

Romany Rights in the Balkan Region

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Introduction

The Romany people are the largest minority group in Europe (European Commission 2014). Believed to have arrived in Europe from the Indian sub-continent in the 12th century, the Roma live mostly in central, eastern, and southeastern Europe. Today, the Roma in Europe live in a very diverse society, and they themselves live in diverse groups in terms of religion, occupation, and language. However, due to the harsh policies of many countries, many Roma appear to be more assimilated than they actually are. Many Roma refuse to register their ethnic identity in the official censuses due to fear of discrimination. As a consequence, it is hard to know the exact number of Romany people residing in Europe, although some Romany organizations in collaboration with the Council of Europe claim that the population of the Roma is nearly 10 million or more (Council of Europe 2012). The Holocaust of World War II, the subsequent rise and fall of communism in the Balkan region, and the current situation in the Balkan countries have affected the fundamental rights of the Romany people and their integration into mainstream society.

Today, after centuries of official persecution and abuse, the Romany people of Europe continue to face systematic discrimination and human rights abuse, despite living in democratic countries, most of which are in the European Union. The EU should take measures to end the practice of systematic discrimination against the Roma and promote the rights of the largest minority in Europe.

Background

The Roma are an ethnic group living mostly in Europe. The Romany people share genes with a group migrating from the northwestern region of the Indian sub-continent about a millennium ago. Roma are also known in the English-speaking world as “gypsies” and by different names depending on the country in which they live (Mendizabal et al. 2012, 2342-2349). For instance, in Albania they are called “Romë” and “Gabel” (a highly derogatory slang word). The Romany minorities resident in the Balkan Peninsula are often referred to as “Turkish Gypsies” or, in Albania, as “Gyptian,” which comes from the word “Egyptian.” The Romany minorities in most

Balkan countries are Muslim while a few practice the dominant religion in the country in which they live.

Roma are broadly dispersed, and the largest population concentration of this ethnic group is in central and eastern Europe. Nowadays, Romany people live almost all over the world. Some have lost track of their origin, and some others do not live in tribes anymore. In some Latin American countries, “gypsy living” is seen more as a way to live life, to be free. This new way of living is more like a fashion that otherwise ordinary people choose to follow.



Caravan of Roma in Romania, 1938. Source: *A Ovelha Perdida (The Lost Sheep)*, <https://ovelha-perdida.wordpress.com/category/memoria/page/17/>.

According to some genomic studies, the Roma arrived in the Balkan Peninsula around the 12th century (Bhanoo 2012). A few years later, they were recorded in Germany, and by the 16th century they reached had countries in northern Europe, such as Scotland and Sweden. In a short time, they inhabited most European countries.

The persecution of Romany people began from the time they arrived in Europe from South Asia. As they inhabited more European countries and encountered established social and ethnic groups, the Romany people faced discrimination and were often classified as second-class citizens. In some European countries they were subject to ethnic extinction as they were forced to do hard labor; in order to prevent the

population from growing, their children were captured or murdered (BBC News Europe 2009). Romany people were sometimes forced to leave certain cities and communities in England; in France they were branded like cattle and their heads were

shaved (BBC News Europe 2009). They were not able to create any sort of political party or to attend schools. Moreover, the governments of the countries where they lived did not recognize them as inhabitants nor grant them the status of a minority ethnic group.

In 1721 Germany, under the rule of the Emperor Karl VI, issued a governmental order that contained a resolution to erase the Romany people from Germany (Hancock 2004). Laws against Romany people had already existed and been enforced for more than three hundred years. They, being outsiders in a foreign land, were breaking rules that had been in place for hundreds of years. They had no permanent jobs or houses; because they relocated frequently, the German tax system was incapable of collecting taxes from them. To not have a permanent habitation and to



Romanian-language poster advertising an auction of Romany slaves, including 18 men, 10 boys, 7 women, and 3 girls in Bucharest, 1852. Source unknown, from Ian F. Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*, Karoma Publishers, 1987, p.46.

not appear on the taxpayers register was punishable by law. By the 19th century, the discrimination against the Romany people began to increase due to the writings of European scholars who claimed the Jews and the Gypsies were inferior; furthermore, Charles Darwin, who wrote about the theory of evolution, classified the Gypsies as not being culturally advanced (Hancock 2004).

For the Roma, this neglect and abuse meant a lack of allegiance to any state or nation, often driving them to live in precarious conditions and without any governmental support or representation. They became unaffiliated people in an increasingly systemized culture.

