



## Roma Inclusion and Antiziganism in Europe

### Introduction

Every year since 1990 on the 8th of April, International Romani Day is celebrated – although a whole bunch of events – discussions, film screenings and presentations of publications such as studies and policy recommendations is taking place around that day. NGOs, journalists, activists and some politicians struggle to shed a light on the problems of exclusion, poverty and discrimination in Europe, not much has improved concerning the situation of Roma people in European societies. Instead – due to the continued economic downturn and the political and social crisis of the EU, antiziganism is rising and those who have found themselves in a vulnerable position already before are especially badly struck by the loss of jobs and the austerity measures of many European countries. Basic rights in the EU are being questioned by member states such as the freedom to move for Roma migrating from e.g. Bulgaria or Romania and the Human Right to ask for asylum. Media and politicians are engaging in extremely populist portrayals of the Roma populations in Europe, accusing for instance Romani migrants from Macedonia or Serbia of abusing the asylum system of states such as Germany or France. Roma people in every European country face significant difficulties with regard to employment, housing, education, health and the relation with non-Romani society – there might be differences between different regions, but no matter if it's Finland, Hungary, Italy, Germany or any other place in Europe: Prevailing stereotypes and a lack of rights and empowerment are calling for European solutions to an issue of European concern, to be implemented at a local level.

We as Young European Greens fight against every form of racism and exclusion and for a self-determined, decent life with full access to social, political, cultural and economic rights.

The socio-economic crisis cannot be an excuse to stop fighting for a more inclusive and cohesive society. We demand instead that at every level decisive steps are taken to tackle antiziganism, understood as hostility, prejudice or racism<sup>30</sup> directed at members of the Roma minorities, and that every member of the European society, including those with specific impact on public opinion like media and politicians, acknowledge their responsibility to make a change for the real enactment of Human and citizenship rights in the European Union.

### The “Roma minority”

The picture drawn by sensational newspaper reports and many politicians about the begging, stealing and unwilling to integrate “nature” of Roma needs to be opposed by all means and replaced by a less emotional and populist view of the actual situation. It is estimated that 10-12 Million Roma are living in Europe at the moment, the biggest proportion compared to the non-Roman population in Eastern and Central European countries.

It brings difficulties to use the somehow homogenizing term “the Roma minority” since it is actually an umbrella term. Although they are spread around the continent there exist some similarities in the language spoken by the majority – “Romani” – but with very different dialects and even vocabulary. “Roma” is not used by all groups as self-designation, since other names are preferred differing from region to region and group to group – one can distinguish also Manouches, Kalé, Kalderaš, Sinti, Gitano, Romanichals and some more. So one of the most important<sup>51</sup> things to acknowledge is the

heterogeneity of the persons and their situations who are very often just broadly categorised as "Roma". Another widely held assumption regarding this biggest European minority is their itinerant way of living, since Roma are very often discussed together with "Travellers" who might overlap from time to time with members of the Roma communities, but in general constitute a distinct group. In fact a big majority of the European Roma are living fixed at one place, but they often have to deal with forced evictions or take the decision to leave for other countries which may promise better job and living opportunities.

### **Antiziganism in Europe**

Stereotypes about Roma make up already one very significant part of what is to be called "antiziganism". The common prejudices towards Roma are very contradictory and have a long history in European societies. On the one hand the life of "gypsies" - a term which is permanently contested as it displays harsh negative connotations and problematic conceptions in some linguistic contexts, while in others not - is romanticized when speaking about the "timeless nomadism", "culture of poverty", the "beauty and grace of gypsy women and their colourful dresses", the "joyful music" and soon. These are just as much examples of deeply entrenched exclusionary and disempowering concepts as the opposite talk many politicians and media participate in when they depict Roma as "parasites", lazy, dumb, destructive and therefore not willing and/or able to be "integrated into society". These views are widespread and embraced by Europeans in every corner of the continent which contributes to the systematic discrimination Roma face and results in hate crimes and violent attacks. Perpetrators are very often rather protected by the respective local or national responsible than being brought to the courts. Governments all over Europe are blatantly inactive when it is about safeguarding the rights of their citizens. This is why we actively need to change the perception of Roma as "problems to get rid of" or as being "out of context" and therefore negligible.

