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Affirmative Re-Action: Attitudes Towards Roma Students in Serbia

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∞ The education system in Serbia has been facing the issue of underrepresentation of sensitive social groups in (higher) education. Although Roma people are estimated to make up around 2% of Serbia's population, they account for only 0.2% of active students (according to the Republic Institute of Statistics, 2022). One measure for correcting long-term discrimination and ultimately equalising minority groups with the majority is affirmative action. Affirmative action has been implemented sporadically in Serbia's education system since 2003 but became official in 2009 through a quota system. Since then, certain progress has been made in increasing the inclusion of students from vulnerable groups at all levels of education. However, it is still necessary to work on activities that not only concern the provision of opportunities for participation in education but also provide social inclusion. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to examine the perceptions and attitudes of majority students towards affirmative measures for Roma students. This is investigated via an originally constructed questionnaire, completed by a total of 190 students of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. The results show that the majority of students support affirmative action, although male respondents demonstrate more negative attitudes towards it. The findings also indicate a correlation between ill-informed students and those with greater social distance towards Roma people. In order to increase the number of Roma students, the authors suggest increasing awareness about affirmative action among both majority and minority groups, and creating diversity courses and networking programmes in higher education institutions.

Keywords: higher education, affirmative action, Roma students, social inclusion

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Afirmativne (re)akcije: stališča do romskih študentov v Srbiji

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∞ Vzgojno-izobraževalni sistem v Srbiji se spoprijema s problemom premajhne zastopanosti ranljivih družbenih skupin v (visokem) šolstvu. Čeprav Romi po ocenah predstavljajo okoli 2 % prebivalstva Srbije, predstavljajo le 0,2 % aktivnih študentov (po podatkih Republiškega inštituta za statistiko iz leta 2022). Eden izmed ukrepov za odpravo dolgotrajne diskriminacije in končno izenačenje manjšinskih skupin z večino so t. i. afirmativni ukrepi (tudi *pozitivna diskriminacija*). Ti se v srbskem vzgojno-izobraževalnem sistemu občasno izvajajo od leta 2003, uradno pa so bili uvedeni leta 2009 s sistemom kvot. Od takrat je bil dosežen določen napredek pri povečanju vključevanja študentov iz ranljivih skupin na vseh ravneh izobraževanja. Še vedno pa je treba delati na dejavnostih, ki zadevajo zagotavljanje možnosti za sodelovanje v izobraževanju pa tudi zagotavljanje socialne vključenosti. Zato je glavni cilj tega članka preučiti zaznave in stališča večinskega študentskega prebivalstva do pozitivnih ukrepov za romske študente. To vprašanje smo preučevali s pomočjo izvirno sestavljenega vprašalnika, ki ga je izpolnilo skupno 190 študentov Filozofske fakultete v Novem Sadu. Izsledki kažejo, da večina študentov podpira afirmativne ukrepe, čeprav moški anketiranci kažejo bolj negativno stališče do njih. Ugotovitve kažejo tudi na povezavo med slabo obveščenimi študenti in tistimi, ki imajo večjo socialno distanco do Romov. Da bi povečali število romskih študentov, avtorji predlagajo povečanje ozaveščenosti o afirmativnih ukrepih med večinskimi in manjšinskimi skupinami ter uvedbo tečajev o raznolikosti in programov mreženja v visokošolskih ustanovah.

Ključne besede: visokošolsko izobraževanje, afirmativni ukrepi, romski študenti, socialna vključenost

Introduction

“You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair” (Peters & Woolley, n.d., para. 12). These are the words of the American president Lyndon B. Johnson, who is best known for signing the Civil Rights Act, the document that was pivotal for US history in prohibiting discrimination based on colour, race, religion, sex or nationality (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Later during his term, in 1965, Johnson signed an Executive Order “mandating government contractors to take affirmative action in all aspects of hiring and employing minorities” (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004, p. 24), thus making affirmative action a well-known policy. After this mandate, higher education institutions started implementing affirmative action in their recruitment policies, thus increasing the admission of marginalised groups into college (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004; Schuck, 2002). The implementation of affirmative action in US law led to it being one of the best-known measures for fighting against discrimination worldwide.

