

Opportunities and Challenges - EU Enlargement and the Roma/Gypsy Diaspora

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The prospective enlargement of the European Union provides a unique opportunity to develop policies to address the increasingly critical situation of Roma minorities in Eastern Europe.^[1] As a political institution, the activities of EU need to be based not only on an accurate understanding of Roma people and their circumstances, but also on objective analysis of political conditions. This represents a considerable challenge due to the way "Roma" has evolved as a policy paradigm at the European level, characterised by the down-playing of social, economic and political complexity in favour of a superficial focus on discrimination (culture), which increasingly takes Roma/Gypsy people and their issues out of their national context in order to promote a symbolic coincidence between a notional European "Roma" people and the political re-unification of Europe.

A European Issue

Roma/Gypsy populations have been identified in almost every European country and so are of particular interest to supra-national European political institutions. The manifest disadvantages of Roma/Gypsy communities throughout the continent appear to point to common limitations of nation-states in tackling these problems, and to open an opportunity for a superior form of trans-national governance. Prior to 1990 "European" institutions paid little attention to Roma/Gypsies, however this has changed with "transition" states becoming members of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. ^[2] Enlargement of the EU has progressed more slowly, but in 1997 accession negotiations were formally begun with (amongst others) Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

The concept of Roma/Gypsies as a "European" issue was formally acknowledged in 1993, in Council of Europe Resolution 1203 which declared Gypsies to be "a true European minority". However, treating the Roma/Gypsy diaspora as a specific political entity may obscure the considerable diversity of Roma/Gypsy communities and their circumstances.

Significant disparity exists between East and West Europe in both the absolute and relative sizes of national Roma/Gypsy populations. Furthermore, there are profound historical, social, economic, linguistic and cultural differences amongst Roma/Gypsies in the different halves of the continent, as well as considerable diversity within each of these regions, between the Roma/Gypsy populations of neighbouring states and even between Roma/Gypsy communities within individual countries. As the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities has noted, Roma/Gypsies "comprise an extremely heterogeneous set of communities that are perhaps best understood in their own specific circumstances." ^[3]

Though it is often claimed that "the Romani language [is] the language of the Gypsies", there is no common tongue within the diaspora as "there are between 50-100 dialects. Romani dialects are not mutually comprehensible except at very basic levels, such as words relating to food and family." ^[4] Only around 2.5m of Europe's putative 8m Roma/Gypsies speak Romani, whereas almost all are fluent in their national languages. ^[5] Roma/Gypsy lifestyles vary enormously, from large urban communities through to small itinerant groups, and Roma/Gypsies can be found at all points along the spectrum of interaction with mainstream society, from close integration to extreme isolation. There is no common trans-European Roma/Gypsy culture. The Director of the Gypsy Research Centre (Paris), Jean-Pierre Liegois, considers Roma/Gypsies to represent a "mosaic of diversified groups". ^[6]

The Contemporary Political Significance of Roma/Gypsies

Roma/Gypsy diversity leads to considerable variety in the policy needs, aspirations, and political capacities of different Roma/Gypsy communities. There are also important differences in the wider economic, social, political and cultural contexts of the countries within which Roma/Gypsy populations live.

In particular, there is a profound difference in the political significance of the Roma/Gypsy issue between the western and eastern states of Europe. In the West, Gypsies represent a peripheral issue rarely receiving national governmental attention. In many East European (nation) states, the Roma issue goes to the heart of the meaning of the state with important implications for the economic, social and political development of individual countries. This discrepancy is only partially due to the relatively greater size of eastern Roma populations. Other factors include the nature and scale of objective policy problems; the political culture of the region; and the emergence of explicit Roma political activity.

Objective conditions

Conditions in which most East European Roma live are unquestionably poorer than their non-Roma neighbours in numerous areas of life. Rising Roma numbers appear to result from better pre- and post-natal care rather than increased longevity. [7] Though infant mortality rates are still around twice that of their non-Roma neighbours, this represents a considerable improvement from the immediate post-war period when 10% of Roma children died in early infancy. The living conditions of many Roma are constrained by isolated, poor quality and/or segregated housing, problems exacerbated in the 1990s by the declining security of tenure. Along with many other poor people, many Roma have found it hard to maintain properties or pay rent, mortgages or utility bills. This has led to evictions, increasing homelessness, internal displacement and increasing tensions with local authorities, which have been a significant contributory factor in Roma seeking asylum abroad.

