulnerable population from the former shelter housing. A community coordinator helps inhabitants to solve their everyday problems.

From the distributive environmental justice point of view, people were moved from a dilapidated health-threatening building to new housing, yet at the same time they were moved from a town centre setting with proximity to services to a peripheral area physically and perceptually, and therefore also socially separated from the rest of the town. The municipality created a socially and spatially excluded ghetto of people living in good quality housing. While the dwelling quality improved, the inhabitants of the former town centre ghetto were shifted within urban space to a peripheral locality with a stronger state of socio-spatial exclusion. We can speak about the intra-urban export of poverty and social exclusion and its within-urban peripheralization materialized in a newly-built, socially and spatially excluded locality.

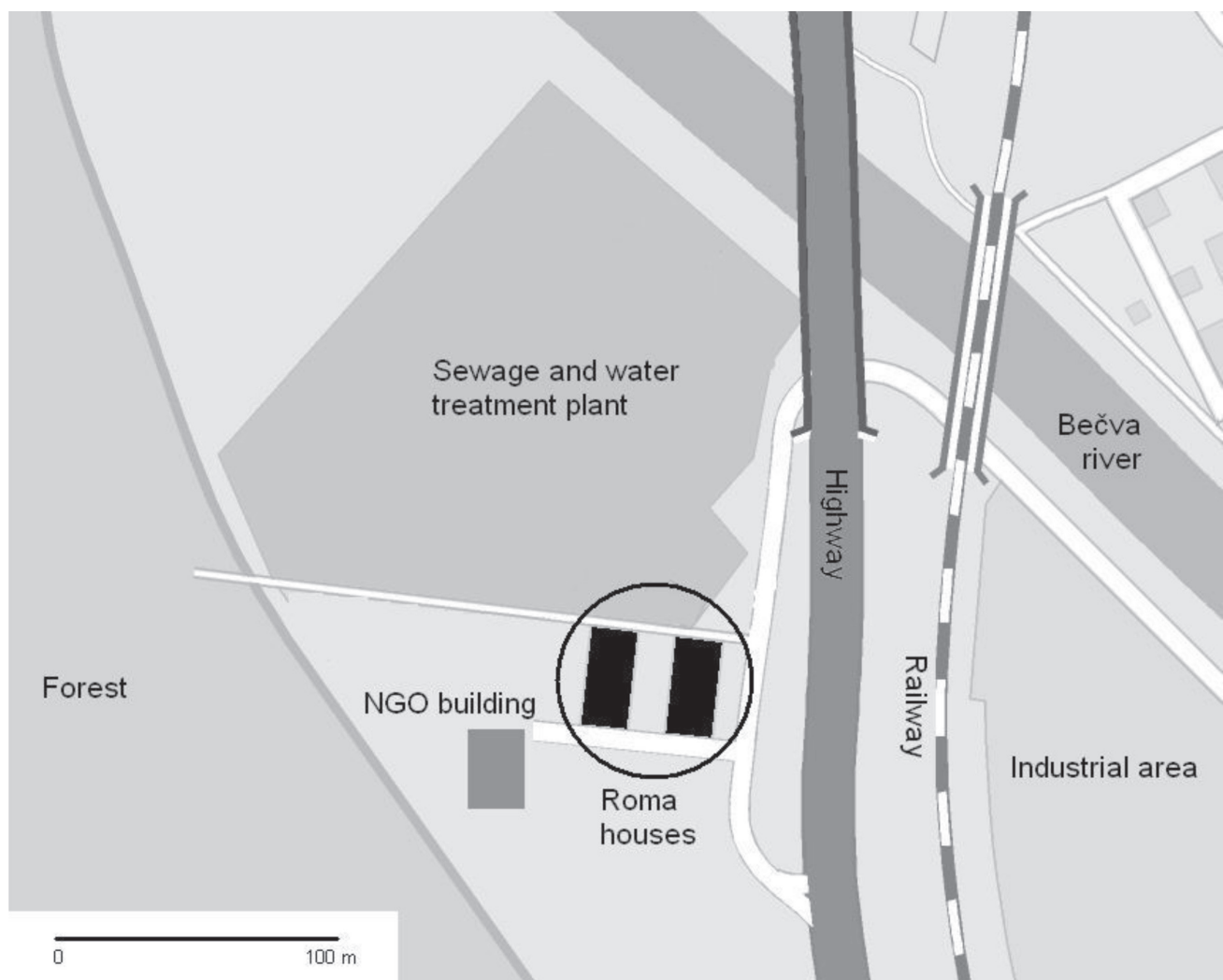


Fig. 5 New residential locality Poschlá: new houses in the middle surrounded by sewage and waste water treatment plant (north and west), highway, railway and industrial area in the east. Source: adopted from www.mapy.cz

5.3 Socially excluded locality forever?

Under the pressure of nation-wide institutions, Vsetín admitted the undesirable effects of the Roma concentration and socio-spatial exclusion in Poschlá. A community Social Service Plan, which was prepared in 2008 as a part of Local Agenda 21, addresses the issue of Roma segregation. Its aims are to help Roma with obtaining employment and access to housing in other municipal flats located out of Poschlá, elsewhere in Vsetín.

However, other policies applied by the municipality make the achievement of this goal unrealistic. Vsetín privatized nearly all former municipal housing with the last round of 274 flats sold in 2007 and 2008. The municipality now owns only a few flats to fulfill the needs for social housing. With its small amount of social flats, the municipality cannot fulfill all the applications from young families, the elderly and poor. The real possibilities of a municipal housing policy towards Roma integration or de-segregation are thus strongly limited. It is highly unlikely that Roma could use private rented housing or buy a flat or house due to their low income and discriminatory practices on the housing market.

Importantly, the construction of new houses was predominantly financed by the State Fund for Housing Development, a governmental agency which supports the construction of housing for young families, social housing or the rehabilitation of old housing estates. The rules of the Fund oblige the municipality to rent the house built with subsidies to low-income tenants for limited rent. The support to housing construction for low income groups actually leads to the socio-spatial fixation of Poschlá estate as permanent housing for the low income population. This way the socially vulnerable are determined to be spatially excluded which in turn strengthens their social exclusion.

6. Conclusions

