

spotlight europe

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Roma Integration in Europe – Mission (Im)possible?

Hermina Emiryan

The Roma people are the largest ethnic minority in the European Union. However, in many EU member states they have not been sufficiently integrated. Recently there have been disagreements between EU states on the Roma – the treatment of the Roma has led to a dispute between Italy and Romania. This analysis provides a short survey of the situation of the Roma in Europe and of past European initiatives.

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Roma in Eastern and Western Europe

Today an estimated 9 to 12 million Roma people live in the European Union, which makes them the largest minority group in Europe. All over Europe they face more or less the same problems, although the challenges appear to be more acute in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore the new member states face a lot of criticism from Western Europe for failing to improve the situation of the Roma. The new member states joined the EU along with their minorities and the problems that come with them, leaving the EU unprepared to deal

with the minority immigration, education and work force integration. The problems to be addressed are clearly interrelated and interdependent.

Official numbers

The actual numbers of Roma living in a country are disputed in almost every EU member state. Censuses are not considered to be reliable as many Roma do not identify themselves for fear of discrimination. Estimates indicate that the real numbers are usually two to three times more than what the statistics show. According to official figures about 535.000 Roma live in Romania, which is the country with the largest Roma population in the EU. But other estimates suggest that actual figures lie anywhere from 700.000 to 2.500.000.

Numbers for Spain also diverge strongly between 600.000 and 1.500.000, as do figures for France, Hungary and Bulgaria. In Germany the number is thought to be around 130.000 Roma.

Italy, with a population of about 100.000 Roma, has been in the spotlight in the past year for its attempts to introduce a somewhat different and in many ways discriminatory scheme to count its Roma by fingerprinting them. After the EU Commission gave Italy the green light for the plan, a spokesman told journalists that the practice was only aimed at identifying persons "who cannot be identified in any other way" and excluded the collection of "data relating to ethnic origin or religion of people".

Living conditions

Housing and living conditions have long been a problem for Roma. As nomads, some Roma tend to eschew permanent dwellings and settle temporarily in camps, whereas others have settled permanently in towns. Generally, they tend to keep together in a group. Most socialist regimes of the 1950s and 1960s in Central and Eastern European countries implemented aggressive policies to assimilate Roma and incorporate them into mainstream society. This was to be achieved through the provision of improved housing, aiming for higher educational enrollment figures and guaranteed employment. However, many of these policies were pursued with a heavy hand and ultimately failed. There are currently large Roma settlements far away from urban centers that are relatively difficult to enter and which are essentially cut off from the surrounding environs.

Education

Education is crucial to development and overcoming poverty. The lack of access to good education constitutes one of the biggest problems for Roma. There is an entire generation of young, illiterate Roma, who lack basic employment skills and cannot compete in the labor market. The practice

of segregating Roma children to separate schools in their settlements is still common, and school drop out rates remain high.

In the last two years, Hungary and Bulgaria have presented studies on the budgetary implications of providing education for Roma as compared to a continued lack of education. In 2006 the Roma Education Fund published a study focusing on the long-term benefits of investment into Roma education in Hungary, and found that the government would realize a net benefit of 70,000 Euro for each Roma child continuing education beyond primary school. A year later the [Institute for Market Economics](#) repeated the study in Bulgaria and came to similar findings: "The present value of the net budget benefits from education in one Roma child is more than 82,000 Euro if investment in the education of 30,000 Roma children is made now, it would lead to more than 2,468 billion Euro net budget benefits."

"Segregating Roma children to separate school is common."

Very few Roma children complete secondary education levels or move on to attain an advanced degree. The well-educated Roma usually live outside of their community. Roma children in Central and Eastern European countries often end up in special classes or schools for children with special needs, despite being thoroughly healthy and capable.

Several efforts to integrate Roma children into the mainstream school systems have lead to tensions between Roma and non-Roma children, as well as between their parents, the school administrations and the NGOs working in the sphere of education and human rights protection. Of the many projects implemented in education, some have proven to be effective, some unsustainable and others completely irrelevant. All is not entirely bleak, however, as there are isolated examples of

small, mixed communities with only one school, where Roma children have successfully integrated, have achieved higher performance scores and show lower attrition rates.

Unemployment

Due to illiteracy and low education levels, Roma are not the preferred choice when

tracts or social and medical insurance. In South Eastern Europe unemployment among Roma aged 15-55 ranges from 44 % (Romania) to 71 % (FYR Macedonia) according to UNICEF.

