

Roma Migration From the Youth Perspective

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Migration has always played a key role in the development and the survival of humankind since its existence on this Earth. Even more so today, the relative ease with which a person can relocate, as well as the right to free movement has made the discourse pertinent and widespread. In many ways the “pursuit of happiness” has become an integral characteristic of this century. On a broad level, values such as freedom, democracy, free movement, independence, freedom of choice, intrinsic and fundamental human rights are being constantly woven into the discourses of academics, policymakers and lay people alike. One of the most tangible indicators of such phenomena are the unique formations such as the European Union whose core premise lies in the concept of unity and the guarantee of freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and people within its Member States.

However noble or grand our intentions and ideas might be, reality is often far from the ideal. One of the greatest and most relevant examples is the situation, or rather the challenges, facing the Roma people across Europe. This is the group which is aptly described as “Europe’s forgotten citizens”, they continue to be stigmatized, discriminated against and subject to prejudices and marginalization. What is seen as most interesting is the question *who* tends to forget about these “citizens” of Europe. One of the most important downfalls we as a society must seek to avoid is having decision-makers, institutions, and governments “forget” about minority groups; we should constantly be striving to be all-inclusive. Regardless of the obvious determination, demonstrated political will and dedication of states for the inclusion and equal treatment of *all* regardless of their perceived race, nationality, disability, age, sex, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation, too often, there are shortcomings in European policies, especially when talking about the Roma people. With the most recent widening of the EU, the Roma has emerged as its greatest minority whose population has been approximated to equal the size of middle sized nation-states such as Belgium, or Portugal, but yet the Roma continue to face obstacles which could hardly be seen among any other ethnic minority in the world.

The Forum of European Roma Young People (FERYP) held between 10-15 November in Valencia was one of the most recent examples which could be seen from a conceptual point of view, very in tuned to the intrinsic values of the 21st Century on the one hand, and the realities which the Roma face, on the other. The young Roma participants in that forum discussed several related topics with great interest and enthusiasm giving insight to some of the realities taking place on the European level and further highlighting the importance and relevance of the topic of Roma migration and its integral challenges and opportunities.

When discussing the question of Roma migration, one should consider the positions of and provisions made by national governments, international and regional organizations. That would also ignite a number of crucial discussions and complex questions with no easy solutions such as what should be the approach for the effective dissemination of important messages? What would be an effective policy? or What exactly should and could be done to

ensure the rightful integration and inclusion of the Roma people on local and international levels?

Meetings and forums of such as the FERYP could be seen as a response of the clash and the great discrepancy between widespread principles, beliefs and commitments evident from the context of common European discourse, and the widespread continuation and preservation of previously observed acts of violence and exclusion of the Roma people as a whole. The great attention paid by European policymakers, the media and the general public to the migration of Roma, could be linked with the failure of policy-makers and law, international and domestic, to effectively respond to the wide range of challenges and realities that the Roma face in Europe. The emergence and continuation of policies, measures, and acts, of violence against the Roma are seen as persistent or even increasing and more radical, requiring the special attention of key decision-makers and the elites in national and supra-national levels. Migration of the Roma people in Europe has managed to urge the development of Roma policies by organizations such as the EU, Council of Europe and the OSCE, and also, Romani migration has also been seen as a threat to the EU expansion and/or integration¹.

In line with the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, and in the context of breaking down barriers, blocks and hurdles in the name of progression, human rights, peace and happiness, it still seems that there is a metaphoric wall that is not only yet to be torn down but rather it has been fortified. Such is the case in Ostrovany, a city in Slovakia, where a literal wall has been built to isolate its Roma citizens from the rest of the community. In such cases, certain rights of the citizen, provided and guaranteed by instruments at European and international levels, could be easily seen as impeached putting into question rhetoric that is often bandied about concerning freedom of movement and pursuit of happiness. There is a consistent increase of nationalistic and xenophobic parties in Europe, the increase of the constituency of nationalistic parties, widespread anti-Romani migration policies of Member countries such as Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic, or England. Moreover, with the increase of violence and death because of racism and ethnic hatred, and most of all, peoples' increased unwillingness and inability to tolerate other ethnicities, further heightened by the often inflammatory, over-exaggerated and incompetent response of national and mass media, makes us believe that a general revolutionary reform not only on the political and institutional levels but also in the mindsets of the masses is required and necessary; a reform which is in alignment with recognized international frameworks and provisions. Racial hatred has led to grave and detrimental outcomes, as history has already demonstrated, and we need to look to the past to clear the right path for our future and firmly address the current circumstances facing the Roma. We, the Roma from all over the world, are horrified from the truism "those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it", and that is certainly not a case the Roma would be eager to experience again...

