

Future of Roma Policy in Europe, Brussels (στα αγγλικά)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT		Anna
KARAMANOU		
Member of the European Parliament Chairperson of the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities		

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Now that the EU opens its doors to the countries of Eastern Europe, it is also opening its doors to millions of Roma. They are a people who, after a millennium in Europe, have never fully assimilated and frequently suffer from discrimination and abuse.

The enlargement of the European Union provides a unique opportunity to develop policies to address the increasingly critical situation of Roma minorities in Eastern Europe. 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 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 populations have been identified in almost every European country and so they are of particular interest to supra-national European political institutions. The manifest disadvantages of Roma 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, however this has changed with "transition" states becoming members of the Council of Europe, the OSCE and certainly of the EU.

The concept of Roma as a "European" issue was formally acknowledged in 1993, in Council of Europe Resolution 1203 which declared them to be "a true European minority".

Significant disparity exists between East and West Europe in both the absolute and relative sizes of national Roma populations. Furthermore, there are profound historical, social, economic, linguistic and cultural differences amongst Roma in the different halves of the continent, as well as considerable diversity within each of these regions, between the Roma populations of neighbouring states and even between Roma communities within individual countries.

The Contemporary Political Significance of Roma

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

In particular, there is a profound difference in the political significance of the Roma issue between the western and eastern states of Europe. In the West, represent a peripheral issue rarely receiving national governmental attention. In many East European 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.

Objective conditions

Conditions in which most East European Roma live, are unquestionably poorer than their non-Roma neighbours in numerous areas of life. 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. 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.

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. Enormous investment is required to ensure that Roma people can enjoy similar living conditions and opportunities as their non-Roma neighbours.

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. The introduction of pluralist political systems has intensified competition for scarce governmental resources and attention. The Roma issue has fallen on the domestic political agenda, even as it rises internationally.

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.

The EU standpoint on the Roma issue is very clearly shown by its policies. Protection of minority rights is a part of the Copenhagen criteria, detailing obligations to be fulfilled by EU applicant countries. However, there are two major challenges in implementing this policy.

The first is the lack of sufficient political pressure concerning Roma rights.. EU officials criticize violations, but no concrete sanctions are planned. This applies especially for Italy (unequal laws) and Greece (police violence towards Roma people).

The other challenge concerns certain aspects of EU financial aid for supporting Roma development in the candidate countries. The divided sums have been relatively small – between 1993 and 1999 only 20m Euros was allocated to explicit Roma-related initiatives across six countries.

Still, the disappointing financial aid is not the main challenge in that area. On closer inspection of the list of funded projects, mainly initiatives concerning youth and culture, democratization and education can be found. Unluckily, there has been almost no attention to the economic aspects of Roma situation. The EU should define clear goals for the development of the Roma community, therefore forming the basis for result-oriented funding principles.

In this context, particular attention is paid to the situation of the Roma communities as these populations (around 6 million people in countries of Central and Eastern Europe) suffer from widespread prejudice and discrimination.

The European Parliament has made clear the commitment of the EU to this vulnerable category, particularly with regard to the applicant countries for EU membership, calling on the Council and the Commission to "enhance the ability of these countries to pass and implement laws aimed at countering discrimination against minorities."

With the European Union set to expand, there are fears in some Western European circles that EU enlargement eastward will be followed by a wave of undesired migrants, including large numbers of the region's estimated six million Roma.

We have seen in recent migration waves to a number of Western European countries that these Roma who were leaving their countries very often, were not the uneducated, illiterate, very poor Roma, it is rather the Roma middle class, because the others, they just do not have the possibility to leave their countries.

Roma who have sought asylum in the last few years in England, Canada, Germany, and elsewhere often have cited discrimination and fear of bodily harm as their motive for escape. Receiving countries, however, rule that the true motive is economic — and therefore grounds for denying asylum.

Those who fear a wave of Roma crossing national boundaries within the EU are focusing on the wrong issue. People should begin thinking of Roma as citizens of their home countries who should enjoy the same rights of

unfettered travel within the EU as any other citizens.

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 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. Economic resources are not the "solution" as societies also need to address cultural and legal problems of inclusion and anti-discrimination. Only by addressing these problems can East European societies be realistically expected to *effectively* tackle anti-Roma prejudices and discriminatory practises.

Unlike organisations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE (which have pan-European membership), EU practice has developed along these two key lines of local sensitivity and resource provision. The primary forum with East European states was 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 was 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. 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 provided financial support for Roma-related initiatives through the PHARE programme for candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe:

* The high rate of non attendance and school drop out amongst Roma children is a symptom of their community's social exclusion. It is also an area where efforts to improve the level of Roma participation promise substantial long term benefits. Improving the access of Roma children to education is therefore an essential component of numerous EU Phare programmes: for example, € 9.6 million were allocated to this aim under the 1999 programme for Hungary.

* A minority tolerance programme co-financed by the Slovak government. One of the programme's main feature is the training of 450 local public administration representatives and opinion makers on minority issues and conflict resolution.

Projects in favor of the Roma communities totaled € 10 million in 1999 and € 13 million in 2000 under the Phare programme

Such support needs to be massively increased. Therefore, initiatives should be encouraged which cut across ethnic lines and address wider problems of disadvantage and social exclusion. Also, methods for the effective and transparent use of resources are needed.

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 total 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.

Policy makers in the EU need to consider 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). 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

Fortunately, conditions may finally be beginning to change for Roma. Europe's accelerating process of political integration offers the prospect of improved legal protection for the

Roma and other minorities, through human rights laws and strict conditions imposed on countries eager to join the European Union. Recent accession may also lead the EU's older members to look inward and address their own shortcomings in this area.

Such a positive future for the Roma is by no means secure, however. In recent years, the Roma have been subjected to physical attacks, discrimination, and exclusion from many aspects of mainstream life. Economic hardships have created a fertile environment for the exploitation of racial prejudices, and more than a few European politicians have eagerly taken advantage.

The OSCE, the UN and the Council of Europe have all turned their attention to finding an appropriate solution, and the Roma problem has also been the topic of international conferences. International organizations began to discuss and tackle the Roma question as a common concern not merely as an internal matter of certain states. But one year is too short a period for fundamental changes in introducing new solutions. It is, therefore, necessary for this concept to continue to be applied in the context of foreign policy.

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 further ethnic fragmentation of their societies by reversing the trend toward segregation and exclusive ethno-politics.

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