Education is widely seen as providing a solution to Roma marginalisation. However, the gap between Roma educational attainment and the national average remains enormous and has even widened. Despite a steady growth in the number of Roma pupils completing primary school, the vocational education chosen by the vast majority of Roma secondary school students has lost its value as education systems become increasingly academically oriented. Educational segregation has intensified in the form of remedial schools, and separate Roma classes and even educational institutions. [8] As a group, Roma suffer conspicuous disadvantages in relation to the criminal justice system. Roma are often the main victims of racial violence and discrimination, but are also grossly over-represented amongst the region's prison population.

These problems are partially related to the decline in the quality and accessibility of public services as a consequence of the rolling-back of the ubiquitous socialist state. The introduction of a market economy has severely constrained the ability of many Roma people to cope with change by depriving them of income and employment. A recent study by the World Bank found extensive impoverishment. Roma unemployment, which is long-term and structural, ranges from 45% to 70% with some communities experiencing 100% unemployment. [9] Enormous investment is required to ensure that Roma people can enjoy similar living conditions and opportunities as their non-Roma neighbours. As Nicolae Gheorghe and Andrzej Mirga note, there is a "danger of [Roma] evolving into an ethno-class or underclass and thus perpetuat[ing] its marginality in society. Such a development could lead to deadly conflicts with majority society." [10]

Political culture

The primary responsibility for ensuring equality of opportunity and for improving the living conditions of their Roma citizens falls on national governments. However, post-Communist states operate under considerable economic and political constraints. They are far poorer than their western counterparts and have experienced deep recession since the mid-1980s. Even where production has recovered to 1989 levels, economies have been restructured to encourage competitive capital accumulation rather than to achieve full employment or the elimination of poverty. [11] The introduction of pluralist political systems has intensified competition for scarce governmental resources and attention. As Janos Bathory predicted in 1989, the Roma issue has fallen on the domestic political agenda, [12] even as it rises internationally.

Governmental activity is limited by recognition that the fundamentals of the contemporary "Roma Question" (un/under employment, poverty, poor housing, health, and educational disadvantage, social tensions) are essentially the same as they were 50 or 100 years ago. Governments have to contend with the legacy of Communist policies towards Roma, the gains of which proved less than anticipated and were swiftly undermined during the change of system. The old problem of public antipathy towards public spending on Roma is exacerbated in political systems based on public scrutiny of government expenditure. [13]

Given these constraints, post-Communist Roma policies have been characterised by "crisis-management" and have sought low-cost solutions (such as public work schemes, micro-investment in agricultural and entrepreneurial initiatives) and the promotion of a tiny "middle-class". The main innovation has been the redefinition of Roma as an ethnic group, increasingly supported by a minority rights framework. The promotion of Roma "difference" over "equality" helps reduce expectations by emphasising the abstraction of "cultural development". [14]

The ethnification of objective policy problems places them within the contentious arena of national identity politics. This not only constructs a barrier to societal solidarity along the lines of "I'm not a Gypsy, why should I help *them*?", but also touches upon deeply-rooted anxieties about the fate of the (majority) "nation".

The emergence of Roma politics

The minority rights framework responds to the recognition that policy can be made more effective by including Roma within the policy-making and implementation process. Yet, in creating a separate agenda and path of development for Roma politics, it disconnects Roma people and their concerns from the wider political scene. [15] The strategy entails increasing risks. In embracing an explicit Roma politics, states hope to control its development but, by stimulating political consciousness, the aspirations and capacity of Roma people to demand greater concessions increase.

