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Author

Alexieva, Petrouchka

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ROMA MIGRATION INEQUALITIES IN MODERN EUROPE

Petrouchka Alexieva, Department of Anthropology, CSULA

Mentor: Assistant Professor Susan Saul

The overthrowing of the socialist regime in Eastern Europe in 1989 restored political freedoms but also resulted in a severe economic crisis. The artificially maintained state-owned and -controlled economy collapsed leading to the unemployment and the pauperization of a significant part of the population. The minorities, especially the Gypsies, suffered the worst blows of the transition to market economy.

The Gypsies are a distinct nomadic tribe which migrated into Europe from Asia sometime during the 13th and 14th century. The name “Gypsies” came from “Egyptians” though they have suspected Hindu origins (Crawford 1865, 26). They are also called “Tsigani” in Southeastern Europe, “Sinti” in Austria, Germany and Northern Europe, but the most common name they use for themselves is “Roma” or “Romi.” For consistency, throughout this study I will use Roma or the popular Gypsy as synonyms.

The most severe adverse effects of the postcommunist transition period on this vulnerable minority are evident in the countries with considerable percentage of Gypsy population such as Bulgaria (4.7% of the population identified itself as Roma during the 2001 census, National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2007) and Romania. In reality, there are many more but most of them are trying to identify themselves as Turks in Bulgaria or as Hungarians in Romania to avoid discrimination, at least on paper. The estimates are of approximately 500,000 Gypsies in Bulgaria and as many as 2.5 million in Romania (Borowiec 2005). The World Bank estimates are even higher (Fig. 1).

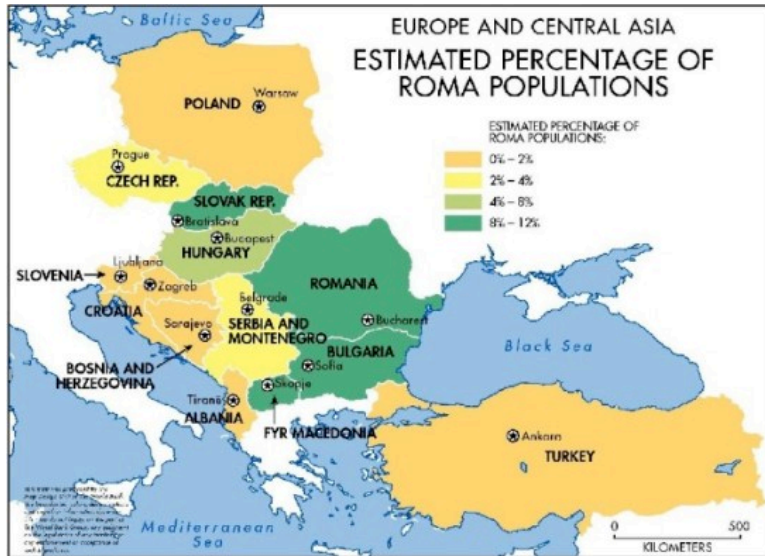


Fig. 1. Estimated Percentage of Roma Populations in Eastern Europe (World Bank, 2007, <http://go.worldbank.org/LGZN671T10>).

Unable to find regular jobs in the shrinking employment market of post-socialist Eastern European economies, the Gypsies are forced to feed their families through illegal “business” activities – smuggling, shoplifting, and stealing state or private property. This additionally enforces the criminalization of the Roma people making it harder to find jobs and perpetuating the vicious circle of poverty, illiteracy, and abuse. The unemployment rates among Gypsies reach as high as 90% in some areas (Nahbedian 2000). The Roma also tend to stay unemployed much longer than the general population (Fig. 2).

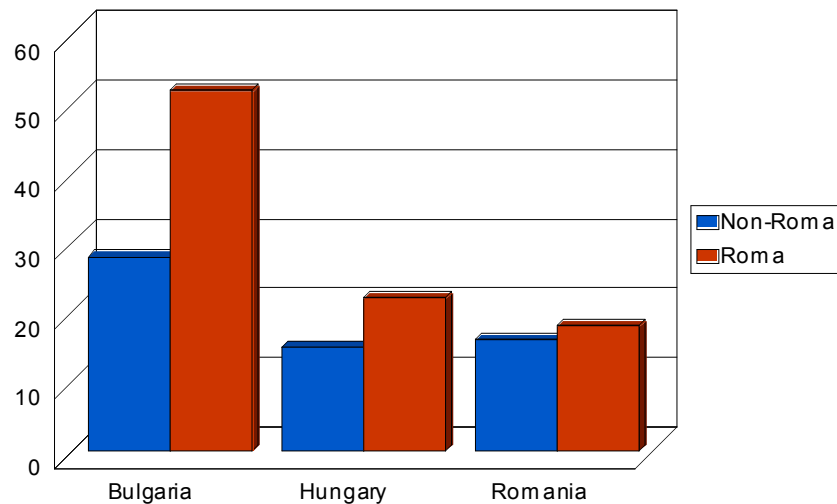


Fig. 2. Unemployment Duration of Roma in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania (Ringold et al., 2005).