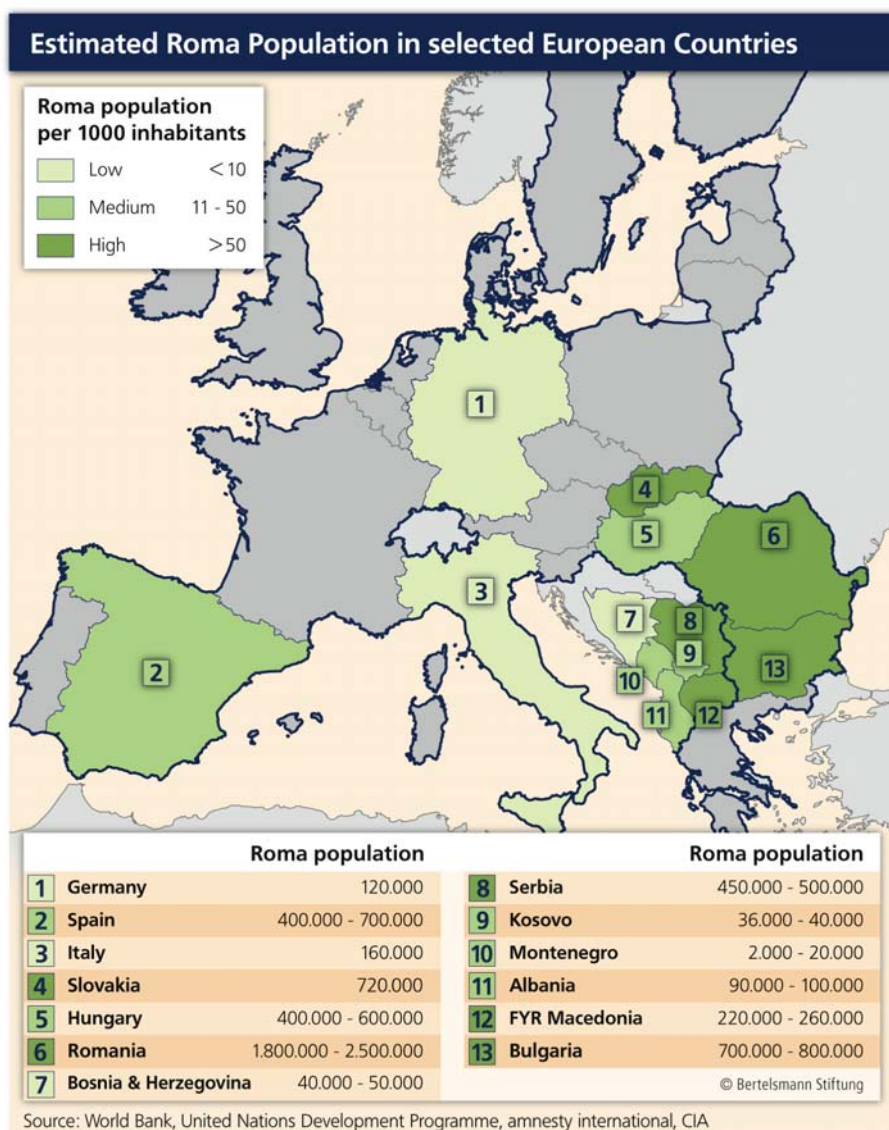
There are some good examples of income generating projects targeting Roma. In Bulgaria the program “The Land - source of incomes” attempts to design new models for Roma integration under the conditions of the market environment. It focuses on the Roma families from villages in the Plovdiv region who don’t have land of their own. The idea is simple: those willing to be involved in farming are provided with access to land in order to enable their families to become self-sufficient. A team of experts has worked on helping Roma families to develop practical skills for effective agricultural activity. They are providing

consultations and trainings, as well as providing access to financial funds by creating a financial program for working capital for agriculture.

employers are hiring new staff. Prejudices are effective, too. A vicious circle results from this negative interaction of social reality and biased behavior of the majority of the society. Most of the Roma population subsists on social welfare and unemployment compensation. Others operate in the grey economy, where they don’t pay taxes and work privately - often without con-

Social services

Access to social services has been threatened by an increasing need for services and tight budgets. Formal and informal



charges now accompany services previously provided free of charge, and the quality of these services has eroded. Roma are particularly affected by increasing barriers to access because they are at a higher risk of poverty and face unique circumstances limiting their access to services.

Geographically isolated Roma communities may be far from social service facilities and personnel. As Roma frequently live in remote areas or illegal housing, they may lack the documentation necessary for enrolling in school and claiming social assistance or health benefits. The prevalence of Roma in informal sector employment also limits their benefits in areas such as health care and unemployment, which are based on social insurance contributions. The lack of identity documentation and registration among Roma, which is compounded by the absence of basic language and writing skills enabling individuals to fill out the documentation, often results in limited access to social aid.