Life Under Nazi Rule During the Second World War

The rise of the Nazi party in Germany introduced a new level of persecution. “It was the wishes of the all-powerful Reichsführer Adolf Hitler to have the Gypsies disappear from the face of the earth,” stated SS Officer Pery Broad, Auschwitz Political Division (Hancock 2004, 390). Hitler did not have to pass any law or create any new restrictions on the Roma because rules were already imposed by the early German Emperors. During the Second World War, the Nazis and the Ustaša, the fascist Croatian Revolutionary Movement, targeted the Romany people as an undesirable population and murdered them *en masse*. They were also killed on sight, imprisoned, and tortured. Both the Jewish people and Romany people shared the same status, and indeed the Jewish solution resembled the Romany solution. However, the Nazis did not speak of an explicit final solution for the Roma. Moreover, Holocaust writers have rarely written about the Romany final solution.

The Nazi regime forced Jews to wear a yellow star on all their clothes to distinguish them from non-Jews, whereas the Romany people were tattooed with a “Z” for “Zigeuner” and were required to wear a brown or a black triangle to single them out (Teleki 2009, 92). The Einsatzgruppen, special German police, tracked down the Roma. This secret police force had, among other tasks, the tracking and killing of those who were perceived by the regime to be racial or political enemies. Their victims included Jews, Romany people, homosexuals, communists, the mentally challenged, and physically disabled people (United States Holocaust Museum 2012).

After they were tracked down, Jews were sent to selected neighborhoods and finally to the concentration camps, where they were forced to do hard labor or simply killed immediately. Locating the Jews and sending them to the observed neighborhoods required substantial resources. The resources committed to hunting down the Jews were also used to target other unwanted groups. Like Jews, the Roma were subject to ethnic cleansing; their clothes were marked in order to differentiate them from other people. Also they were easier to distinguish from other ethnicities due to their dark skin and their way of living. After being tracked down, Roma were sent to ghettos or monitored neighborhoods from which they were taken to concentration camps and killed or forced to work until death.

Life in the concentration camps was not easy for anyone, especially for Romany prisoners. Many survivors of the notorious concentration camp of Auschwitz witnessed the inhumane experiments performed by SS Medical Corps. The medical corps took a special interest in experimenting with Romany children. In January 1940 the first mass genocidal action of the Holocaust took place when the Nazis used 250 Romany children as laboratory subjects to test the efficacy of the Zyklon-B cyanide gas that was used later in gas chambers (Hancock 2004).

According to Nazi Germany’s policies, people were considered to have tainted Romany blood even if only one grandparent was Roma. Nazi persecution of the Roma was to this extent harsher than racism perpetrated by the Nazis on Jews, who were defined by having at least two Jewish grandparents.

The Nazis were not the only organization to impose terror and mass murder on the Romany people. Ustaša, a fascist and terrorist organization that controlled Croatia as a puppet state under Nazi Germany, had an important role in exterminating

the Jews and Roma. The Ustaša manifesto promoted hatred and genocide against Jews, Roma, and Serbs. During the Second World War, the Croatian state served as a German satellite and military base. Croatia also received funding from the Fascist Italy



Roma marched to Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia by Ustasa guards. Source: Holocaust Research Project, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/jasenovac.html>

of Benito Mussolini. The Ustaša movement, in collaboration with Nazi Germany, tracked down the Roma and sent them to labor or concentration camps where they worked or suffered medical experimentation until their deaths (Fischer 2007, 10-15).

During the Second World War, Albania was occupied by Fascist Italy. During this time, the Albanian Roma were not persecuted or sent to death camps, unlike the Roma in many Eastern European countries. The Albanian partisan army invited everyone, including the Roma, to participate in the liberation of Albania from Fascist Italy. Many Roma participated in the war and many of them fought against Fascist Italy. Until the German occupation of Albania in 1943, neither the Italians nor the Albanian nationalists persecuted the Albanian Roma. Even the Germans did not target the Albanian Roma because the German occupation in Albania lasted only for one year, and the Nazi forces did not have enough time and resources to track down and exterminate the Roma of Albania (Koinova, 2000).

The concentration camps were closed after Nazi Germany lost power. The survivors of the Holocaust and the concentration camps had difficulties starting their lives again. With no place to go and no money, the survivors were left beneath the open sky. They lost so much during the Second World War, as many of their family members were killed or kidnaped. Their property was either confiscated or destroyed. However, the mass killing of Romany people was not an issue at the Nuremberg trials. The

Romany genocide was hardly recognized in public (Council of Europe 2012, 54-57). The Nuremberg trials focused on the prosecution of crimes against the Jewish people, excluding other groups like the Roma, homosexuals, communists, and sex workers, because the Jewish community had political influence in Britain, the United States, and France, and because the overwhelming majority of Holocaust victims were Jewish. The Romany people, who suffered in the same way as the Jews during the Holocaust, were not represented in these trials.

