

# Romani migration in Europe in the post-communist period

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## Historical introduction

Roma are the second oldest minority in Europe, the largest, but also the poorest and the most stigmatized and persecuted. Violence against Roma were not perpetrated, (or better, not only) by common people, but by highest authorities, and even the “less impactful strategy” of cultural assimilation and social integration, has to be considered as a form of violence whose aim was the eradication of the Romani culture and identity. This population had been the scapegoat for real problems which states’ leaders were not able to solve and for whom they needed an excuse (eg: high level of unemployment, economic crises, poor health care standards, etc.).

An aspect of considerable importance is that there is not an official Romani written history and, in addition, most of the reports and research have been made by non-Roma scholars, and this fact creates a lot of biases within the available knowledge about Romani history and culture’s development.

Romani first arrival in Europe dates to the XIV century in the Balkans, after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and in the XV century they also arrived in Western Europe. Romani movements towards Europe continued over the centuries and historians divided these migrations into “waves” to get a clearer view, even if some academics consider this organisation too strict and not very correct because movements never came to a complete stop.

Within this paper the focus will be on the so called “Third Wave” which coincides with the collapse of the communism (1989), and whose consequences: the outbreaks of wars in ex-Yugoslavia and the economic crisis. During this period, indeed, many Roma decided to escape from their origin countries because of the poor and dangerous conditions. It was found that between 1991 and 1995, 10.000 Roma from Bosnia-Herzegovina left their countries and applied for asylum since they were afraid of being rejected by all the sides involved in the conflict. Moreover, after the NATO intervention in Kosovo (1998 - 1999) an ethnic cleansing took place, Romani camps were disrupted and the 80% of Roma present decided to depart.

Some of them decided to remain in the Eastern part of Europe and became displaced persons, others, instead, tried to reach Western Europe and ended up in reception camps.

## Starting Point

Countries from where most of the Romani migrants came from are: Bosnia Herzegovina, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic. In all these countries life conditions got worse after the end of the Communism and new disadvantageous policies were applied to Roma. For instance, in 1994 Czech Republic introduced a new citizenship law and people had to meet some strict standards to reacquire it, so many Roma decided to allow their passports to expire and then to apply for asylum as stateless persons. In some countries of ex-Yugoslavia Roma were denied of “minority status” or were exposed to similar measures; for example, in Hungary and Slovakia Roma were divided from national minorities, and for this reason they lost all their benefits.

During the Communism a lot of hard and violent policies were applied to Roma, these provided the ban of Romani culture, traditions and language, forcibly sterilization or to place Romani children in orphanages<sup>1</sup> or exclusion from some kinds of work. Despite these, the communist system also established protection measures from open violent discrimination and to ensure Roma decent life conditions. After the collapse of this regime the assistance policy was abandoned, and people were free to discriminate and do violence against Roma. Life conditions got worse and the level of unemployment of Romani people increased rapidly, so, the only way to survive was committing little crimes or begging. The anti-Roma sentiment also affected justice, indeed, the punishment for them were harsher and more humiliating; Roma were tied to trees, shot and beaten publicly.

The factors that pushed Roma to leave their origin countries (or zone) to find new opportunities and better life conditions were:

- Discrimination in employment, housing and education
- Detrimental economic situation and impossibility of improving their life conditions
- New disadvantageous policies concerning the status of Roma as a minority or citizens
- Sentiments of non-identification and non-confidence toward the gadje<sup>2</sup> society
- Racially motivated violence

There were different kinds of violence suffered by Romani people in their origin countries. It is also important to remember that these were not done only by the population, but also by authorities. Violence could reach different level of gravity, from a little brawl through the streets of a city to burning Romani houses and forced them to settle in another place. The activity of skinheads, an extreme-right political group whose aim was to preserve the idea of national identity, was relevant because they caused huge sufferings to Roma and they were rarely brought to justice, and when it happened, the members had light sentences. It has been acknowledged that between 1990 and 1995 thirty pogroms against Roma took place around Poland, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. Moreover, a large wound on the skin of the Romany population is the porrajmos<sup>3</sup> and the fact that states, institutions and academics seemed blind eyed regarding this issue.