Affirmative action refers to positive measures aimed at increasing the representation of minority groups in areas such as employment, education and culture, from which they have historically been excluded (Zalta, n.d.). It applies to various social groups, including “women, ethnic, religious, or racial minorities, and their inclusion in decision-making processes, as well as in societal flows in general” (Čekić Marković, 2016, p. 55). These measures address the long-term effects of historical discrimination and support the inclusion of marginalised groups in social, economic and educational opportunities, responding to their specific needs and enabling equal

standing with the majority population (Crosby et al., 2006). Affirmative action represents a proactive policy in which organisations allocate financial and human resources to prevent discrimination, with the possibility of discontinuation once injustices are remedied (Crosby et al., 2006). Its forms vary depending on the cultural context and target group, ranging from quota systems reserving positions for marginalised groups (Čekić Marković, 2016), to mobilising target groups to apply for jobs or education (Denić, 2014), favouring specific groups in selection processes (Crosby et al., 2006) and, in its mildest form, “carefully examining whether members of target groups are treated fairly in the allocation of social resources” (Denić, 2014, p. 71).

However, new questions arise. Do these measures actually get to the hands of people who need them? Are there better ways to combat societal

barriers? In general, does affirmative action do more harm than good? These are the questions we will be touching on in this paper.³ As the research is set in Serbia, the group we focused on are Roma students, because they are one of the most excluded groups in the Serbian education system. Even though there are many affirmative measures aimed specifically at this group, the situation regarding educated Roma people has not undergone significant improvement. We therefore sought to examine perceptions and attitudes of majority students towards Roma students at the higher education level.

Affirmative Reaction

The first major case to challenge the legality of affirmative action was *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) (Knight, 2002). At that time, the Davis Medical School of the University of California was implementing a quota-based admissions system, allowing entry through general or special admission for racial minorities and economically disadvantaged applicants. Of 100 available places, 16 were reserved for the special admissions group. After being denied admission twice, Allan Bakke, a white applicant, filed a lawsuit claiming “reverse discrimination” (Knight, 2002). The Court ruled that the quota system violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and ordered Bakke’s admission. However, it upheld affirmative action in principle, stating that race may be considered as one factor among others in admissions decisions (Knight, 2002). This case anticipated ongoing public and legal debates on affirmative action in subsequent decades.

Despite the historical exclusion of certain groups, affirmative action remains highly controversial in public, scientific and legislative discourse (Zalta, n.d.). As Sowell notes (2004, p. 9), “many – if not most – people who are for or against affirmative action are for or against the theory of affirmative action”, highlighting the importance of empirical evidence alongside theoretical arguments. Critics argue that affirmative action often benefits middle- and upper-class members of minority groups rather than those most in need (Čekić Marković, 2016), and that beneficiaries may be exposed to stigma or ridicule (Čekić Marković, 2016). Others contend that such policies signal that race, ethnicity or gender outweigh competence and academic achievement, potentially fostering feelings of injustice among majority-group students and reinforcing

3 We intentionally used the term “re-action” in the title as a brief wordplay capturing several dimensions discussed in the paper. Specifically, we aimed to condense the potential positive and negative outcomes of the implemented measure into a single expression: action (the measure itself), reaction (responses to it) and rejection (the possible refusal or contestation of the measure). The term “re-action” therefore serves as a conceptual shortcut that reflects these intertwined processes.

negative intergroup attitudes, even when legal inclusion is achieved (Arcidiacono et al., 2015). Additional concerns relate to academic motivation and performance. Some studies suggest that minority students admitted through affirmative action may feel discouraged when compared to peers with higher entrance scores, which could negatively affect achievement (Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Sowell, 2004). There are also claims that lower admission standards might reduce academic effort or lead to lower teaching standards if instruction is adjusted to accommodate weaker prior preparation (Arcidiacono et al., 2015).

