



Roma: A people without a land

Street Roots works with our sister paper in Belgrade to look at the plight of the Roma people in Europe

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Before coming to Street Roots in mid-August for a year of service through Jesuit Volunteer Corp Northwest, I recently traveled to Central and Eastern Europe to research community organizing in post-Communist European states. Although, not central to my research, I suddenly found myself trying to comprehend a difficult reality. The Roma people are without an official homeland, although some groups of Roma may have lived in Europe for centuries.

During my time in Europe, I witnessed individuals and families with darker skin who walked down the street, while others would walk on the other side of the sidewalk or take a wide turn around. On the train, people refused to sit in the same cab with Roma people. I witnessed blatant discrimination, which both astounded and outraged me.

I constantly asked the people I was meeting to explain to me the situation with the Roma. Here is a group of people who want to maintain their language, culture and way of life, but are not accepted by the majority group.

Roma people tend to live in isolated neighborhoods and receive sub-standard services. They face deep, systemic discrimination, sometimes perpetuated by the government itself. The European Roma Rights Center has documented discriminatory actions ranging from cutting off water supplies to Roma camps, to the building of a wall around a Roma neighborhood in Kosice, Slovakia.

Why are the Roma people being discriminated against throughout Europe? What is being done? The first step in ending discrimination is countering ignorance. In the United States, the situation with the Roma is widely unknown. Street Roots' sister paper, Liceulice, in Belgrade, Serbia, has been working with Roma vendors for a number of years. Nikoleta Kosovac, a

coordinator with the Belgrade street newspaper provides an insight into the situation of the Roma people.

Grace Badik: Most readers will know very little about the Roma people and Romani culture. Can you give a brief history?

Nikoleta Kosovac: For more than a thousand years, Roma people (including Travellers, Gypsies, Manouches, Ashkali, Sinti, etc.) have been an integral part of European civilization. Today, with an estimated population of 10 to 12 million in Europe (approximately six million of whom live in the EU), Roma people are the biggest ethnic minority in Europe. Most Romani—about eight to 10 million of them—live in Europe, where they are that continent's biggest minority; in some countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, they amount to as much as 12 percent of the total population. In addition, there are Romani scattered across Asia, Africa, North and South America and Australia as well.

The Romani have been always described as unique among peoples because they have never identified themselves with a territory. They have no tradition of an ancient and distant homeland from which their ancestors migrated, nor do they claim the right to national sovereignty in any of the lands where they reside. Rather, Romani identity is bound up with the ideal of freedom expressed, in part, in having no ties to a homeland. The absence of traditional origin stories and of a written history has meant that the origin and early history of the Romani people was long an enigma.

Most Roma speak dialects of a language called Romani, which is based on Sanskrit, the classical language of India. The language is largely unwritten, however, because of the high rates of illiteracy in most Roma communities.

During the history, Romani were subject to many sort of restrictions and penalties. Roma were living in Spain, France, England, and large parts of what is today Russia and Eastern Europe by the late 1400s. They suffered persecution in those countries ranging from laws against their language and dress to expulsion. In the beginning of the 15th century, many Roma were forced into slavery by Hungarian and Romanian nobles who needed laborers for their large estates. Roma suffered horrible persecution also during World War II.

In some ways, the ultimate culmination of the anti-Romani hatred came during World War II, when the Nazis decided to exterminate the Romani people altogether. When the war ended in 1945, an estimated two million Romani had perished, including 500,000 who had been sent to the Nazi death camps. While exact figures or percentages cannot be ascertained, historians estimate that the Germans and their allies killed around 25 percent of all European Roma.

Nowadays, we have the Directive on Racial Equality that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin. All EU countries have transposed the directive into their own national laws. Yet many Roma are still victims of prejudice and deep-rooted social exclusion.

There is room for optimism about the Romani people's future. The United Nations, the European Commission, and other international organizations have begun pressuring countries to end their exclusionary policies and to give the Romani people an opportunity to participate more fully in society. In addition, European Romani has formed organizations such as the Roma National Congress to represent their interests and press for change.

G.B.: Commonly, Roma people are labelled as "gypsies" and "travelers," where did these names originate from?

N.K.: Roma groups often have similar occupations, drawing upon traditions of peripatetic and mobile economies that exploit niche markets, such as peddling and trading certain livestock (horses, dogs, and small birds). Roma artisans have also made livings from repairing items deemed "uneconomic" to mend, such as pocket watches, tea-pots and porcelain dishes — the originators of what is now described as the circular economy. Many Roma, Gypsies, and Travelers are engaged in recycling and have been for centuries, long before major environmental concerns.

G.B.: Currently, what is the situation in Europe for the Roma people?

N.K.: Many Roma live on the edges of communities or are transient. They suffer massive discrimination throughout all of Europe, and are often the victims of forced evictions, racist attacks and ill-treatment by police, and are often denied their (basic human) rights - to housing, employment, health care and education. In some cases, Roma are ten times poorer than the majority population. A recent survey showed that nearly 80 percent of Roma in Bulgaria and Romania were living on less than \$4 a day. On average, Roma live 10 to 15 years less than others.

In 2005, the Decade of Roma Inclusion was launched, aimed at fighting discrimination, providing a strategy for integration, improving the social situation by giving Roma equal access to education, housing, healthcare and the EU labor market; over 26 billion have been made available from EU funds to Member States for Roma programmes.

With so much attention, one would think that the days when over 80 percent Roma lived below the poverty line, 15 percent

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