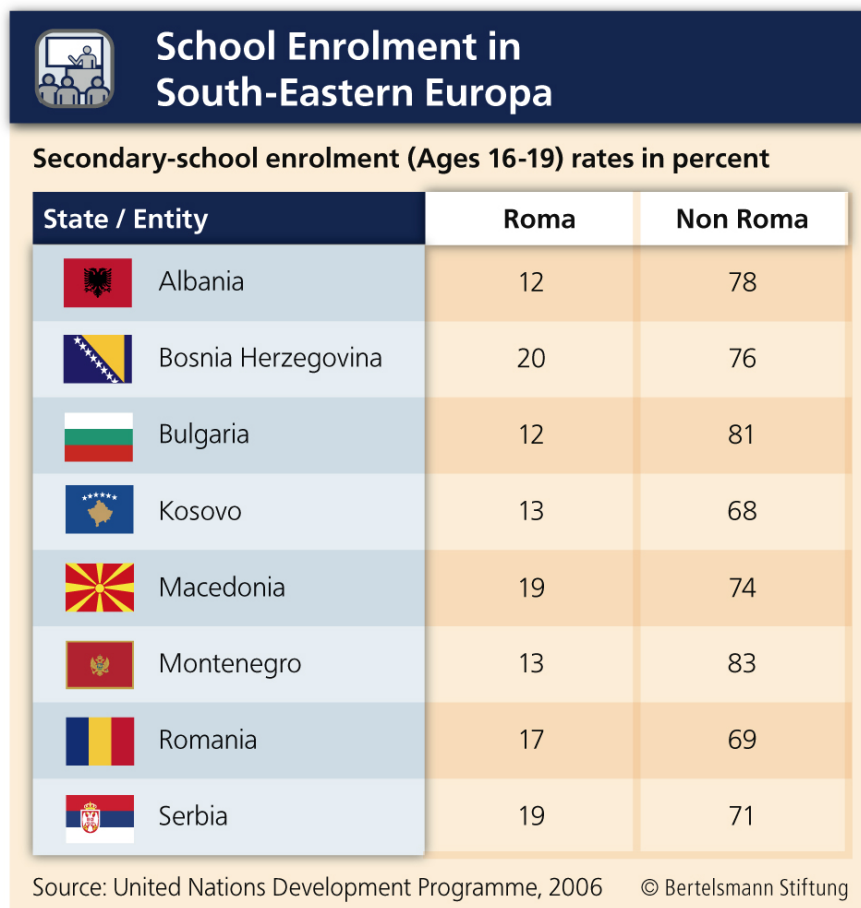
Health

As most Roma in Central and Eastern Europe don't have health insurance, their access to health services is limited. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the poor living conditions of many Roma (i.e., no sewage system or running water) contribute to the spread of infection and epidemic diseases. In addition to drug use, unprotected sex and family planning are

the major issues currently drawing attention in the community.

Public opinion

Surveys and opinion polls consistently indicate that public attitudes towards minorities and foreigners are generally marked by intolerance and low levels of acceptance. Recent data suggest that discrimination against Roma is on the rise. In Bulgaria, for example, in 1994 just 54 percent of the majority population stated that they would not mind working with Roma.



By 2004, this figure had fallen to just 45 percent. Other countries in the region show similar results.

Rather than educating the public on Roma culture and traditions, media coverage shapes negative perceptions of the Roma by concentrating on criminal activities. School textbooks as well as in-class discussions are generally void of substantive information regarding Roma's cultural heritage, which is not the case for other

minority groups. The absence of pro-active education promotes ignorance about the Roma people and intolerance towards ethnic diversity.

Leadership and representation

Although there are leaders among the Roma, the community is generally not well represented in local and state governments. There are some efforts in Bulgaria to introduce Roma advisors at the local level of municipalities, but these initiatives are insufficient and should be part of a larger strategy to give voice to the community to address the important issues and problems. The most significant success of Roma representation at the EU level constitutes in the election of two Hungarian members of the European Parliament who are of Roma origin and are openly discussing Roma issues.

II

Decade of Roma Inclusion and first EU activities

In February 2005, the heads of several governments (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia) launched the [Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015](#). With this initiative, each of the governments agreed to give priority to develop policies that address Roma education, employment, health and housing. Albania joined in July 2008 and is the newest member of the Decade. Spain as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina have also declared their intention to join the Decade. They will officially become members when their governments have signed the Declaration of the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

Building on the principle of Roma participation in the Decade, Decade Watch, which is supported by the Open Society Institute and the World Bank, is an initiative of a group of Roma activists and researchers to assess the progress made since the Decade was launched in 2005.