When discussing the positive aspects of affirmative action, the primary rationale is that these measures in education benefit minority students. Studies indicate that the majority of those who enrol in universities through affirmative action measures successfully graduate and gain access to well-paying jobs and a higher quality of life (Allen et al., 2025). Interestingly, affirmative action can also positively influence students belonging to the majority social group, as they have an opportunity to learn and spend time in ethnically diverse environments (Gurin et al., 2002; Holzer & Neumark, 2006). Moreover, “research shows that ethnic diversity contributes to improving the quality of education” (Čekić Marković, 2016, p. 56). In addition, interactions with different racial, linguistic, ethnic and other groups are associated with cognitive development in individuals, unlike interactions within homogeneous social groups (Antonio et al., 2004; Zalta, n.d.).

Education of Roma People in Serbia

The limited availability of data on Roma students makes it challenging to accurately assess their situation in Europe. While existing data indicate that the participation of Roma children in education has improved over time, disparities in educational attainment persist (OECD, 2020). In many countries, Roma individuals are more likely to experience poverty, hunger, unemployment and limited education (OECD, 2020). Ongoing discrimination and the lack of inclusivity in most education systems contribute to many young Roma leaving school prematurely (Milutinović & Simunović, 2024; OECD, 2020). In Serbia, only 76% of Roma children attend the mandatory preschool preparatory programme (Babović, 2022). While 92% of Roma children enrol in primary school, only 64% complete it (Babović, 2022). Their enrolment decreases with higher, non-compulsory levels of education: 28% of Roma children enrol in secondary school, of whom 61% complete it (Babović, 2022). When it comes to higher education (HE) for the 2023/2024 academic year, Roma students accounted for only 0.2% (460 students) of the total active student population (249,768), while the number of Roma graduates that year was 35, or just 0.1% (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2024).

Numerous regulations in the Republic of Serbia guarantee the right to education for Roma people at all levels, including HE. Equal access is ensured through enrolment regulations at state universities, which prohibit discrimination based on “gender, race, marital status, skin color, language, religion, political beliefs, national, social, or ethnic origin, disability, or any other similar basis, status, or circumstance” (Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2019, p. 1). Serbian HE institutions are required to implement affirmative action measures through quota systems aimed at improving the status of students from vulnerable social groups, including persons with disabilities, citizens who completed secondary education abroad, and members of the Roma national minority (Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2019). Under these measures, the government determines the annual number of budget-funded students, with places for affirmative action candidates deducted from self-funded or total budget-funded slots (Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2019). Applicants under affirmative measures take the same entrance exams as other candidates but are ranked on a separate list with a limited number of positions. Importantly, candidates from minority groups may choose whether to apply under affirmative measures. Students admitted through affirmative action retain budget-funded status if they earn at least 36 ECTS per year, compared to 48 ECTS required of the general student population, and may study for up to three times the standard programme duration, versus twice the duration for other students (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2021). Although studies are primarily conducted in Serbian, examinations and academic work may be completed in a minority language in accordance with institutional statutes (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2021). Additionally, up to 10% of state scholarships, student loans and accommodation capacities are reserved for students from vulnerable groups (Čekić Marković, 2016). However, data from 2007/2008 to 2009/2010 indicate that Roma students received significantly fewer scholarships than other minority groups, such as students with disabilities (Čekić Marković, 2016). Beyond state programmes, additional support is provided by local governments and NGOs, including the Roma Education Fund (Radu, 2021).

Although these measures are extremely beneficial, and numerous findings highlight progress in inclusive education (Kovač-Cerović et al., 2016; Kovač-Cerović, 2013; Kuzmanov & Marković, 2021), Roma students remain underrepresented in HE in Serbia (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2021). Thus, it becomes evident that although necessary conditions for achieving equal opportunities have been established in Serbian HE, “this process is not complete and requires further regulatory definition, addressing the social dimension of the issue, and ultimately defining a financial framework” (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2021, p. 19).