Furthermore, Roma politics is not a product of the top-down minority rights discourse but is a reflection of the necessity of Roma people to engage with extra-communal authorities to secure the benefits and protections of modern society. Roma activists need to win improvements for their "constituents" through pursuing all available political avenues. Thus, Roma politics evolves in accordance with the opportunities provided by the wider political environment. To avoid political crisis governments must maintain a balance between expectations and concessions. This is no easy task given the scale of objective needs (potential demands), constraints on policy, international considerations and an increasingly emotive discourse of Roma "national" emancipation.

Today we are witnessing the earliest stage of what is likely to be a sustained political phenomenon. Roma populations confront considerable objective difficulties in constructing a coherent political lobby - as a result, pressure on the state has been limited thus far. The

encouragement of Roma political ethnocentrism places an obstacle to solidarity between Roma and non-Roma and means that, as a minority, any coherent Roma mobilisation can be countered by elements from mainstream society. East European societies face the danger of a growing, frustrated, impoverished and politicised minority seeking better living conditions within a zero-sum game of exclusive ethno-political identities.

The Role of the European Union

The ethnification of deepening social divisions partly reflects the inability of national governments to cope effectively with all the political and economic challenges of transition. The role of European institutions, particularly the European Union, is to break the impasse within individual states that is obstructing the development of effective policies towards Roma minorities. Therefore, the EU must not be seduced by the romantic abstraction of a mythical European Gypsy "nation", but must base its activities on the objective analysis of political conditions. [16]

Historically, central Gypsy policies have foundered at the local level and the engagement of European institutions adds yet another, remoter layer to the policy pyramid. EU activities should be based on a country-by-country approach ensuring initiatives are appropriate to the particular needs of different Roma populations and take account of the conditions and traditions of each country. European institutions cannot possess the knowledge and expertise required to understand the diversity of Roma communities and the complexity of their specific situations. The EU must rely on local experience (Roma and non-Roma) and facilitate domestic consensus.

As important as flexibility and sensitivity to local conditions, the EU needs to provide the resources required to make meaningful improvements in Roma people's lives. The investment required to address the objective problems outlined above is so immense as to be beyond the scope of national governments. This produces a culture of low expectations, limiting political commitment. Money is not the "solution" as societies also need to address cultural and legal problems of inclusion and anti-discrimination. However, money is a pre-condition for all these things. Only through provision of the means to address objective conditions can East European societies be realistically expected to undertake the painful process of *effectively* tackling anti-Roma prejudices and discriminatory practises.

Unlike organisations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE (which have pan-European membership), EU practise has developed along these two key lines of local sensitivity and resource provision. The primary forum with East European states is through the accession negotiations, where Roma issues are dealt with as part of the "political criteria", on a state-by-state basis. Since 1997, Roma have attracted increasing attention in the annual "Regular Reports". Each report is based on an analysis of specific national circumstances and the process allows for (limited) dialogue between states and the EU. However, the political criteria are vague and there is some risk of the "Roma issue" becoming a source of confusion as enlargement draws nearer. [17] Furthermore, thought needs to be given to the post-accession environment and the need to maintain flexibility and national focus within a new framework. The EU already provides financial support for Roma-related initiatives through the PHARE programme though, to date, sums have been small. [18] Such support needs to be massively increased, though quite by how much is unknown as east European governments are understandably anxious not to reveal the scale of need whilst they seek membership. As the OSCE High Commissioner on Minorities has noted, policies should be based on "objective analysis of community need", but also should be sufficiently sensitive that "intra-community tensions [Roma - non-Roma] are not exacerbated by (the appearance of) unfavourable treatment for one group over others." [19] Therefore, initiatives should be encouraged which cut

across ethnic lines and address wider problems of disadvantage and social exclusion. Methods for the effective and transparent use of resources are needed and greater emphasis placed on outputs (income and employment levels, educational attainment, constructed houses and roads) rather than, as is currently the case, on inputs (money spent, legal reforms, new administrative structures).

The power of the European Roma policy paradigm

As a supra-national institution the EU has far greater legal and political authority than trans-national organisations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, as well as the capacity to allocate considerable material resources. Therefore, the EU's relationship with Roma issues is qualitatively different both in respect of effecting change and in the wider political consequences of its activities.

