

The Eternal Migrant? Roma Belonging in Europe

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In spite of their long history in Europe and status as its largest ethnic minority, Roma continue to be seen as the “perpetual foreigner” and have suffered violence, marginalisation, and exclusion. A real sense of belonging for Europe’s Roma can only be built on an acknowledgement of the power relations at play.

Although the Roma have been in Europe since at least the 11th century,¹ they are often seen as the eternal migrant or “stranger” as described by German sociologist Georg Simmel.² They live next to us, but we don’t really know them; they are near and far at the same time. And what we think we know – picked up from media portrayals and fleeting encounters – is often nothing more than stereotypes and prejudices.

In his 2012 article “Europe invents the Gypsies: The dark side of modernity”, literary theorist Klaus-Michael Bogdal argues that, as the Roma were unable to write their own story, it was written by others – whose perceptions strongly coloured the narrative. He believes that the Roma are a modern European invention, and that the image representing them is marred by distortion. In his 2007 book *Roma in Europe*, sociologist and Roma expert Jean-Pierre Liégeois notes that attitudes towards the Roma can be defined by a measure of “romantic sympathy”, but that the most negative stereotypes are revived as soon as social tension arises. Widespread beliefs about Roma communities may be equally distorted. The view that the Roma lead a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle is often unjustified, as many Roma are now in fact settled, while allegations linking Roma culture to a general disregard for rules belie the fact that Roma life is governed by complex norms of social behaviour.

Othering and subversion

In an attempt to explain the lack of Roma belonging to the non-Roma societies with which they live, Romanian cultural anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu identifies three elements of the “Roma condition”. The first is the Roma relationship to the land. Mihăilescu states that there are no examples of significant numbers of Roma having become peasants or farmers, with their roots and resources depending on the land. This caused the Roma to be perceived as an “absolute Other” by local residents. Mihăilescu proposes that Roma mobility was actually driven by the search for livelihood resources. In addition, he refers to the period of Roma enslavement on the territory of present-day Romania (discussed in more detail below), when most Roma led a sedentary life, and posits that nomadism was invented by the “host societies” and functioned as an explicit or implicit operator of social categorisation and stigmatisation.

The next element of the “Roma condition” is their relationship to space. Space in general, and the land in particular, does not offer the Roma a sense of identification or of belonging. Not subscribing to a “cult of territory”, the Roma have no qualms about violating other people’s property interests and are therefore prepared to settle on any available land. Being deprived of land and disinterested in it, the Roma refer to another category of resources – namely their own crafts, from which they earn a daily living. Mihăilescu notes that this often made the Roma an integral part of their “host societies” and their economic

functioning – meaning that the social inclusion of the Roma was much deeper than is generally believed.

The third element of the “Roma condition” is their relationship to property. Aside from rare exceptions, the Roma tended not to accumulate significant property; their most valuable possessions were usually transported by cart. As a result, their economic activity was predominantly orientated towards survival rather than growth. This led to the idea of the Roma having an “economy of waste”, which significantly contributed to the reproduction of their marginal status.

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Interestingly, Mihăilescu suggests that these three elements – a lack of attachment to place, a lack of property ownership, and the practice of an economy of services offered on a peripatetic basis depending on the opportunities available – facilitate a kind of rite of reversal that, by presenting a mirror image of non-Roma society, turns the explicit domination of host societies on its head and allows the subversion of the status quo.

Slavery, emancipation, and westward migration

According to specialist on minority and marginalised communities Aidan McGarry,³ the construction of mainstream identity usually designates an outsider – someone who does not belong – as a foil. A social space is constructed, and those deigned not to belong are positioned outside it, both physically and conceptually. In Europe, Roma are placed outside the space belonging to non-Roma, both physically and conceptually, and are construed as a threat to Europeans.

The most egregious example of exclusion is represented by the enslavement of the Roma on the territory of present-day Romania from at least 1385 until 1856. Not only did this place the Roma outside society; it excluded them from the category of the human. Slaves were like things: they could be bought and sold, gifted, bequeathed, dowried, and given in lieu of debt. As in the US, following the abolition of Roma slavery in 1855-1856, the two Romanian principalities offered compensation to the owners for the economic losses suffered but not to the slaves themselves.