### **What are the biggest challenges?**

Even if the number of Roma in Eastern/Central Europe is bigger and the situation concerning poverty, unemployment and racism seems to be worse, in fact also in Italy, Sweden or Germany discrimination and social exclusion is a big problem. Stereotypes exist all around Europe and no government is putting much effort on improving the situation. The discussions about the biggest challenges we are facing in Europe towards the achievement of an inclusive European society which is providing the same rights and space of emancipation to all people living here, safeguarding especially vulnerable groups like "ethnic" minorities, is not a new one. But in the current climate of economic crisis and growing populism, we as young greens, want to prevent European and national stakeholders to forget about what has been agreed upon for instance in the framework of the "Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-96 2015".

#### Education

In many countries and regions with bigger Romani populations the school systems are not providing the same access to education to everyone, but are highly segregated. Romani children often attend "special" schools or classes.

The local authorities justify this educational ghettoization with alleged lower mental abilities of Romani children. This of course serves just as an excuse and lacks any factual basis. Also parents don't want their kids to go to the same schools like the often poorer children of Romani families. This gap then, of necessity, carries on to higher education and only very few Roma enter university and leave it with a degree.

### Housing

Decent living requires passable housing opportunities. But many European Roma have to deal with very poor housing conditions, outside of any urban infrastructure, employment possibilities or cultural participation. They often live in segregated communities without access to sanitary facilities or drinking water supply. Concerning the leasing market, the majority of Roma faces discrimination by landlords, who refuse to rent flats to Roma without any well-grounded, objective reasons.

### Employment

In most countries the employment rate among Roma is much lower than among the rest of the society. This is partly a consequence from the miscarried economic transformation after the fall of the Communist regime, which hit those in state owned and then rapidly privatised companies' first. The missing construction of strong and inclusive welfare states worsened this situation which nowadays leads to poverty and social marginalisation.

Having no permanently registered address often means to not be able to open a bank account and/or being employed with a formal contract. A person under these conditions is especially vulnerable and easy to exploit by employers looking for cheap and discrete workers.

### Health

In Central and Eastern Europe the life expectancy of Roma, according to a World Bank report published in 2005, is on average 10 years lower than the rest of the population. This is a consequence of the low socio-economic status and a disadvantaged access to health care. Infant mortality rates among the Roma population are often much higher than that of non-Roma.

Also cases of forced sterilization of Romani women present a clear breach of Human Rights. This happened not only under the Communist regime, where it was e.g. in Czechoslovakia a common governmental practice, but is still occurring today often without the women's consent or knowledge about what is happening to them.

Discrimination including the denial of European citizen's and Human Rights

Roma face serious racism and discrimination, not only as individuals from the surrounding societies, but also from state side - in Western European countries as well as in Eastern and Central Europe.

Against International and European law governments are conducting forced evictions, as it happened for instance in Italy and France in 2011. There was no legitimized reason for these actions, which were solely motivated by populist and irresponsible reasoning of politicians.

In other places, e.g. Hungary and Czech and Slovak Republic the situation of Roma in terms of basic security worsens drastically. Roma communities are threatened by paramilitary, non-state "civil defence corps" and neo-Nazi groups marching through the villages. Violent attacks happen without reactions from the local authorities or the governments. In this way the states fail to safeguard the life and well-being of their citizens.

Serious Dealing with the past of Roma discrimination and persecution in European history

Under the National socialist regime approximately half a million Roma were persecuted and murdered since "gypsies" were as well targets of the systematic extinction of unwanted groups in the European population. But this does not represent an isolated

incident, rather it is the continuation of systematic persecution in place already centuries before the Nazis came to power and widespread in Europe.

Until today this part of the Roma and European history is not dealt with appropriately if addressed at all. This accounts for school curricula as well as national commemoration days or the maintenance and progressive development of sites of remembrance and memorial like former concentration camps that are left without any designation or are overbuilt by pig farms etc. Also surviving victims of persecution are not officially accepted as such by the responsible states and don't receive any kind of compensation.

## **Ways forward**

We, as Federation of Young European Greens, want to stress the importance of political and societal engagement with the topic of inclusion and minority rights in Europe. The often lower-than-average living conditions of Roma all over Europe are a systemic failure of countries in Europe and the supranational institutions of the EU to guarantee a decent standard of living and basic rights to everyone. After the demise of the Communist regime the EU was focusing too much on economic growth and market integration instead of human well-being and advancement.

Serious commitment on all levels and the participation of everyone affected is imperative to tackle the aforementioned challenges. In order not to shift responsibilities from one point to the other and from one level to the next, an integrated approach must be taken to equally involve stakeholders from the European institutions down to the local stage. Making the goal of Roma inclusion an issue of European concern must not mean that national, regional and local responsible may absolve themselves from becoming active.

