

Challenges due to European enlargement

The Eastern European Roma/ Asylum Seekers and Refugee

A lot of evidence has confirmed that the Roma ethnic group - one of the largest established ethnic minorities in Europe, dispersed across the whole continent, were for centuries subject of high levels of social exclusion and brutal persecution in different forms such as slavery, holocaust and pogroms through different countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

Through different periods of the European history we can observe that there have been many policies which have tried to address Romany issues, but often they have only worsened, or just changed the situation in a limited way, because of the policies had discriminatory attitudes built in to them.

Today the approximate figure of 7 million Roma in Central and Eastern Europe live in poverty, high level of illiteracy and marginalisation, beyond the remit supposedly of human rights, where the state's institution plays a role of encouraging and in some cases even rewarding discrimination and racist actions.

In the wider European context through the long duration of time the Romany community finds itself in a position of "anti-Roma sentiment" and rejection of "otherness". Such discriminatory attitudes are, in part, due to the process of building modern nation-states in Eastern Europe, a process based on the domination of national consolidation.(UNDP *The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe; Avoiding the Dependency Trap*"; Barany Zoltan, *The Roma of Eastern Europe*)

I can mention here that "the rejection of otherness" works not just in terms of the society but within the community as well. Contrary to expectations of Roma asylum seekers, Gypsy organisations in the UK haven't shown much sympathy, considering them as "poor foreigners that enjoy better opportunities than us" without thinking too much of the racism and discrimination that Roma face in Eastern Europe.

Recent EU expansion has given more citizens of Europe the right to move freely among all the member states. Roma were among

those taking advantage of this right in the hope of securing a safer and more prosperous future. This can be considered a good move for the economic migrants, but we also have to think what will happen with the victims of real persecution and racism: what will be the definition of the “victims of racism” in the new EU member states where some Roma were and still are persecuted despite the wonderful rhetoric of equal opportunities and individual and group rights?

Many of us know that national strategies for Roma inclusion in many Eastern states - have been drawn up to conform to EU guidelines but the policy is not yet practiced in favour of the Roma community, which remains largely unrepresented at every level, the quality of life remaining largely unchanged despite the positive reports of the token representation.

The state programmes aimed at integration have lacked real Roma participation in the design of the policies. Politically the Romany communities still remain marginalised and disenfranchised. Until this is changed and more Roma become effective partners in decision-making rather than consulting, the situation will continue to negate all that these communities have to offer.

Today Europe is facing the biggest challenge in stopping the huge numbers of human rights atrocities still occurring throughout the continent. Roma Asylum seekers have little power to produce the evidence that they need to prove the high levels of exclusion and violence. In some cases this is because they are economic migrants, but for others this is because the institutions in East Europe know how to cover their own racist actions, leaving no evidence.

Recommendations in brief:

- Human rights and the rights of minorities are one of the main requirements of any state that wants to join the EU. Greater efforts are needed to ensure the effective realisation of Roma’s human rights that is political, civil, social and economic.

- European policies must start with recognition of Roma as a European minority with a significant contribution to Europe. Public relations campaigns to promote tolerance, improve the

image of Roma and combat everyday prejudice should be launched. This should take place in both Eastern Europe and countries hosting asylum seekers and refugees.

- National policies of all European states must develop real social, economic and political strategies WITH Roma/Gypsies groups not FOR them, where Roma/Gypsy themselves are part of the process of inclusion not witnesses of it.

- Recommendations to promote Roma minority participation in the public life of every country have to be practiced. Roma have to be part of the decision-making not just advisers and consultants in public services and public administration.

- Equal opportunities in all areas of society have to start within schools, and employers and policy makers must be held responsible for the implementation of state and EU directives.

- Roma Asylum Seekers in the UK want to be part of the UK society, contributing positively to the society and to Europe, but we need access to be part of the process of our own integration.

It is necessary that the Roma voice be heard at all levels, and measures have to be taken to ensure equal participation. We can only build an integrated Europe through the equality of all citizens.

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