Romani historian Petre Petcuț⁴ states that the abolition of slavery was the most important social event in the modern history of Romania. It triggered two long-lasting phenomena: state attempts to integrate/assimilate these new citizens – still unfinished – and dramatic inequality between the emancipated and the rest of the population. Superficial abolitionist policies, ostensibly aimed at integrating former slaves into society, instead created a distinct citizen group. Many people were simply thrown onto the street and forced to become vagrants, populations were displaced, and whole groups became stateless.

Former slaves were excluded from land ownership, making it difficult for them to settle permanently and find a place in Romanian society. Petcuț gives the example of an emancipated blacksmith who was the only resident of a village who had not been given land. As a result, he was unable to supplement his family’s income through agriculture; at most, he and his family could have worked as day labourers. The descendants of this family, who were also landless, were obliged to continue in the family profession. As a result of this type of politics, the Roma remain in a kind of social periphery on the edges of Romanian rural society.

Another important phenomenon triggered by Roma emancipation was a migration wave of primarily nomadic Roma to Western Europe. As a result of poor knowledge of Roma culture and practices, these nomads became the target of permanent pressure, subject to control and suspected of crimes or illegality. The conflation of the nomad with the delinquent by public authorities and within public opinion became more and more frequent in the countries of Europe – with the Roma accused of robbing villages, trespassing, and kidnapping children – and still persists.

Petre Petcut⁵ describes the figure of the “threatening nomadic gypsy” who becomes an indeterminate image in a world dominated by political violence and racism, where legends and monsters meet. He underlines that the representation of the “gypsy nomad” who steals, kidnaps children, or even rapes and murders is the result of popular cultural consumption as opposed to posing a real danger for the majority community, emphasising that Roma mobility is primarily linked to the practice of their profession or craft.

Systems of control, expulsion, and genocide

From the beginning of the 20th century, Roma mobility became an international issue in Europe. Nationalism and xenophobia began to influence the parameters of mobility of Roma groups. The mutual expulsions that took place between France and Belgium, France and Switzerland, and France and Italy demonstrated the extent of anti-Roma sentiments and were accompanied by the development of an even more rigorous system of surveillance and control of nomadic Roma groups. Switzerland proposed the establishment of a commission with supra-national powers responsible for the “Gypsy problem” at the European level, but this initiative failed – mainly due to Italy, which considered the Roma as belonging exclusively to the states of central Europe and the Balkans, but also due to the refusal to “nationalise” the Roma by other states, caught in a maelstrom of nationalism and anxiety towards foreigners.⁶

Following the outbreak of World War II, the situation markedly worsened. In 1940, the German police began to deport Roma from Nazi Germany and Austria to German-occupied Poland – primarily to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where a “Gypsy Family Camp” (Zigeunerfamilienlager) was established in February 1943. By the end of 1943, 18,736 Roma lived in the camp, of whom around 9,500 were under the age of fifteen. Almost 400 children were born there.⁷

In total, around 21,000 Roma from 12 countries are thought to have been killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The same fate was shared by Roma interned in other concentration camps. Many others were victims of the so-called Einsatzgruppen – mobile paramilitary death squads that executed both individual Jews and Roma and entire communities. The exact number of Roma who were killed in this way is not known, but it is estimated that there are 180 mass graves in Ukraine, Belarus, the former Yugoslavia, and Poland.⁸ Scholars including Angus Frazer, Jean-Pierre Liégeois, and Ian Hancock estimate that at least half a million Roma from all over Europe died during what has come to be known as the Roma Holocaust.

The Roma genocide is rarely mentioned in public discourse and has not yet been sufficiently investigated.