Using the case of Roma resettlement in the town of Vsetín, this paper illustrates the complexity of environmental injustice issues in relation to the residential segregation of a particular ethnic group – Roma. It documents multiple situations of environmental injustice and multiple causalities and contingencies in the production of environmental injustice. In Vsetín, environmental injustice started with the purposeful concentration of Roma in an old deteriorating municipality-owned block of flats. In this instance, environmental injustice was associated with poor housing conditions in a slum building with the threat of physical collapse. The resettlement from the building protected the people from the hazard associated with the poor sanitation conditions and potential collapse of the building and provided them with new better quality flats.

The actual decision to move Roma inhabitants from this building and demolish it was driven by an interest to

eradicate the physical slum and social ghetto from the town centre rather than to help tackle residential segregation in an environmentally degraded place. Importantly, the local government intentionally moved or supported the migration of the socially vulnerable Roma population to places that are environmentally less desirable, socially segregated and spatially separated with worse access to jobs and services. The resettlement was planned and realized without the participation of the group concerned. Procedural injustices directly shaped by the public sector were central to the production of distributional injustices.

Most Roma were resettled to a new peripheral housing estate with good quality dwellings, however, it was located in a peripheral socio-spatially excluded area. Other Roma were assisted in resettlement to remote peripheral villages with very restricted opportunities on the labour market and poor provision of services. What is important is the contrast between different environmental characteristics of the old and new residential places of the resettled population. The old deteriorating building in a central place with the proximity of services was unfair in regards to the poor quality of flats while it offered a location that kept a socially vulnerable group physically located and in touch with the majority population and its social institutions. The new housing alleviated injustices related to the substandard dwelling itself, yet it geographically cut off the population to a spatially and socially excluded area with poor local environmental conditions resulting from the concentration of industrial and transport facilities. Despite benefits from better quality flats compared to the old slum building, the social isolation is higher and the environmental quality in terms of access to jobs and services and local milieu is worse in these new residential places of the resettled population. In terms of residential segregation, the original Roma ghetto in the town center was replicated in new Roma ghettos in the peripheral part of the town and outside the town itself. From an environmental justice point of view, the benefits of better quality flats can not outweigh the socio-spatial isolation and its long term consequences for a population segregated in environmentally poor conditions.