Striving for equity in education is crucial not only for the individuals who benefit but also for the education system as a whole. Equity in education refers to the system's ability to provide quality education to diverse students regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, living environment or social group (Pavlović Babić & Baucal, 2013). It is essential for students to feel that they have similar opportunities for success in life. Moreover, equity in education can contribute to economic development, as involving a larger number of children in quality education can lead to a skilled and professionally capable population in the future (Pavlović Babić & Baucal, 2013).

Research Questions

According to studies about intergroup contact, it is essential for people from different social groups to interact in order to bridge gaps between “us” and “others” (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Although not sufficient on its own, increased intergroup contact has shown in the past that it is possible to gradually reduce conflicts rooted in historical divisions. In order to promote equality and reduce tensions, structural measures that ensure equal access to quality education, employment opportunities and housing are necessary. This underscores the importance of initiatives like school desegregation, affirmative action and other diversity-promoting policies (Pettigrew et al., 2011). In order to determine the degree to which affirmative measures in Serbia have helped this case, the main goal of the present research is to determine the intensity and direction of the attitudes of students of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad towards affirmative action for students of the Roma population. The following research questions were established:

1. What is the degree of familiarity of students with the education policy of affirmative action at the university level of education?
2. What attitudes do students have towards the education policy of affirmative action at the university level of education?
3. What actions would students be willing to implement regarding the education policy of affirmative action at the university level of education?
4. Is there a correlation between the level of social distance towards Roma and the degree of familiarity, attitudes and actions of students regarding the education policy of affirmative action at the university level of education?
5. Is there a correlation between the gender of students and the degree of familiarity, attitudes and actions of students regarding the education policy of affirmative action at the university level of education?

Method

Participants

The research involved 190 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad. A convenience sample was used, consisting of participants who volunteered to take part in the survey. The study programmes included were: English Language and Literature (15.9%), History (4.6%), Pedagogy (16.4%), Psychology (14.9%), Social Work (19.5%),

Sociology (15.9%), Serbian Philology (7.2%) and Philosophy (5.6%). Out of the sample, 72.8% of the participants identified as female, 23.1% as male and 4.1% did not wish to share this information. The age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 51 years, with an average of 21.5 years. As many as 172 respondents declared that their nationality is Serbian, while the rest of the sample belonged to the following ethnic groups: Croats, Hungarians, Roma, Slovaks or refused to state their nationality (which is permitted according to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2021), Article 47, “no one is obliged to declare their nationality”).

Instruments

The data collection employed a battery of surveys and attitude measurements. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of demographic characteristics (four items regarding gender, age, nationality and study group). In order to assess the closeness of participants to the Roma ethnic minority, a modified Bogardus Social Distance Scale was used (Bogardus, 1993), including seven items, i.e., seven types of relationships arranged by closeness across five ethnic groups (Serbs, Hungarians, Croats, Roma and Russians). The participants evaluated the acceptability of each relationship for each ethnic group. A score of one point was assigned for willingness to accept a particular relationship, with a maximum of 7 points per ethnic group, indicating the smallest social distance, and a minimum of 0 points, indicating the greatest social distance. In order to assess the intensity and direction of the students' attitudes towards affirmative measures for Roma students, a self-constructed Affirmative Measures Scale was developed. Based on findings from a prior pilot study, the questionnaire included 22 questions divided into three sections: Experiences and familiarity with affirmative measures (including six items, e.g., “Have you met anyone who has used affirmative measures during university?”), Attitudes towards affirmative measures (13 items, e.g., “Affirmative measures negatively affect my chances of getting a place in a student dormitory”), and Actions regarding affirmative measures (three items, e.g., “If you were the Minister of Education, what

would you do about the affirmative measures for students of Roma national minority?”).