On 15 April 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution recognising the genocide and establishing 2 August as European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day. The date was chosen in

remembrance of the massacre of the almost 3000 Roma men, women, and children that remained in the Gypsy Family Camp by SS troops on the night of 2 August 1944. (According to some sources, the number of deaths was over 4000.) However, the road to acknowledgement was not easy: the Roma had to fight to be recognised as victims of the Holocaust. They had been excluded from the Nuremberg trials on the grounds that their persecution was based on social rather than racial criteria, as was the case with the Jews.

On Good Friday 1980, in a desperate attempt to move the German state to recognise the persecution of Roma on racial grounds, Roma rights activists led by Romani Rose – head of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma since its foundation – resorted to a hunger strike. In March 1982, thanks to their efforts, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt officially recognised the genocide and stressed the obligation to compensate the victims. Roma victims of the Holocaust began to receive compensation payments in the mid-1980s.

In spite of these efforts, the Roma genocide is rarely mentioned in public discourse and has not yet been sufficiently investigated. Researchers in this field focus primarily on its administrative and organisational aspects, highlighting the role of local authorities in categorising and deporting Roma, and give less emphasis to the thinking that underpinned this Europe-wide campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Romaphobia in today's Europe

Romaphobia continues to be widespread in Europe, with Roma stigmatised en masse as criminals. In France, for example, the government decided to deport Roma migrants that held the citizenship of other EU countries in summer 2010 – sometimes by force. This campaign was accompanied by anti-Roma rhetoric, with the entire Roma community being accused of criminal behaviour. Another example is the unfortunate language used by some candidates in the Italian elections in 2008, which resulted in ugly incidents of violence against the Roma and their camps. Likewise, the killing of six Roma, including a 5-year-old child, in Hungary was committed in an atmosphere inflamed by hate speech.

The Roma have remained the outsiders, the scapegoats of Europe who are blamed in times of crisis when no one is willing to take responsibility for the situation. The most recent example is the Covid-19 pandemic, during which hate speech and incitement to hatred against the Roma – and even acts of violence against them – noticeably increased.

The impact of public policies for Roma in European society to date has been limited.

The history of the Roma in the European space is one of violence, marginalisation, and exclusion. They were considered inferior and were exploited. Over the centuries, a whole set of images developed, crystallising collective stereotypes without taking into account the power relations that formed between Roma and non-Roma.

Policy initiatives and power relations

In order to improve the status of the Roma and to give to them equal rights as European citizens, numerous policy initiatives have been launched over the past 25 years. The most promising were the national strategies for the Roma developed by the governments of the candidates for accession to the European Union in Central and Eastern Europe, the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 initiated by

the World Bank and the Open Society Institute, and the EU Roma strategic framework on equality, inclusion and participation. The last of these was consolidated and reformed on 7 October 2020. In comparison to the previous framework, which focused on the socio-economic integration of the Roma without taking into account their cultural specificity, it establishes a more complex approach to the Roma issue at the European level.

According to the new framework, all Roma should have the opportunity to realise their full potential and get involved in political, social, economic, and cultural life. This new approach puts a stronger focus on diversity among Roma to ensure that national strategies respond to the specific needs of different groups, including Roma women, young people, children, mobile EU citizens, stateless persons, LGBTQIA+ people, and Roma elderly and disabled people. The European framework encourages an intersectional approach, taking into account how different aspects of identity can be combined to combat discrimination. It also pays more attention to measures that provide for a policy-level approach to the issue of Roma inclusion, alongside specific actions aimed at favouring their effective equal access to rights and services.

However, the impact of public policies for Roma in European society to date has been limited. One of the reasons for this, notes Roma expert Iulius Rostaş, is that these policies do not adequately take into account the crucial importance of ethnic identity as an essential causative factor in the social exclusion and marginalisation of Roma. In order to reduce these gaps and ensure that public policies regarding the Roma are fit for purpose, the history of power relations between Roma and non-Roma and the exclusion of the Roma must be taken into account. Power must be shared⁹ so that it belongs equally to all – including the Roma. Only this way will they feel a real sense of belonging to Europe – as European citizens with all of the associated rights, not just the oldest “migrants from Europe”, the perpetual foreigners.



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