The treaties that ended the great wars of the 20th century did not take into consideration the future or the integrity of the Roma, and the Roma were not taken into consideration in any reparations or social integration programs thereafter (Fischer 2007, 10-15). In the first decades after WWII, discussions of the Holocaust ignored the Romany genocide (Hancock 2004). The countries behind the Iron Curtain neglected the Romany Holocaust; they simply did not mention it anywhere. The impact of the Holocaust on the Roma was lost somehow under the shadow of the destruction of the Jewish population. Many scholars and historians argue about how many Roma were actually murdered by the Nazis. Some historians place the toll at 500,000, but historians can only estimate the figure because exact numbers are unknown (Hancock 2004).

Life Under Communism

Discussion of the notorious “Socialist Bloc” in Eastern Europe gives the impression of a colossal totalitarian system, directly under USSR rule, with a common policy dominating all aspects of life. Those impressions or assumptions are partially true, yet many differences in policies make each country unique (Lucero and Collum 2007). Still, each country declared that national policies were based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism, and they developed a sort of interdependence adapting the principles of Marxism-Leninism to their own inherited state policies. With the exception of the former Yugoslavia, policies concerning minority populations adopted by the communist regimes throughout the southern Balkans were quite similar to one another (Rougheri 1998–1999). Sedentarization of itinerant Roma was one of the most common policies used to assimilate the Romany population into each Eastern European community. In many Eastern European countries, the sedentarization of the nomadic Roma was done through governmental channels and party decisions (Barany 2000). The USSR, which dominated the Eastern Bloc, followed a harsh policy of assimilation by banning the itinerant way of life; it was the first country to embark on an active policy for resolving the problem of nomadic Roma. The Romany people were denied the recognition of a separate identity based on the criteria used by Stalin, which concluded that the Romany people had no territorial base and thus no unifying culture and language. As a result of the guidelines provided by the USSR, many countries passed special legislation banning the nomadic way of life, with the Soviet Union taking the lead with the adaptation of its decree in 1956 on “the inclusion of itinerant Gypsies in labor activities” (Taylor 2014, 196-197). Attempts to assimilate the Roma were made in all the communist states of the southern Balkans. From a non-Romany point of view, it might seem as though Romany life was good under communism, given the flow of strong black market trade made possible through their cultural ties with merchants in

different neighborhoods and cities, and government-funded living quarters and land to be tilled for the collective (Lucero and Collum 2007).

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the communists initially did not take any action against minorities, including the Roma. The Bulgarian constitution in 1947 provided for the education of national minorities in their mother tongue. In 1946, Roma in Bulgaria had their own cultural association, theatre, and newspapers. Romany identity was favored by the Bulgarian communist regime. The Communist Party made some efforts to have Romany representation in the party as well as in the National Assembly. The policy of land allocation in Bulgaria can be perceived as a way in which the policies of the state promoted sedentarization by allocating the Roma certain territories. Collectivization policies allowed the Roma to find a permanent role in companies and on state farms. Many protested and left the villages to live in illegal settlements beside the rivers of the expanding cities (Taylor 2014, 196-197). The days of political ease for the Romany people came to an end when the Bulgarian Communist Party implemented mainstream assimilationist policies. During the 1950s, all the Romany associations were outlawed. The previous policies, under which the Roma were a favored minority, were never reinstated. Moreover, through a series of assimilationist policies, the Bulgarian communist regime denied the existence of Romany identity, culture, and lifestyle. Romany people were prevented from traveling, their tents were destroyed, and they were forced to live in apartments built by the regime. By 1969, several schools had been built to give thousands of Roma a primary education in the Bulgarian language. The Bulgarian communist regime did what it could to prevent the Romany people from preserving their culture and traditions (Rougheri 1998–1999).

Albania

Albania emerged from the Second World War without territorial losses compared to pre-war Albania. The communist leader of Albania, Enver Hoxha, borrowed the idea of assimilation and the idea of an equal Albanian nation from the nationalist Albanians who formed the modern country in 1912. Hoxha imposed a Leninist-Stalinist regime, trying to homogenize the Albanian population by banning religion and restricting the Albanians and the Romany people from traveling abroad (Koinova 2000). Minority rights were denied under the false argument that discrimination against minorities did not exist in Albania because all individuals were equal before the law (Rougheri 1998–1999). The policy of the Communist Party under Enver Hoxha was to unify the Albanian nation despite disparate cultural traits, traditions, languages, and religions. The official argument of the communist regime concerning minority rights was that “in Albania minorities were not discriminated against because they enjoyed the same rights as other Albanian citizens” (Koinova 2000). During the communist regime in Albania, organizations based on political, religious, or cultural affiliations were not allowed. In 1967, Hoxha declared Albania to be the first atheist state in the world. The communist government banned all inappropriate non-Albanian personal names, such as Turkish and Greek names. The Albanians, Greeks, and members of other ethnic minorities, with names that were judged to be inappropriate and offensive by the regime, were required to change their