Research Design

Prior to the research, a pilot study was conducted on a convenience sample using the focus group method. The pilot study included 12 students, age-diverse but homogeneous in student status, divided into two gender-balanced groups of six, with a moderator present. Each one-hour session was audio-recorded and supplemented with notes. The discussion protocol consisted of 11 questions structured according to the funnel principle and organised into three thematic areas: familiarity with affirmative measures, attitudes towards these measures, and possible actions or alternatives. The transcripts were analysed using a combined inductive-deductive coding approach, with codes verified by frequency. Ten codes were identified, including familiarity with vulnerable groups, “symbolic racism”, i.e., stereotypes towards Roma people, limited knowledge of affirmative measures, beliefs about social stratification, personal economic interest, perceived positive effects, feelings of inferiority, perceived risks of corruption or misuse, and alternative solutions for Roma educational integration. The most frequent themes informed the questionnaire items measuring attitudes and beliefs, while less frequent but relevant codes guided the inclusion of items on knowledge, personal experience and perceived risks. Thus, the pilot study provided the empirical foundation for the quantitative instrument used in the main research.

The recruitment of participants was opportunistic and took place in March 2023 during regular university classes. The data were collected in person, using a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that was distributed at the beginning of a scheduled lecture. The students were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation and were asked individually to complete the questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes. Before completing it, all of the participants received information about the study and signed an informed consent form, which emphasised anonymity and the exclusive scientific use of the data. The research was carried out among full-time undergraduate students at the Faculty of Philosophy. All of the students present in the selected lectures were invited to participate. Out of the 201 students who were invited, 195 agreed to participate, resulting in a final sample of 190 respondents. The sample therefore includes students from various humanities and social science study programmes offered at the Faculty of Philosophy.

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Descriptive statistics were used for Research Questions 1–3. Responses to the open-ended question in Research Question 3 were thematically coded. Pearson correlations examined relationships between social distance, familiarity and attitudes towards affirmative measures (Research Question 4). Independent samples t-tests assessed gender differences in familiarity, attitudes and intended actions related to affirmative action (Research Question 5).

Results

Research Question 1 deals with determining the degree of familiarity with the education policy of affirmative action at the university level of education. Most of the participants have heard the term “affirmative action” (84.5%), although fewer of them actually know what is meant by it (68.6%). These questions were followed by a short definition of affirmative action, in order for the participants to understand the rest of the questionnaire. Only 13% of the respondents reported that they had personally used affirmative action measures during their studies. This indicates that a relatively small portion of the sample has direct experience with such measures. In contrast, 61.7% stated that they know someone who has used affirmative action during their studies. This suggests that, although few respondents have personally relied on these measures, a majority are familiar with them through peers or their social environment. A large number of students believe that affirmative action can be abused (75.1%).

With Research Question 2, we intended to understand the attitudes of students towards this education policy. The respondents mostly agree that members of the Roma community have equal chances to enrol in university (see Table 1). The largest number of respondents agree that there is a need for state intervention in enrolling Roma students in university, enrolling in the next academic year and enrolling in the student dormitory, as well as obtaining student scholarships and loans. The items in the rest of the questionnaire were intended to assess how affirmative action affects the respondents: is there a fear that it will in some way jeopardise their chances of enrolling in university, in general, or the next academic year, and enrolling in the student dormitory, as well as obtaining a student scholarship/loan? Again, the respondents overwhelmingly disagreed. Further questions concern the respondents’ opinions on how affirmative action affects them, as well as students of Roma nationality. The largest percentage of the respondents neither agree nor disagree that affirmative action has a positive impact on their studies, while a large percentage believe that it has a positive impact on Roma students.