It is very important to highlight that forums and meetings dealing with the question of Roma migration should also consider the linked historical facts, drives and reasons associated with these realities. That is why, having knowledge and thorough understanding about the origins of Roma migration is crucial for the competent addressing of the phenomenon. Furthermore, high level meetings and forums could be equally effective only when their major findings, and final recommendations and messages are able to successfully reach and be disseminated to the respective institutions at national, regional, and international levels. Another crucial way for

¹ As an example, when a large number of Roma from Hungary were granted asylum in France in 2000, Hungary's readiness for *free movement* was put into question; similar scenario has also taken place in other EU Member States with respect to Slovakia's then candidacy as EU Member.

the effective addressing of Roma issues and migration is the existence of Roma experts, leaders, and officials in various and key positions throughout at national and supra-national/ European levels. That is why, in that recent forum, I thought it key to highlight and emphasize the need for the emergence, location, and promotion of truly competitive and appealing, charismatic Roma politicians and elite who can effectively challenge the status quo for the betterment of all the Roma people. In such a way, the major issues that the Roma societies currently face in Europe could to be able to be addressed more effectively and efficiently. Such a movement is also greatly desirable so that Roma are able not only to compete but to demonstrate excellence, which in turn would help to dispel and counteract existing beliefs about the Roma, based on stereotypes, prejudices, or “common knowledge”. In such a way, dedicated Roma officials would be able to be more effective and exert greater influence in challenging unwanted, unlawful policies and practices that are against the human nature.

Very often, ignorance manages to prevail at the local levels surrounding the legal requirements arising from the commitments of states in the European Union and/or Council of Europe². The fact that the Romani people is the largest minority in Europe and yet it is the only ethnic minority that is still affected by all 14 barriers that an ethnic minority could face, provides some explanation of the question why the Roma often times decide to undertake actions seeking for better havens for themselves, their offspring, and their cultural legacies. Even though there has been major media coverage warning about the flood of Roma after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU family, a 2002 study has showed that the Bulgarian Roma were less likely to migrate than their Bulgarian and Turkish counterparts³. Beginning in the 1990 and continuing to the present day, many thousands of Roma have gone to the United Kingdom originally as persons seeking and often receiving refugees status, and now, as persons exercising their EU rights of free movement. However, Romani arrivals in Britain have ignited a number of racist press conferences and explicitly discriminatory measures by the government. Anti-Romani media emerged again in 2006 and 2007 before and after Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU⁴. As a matter of fact, including the much larger native Traveler and Gypsy community, the Roma, Gypsies and Travelers would make up 0.40 % of the total population in the UK. Also, in the countries of major recent immigration destinations for the majority of the Roma, namely Austria, Germany, and Italy, the representation of the Roma populations as a whole is miniscule and take up 0.3 %, 0.12 % and 0.23 % of the general population of these countries respectively⁵.

In Europe, major efforts have been made to force the Roma to go away from the economically advanced and dynamic parts of Europe and stay in the East. In the cases where that has proved impossible, certain actions of public authorities has contributed to the further worsening of the situation of the Romani migrants or to the neglect of their plight. There is a need for the re-invigoration of the European project and its visions, so that it would ensure

² OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, *Recent Migration of Roma in Europe*, Cahn and Guild Dec. 2008

³ This study has showed that the coefficient of potential non-travelers abroad is 79.3 % for the Roma, 71.8% for the Turkish and 68.3 % for the Bulgarians. Please see Социологически проблеми, 2008, Външни миграции при ромите в посткомунистияеска България: Причини, нагласи, поведения и последици, 2008, p. 163, Tomova)

⁴ Headlines have included “Gypsies Invade Dover, Hoping for a Handout”, “Gypsies out to rip off the system”. This is available at <http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2004/migration/pt2/whoafraid>

⁵ OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, *Recent Migration of Roma in Europe*, Cahn and Guild, Dec. 2008 pp. 32-34

that European integration is enjoyed by all parts and levels of the society, so that ethnic origin is no longer regarded as a factor in any of its provisions.