Those who succeed in getting jobs are engaged in the lowest paid professions – janitors, manual laborers in fields or factories. As a result the majority of Roma population is well below the generally accepted absolute poverty line of purchasing power parity of less than \$2.15 per capita per day (Revenga et al. 2002, 12). There is a striking difference when the Roma and non-Roma populations are compared (Fig. 3).

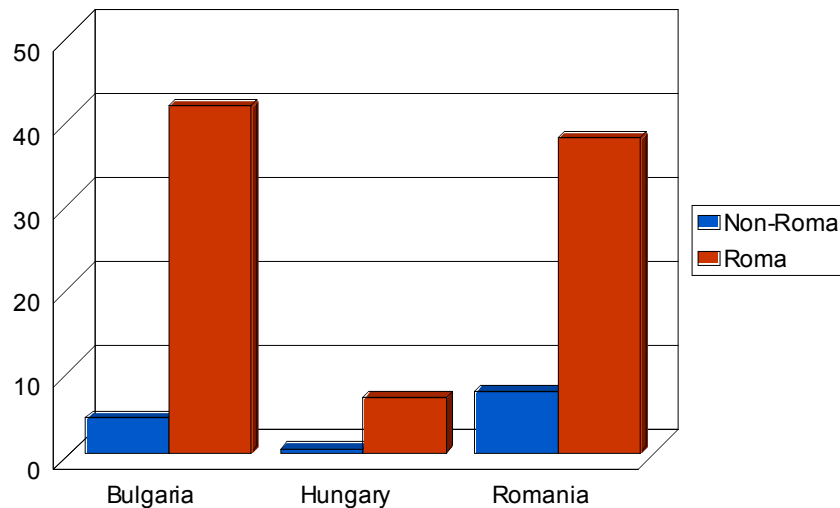


Fig. 3. Percentage of people below the absolute poverty line - less than \$2.15 purchasing power parity per capita per day (Revenga et al., 2002, 13).

The racial prejudice and criminalization make it almost impossible for the Roma to migrate within their own countries and seek employment somewhere else. During communist times most of them were forcefully settled and employed in the factories or agricultural industry. As far as their civil rights were concerned, during communist rule the Gypsies were forced to change their names twice, obligated to study and use only the Bulgarian language, and denied the right to practice their religious rituals, whether pagan Roma, Christian, or Muslim (Lazarova

2007). However, most communist regimes had “affirmative action” rules in higher education providing a fixed number for minorities to be able to achieve their goals in higher education and different professional careers (Ivanov 1990). Furthermore, Roma families were given additionally significant welfare payments for their children. For example, in Bulgaria during the 1980s Gypsy parents received up to 120 leva per month while the minimum monthly salary of a farm worker was 25 leva (personal observations). “Everyone worked during communism, even the Gypsies” says an informant to an American journalist (Pucci 2007). Thus, they could build their own houses and maintain an adequate standard of living.

With the abolishment of affirmative action in the early 1990s the Gypsies were practically eliminated from all universities in Bulgaria. Currently, only 1% of the Roma succeed in graduating higher education compared to the 15% of the Bulgarians. Over 18% of the Gypsies are completely illiterate (versus less than 1% among the general population) and 65% of gypsy children drop out at elementary school level (Bangieva 2007). According to the European Union Monitoring and Advocacy Program (OSI 2007) the situation with education and employability is not much different in Hungary, Romania and Serbia.

As a result of the economic recession in the 1990s the unemployment rate in the country reached 20% among the general population. Many Bulgarian specialists with higher education took jobs quite below their qualifications but preserved their employment. For example, building engineers became construction workers, architects and interior designers became painters, mechanical engineers became automotive mechanics, and the former military officers and other people with higher education became bus and taxi drivers (Peneva 2006). Many people migrated out of the country (Minchev 2000). Most of the employers would naturally prefer highly educated and reliable Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, or Armenians, rather than the uneducated and

“unreliable” (quotation marks are mine) Gypsies (BAS 2002). Thus, most of the Roma became permanently unemployed. Petty trading or criminal activities became their only choice to put food on the table (Konstantinov 1998).

Many are forced to migrate to the West in order to survive. The issue is global for all European countries, with an emphasis on Eastern Europe. Despite the talk about human rights, the European Union sternly protects its labor market from Eastern European competition, especially by the Roma. For example, in the late 1990s the government of the United Kingdom introduced visas for the Slovaks to block the influx of Roma asylum-seekers (Grabbe 2000, 533). As the whole population in Slovakia became disadvantaged, this raised the resentment against the Roma among the general population. Similarly, visa restrictions for Bulgarians and Romanians were seen as a direct result of the fear of Western Europe from anticipated mass migration of Roma from the two poorest European nations (Grabbe 2000, 533). At the same time, the European Union hypocritically demanded better treatment of the Gypsies in Eastern Europe (ECRI 2003) and Schengen countries continued to give political asylum to Gypsies.