Table 1*Attitudes towards affirmative action*

Question	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree
1. Roma have the same chances to enrol in university as the rest of the population.	36.3%	13.2%	50.5%
2. State institutions should help the Roma community to equalise their chances for university enrolment.	7.3%	12.7%	80%
3. State institutions should help the Roma community to equalise their chances of enrolling in the next year of university.	12.1%	15.8%	72.1%
4. State institutions should help the Roma community to equalise their chances of enrolling in a student dormitory.	11.9%	18.1%	70%
5. State institutions should help the Roma community to equalise their chances of receiving student scholarships and loans.	10%	11.6%	78.4%
6. Affirmative measures negatively affect my chances of enrolling in the desired studies.	65.8%	18.4%	15.8%
7. Affirmative measures negatively affect my chances of enrolling in the next year of studies.	74.7%	18.4%	6.9%
8. Affirmative measures negatively affect my chances of getting a place in a student dormitory.	65.8%	23.2%	11%
9. Affirmative measures negatively affect my chances of getting a student scholarship/loan.	66.9%	20%	13.1%
10. Affirmative measures positively affect my studies.	17.9%	67.4%	14.7%
11. Affirmative action has a positive impact on Roma students (e.g., graduating from university can provide them with access to better-paying jobs).	11.5%	11.6%	76.9%
12. Affirmative action has a negative impact on Roma students (e.g., they may be discriminated against for enrolling in university through affirmative action).	49%	29.5%	21.5%
13. Affirmative action for Roma students is fair to the rest of the population.	19.6%	28%	52.4%

With Research Question 3, we endeavoured to understand what actions students would be ready to undertake regarding the education policy of affirmative action for the Roma population at institutions of HE, under the hypothetical situation that respondents find themselves in the role of decision makers in education. Descriptive values are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Actions regarding affirmative measures*

Question	N	Answer	Frequency	%
If you were the Minister of Education, what would you do about the affirmative measures for students of Roma national minority?	190	I would keep it	126	66.3
		I would abolish it	12	6.3
		I am not sure	52	27.4
If you were the Minister of Education, would you change the way of implementation of affirmative measures for students of Roma national minority?	190	Yes	47	24.7
		No	37	19.5
		I am not sure	106	55.8

Note. N - number of respondents; % - percent.

There was one open-ended question (“If your previous answer is yes, how would you change the way of implementation of this education policy?”), to which 36 answers were received (Table 3). These answers were then coded, resulting in nine codes into which we can categorise the answers and parts of the answers (since some respondents listed more than one suggestion).

Table 3*Coded answers for alternative ways of implementing affirmative action*

Code	Frequency	%
Focus on the earlier stages of education for Roma students.	8	24.24
Affirmative action should depend on the material income of students, not on their nationality.	5	15.15
Reduce the number of places for students who enrol in university through affirmative action.	5	15.15
Raise awareness of the importance of education for members of the Roma community because these measures are not used.	3	9.09
Raise awareness of the reasons for the existence of affirmative action measures among the majority population so that discrimination does not occur.	3	9.09
Eliminate any possibility of abuse of these measures.	3	9.09
Add budget-financed spots specifically for marginalised groups, so that the majority population does not “lose” anything in enrolling in university.	2	6.06
Increase the number of places for students who enrol in university through affirmative action education policies.	2	6.06
More research by competent institutions on this topic.	2	6.06

Note. % - percent.

In order to determine the degree of correlation between variables, an analysis of intercorrelations of variables was performed. Using Pearson’s

correlation coefficient, a negative correlation was found between social distance and knowledge of what affirmative action is ($r = -.15, p < 0.05$). This means that respondents with a greater social distance towards the Roma national minority knew less about affirmative action. No statistically significant relationships were found between social distance and the remaining indicators of familiarity with affirmative measures, hearing about affirmative action, personal use of affirmative measures during studies, knowing someone who used them, or perceiving the possibility of misuse. Although some intercorrelations appear between the familiarity variables themselves (e.g., having heard about affirmative action is associated with having used it during studies, $r = -.20, p < .01$, and with knowing someone who used it, $r = .15, p < .05$), these are expected patterns that reflect internal consistency of the familiarity construct.

