



Trying to solve a European problem: a comprehensive strategy for Roma minorities

Annabel Tremlett, 11th January 2011

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A European strategy for Roma minorities is much needed, but has to take into account the heterogeneous and hybrid nature of Roma communities and the multifarious contexts within which they live, argues Annabel Tremlett.

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Leaders and activists of Roma (Gypsy) minority rights must be both devastated and excited by recent events in Europe. On the one hand horrific discrimination against these minorities has reached sinister proportions. State-sanctioned forced evictions, threats and compulsory finger-printing have been ongoing in France and Italy, specifically, and very publicly targeting Roma communities. In Hungary and the Czech Republic mobs have attacked Roma individuals and families in organised (and unprovoked) incidents. On the other hand, these incidents have renewed public interest in the plight of Roma minorities and more pressure groups have joined in the call for European institutions to create a European strategy that actually works. This has built up a stirring momentum in an otherwise [lacklustre European performance](#) [3] towards Roma minorities to date, with the next country in line up for EU presidency, Hungary, publicly pledging to focus on the inclusion of Roma minorities in one of its main aims [in office](#) [4]. Hungary will be carefully watched: Amnesty International is the latest non-governmental organisation to get on board, with a [publication](#) [5] (pdf) in mid November 2010 investigating the catalogue of failures of police investigations of recent murders of Roma people in Hungary.

Whilst a European strategy may pave the way for an integrated pan-European approach, some serious dilemmas must be properly addressed if such a strategy is ever going to have an impact. Firstly, whilst recognising Roma minorities as emerging from a similar history of migration and discrimination, this recognition should not lose sight of the fact that Roma people and communities vary hugely across Europe. If a 'strategy' wants to reach all of these people, then it needs to consider the fact that Roma people cut across socio-economic status, language, culture, tradition, while the individual contexts of poverty and discrimination can be very particular to the country, political party, local affairs and so on. This brings us on to the second consideration - whilst it may make for useful (and stronger) political rhetoric to draw people and their problems together, these ideas can become too hard to translate at local levels, and in fact, may play into the hands of far right ideas of a certain type of people being 'problematic'. If the strategists don't tackle these challenges in some depth, then state and community representatives, already under pressure with financial cuts, will gladly defer all responsibilities to some vague 'European' level that will not be able to react at the necessary speed to stop injustice or the devastating results of discrimination, poverty or marginalisation.

The vortex of poverty & discrimination

Let this overview not, however, detract from the appalling situations that Roma minorities can find themselves in across Europe. A recent event at Amnesty International's Human Rights Action Centre in London showed the premier of the documentary film [Vortex](#) [6], a harrowing tale of the impoverished lives of families in a small village in North-East Hungary. Alongside the film was a presentation of the publication of Amnesty's latest shocking [report](#) [7] on police failings in Hungary to properly investigate a series of brutal attacks and murders on Roma minorities. In 2008-9 nine



attacks were reported, which claimed six lives in vile circumstances - in two separate incidents, four people were shot dead after fleeing their homes which had been set on fire by Molotov cocktails. One was a four year old boy who died alongside his father.

Other media stories of Roma minorities in Europe do not paint a brighter picture. Just a few months ago president Sarkozy forcibly evicted Roma families from suburbs [in France](#) [8] in a process of 'decriminalisation', prompting a further wave of reactions against immigrant Roma communities in other countries. In Milan, the vice mayor, who is in charge of handling camps of immigrants is [reported](#) [9] to have said that "these are dark-skinned people, not Europeans like you and me", pledging his "final goal" as "to have zero Gypsy camps in Milan". It seems that across Europe, public reaction to Roma minorities is one of repulsion or indifference. Remember in the [summer of 2008](#) [10] when a photograph of the bodies of two young Roma girls, drowned while swimming in a popular resort near Naples, was published in many news outlets. Not only was the sight of the towels hastily thrown over their lifeless figures horrifying, but the holiday-makers, continuing to sunbathe in the background, eating lunch and enjoying themselves within sight of the corpses, seemed to tell the true tale: no one cares about the Roma.

But some do. As evidenced from the Amnesty report, there are groups who *do* take an active and campaigning interest in Roma minorities, and there are numerous national and international [organisations](#) [11] solely devoted to Roma causes. Moreover, highlighting discrimination does reap results: in October 2010 the judicial courts in the Czech Republic gave [lengthy prison terms](#) [12] to four Neo-Nazi men who had attacked Roma communities. While brave activists and forward thinking initiatives continue to report failures and injustices that do still occur, at times there seems no way out of this continual cycle of hatred, crime and victimisation.