names to acceptable ones. By implementing these policies, Hoxha aimed to eliminate the “alien” influences in Albania. Romany camps were destroyed and, just as in Bulgaria, the Roma were forced to live in apartments assigned by the government. According to the Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe—Southeast Europe, “The methods used by the Albanian communist state were the same in all communist regimes: banning of all religious practices and suppression of cultural pluralism” (Koinova 2000). Despite the harsh measurements taken by the communist regime, Romany people enjoyed having employment and a general feeling of security in Albania.

Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia officially had no dominant national group, but instead a complex hierarchal structure of national/ethnic communities unified following World War II into in a new, higher socialist formation as Yugoslavs. Yugoslavia was a union of Slavic countries and an Albanian one: Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Kosova. The former Yugoslavia has been recognized by many scholars for treating the Romany people better than any other East European country (Silverman 1995). The Yugoslavian communist regime guaranteed national minorities the right to use their language and to develop their own culture. The constitution of 1946 represented what Tito wanted Yugoslavia to be; he was aiming for the creation of a common Yugoslav identity. Romany people were classified as a third category coming after Albanians, Turks, and Hungarians, but despite this fact they were recognized as a minority in the Federation of Yugoslavia (Rougheri 1998–1999). Yugoslavia had the largest concentration of Romany people in Europe. The Roma were recognized by the constitution as equal, and in the 1970s the derogatory ethnic term “tsigan” disappeared from all official documents. In practice this term continued to be used, but this measure shows some change promoted by the government (Silverman 1995). In contrast to other communist countries, in Yugoslavia there were nearly two hundred professional Roma working as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, as well as some percentage of Roma working in the industrial sector and others as farmers who owned their land. In the 1980s, the Romany language was introduced in the public schools and was taught to primary school students in Kosova; radio programs in Romany were also introduced in Kosova (Silverman 1995). Romany people had a representative in the provincial Macedonian parliament who was able to propose an amendment to the Macedonian constitution that would give the Romany minority some rights, including the usage of the Romany national flag (Rougheri 1998–1999).

Post-Communism and Today

The fall of the Berlin Wall caused the “Iron Curtain” to also fall in a domino reaction that toppled all communist regimes in Eastern Europe. With the collapse of communism and the start of a capitalist-based society in Eastern Europe, the Roma were the first of minorities to become unemployed. The change from communism to a free-market economy marked the beginning of a crisis period for the Roma; the social and economic changes plus the loss of government social programs and initiatives

made the Roma more vulnerable to the harsh transitional system (Taylor 2014, 196-197).

The individual republics of Albania, Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria now recognize the Romany community as a minority. On the other hand, Greece has not provided the Roma with minority status, even though the “Greek Constitution shows that the rights of minority members are covered within the provisions of common law, and needless to say, on an individual basis” (Rougheri 1998–1999). Greece is the only country in the Balkans that did not experience communist rule; however, it has not made much progress in ensuring fundamental rights for the Romany people. According to the Greek Helsinki Monitor, large numbers of Roma in Greece today live in racial segregation from non-Romany groups and are under-employed and poorly educated (European Romany Rights 2003). Their houses and settlements in the cities have been destroyed and Roma have been forced to move elsewhere. The Greek authorities have refused to register Roma as citizens of the Greek cities. There is no recognition of Romany language and culture in Greece, nor are there radio or television programs in the Romany language (European Romany Rights 2003).

Many citizens of southeastern European countries recall brutal images of the conflicts that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The genocide in Srebrenica and Kosova and the legacies of other Balkan conflicts still shape EU policies in the region. Many human rights are being suppressed in the Balkan region, including Romany minority rights. Although the Roma sometimes received gracious welcomes from European countries, they have historically been marginalized in every European country in which they have settled. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, many Roma in the Balkans and Eastern Europe have faced levels of discrimination unknown to Roma in Western Europe. Many Roma remain displaced from their homes, while many others have been forced to live near landfills and other polluted areas for years (McRae 2011).