The relationship between social distance and attitudes towards affirmative action in education was also examined. Higher social distance was negatively correlated with support for state assistance to Roma students in university enrolment ($r = -.26, p < .01$), student housing ($r = -.28, p < .01$), and scholarships or loans ($r = -.26, p < .01$), indicating lower endorsement of institutional support. In contrast, social distance was positively correlated with perceptions of personal costs of affirmative action, including reduced chances of university admission ($r = .21, p < .01$), access to dormitories ($r = .21, p < .01$), and scholarships or loans ($r = .25, p < .01$). Higher social distance was also associated with weaker beliefs in the positive effects of affirmative action for Roma ($r = -.40, p < .01$) and lower perceptions of its fairness to the general population ($r = -.29, p < .01$). No associations were found between social distance and intended actions. Overall, greater social distance was linked to more sceptical attitudes towards affirmative action, which was perceived less as an equalising mechanism and more as a personal disadvantage.

Independent samples t-tests revealed gender differences in attitudes towards affirmative action (Research Question 5). Male respondents expressed more negative attitudes overall, while women showed stronger agreement with institutional support for Roma, including equalising chances for university enrolment ($t(180) = 2.38, p = .00$), progression to the next study year ($t(180) = 1.90, p = .01$), and access to scholarships or loans ($t(180) = 2.09, p = .05$), as well as with the positive impact of affirmative action on Roma students ($t(180) = 2.64, p = .01$). Men more strongly endorsed statements emphasising negative personal consequences, such as reduced chances of enrolment, housing and financial support. No gender differences were found in familiarity with or intended actions related to affirmative action, nor for the following items: "Roma have the same chances to enrol in university as the rest of the population", "State institutions

should help the Roma community to equalise their chances of enrolling in a student dormitory”, “Affirmative measures have a positive impact on my studies” and “Affirmative measures have a negative impact on Roma students”.

Discussion

Based on the data, university students’ familiarity with affirmative action is very high (Research Question 1). Most of the respondents had heard of the term (84.5%), and over two-thirds reported knowing what it represents (68.6%). As no comparable prior studies were identified, these findings cannot be directly contrasted with earlier research. The present research contributes to knowledge about students’ perspectives on affirmative measures, although caution should be exercised in generalising the findings beyond the context of the study. The sample comprises students from humanities study programmes, which could provide students with substantial background knowledge about mechanisms designed to support equity in education. At the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, several courses address social inclusion, diversity and inclusive education (e.g., Social Inclusion and Education, International Education and Educational Policies, Sociology of Education) (Filozofski fakultet, 2018). These courses aim to develop critical understanding of inclusive education and access for all, which likely explains the high familiarity with affirmative action observed in this study (Filozofski fakultet, 2018). For example, the course Social Inclusion and Education introduces students to the key educational paradigms of the contemporary world and provides a foundational understanding of inclusive education. Upon completion, students are expected to critically analyse educational issues related to diversity and articulate informed views on the importance of accessible education for all (Filozofski fakultet, 2018).

The respondents also expressed predominantly positive attitudes towards affirmative measures (Research Question 2). Most supported state intervention to assist Roma students in higher education, including enrolment, progression, housing and financial support, while largely rejecting claims that such measures jeopardise their own studies. Regarding actions (Research Question 3), 66.3% supported the continuation of affirmative action at the university level. These findings diverge from prior studies reporting that affirmative action is often perceived as unfair by majority groups (Beaton & Tougas, 2001; Cancian, 1998; Oh et al., 2010). One possible explanation lies in the questionnaire design. When programmes are insufficiently explained, individuals may assume that beneficiaries receive excessive advantages or are unqualified, thus fostering negative reactions (Knight & Hebl, 2005). In the present study, a

definition of affirmative action preceded the attitude scale, which may have reduced misconceptions and influenced more positive responses (Knight & Hebl, 2005).

Research Question 4 examined associations between social distance towards Roma and students' familiarity, attitudes and actions regarding affirmative action. Greater social distance was linked to lower familiarity, reduced support for state intervention and stronger beliefs that affirmative action negatively affects one's studies, while no association was found with actions. These findings align with evidence that prejudice is related to opposition to affirmative action (Steinbugler et al., 2006). Finally, Research Question 5 explored gender differences. No differences emerged in familiarity or support for continuation, although women did express more positive attitudes towards affirmative action than men, which is consistent with earlier research (Beaton & Tougas, 2001; Haneš, 2012; Knight & Hebl, 2005).