Member States should not only develop National Action Plans but obligatory equip the paper work with staff and institutional capacities to coordinate what has been conceived. EU institutions have to support these efforts. Projects, budgets and implementation strategies must be planned in close and permanent cooperation with Roma self-organisations and in support of Romani politicians, although attention has to be paid as well to non-legitimized claims of some to represent and "speak for the whole Roma minority".

EU Member states should underscore their paid lip service by agreeing on the required financial backup for their at least partially declared goal to improve the situation of European Roma.

Considerable money must be spent, since some valuable projects exist which are constantly threatened due to lack of consistent funding and facing the current mood of cutting EU budgets it is anyway important to fight against the reduction of spending for social policies. It should be kept in mind though, that available money is not the guarantee for success - high quality, long-term projects need to be developed and implemented at the local level including clear indicators, goals and wholehearted monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

We live in a patriarchal society - minority communities are no exception to this structural problem, that's why all projects and measures taken up must be designed in a gender-sensitive way including the perspective of women and ensuring their full rights and participation. Gender-budgeting has to be incorporated as a general instrument in all EU-funded or supported activities.

The position of women within Roma communities must be strengthened which includes education, decision making power and bodily autonomy guaranteeing reproductive rights. Girls and women have to be empowered to take a stance against forced

marriages and violence against them. This has to be accompanied by strong police and judicial systems to protect and implement women's rights.

A priority issue to us as Federation of Young European Greens is the access to education – the de-segregation of schools and increased support for Romani children and youth to receive an enabling education that will open up new perspectives to them must be accomplished as soon as possible. This includes free means of transportation to schools, which might be at some distance to Roma settlements – the long term goal being of course the end to "ghettoization" of Roma communities. It includes as well a general free access to education, free school books and learning materials and if possible common afternoon activities provided by the schools or attached institutions. Young Romani people should be encouraged and supported to attend schools of higher education and universities or to seek vocational education. Affirmative action like quotas for instance might be a viable tool to increase the numbers of Roma in important social or political positions.

Political actions must not be ethnically exclusive though – especially in rural communities the overall situation of people has to be improved – only where perspectives, developed infrastructure like proper and free healthcare, decent housing opportunities and hope exists, inclusion can be achieved. That means:

Any kind of austerity measures and cutting back welfare state provisions have to be stopped and a European social model be developed that turns it's back to the neoliberal reconstruction of economy and society which has taken place in the last years, stirred by the EU.

Ending discrimination in all fields of life requires a profound change of thinking this must be seen as an important, long-term process. Antiziganism must be subject of European wide campaigns and local educational work to counter xenophobia and stereotypes. It is a serious expression of racist ideologies and calls for honest and determined action by politicians, media and civil society. School curricula should incorporate teaching units on the history and current situation of Roma to get the widespread misinformation and wrong depictions straight.

Anti-discrimination legislation must be supplemented by the actual set-up of institutions and decentralised offices to receive and process claims of discrimination. Only if such bodies work successfully and visibly, trust into public authorities can be created. Moreover the European Union needs to develop and deploy instruments capable of ensuring fundamental rights in all member states.

Another important question is the one of mobility. The freedom of movement is a precious principle, but actually doesn't live up to its promises. Facing the migration of Roma from one EU member state to another, governments attempt to restrict this right and undermine the rules of the Schengen agreement. We strongly oppose these populist moves and aim instead to make Europe a mobile, borderless society. A society which respects mobility as a basic right and which cherishes the benefits of diversity – not punishing it.

We, as Federation of Young European Greens, demand the full freedom of movement for everybody and access to rights independent from origin, nationality, passport etc. This goes hand in hand with a reconceptualization of European citizenship – all kind of documents that are required for housing contracts, bank accounts, employment etc. should be available on the basis of residence not citizenship.

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The rules of the Schengen agreement may not be changed on the decision of single member states but may only be subject to agreements on a European level including European institutions like the Parliament. Increased migration must not be acknowledged as a legitimate reason to restrict the free movement of people in the EU and in the Schengen area.

We, as Federation of Young European Greens, don't want the efforts on Roma inclusion in Europe and the fight against antiziganism to end with a collection of "best practices" in nice brochures, to hide behind.

We demand concrete and committed action and structural changes in Europe<sup>268</sup> for an inclusive society. Not although we're in an economic crisis right now, but especially because of this, Europe needs a new social model and a different<sup>270</sup> approach to diversity and mobility. We call policy makers on all levels to not<sup>271</sup> forget the most vulnerable in society which are hardest hit by the recession and which face increased hatred in this climate of insecurity and shrinking perspectives.