Even in many Western European countries, such as France, the Romany community faces discrimination. The European Union’s eastward expansion means that many governments are pushed to give Roma the same rights as other citizens, and that Roma who reside in eastern EU countries should be able to freely live and work in any EU country. Yet France sent dozens of Roma back to Romania and Bulgaria for repatriation; this harsh policy was supported by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy (Kenrick 1998). Roma, being European citizens, have the right under EU law to remain in France; the counterargument used by Sarkozy was that French law required them to have work permits and prove they were able to maintain their families. But many Roma who were banished to eastern Europe had been living in France all their lives, and some of them had no family in Romania and Bulgaria (Fraser 2010).

In Albania, Roma are the poorest minority; they are mainly concentrated in the suburbs of the large cities. They obtained the status of a recognized minority in Albania and in 2008 were issued with identification cards asserting their nationality to be Albanian. However, the issuance of ID cards was just a ploy the Albanian government used to win Romany votes in the elections of 2009. Many promises were made during the elections, including better jobs and better living conditions; however, those promises went unfulfilled (Romet, Lufta per te Mbijetuar 2010). The Roma of Albania

face job discrimination. The overall unemployment rate in Albania is 13.1%, but unemployment is much higher for the Romany population. One-third of job seekers in Albania are Roma; they suffer long-term unemployment due to the low level of education, their residence in poor regions, and the discrimination and ineffective measures taken by the government (“KMD: Komuniteti Rom” 2012). Romany people in Albania do not often interact with individuals other than their own “tribe.” Despite that, many Albanians seem to hate and discriminate against the Roma: anti-gypsy posts on social networks like Facebook or Twitter contribute to an atmosphere that can cause violence against the Romany people in the real world (Council of Europe 2012, 54-57).

Despite some notable positive changes that were achieved as a result of communist regimes’ assimilation policies—recognition of minority status, establishment of political parties and cultural organizations, publication of books and newspapers in their language—the Roma’s problems in Eastern Europe have continued to be dire since the fall of communism. The transition from communism to so-called democracy and the privatization of the state-run factories that provided full, even compulsory, employment have closed many of the “unprofitable” industries, mines, factories, and construction sites that provided work for most Roma. The Roma have always been a socially and economically marginalized population in Eastern Europe. Now more than ever, the Romany communities face a lack of electricity, running water, and infrastructure in their communities and neighborhoods. In the legal arena, the Roma do not have an adequate voice. In Albania, for example, there is no Romany representation in the national parliament although many non-governmental organizations push to win notable court cases condemning discrimination at work. The lack of access to governmental services, health care, education, and employment make the life of Roma problematic (Koinova, 2000). Their limited resources make them unable to compete for jobs or to start their own businesses. Furthermore, many governmental institutions lack the interest and the ability to tackle the problems that the largest minority in Europe is facing.

Although the EU has long stressed the need for better Romany integration through legal reform, more needs to be done by each respective state (European Commission 2010). The solution to violence and discrimination must revolve around political and economic liberalization, thus eradicating the traditional state-institutionalized racism (Kamm 1993).

Conclusion

Romany people have been discriminated against and hated since they first set foot in Europe. They were expelled from cities in Great Brittan, their heads were shaved, and they were marked like cattle in France. They lived under the harsh rule of the German Emperor Karl the VI and later were sent to death camps and murdered by the Nazi regime and Ustaša. Roma then lived under the assimilationist regimes of communist Albania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and other Eastern European states. The cost of Romany sedentarization was high, not only in terms of state expenditure and growing inter-ethnic tensions, but also in the loss of gypsy traditions. Moreover, the Roma have been discriminated against and hated in many Western European countries.

Today's civilized standards can perhaps not be used to judge the mistakes of the past. But by today's standards, governments must condemn the human right violations against Romany people happening today and strive for means to better serve the Romany people of Europe. Roma live in segregated neighborhoods and seem to survive in urban areas on what remains from the lives of others. Many Romany people have indeed preserved their way of living, traditions, and culture. Despite the discrimination, their quality of life has risen: their educational level has improved in comparison to previous historical periods, the integration of Roma has increased, and a considerable number of educated Roma have emerged (Barany 2000).

The price paid for the integration, however, has been quite high. Even though Roma are now a recognized minority in all Balkan countries, they are still oppressed and treated as second-class citizens. The processes that marginalize the Roma are felt most strongly in countries with specific formulated policies toward the Roma, as in Bulgaria and Greece, and to a lesser extent in the countries of former Yugoslavia and in Albania, where formal policies are absent or limited (Marushiakova and Popov 2015). Many Roma of Eastern Europe follow the road of social degradation and isolation. The dreadful socio-economic situation of the Roma across the Eastern European region should serve as a major force in shaping state policy.

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