Conclusions

Due to the small number of studies on affirmative action measures in our region, we find that the greatest significance of our research is that it is one of the first studies to examine the perception of affirmative measures in the HE context. The results indicate a greater need for informing and sensitising the general population on social inclusion policies. According to the data obtained, the emphasis in this regard should be on men and people with high social distance towards Roma. Education and exposure to diversity could contribute to greater solidarity and cooperation between members of the multicultural society in which we live. By building bridges between members of different ethnic groups, it is possible to reduce, and possibly eliminate, the barriers between the "us" and "the others".

The relevant literature identifies certain alternatives to affirmative action education policies. Although the general public would assume that affirmative action should be implemented according to socioeconomic status rather than race, ethnicity, disability or gender, research suggests that such programmes would not achieve the same results as programmes targeting racial and ethnic minorities (Cancian, 1998). Consequently, we present some alternatives that could be implemented alongside affirmative action policies, which could help increase social inclusion of the Roma community in HE. One suggestion is diversity training, which could be implemented at the university level. This is a type of programme specifically designed to enable students to interact positively, to reduce students' discrimination and prejudice towards groups who are

different from them, and to teach students how to work together successfully (The Ceceilyn Miller Institute, n.d.). Providing people with information about members of their out-group can reduce prejudice and stereotypes (Kalev et al., 2006). One meta-analysis (Bezrukova et al., 2016) found that diversity training was most effective when it was well developed and integrated into the curriculum, as opposed to giving just one lecture on diversity. Integrated training increases the likelihood that content will be supplemented and increases students' motivation to learn (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Another way to enhance social inclusion is the implementation of networking programmes. As Kalev et al. (2006) state, social isolation is the biggest problem for minority groups. To avoid this, it is possible to design networking and mentoring programmes that connect members of the majority with minority social groups. Networking programmes provide a space for members to meet and share information and career advice (Kalev et al., 2006). Although networking can occur without any organisational incentive, the potential of formal networking programmes should not be overlooked. On the other hand, mentoring programmes connect ambitious individuals with mentors for career advice and informal topics. In 1978, the prestigious management magazine *Harvard Business Review* published an article entitled "Everyone Who Makes It Has a Mentor", which indicates the great potential of mentoring (Kalev et al., 2006).

In addition to all of the above, there is a need for greater awareness of affirmative action education policies among the general population and marginalised groups. Informing the community about affirmative action can reduce prejudice and negative reactions to affirmative measures. Emphasising the value of diversity and creating positive discourse about affirmative action at the university level of education can be particularly effective in raising awareness among the majority population, especially if individuals see that they will indirectly benefit from its implementation (Knight & Hebl, 2005). Education policy makers often make decisions about programmes and actions in isolation from each other (Gulzar et al., 2020). We believe that affirmative action education policies can benefit from the aforementioned supportive programmes in order to be more effective in the integration of marginalised communities.

The main limitation of the present study is the insufficient representativeness of the convenience sample. The sample was imbalanced in terms of gender, age and nationality, with a disproportionately high number of female respondents (142 of 190), a concentration of participants aged 21–22 and a predominance of Serbian nationality (88.2%). These characteristics likely reflect the undergraduate student population from which the sample was drawn. Future research should include students across all levels of study, from multiple faculties

and with greater ethnic diversity. Despite these limitations, the sample meets the study's design criteria, and the findings should be interpreted within this specific research context.

Ethical Statement

This research formed part of the requirements for the author's Master's thesis. It was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for pedagogical research. The study was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the University of Belgrade, at the Department of Educational Policy, ensuring compliance with institutional guidelines for research involving human participants in educational settings.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request, subject to ethical considerations regarding the protection of research participants.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. When preparing this article, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5) on 22 January 2026 with the following prompt: "Please improve the academic style and clarity of the following text while preserving its original meaning." The tool was used for stylistic editing and language refinement of selected sections of the manuscript. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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