



The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe Today. An Appalling Situation

Richard Crowson

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For the last three and a half years I have been working with the Roma in the Czech Republic, and my eyes have been opened to an extent I would never have believed possible.

The circumstances of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe today are absolutely appalling. One basic aspect of their plight is that they are readily distinguishable by their colour, and have thus provided an easy target for persecution over the centuries. They were targeted for genocide persecuted by the Nazis; at the end of the Second World War there was not a single Roma left in the Czech lands; all those there today are recent immigrants, mainly from Slovakia. Today throughout Central and Eastern Europe they are subject to overt discrimination, exacerbated in a context of growing right-wing nationalism: far-right groups explicitly target them. They are routinely excluded from cafes, swimming pools, dance halls. Most of the countries concerned have passed anti-discriminatory legislation, in line with EU norms; but these laws are routinely ignored as far as the Roma are concerned.

One basic problem is that the Roma are educationally sidelined. Many of them end up in special schools of the kind where in the 1960s the 'educationally subnormal' would have been placed in the UK. Between 60 and 70 per cent of the pupils in these schools are Roma. They have no real chance of higher education. Another basic problem, arising out of the above, is that most of the Roma are unemployed: in some cities up to 90 per cent of them. The result is that they are generally perceived as spongers and a drain on the social system. Many older Roma look back nostalgically to communist times when all citizens had to have a job.

Their housing is terrible. They are placed in the huge blocks of flats which in communist times sprang in the suburbs of Eastern

European cities, and are thus effectively ghettoised. The conditions I have seen in the Czech Republic are worse than those I saw 30 years ago in black townships in South Africa. Outside Sofia, in Bulgaria, there is a town of 35,000 Roma which has no electricity or water supply and no proper road connections with Sofia itself. Sub-Third-World settlements are particularly prevalent in Slovakia; they effectively exclude the Roma from normal life.

The Roma see the police as the repressive arm of the state. Police attitudes and policies are unlikely to change, however, in the absence of initiatives from above. Here there is a basic problem: most people in power in these countries are incapable of recognising that they have prejudiced attitudes.

There have been some positive developments. The Know-How Funds in various Eastern European countries started sponsoring projects, many of which were on the treatment of minorities, and today the Department for International Development (DFID) continues to do so. Elements in these projects include empowering Roma to enter into relationships with key agencies which can help them and also sensitising local authorities to listen to the voices of groups asking for help. Local authorities in Eastern Europe have a genuine conceptual difficulty in thinking of minorities as people of equal rights and status. There has been some progress. In the Czech Republic the government has set up a Roma adviser in every city and district; advisers have been placed in schools with the aim of integrating the Roma children; and the government has given money to NGOs working with the Roma. The basic failure of governments throughout Eastern Europe, however, is to set up any administrative organs to ensure that laws are applied and that those who suffer discrimination or persecution have the mechanism to seek redress. There is nowhere for the Roma to turn to secure their legal rights.

What is still generally lacking in Central and Eastern Europe is the political will to make any basic improvements happen. I can't think of a worthier cause for concerned Western groups to take up than that of the Roma.

Discussion

Various members offered perspectives on the situation of the Roma in other Eastern European countries.

The largest number of Roma is in Romania (estimates run as high as 5 million), and there is a perception both inside and outside Romania that the Roma originated there. This special relationship is sadly reflected in widespread deep prejudice amongst the population. Vadim Tudor, the right-wing presidential candidate who gained a huge proportion of the popular vote, but who was narrowly defeated a couple of years ago by Iliescu. was asked how he would

deal with the Roma problem. His reply was that he would put them all in a football stadium and shoot them. A distinctive feature of the Romanian situation is that many individual Roma are immensely rich, having made money out of organised crime.

The European Parliament has just adopted a report on the treatment of the Roma, which inter alia criticises Greece. The disturbing thing, however, was the narrowness of the majority: the report was nearly rejected. There were 274 votes for, 269 against, with 14 abstentions. This gives no cause for complacency about the level of anti-Roma feeling in Europe.

One piece of good news from Serbia: the post-Milosevic government has set up a Roma representative body to address problems of the integration of Roma in education and other social areas.

When the first Roma arrived in Dover as asylum seekers in October 1997, a group of about 160, there was a loud outcry in the tabloid press. It seems that their arrival evoked a combination of two negative stereotypes: asylum seeker and Gypsy. It is now the case that there is a screening post at Prague airport where the British authorities check everyone flying to the UK; Roma are the ones who have the most difficulties here.

The Roma do not belong to any particular church or religion. They generally reflect the religious allegiances of the country they are living in. Richard Crowson shared his impression that the churches in Central and Eastern Europe have little interest in Roma problems. A typical church response he has heard is that the Roma must reform themselves before the church can do anything to help them. One member observed that many Roma villages in Romania are without a priest because the Orthodox Church will not appoint one to serve there. This kind of attitude tends to leave the Roma settlements open to conversion by foreign religious organisations. You find Roma villages where the inhabitants are all, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses. This in turn then just worsens relations with the local Orthodox population.

The Roma do not tend to identify themselves with the state they are living in. Usually they perceive the state as part of the problem. Meanwhile all Roma throughout Eastern Europe are linked through their common language.

The contrast was made between Gypsies in the West who are known for travelling about the country and the Roma in Eastern Europe in permanent tower-block ghettos. One member pointed out that the Roma in Eastern Europe are traditionally travellers too, but that in 1947-51 the communist authorities immobilised all their caravans so that they would no longer be able to carry dissent or cross

international borders. Since then, he confirmed, they have been placed in towns and villages outside the major cities, a situation analogous to that of the blacks in apartheid South Africa.

For Further Information and Action

The European Roma Rights Center (ERRC)

The European Roma Rights Center is an international public interest law organisation which monitors the rights of Roma and provides legal defence in cases of human rights abuse. For more information visit the ERRC on the web at <http://www.errc.org>.

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Roma Rights and Access to Justice in Europe (RrAJE)

The RrAJE Programme is a three-year programme which started in February 2001 and which receives core funding from the British Government's Department for International Development (DFID). Its aim is to contribute to tackling the social exclusion of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe by developing models for good practice at the municipal level.

The Programme provides support for local Roma NGOs to build partnerships with municipal authorities to develop integrated strategies for equal opportunities for Roma. During the first year, local programmes were launched in four municipalities in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, and during the second year the RrAJE programme is being extended to Romania and Slovakia. Subsequently, the models derived from these local programmes will be disseminated both nationally and across Central and Eastern Europe.

The Programme is managed by the UK-based NGO European Dialogue, in association with the East Anglian Gypsy Council.

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