The biggest problem is that many societies in the better economically developed North West of Europe have not changed their attitude towards minorities, especially Gypsies, regardless of their high standards for protection of human rights among their neighbors. During a survey by *Eurobarometer Report on Racism and Xenophobia* among the Western European countries over 90% put equality above all, almost a third of the interviewed Western Europeans declared themselves quite or very racist, and 40% considered that there are too many foreigners or minorities living among them to feel comfortable (O’Connel 1998). According to the same report, most European countries have the appropriate anti-racist legislation protecting their citizens, but “non-citizens” or “aliens” are generally not protected. Furthermore, in most Western

European Democracies Gypsies are denied the status as a racial or ethnic minority, but are regarded as a “socially marginalized group” (O’Connel 1998).

The analysis of the French *Insitut Historique Akewand* talks about the necessity of special attention to the increased migration of Gypsies from Eastern and Central Europe (Manfrass 1992, 391). In the same article, the author admits that the Gypsy problem “can hardly be addressed solely with the concepts of “integration” and of a “multicultural society.” Accordingly, France changed its policy and in December 1990 stopped granting political asylum to migrants from Eastern Europe. France also expressed serious concern against the migration of Yugoslavian Gypsies from Germany (Manfrass 1992, 395). This clearly shows that the center of attention of the French right politics is moving from the South to North migration threat towards the new threat of Gypsy influx from Eastern Europe.

Germany with its own Gypsy population of approximately 100,000 showed another interesting phenomenon. The local Gypsies called *Sinti* who spoke German and were settled a long time ago, showed more contempt and hatred towards their Roma fellows coming from Yugoslavia, Romania or Macedonia. They looked upon the newcomers as beggars and thieves and did not want to have any contact. This explains the passivity of the local Gypsy organizations in Germany when many Roma were deported back to Macedonia, Yugoslavia, and Romania, regardless their claims of racism and harassment (O’Connel 1998). When interviewed, over 37% of the students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wuppental, who are usually liberal, admitted that they considered Gypsies at the top of their list of the most despised groups.

The local nationalists in Western Europe immediately raised the Specter of “economic competition” (Grabbe 2000, 523). Still, highly educated individuals from Eastern Europe have

much better chance in finding any type of job than the uneducated Gypsies (Rutkowski 2007) and they can also become competition for the local qualified personnel. Accordingly, Austria and Germany created legislation that would limit the ability of foreigners to work in the EU even after the accession of their countries into the Schengen. In this context the interests of the extreme right nationalist parties and the leftist labor unions coincide, which explains the increasingly conservative governments elected recently in Western Europe. The truth is that at least the available data shows that after initial spike in the early 1990s due mostly to repatriation of Germans, the influx of immigrants decreased from 400,000 in 1994 to 75,000 per year in 2004 (Huffner 2005). From those, less than one fifth comes from Eastern Europe. Even with the accession of Poland, Bulgaria and Romania, the EU places significant requirements for enforcing the borders with the ex-Soviet republics such as Ukraine and Belarus. In many cases this adversely affects the trade and political relations between the neighboring countries. In the words of the Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, the EU “replaced the Iron Curtain with a paper curtain” (Grabbe 2000, 533) and moved it from Berlin to the line between the Black Sea and the Baltic. Again, this will affect most of all the possibilities for migration of the poorest people in Belarus and Ukraine – the Roma, and will fuel anti-Gypsy sentiments among the general population.

By restricting the funds for social spending, the World Bank and the International Money Fund (IMF) make the plight of the Eastern European Roma worse. The international financial organizations eliminate considerable resources necessary to continue some of the established educational programs for minorities. The Roma children remain uneducated and, thus, less likely to be employed in the modern competitive labor market. IMF is more concerned about the Gypsies’ right to vote but consistently ignores their rights to work and to be able to put food on

their table. The EU requires of the newly accessed members of the Union to enforce antidiscrimination policies while the old Schengen member countries openly express their disdain and hatred towards the “freeloaders and spongers” from Eastern Europe (O’Connell 1998). France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Belgium limit the internal migration of their local Gypsies, pretending that their frustration and hatred is directed towards the lifestyle and not the ethnical or cultural background of the Roma.

Many local and international non-government organizations are trying to protect the rights of the Roma in Europe, to improve their education, qualification and probability for gainful employment. Representatives from nine countries of Central and Eastern Europe gathered in Budapest in 2003 and began the initiative to declare the years between 2005-2015 *The Decade of Roma Inclusion*” (OSI, Roma Initiatives Office 2007). The Declaration of the Decade of Roma Inclusion was signed by the Prime Ministers of Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovakia, Macedonia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic on February 2, 2005 in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. The World Bank agreed to administer the Decade Trust Fund financed by the nine participating countries. But it will take the support and participation of the global community to resolve the global problem of the Gypsies. Besides the proper legislative measures, first of all it would be necessary to revive the economy of the East European countries. Only then it will be possible to open new job opportunities for the Roma men and women in order to break the vicious circle of insufficient education, unemployment, poverty and crime. That will be the best prevention of the migration flows from the East to the West of Europe.

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