According to the annual report for 2007, the Decade gained momentum in that year compared to the previous two years. Among the biggest achievements was the interest on behalf of Spain as the first Western European country to join. The organizers take this as a powerful signal of the importance of the Roma Inclusion agenda in Europe. However, the Decade has yet to yield the impact that Roma in Europe need, namely their tangible and genuine integration into mainstream societies. In terms of policy-making, the highlight of the 2009-2010 agenda is the point of pushing towards an EU Roma policy building on the Decade. If and when adopted, this would constitute a pan-European initiative to foster integration of the Roma.

Clearly a worthy initiative, the Decade nonetheless has been subjected to much criticism for the absence of tangible effects and for the lack of operational plans for each country. In the three years since the launching of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, it has become evident that focusing attention on vulnerable groups is not enough to lift the Roma out of poverty and exclusion. A [survey conducted by the World Bank and the OSI](#) in late 2005 on the perception of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and its priorities shows that “Roma only” measures are not perceived favorably by Roma or by other communities. Deeper analysis suggests that this is not a communication problem, but rather an indicator of broader fatigue from narrow, group-focused approaches.

In mid-September of 2008, the EU Commission, together with the Soros Foundation, launched the first EU Roma Summit. Invited participants included representatives of the EU member states, participants in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, members of the European Parliament, the French Presidency of the EU, non-profit organizations and experts working on Roma issues.

Some 500 people were given the floor to discuss the state of affairs for the Roma

minority in Europe and to make a commitment to develop a European strategy for Roma inclusion. Much criticism was raised with regard to Italy's fingerprinting policy, and with regard to both the EU and national governments' unsustainable efforts to address the problems faced by Roma today. This criticism notwithstanding, the summit recognizes the fact that the Roma are the largest minority in the EU, and that they continue to face the same problems, despite many projects and programs. One of the clear outcomes was the commitment to create a common European policy on Roma to facilitate the integration process of this minority into the European community.



Recommendations

Of the several recommendations that have been made, some have been adopted but many have not been considered. It is important not to generalize the burden of responsibility. All stakeholders must carry their share of possible actions to take.

Civil society should be more engaged in: *Introducing positive role models* into the Roma community as a means of overcoming poverty. Too often, Roma children and their parents lack positive examples of how and why education pays off.

Raising awareness about Roma culture and traditions. Both should be introduced to the school system, where they can be incorporated into the curriculum. Positive educational practices can be adopted to build social skills such as tolerance and the appreciation of diversity.

Working to make schools partners in Roma integration instead of allowing them to be silent supporters of segregation and discrimination.

National governments need to: *Develop policies targeting the reduction of poverty* among Roma as well as non-Roma populations. Whereas most Roma are vul-

nerable, not all of those individuals who are vulnerable are Roma. Policies targeting poverty are particularly important in countries whose populations are witnessing sharp declines in living standards, which is the case in Southeastern Europe. When addressing social issues, it is important that all citizens in each of the respective countries are provided equal opportunities. Policies that aim to do so will help mitigate increasing tensions between Roma and non-Roma communities.

Develop policies addressing the education of Roma children. Reinvigorating pre-school preparatory classes (so-called zero classes), combined with providing additional support for (majority) language acquisition should be a priority for both central and local governments. In addition, appropriate measures should be designed and implemented to provide incentives for families to participate in such schemes. Such measures could include linking parental eligibility for social benefits to their children's school attendance.

Develop policies that can be justified to Roma as well as non-Roma populations. For example, policies that promote Roma access to employment will mitigate the economic burden of Roma dependency on social welfare. A key element of such policies should be to raise awareness among both majority and minority communities of their joint interests in decreasing Roma dependence on social welfare assistance.

Commit budget support and develop the administrative capacity to use EU funding for Roma inclusion projects.

EU policymakers can:

Adopt an EU Roma inclusion strategy to be implemented in all EU member states as the basis upon which each government builds its national strategy.

Foster the exchange of experiences among member countries in order to improve the manner in which Roma issues are handled and to create adequate national policies.

About the author:

[Hermina Emiryan](#) was fellow at the Bertelsmann Stiftung from August 2008 until January 2009.

For Further Reading:

UNDP Regional Report, Andrey Ivanov. *At Risk: Roma and the Displaced in SEE*. Bratislava, 2006.

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Responsible

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dr. Dominik Hierlemann
dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 81537

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme
joachim.vannahme@bertelsmann.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 81421

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