The town of Vsetín uses double track policies and practices. Plans, policies and projects that impact on the majority, such as in the case of neighbourhood revitalization are discussed with citizens as important stakeholders carefully implementing Local Agenda 21. On the other hand the project of Roma resettlement was not discussed with the stakeholders involved, that is the Roma minority. The principles of Local Agenda 21 are applied only in the case of the majority population without taking either the needs of the Roma minority into consideration or involving them in the planning and decision-making process. This double track approach further excludes the group of vulnerable Roma from participation and decision-making about important local issues. The same double track implementation of LA21 has also been documented in other places such as Kladno (Hirt, Jakoubek

2006). Environmental injustices produced at the local scale are safely nested in the national socio-cultural context of ambivalent social relations between the majority and Roma in Czechia.

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RÉSUMÉ

Environmentální spravedlnost a rezidenční segregace v Česku: případ přestěhování Romů ve Vsetíně

Príspevok je štúdií environmentálnej nespravedlnosti a rezidenčnej segregácie na príklade prípadu presťahovania – Romů ve Vsetíně

z chátrajícího domu ve vnitřním městě do nově postavených bytových jednotek na periferii města. Teoretická část příspěvku diskutuje koncepty sociální spravedlnosti, environmentální spravedlnosti a rezidenční segregace a jejich vzájemné vztahy. Zaměřuje se zejména na nerovnosti v přístupu k bydlení. Studie je zasazena do kontextu segregáčnických procesů probíhajících v Česku v období post-komunistické transformace.

Romové ve Vsetíně byli na podzim 2006 z rozhodnutí městské samosprávy přestěhováni ze starého zanedbaného domu v centru do nově postavených bytových domů v průmyslové zóně na okraji města a do několika vesnic v periferních oblastech. V původním bydlení se vyskytovaly plísň, dům hrozil zřícením a v okolí chyběla např. dětská hřiště. Romové nicméně bydleli téměř ve středu města, v blízkosti služeb a v bezprostředním kontaktu s majoritou. Po přestěhování do nových domů došlo k prohloubení sociálního vyloučení od většinové společnosti vzhledem k prostorové izolaci lokalit nového bydlení. Byty vyššího standardu než v původní lokalitě vznikly na okraji města v sousedství čistírny odpadních vod, železnice a silnice a ve větší vzdálenosti od školy, obchodu a dalších služeb.

Článek poukazuje na rozmanitost situací označovaných jako environmentálně nespravedlivé. Zatímco v prvním případě se bydlení Romů vyznačovalo nekvalitním bytovým fondem v centrální lokalitě umožňující sociální integraci, po přestěhování se sice zvýšila kvalita vlastních bytů, nicméně umístěných v periferní lokalitě ovlivňující míru sociálně-prostorového vyloučení. Hodnocení environmentálních nespravedlností vyžaduje srovnání odlišných vlastností životního prostředí, v našem případě kvality bytů a jejich lokalizace v prostoru města.

V obou případech byly distributivní environmentální nespravedlnosti utvářeny procedurálními nespravedlnostmi vyplývajícími z přístupu městské samosprávy k bydlení Romů. Původní koncentrace Romů do domu v centru města vznikla částečně kvůli praktikám přidělování bytů. Samozřejmě, svůj význam měla i výměna bytů mezi nájemníky a samovolné sestěhování Romů. Nevhodný stav domu a jeho exponovaná poloha pak vedla ke konfliktům s většinovou populací, což vyvolalo další reakci radnice. Ta s podporou státní dotace sice Romům zajistila bydlení, přitom jim ale neumožnila zapojit se do spolurozhodování o budoucnosti jejich bydlení, veřejně deklarovala cíl vystěhovat romské obyvatele ze Vsetína a nezávázala potenciální hrozby vznikající segregace. Článek ukázal, jak je poznání mechanismů procedurální nespravedlnosti zásadní pro pochopení vzniklých distributivních nespravedlností.

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