Unfortunately, the EU recently appears to have succumbed to the totalising discourse of the emerging European Roma policy paradigm. This has resulted from the EU uncritically following the Council of Europe and the OSCE, both of which treat Roma issues outside of their national context and interpret domestic situations increasingly in isolation from the distinct and complex factors that determine conditions in individual countries. Over the last decade, the Roma-related work of the two trans-national organisations has demonstrated the difficulties inherent in processing a rapidly expanding body of information about different Roma populations and their circumstances and has showed a pronounced tendency towards simplifying issues by increasingly defining the "Roma Question" as essentially one of culture - the attitude and behaviour of non-Roma to Roma.

The process is exemplified by the EU's adoption, in 1999, of the superficial and contradictory "Guiding principles for improving the situation of the Roma" in candidate countries, drafted by the Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies and the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities. [20] Furthermore, since the Finnish EU presidency in 2000 it has become a tradition for the presiding state to convene a seminar of international Roma activists and administrators to discuss European "Roma issues". [21]

While it is understandable that policy makers in the EU may want to take advice from other European institutions, they need to appreciate that the EU has a fundamentally different role to play. The EU has the power to address the causes of contemporary problems (unemployment, poor living conditions, costs of reform) rather than their symptoms (discrimination and social tensions). It also has to be sensitive to the charge of favouring one group over another, rather than benefiting societies as a whole. Inappropriate intervention on an issue as sensitive as that of Roma is likely to create political problems for the EU by allowing Eurosceptics to attract popular support by claiming that the EU is acting as an imperialist power and using the Roma to undermine "majority" national identities. In other words, the EU needs to reject the simplistic conception of the European Roma policy paradigm and appreciate that its own acceptance and the construction of a European identity will not be served by promoting "Roma" as a symbol of Europeanisation, but by demonstrating its capacity to enable societies to overcome domestic divisions and enjoy prosperity and social cohesion.

Conclusion

The opportunity for the EU is to establish equality of opportunity through facilitating significant improvement in the life chances and living conditions of Roma people and communities in accordance with their actual circumstances and in a way that is widely perceived as being of benefit to all within their home societies. The challenge is to avoid the temptation to construct separate policy and administrative structures for Roma minorities and to prevent the further disintegration and ethnic fragmentation of east European societies by reversing the trend toward segregation and exclusive ethno-politics. May wisdom and humanity prevail.

Footnotes

[1] This paper makes the arbitrary distinction between East European "Roma" and West European "Gypsies" in order to emphasise the difference in political conditions in the different halves of the continent. Of course, Roma, Gypsies, Romanies, Sinti etc. are known by a variety of different terms, under-lining the difficulties inherent in attempting to construct a single political identity for all those within this notional European diaspora.

[2] For a description and analysis of the burgeoning European institutional engagement with Roma/Gypsy issues see M. Kovats, "The Emergence of European Roma Policy" in W. Guy (ed.), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, 2001.

[3] *Roma (Gypsies) in the CSCE Region*, Report of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, 1993, p.3.

[4] D. Kenrick, "Inflections in Flux", *Transitions Online*, April 2000, p.2.

Despite thirty years of attempts to create a standard Romani, the linguist Dr Ian Hancock acknowledges that "progress has been slow". Amongst the reasons identified for this are "a great many and widely differing dialects of the language", "lack of communication amongst the various Romani groups" and the fact that "not all Rom... everywhere will ever learn, or be disposed to learn such a dialect". I. Hancock, "Standardization and Ethnic Defence in Emergent Non-Literate Societies" in T. Acton and M. Dauphanis (Eds), *Language, Blacks and Gypsies*, Whitting & Birch, London, 1999, pp.9-23.

[5] Kenrick, p.2; "the only monolingual Roma [i.e. Romani speakers] are children of pre-school age" P. Bakker, H. Kyuchukov (eds), *What is the Romani Language?*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, 2000, p.41

[6] J-P. Liegeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, Council of Europe Press, Strasbourg, 1994, p.61.

