

EUROPE'S POVERTY-STRICKEN ROMA COMMUNITIES

Askold Krushelnyck

The next few years will be crucial for the Roma people. There are at least 6 million Roma in Europe with the majority in former communist countries, several of which joined the European Union (EU) in May 2004. Roma people hope that the tolerance espoused by the EU will break a centuries-long cycle of prejudice and persecution.

Romania, scheduled to join the EU in 2007, has Europe's largest Roma population of around 2 million people. But the name Roma is not derived from Romania, where they were enslaved until 1864. The Nazis slaughtered between 500,000 and 1.5 million Roma in a little known holocaust.

The Roma, or Romani (meaning 'man' or 'people'), have also been called Gypsies, Tsigani, Tzigane, Cigano and Zigeuner, which most of them consider derogatory terms.

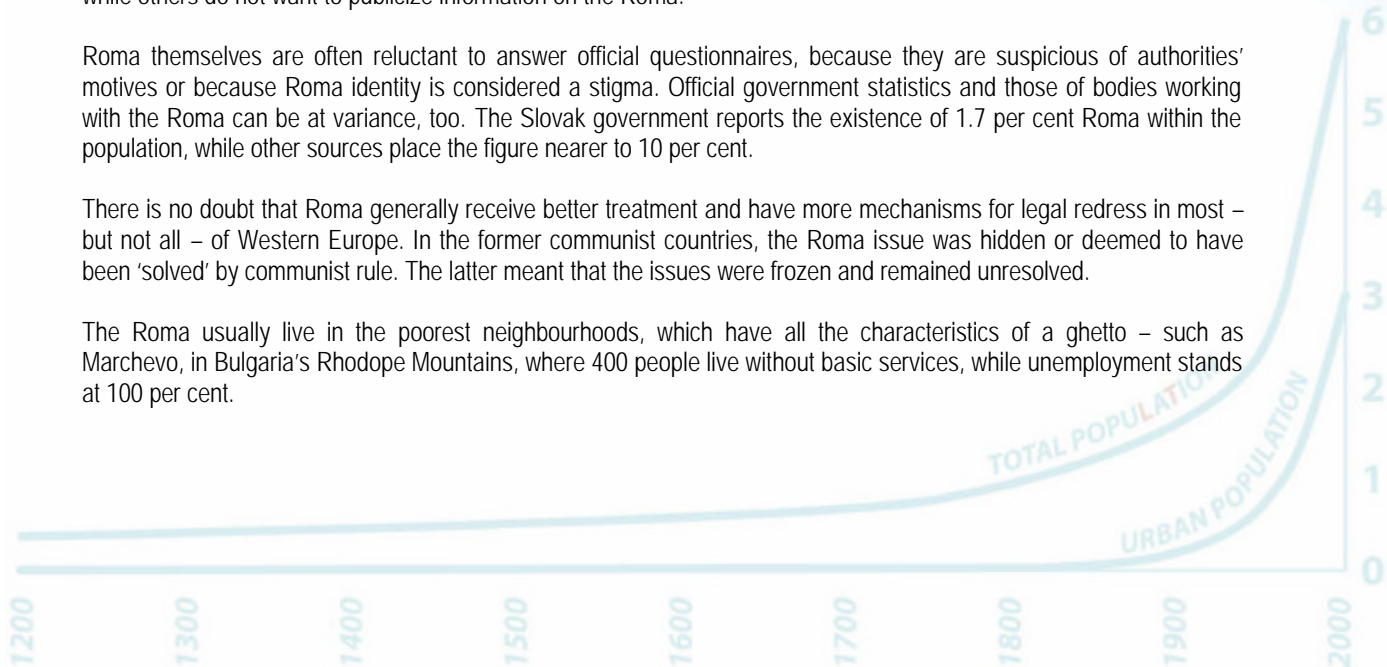
Many identify themselves by their tribes and groups, which include the Kalderash, Machavaya, Lovari, Churari, Romanichal, Gitanoes, Kalo, Sinti, Rudari, Manush, Boyash, Ungaritza, Luri, Bashaldé, Romungro and Xoraxai. There is no universal Roma culture, although there are attributes common to all Roma: Roma populations have the poorest education, health and employment opportunities, and the highest rates of imprisonment and welfare dependency. They have the lowest life expectancy levels of all Europeans. They also have the highest birthrate, giving credibility to evidence that authorities in one Central European country were recently pressuring Roma women to undergo sterilization.

The Roma still have a reputation as nomadic peoples; but the nomadic lifestyle owed as much to Roma people being banned from entering towns as to any desire to wander. Exclusion from towns and lack of access to regular work undoubtedly contribute to a high rate of criminality. Some 60 per cent of male inmates in Hungarian prisons are Roma, 12 times the national average. In Spain, where Roma account for 1.5 per cent of the population, Roma women, for example, make up more than one quarter of all female inmates. Most Roma now live in fixed abodes in villages or cities. But statistics about the Roma are incomplete because some countries, like Portugal, refuse to gather ethnic-based data, while others do not want to publicize information on the Roma.

Roma themselves are often reluctant to answer official questionnaires, because they are suspicious of authorities' motives or because Roma identity is considered a stigma. Official government statistics and those of bodies working with the Roma can be at variance, too. The Slovak government reports the existence of 1.7 per cent Roma within the population, while other sources place the figure nearer to 10 per cent.

There is no doubt that Roma generally receive better treatment and have more mechanisms for legal redress in most – but not all – of Western Europe. In the former communist countries, the Roma issue was hidden or deemed to have been 'solved' by communist rule. The latter meant that the issues were frozen and remained unresolved.

The Roma usually live in the poorest neighbourhoods, which have all the characteristics of a ghetto – such as Marchevo, in Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains, where 400 people live without basic services, while unemployment stands at 100 per cent.



All Central European countries have similar Roma ghettos. Bulgaria has 300 such settlements and Slovakia has more than 600. In most, children under 15 years of age make up between 40 to 50 per cent of the population. Infant mortality and birth defects are on the rise and there have been recent outbreaks of tuberculosis. Unemployment rates of 70 per cent and above are the norm. The fall of communism, as much as prejudice, is responsible for these high unemployment rates.

In many places 'ghettoization' has increased since the fall of communism. In one Czech town, local authorities erected a wall around the area inhabited by the Roma. Under intense pressure from the EU and the Council of Europe, the government ordered the wall to be dismantled.

West European governments have been troubled by large numbers of Roma among asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. While the scheduled 2004 expansion of the EU was not expected to lead to huge population movements, there are indications that the Roma may try to take advantage of EU entitlement to free movement and migrate to Western Europe in search of a better life.

The deputy secretary general of the Council of Europe (CoE), Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, who is in charge of the council's Roma policies said: 'The issue of the Roma touches upon the core values of the Council of Europe.'

The CoE has worked with the EU and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to develop education, access to healthcare, stimulate employment for Roma and improve the situation of Roma women. However, despite central governments' willingness to changing traditional hostile attitudes towards the Roma, local authorities are often less keen to shed prejudices.

All of the organizations working with Roma and Roma groups themselves agree, however, that the chief factor determining the development of Roma communities lies within communities themselves. A breakthrough will only occur when the Roma produce leaders who can represent them at all levels of officialdom, including international bodies. To this end, the CoE wants to set up a consultative forum with Roma representatives. That would, indeed, be an historic milestone for the Roma community.

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