

Turbulences

The Roma in Europe

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he French circular of August 2010 that notably targeted Roma as a priority population for expulsion was the talk of Europe. It was not, however, the first or last time that this population was targeted discriminatorily. This discrimination, at the very least persistent, if not growing, toward the Roma and the less-than-ideal conditions for integration in which they live are undeniable. The Roma are a European people historically, geographically and politically; so what are the challenges faced by their integration, at the crossroads of stereotypes, political instrumentation and reality?

If the Roma population's origins – including, in this article, the diverse Romani, Kale and Sinti groups and the Kalderash, Ashkali, Ursari, Lovara and Gurbeti subgroups – goes back to the Middle Ages in India, their migration between the ninth and fourteenth centuries have made them a European population since the fifteenth century.

Minorities. That is what the Roma are in the countries where they are the most present, most notably in Russia, Turkey, Romania and Hungary. Though they live mostly in Eastern Europe, they also constitute an important minority in countries like France and Spain. Today, ten to twelve million Roma live in Europe, nearly half of which live in the European Union (EU). With the 2004 expansion of the EU alone, a million and a half Roma became European citizens, as did between two and three million Roma in 2007 with the addition of Bulgaria and Romania. Many events, like these, have made the largest European minority into an eminently European people.

In political terms, their situation should be analyzed within the framework of European legislation, then

transposed by each EU member state. Freedom of movement is one of the fundamental rights of the European Union, since 1957, but it is not synonymous with the right to move somewhere unconditionally. The right to move permanently to another country is facilitated for European citizens, but on the condition of having a job in the host country or of having sufficient resources for living here; additionally, the move must not constitute an excessive burden on the country's social system.

In the very specific case of a nomadic population, it is well and truly a European challenge to find just, efficient ways to allow for movement and integration between EU member states. It is to this end that a European framework was put into place concerning national strategies for dealing with Roma integration. Most countries have only partially translated these strategies into their national politics – in 2011, only 70% of available funds for integration programs was used by member states –, too often returning to a politicization of the situation, presenting it as the “problem of integrating Roma in Europe.” Taking up this issue, the European Council released a recommendation in 2013 that aimed to better aid member states in setting up Roma integration measures, but this has not yet replaced current national strategies. In fact, it is not only an issue of increasing the resources already available, but above all it is about adapting to the specific implications of this group's integration: it must be done within a familial context, taking into consideration the oppression that this community feels, all the while endeavoring to limit the impact of certain practices (notably poor schooling and early marriage).

Part of this population is still nomadic, while

another part has attempted to settle down in its countries of origin, where they are generally seen as a rejected minority, or in other European countries, where they are seen as unwelcome guests. A Roma family migrates more often than the average European family, so it is very difficult for them to find decent housing upon arrival. A Eurobarometer in July 2008 showed that 24% of Europeans would feel uncomfortable having a Roma for a neighbor, even though on average Europeans are comfortable (8.1 on a scale from 1 to 10) with having a neighbor of different ethnic origins.

This situation is exacerbated by clichés, stigmatizations and abusive generalizations. But it is also influenced by the behaviors and activities of a minority within this population that spends its time begging or doing undocumented work, more visible than the rest who live in marginalized, deplorable socio-economic conditions. According to studies by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the United Nations Development Program, in 2012, only 50% of Roma children went to kindergarten, as their parents would send them away to preserve their language and culture; only 15% finished secondary school or higher education. One in three Roma claim not to have a job, and 90% live below the poverty line. The absence of support for these populations has not helped to ease their integration (other countries entering the European work market was, for example, restricted until January 1st, 2014, for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens, therefore the Roma).

It is important to analyze and evaluate this delicate, thorny situation with composure and, above all, to avoid the temptation to stigmatize and generalize.

One must look beyond controversy and examine concrete situations by finding reasonable solutions that respect the law and the human dignity of each person. —●



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