The lack of confidence in the social and political structure of the states where their lived influenced Roma decision of emigrating, even when it could mean facing a long repetition of expulsions and rejections of asylum applications.

## Displacement Characterisation

An important clarification that is necessary to make is that not all Roma follow the nomadic tradition and not all the movements made by Roma can be considered as migrations<sup>4</sup>. Most of the travel were determined by market opportunity but also by traditions and occasions to meet relatives and other members of the clan; so, economic reasons were not the only ones that led Roma to a specific place. Unlike the conditions described just before where movements are voluntarily, there are cases in which migrations are forced by socio-political circumstances and external pressures.

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<sup>1</sup> hence the common belief of Roma who stole children, because, when Romani children were forcibly taken away from their families their relatives tried by all means to find and take them back

<sup>2</sup> “Not-rom” in Romanes (Romani language)

<sup>3</sup> The genocide of Roma happened during the WWII in the nazi concentration camps

<sup>4</sup> “migrations” : movements which aim to settle in a new place for a medium-long term period

Romani migrations were not only from East to West, but most of these were within Eastern Europe or within the borders of their origin countries.

There were some features that characterized Romani migrations: firstly, Roma always emigrate in families or group, never individually. Secondly, they were ready to face all the risks of a rejection because Roma could count on a strong community-internal ethic of mutual aid and assistance<sup>5</sup>. In addition, their non-cooperative and mistrustful attitude made Romani community even more cohesive and close.

Not all the Roma settled in a country belong to the same category of migrants, there were: naturalized migrants, migrants who had permanent or temporary residence permit, asylum seekers who made their application or who were waiting from the result of an appeal of a negative asylum decision, illegally residents and past migrants who were returned to their origin country.

## Arrival Countries and Political Context

Focusing on the Romani migrations to Western Europe it is crucial to underline which are the factors that convinced Roma to choose these countries as their new home. The most important element was the presence of other Roma in this area<sup>6</sup>, consequently it was easier to find support during the initial steps of their new life. Western European countries' social system was larger and people had more rights and freedom, indeed, social benefits were also available for asylum seekers and there were no ban for culture and languages, so, Roma could speak their language and carry on their traditions.

This welcoming atmosphere rapidly changed when the number of Roma migrants increased and the leaders of arrival countries had to face all the problems this extremely complex situation brought. The first signal of change within the political system is the shift of the international policy's competence from a common line of openness to domestic level, at which each state could apply the measures they preferred.

The strategy of Western countries was based on the lack of policies to regulate the entrance of economic migrants and the "expulsion tactic". The former's aim was to allow states to decide the acceptance or the rejection case by case; the second part consisted in stipulated bilateral agreements with origin countries to make the procedure of repatriation easier. An example of how this kind of deal worked was the organisation of chartered aircrafts to expel Roma<sup>7</sup> and re-integration programmes financed by western states at the destination, which aim was to deter Romani migrants from trying the asylum application again. It is important to remind that these decisions were taken as high-level policy, but the practical implementation, that was made by public authorities turned out to be a huge burden because of all the difficulties of adapting a theoretical policy to real situations.

Western European countries after a period in which they criticized the neighbourhood states, c.d. "gatekeepers states"<sup>8</sup>, because of the terrible conditions and inhuman treatments to which

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<sup>5</sup> indeed, some Roma undertook clandestine life in a new state thanks to the help of other members of the Romani community

<sup>6</sup> Especially Germany, Sweden, Italy and Austria

<sup>7</sup> Examples of agreements which included this kind of strategy were signed between: Germany and Makedonia, France and Romania, Belgium and Slovakia

<sup>8</sup> State of central Europe, which aim was to avoid that Romani asylum seekers did their applications in Western European countries

Roma were subjected, decided unanimously to consider these states safe to lock Roma in these instead of arriving in Western Europe.