[7] A. Faludi, *Ciganyok*, Kossuth, Budapest, 1963, p.12. Recent surveys have found Roma life expectancy to be 10-15 years below the national average. See, *Health Needs of the Roma Population in the Czech and Slovak Republics*, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, May 2000, pp.30-2; L. Puporka, Zs. Zadori, *The Health Status of the Romanies in Hungary*, Roma Press Centre, Budapest, 1998, p.11-15.

[8] For the most comprehensive and up-to-date review of the educational circumstances of Roma populations see *Denied a Future - the Right to Education of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller Children*, Save the Children, London, 2001

[9] D. Ringold, *Roma and the Transition in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges*, World Bank, Washington DC, 2000, pp.10-16.

[10] Nicolae Gheorghe is a leading Roma intellectual and currently head of the OSCE's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues. A. Mirga, N. Gheorghe, *The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: a Policy Paper*, Project on Ethnic Relations, Princeton, 1997, p.35.

[11] Y. Atal (ed.), *Poverty in Transition and Transition in Poverty*, Berghahn Book, New York, 1999, pp.5-8.

[12] Dr Bathory was the "Gypsy expert" for the last Communist government in Hungary and developed the country's political strategy towards the Roma population, which continues to this day. Under the first post-Communist government he was instrumental in drawing up the Law on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities as deputy-head of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities and in 2000 was appointed its President. See, M. Kovats, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Three Faces of 'Dialogue'- the Development of Roma Politics in Hungary", *Contemporary Politics* vol.3 no.1, 1997, pp.55-72.

[13] In Hungary, research in 1980 found that whilst most respondents agreed with the aims of Communist social policy towards the Roma, its implementation had actually increased antipathy

amongst certain sections of the population. By 1993, only 15% of respondents agreed that "more help should be given to Gypsies than to non-Gypsies" whilst 89% agreed that "the Gypsies' problems could be solved if they would finally start to work". These findings raise a serious question-mark over the viability of adopting an explicit policy of "positive discrimination", as has been the case in Hungary since 1995. F. Partos, "A cigány és nem cigány lakosság véleménye a főbb társadalmpolitika célkitűzésekről," *Szociológia*, 1980/1, 1-18; F. Eros, *Megismeres Eloítelek, Identitás, Új Mandatum*, Budapest, 1998, p.240.

[14] Hungary is the most advanced of the East European countries in this respect having started the process in the late Communist period. See, M. Kovats, "Politics, Equality, Difference - Roma in Hungary", in W. Guy, 2001. This process is also emerging at the European level with the Chair of the Council of Europe's Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies proposal to "replace the socio-economic image of gypsies by a cultural definition". *Council of Europe Report On gypsies in Europe*, ADOC 6733, 1403-7/1/93-4-E Doc.6733.

[15] This is demonstrated in Hungary where 3 Roma MPs sat in Parliament in 1994 but, following the rolling out of the minority self-government system, this number fell to zero in 1998.

[16] For a good discussion of the limitation of claims for international Roma representation see, V. Popov, *The Roma - a Nation without a State? Historical Background and Contemporary Tendencies*, Paper given at the Association of Studies in Nationalism Annual Conference (Paris), 1 July 2001.

[17] See W. Guy, "Aspects of Romani Identity and Post-Communist Policy", in W. Guy (ed.) *Roma and Postcommunism*, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001. It is unlikely that the circumstances of Roma minorities, in itself, could represent an obstacle to membership of the EU as countries such as Spain and Greece successfully became EU members despite the (often worse) circumstances of their large Roma/Gypsy populations.

[18] Between 1993 and 1999 only 20m ECU was allocated to explicit Roma-related initiatives across six countries. *Enlargement Briefing - EU Support for Roma Communities in Central and Eastern Europe*, EU Directorate General for Enlargement, 1999, pp.14-24.

[19] *Roma (Gypsies) in the CSCE Region*, Report of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, 1993, p.12.

[20] *Report on the Situation of Roma in the OSCE Region*, Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, 2000, p.7 fn.

[21] *Press Release for the International Seminar on Roma Integration*, Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communication, Sweden, 20 April 2001.