The procedure of application for Romani asylum seekers was made even more difficult: documents had to be filled in national language, so Roma needed interpreters whose function was most of the time disadvantageous more than useful. Interpreters often did not report human rights violations to protect the image of their country, moreover they forbade Roma to apply for political reasons, they indeed affirmed that discrimination against Roma had to be considered as group discrimination, not as individual. Interpreters also suggested to Roma to add some description of the huge economic possibilities they had in their origin country to please recruiters, but in this way Romani applications were obviously rejected after being considered incoherent with the motivation of the request.

The response to an application could be an acceptance, that did not necessarily mean better life conditions, indeed most of the time Roma lived miserably, trying to survive as they could. After being rejected Roma had two possibilities: looking for other solutions or starting a clandestine existence with the support of other Roma.

This Romani-limitation idea was shared also in the speeches of political leaders, both in Western and Eastern European countries. Two prime examples of aggressive and dehumanising vocabulary used towards Roma were the speeches of the chancellor of Germany, Helmut Kohl ('90) and of the Prime Minister of Slovakia Vladimír Mečiar ('93). In the former case Romani arrival was seen as a factor that "*could spark a national emergency*", and a vision shared by most of the Western European leaders was the idea of Roma as trigger for the pan-European unification process. On the other side of Europe, Mečiar had a speech whose tones were also more aggressive; the official translation concerned the necessity of limiting the reproduction of Romani population, that is considered as "*socially and mentally NOT adaptable to our society*"; the effective translation, more similar to the original speech included also a menacing particular, the fact that they had to face Romani (reproduction) issue and to address with them "*to avoid that they will address us in the future*".

## Italian Case

Nothing different has emerged from considering Romani situation within the borders of our country. In 1994 the government established by the alliance Berlusconi-Fini used harsh and dehumanizing words against Romani migrants, and this was the starting point of a long political campaign against Romani presence in Italy.

In 2007 Giovanna Reggiani was killed by a Rom, as a consequence the anti-Roma sentiment increased and Prodi established the "emergency law"<sup>9</sup> to try to limit the expansion of Roma presence in Italy. That was also the year of the entry into the EU of Romania and Bulgaria<sup>10</sup> and so Roma (as other European citizens) acquired the freedom of movements within the Schengen area, so authorities had to regulate this new flux of arrivals. In 2008 the government established the State of Emergency and Power of Ordinance in relation to Romani settlements in Lombardy, Latium and Campania; this resolution contained also a package of identification practices that had to be applied also to minors. These measures were hardly criticised by Sarah Ludford<sup>11</sup> as illegal and discriminatory methods of collecting fingerprints. The response of the

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<sup>9</sup> L. 181/2007

<sup>10</sup> Two of the countries from which the higher number of Roma came from

<sup>11</sup> Member of the European Parliament for the ALDE

Minister of the Interior, Maroni, was that these practices were necessary to give an identity to the people within the Romani camps who did not have an ID.

## Romani And Human Rights

The role of Romani NGOs was, and still is, crucial to build a new and more open society. These organisations worked in Central and Eastern Europe to encourage Roma to dialogue with society and institutions and to try to change the typical Romani non-cooperative and not-trusting attitude. It is not so simple, the public opinion is not very open towards Roma. Indeed, helping request made by Romani leaders and representants ended with the accusing of extreme self-victimisation.

Violence against Roma continued, a model case is the village of Hadareni, where Nicolae Gheorghe<sup>12</sup> worked a lot to create a more inclusive society. Here, after all his commitment, in July 1993 a pogrom against Roma happened and destroyed all the progress made up to that point and made the coexistence between Roma and gadje even worse.

European Union invested a lot of money in project for integration of Roma but the most of them ended in failures. This happened because Romani people were not involved and when they were part of the team they had no decisional role, but Roma were only consultants and advisers, and it was neither useful nor fair. Within a planning session for a project which aim is to build a new inclusive society, where Roma are accepted and welcomed and in which they can regain their trust in the society it would be a great and meaningful turning point to put some members of this group, as young people, in a prominent role to define the best strategies to achieve it.

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<sup>12</sup> One of the Romani leaders

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