Contexts of prejudice

Commentators summarise the reason for this cycle as rooted in the Roma's historical position as one of the scapegoats of Europe. Kate Allen, Director of Amnesty International, [echoed](#) [13] this explanation by saying that the situation in Hungary is a direct result of the "centuries of discrimination" suffered by Roma people throughout European history. But is this explanation enough? Whilst there is no denying the devastating history of oppression meted out over centuries against the Roma, there is a specific context to each case of discrimination. Firstly, across Europe, no two Roma communities are the same, and a community is not necessarily easily visible or cohesive or even thinks of itself as a community. Secondly, whilst frequently making up the majority of the poorest in European countries, Roma people are not the only poor and are not always poor. Thirdly, there are national and local histories, along with particular political and socio-economic circumstances. Maybe it is the failure to properly address the specificity of each context and to glibly wave a hand over "centuries of discrimination" that leaves us limited in what we do about present cycles of hatred and violence.

Let us take the Italian example: whilst the Berlusconi government gained heavy criticism for its harassment of Roma from human rights groups, there was little talk of linking this harassment to the fact that Italy had turned a blind eye to mass immigration from pre-accession EU countries from the late 1990s onwards. From 2002, when visa-free travel to other European countries was made possible, Romanians (some of whom were also Roma) in particular began to use the three-month tourist visa to find some temporary illegal work in construction or services sectors, providing useful cheap labour for the growing Italian middle classes. Italy and Spain quickly became the favoured migration destinations and it is suggested that about 1.5 million Romanians were working in these two countries in the early 2000s. [Ban \(pdf\)](#) [14] has noted that the Romanian migration was the "largest demographic shock wave linking Southern Europe and Eastern Europe since the Roman times".

Whilst Italy did take (albeit belated) steps to stem this immigration and regularise the immigrants who had chosen to stay and work, many poor migrants carrying out '3D' work (the '3D' jobs being those that are dirty, dangerous and demanding) were living in sub-standard accommodations on the



margins of society. It is these types of socio-economic settings that migration [commentators \(pdf\)](#) [15] say make the Romanians the 'outsiders' of Europe, even after accession. Governments have used this situation, along with using the label 'Gypsies' (whatever the ethnic identity or citizenship of the people) to repeatedly harass poor areas of housing and camps, often as a distraction from their own political and financial disasters. This is not just applicable to Italy but also to France where Romanians (along with other migrants) – some of whom are also Roma – have migrated into the existing problems of the sub-standard living conditions of the [banlieues](#) [16]. The issue is therefore not just about a majority society acting against Roma minorities, but as much about migrants moving into areas where local inequality is [already rife](#) [17]. This is not a problem about Roma minorities per se, but rather about mis-managed migration, the difficulties of the realisation of the concept of freedom of movement of EU citizens, Romania's position as the largest, poorest country of the EU, and finally about highly conservative governance with a vicious method of apportioning blame to distract from political and financial crises. The Roma become not just the scapegoat, but the strategic scapegoat, with politicians relying on a predictable public reaction (or non-reaction) to what happens to "the Gypsies".

Europeanising 'the Roma problem'

Activists and human rights organisations call for new commitments from member states towards their Roma minorities that link to a strong Europe-wide approach. The development of this European strategy for Roma is what the [Hungarian EU presidency](#) [18] has set as one of its forthcoming priorities from January 2011. This may appear to be a positive move. But the recent past tells us that while Hungary comes up with progressive documents and innovative policy frameworks that have made it one of the [leaders of legal reform](#) [19] (pdf) from the new EU accession countries, discrimination and violence continue unabated. There are some concerns that attempting to build another strategy, which other countries have also promised, may only serve to allow member states to deflect from their own responsibilities. As Nicholae Gheorghe, long term Roma activist from Romania who has also served in top positions in international organizations recently [wrote](#) [20] in the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper, "The Romanian government recently announced the intention to adopt a new strategy for the Roma. I think this is a bad idea because it will enable the Romanian authorities to shirk their responsibilities towards their fellow Romanian citizens by "Europeanising" the problem, in other words passing the problem onto the EU institutions and other member states".

Furthermore, in the process of Europeanisation, 'the problem' is continually referred to and thought of as 'the Roma problem'. The problem becomes attached to an ethnic group, which in our current climate in Europe tends to instigate intercultural discussions about 'their culture', 'their identity' and 'their problems with majority society'. Aside from giving potent fuel to [far right groups](#) [21] who jump on the idea that 'they are different from us', and therefore 'incompatible with our societies', it also obscures the shared everyday experiences of life at ground level.

As the aforementioned documentary film *Vortex* shows us, Roma people are humans, and therefore can be beautiful, boring, intelligent, kind, mad, bad or desperate. In the film, some Roma men were shown heading a usury racket that extorted the pittance that a Roma widow and her children gained in benefits or odd jobs. Another mother in the film was shown as an impoverished, anxious woman not always in control of her own emotions and at times incapable of nurturing the eleven children she had given birth to. Her ethnic background was not talked about and not clear – she had been brought up in a children's home, and her story focused on the abuse and neglect she had received as a child. As the director of the film, Professor John Oates from the Open University, commented after the film's showing in London in November 2010: amongst the desperate circumstances in which he found the village of Told there were not only Hungarian Roma, but also people from neighbouring Moldova, Ukraine and non-Roma Hungarians. In the scramble for the basic necessities of life, poverty in the village had not spared any ethnic minority or nationality.

Vortex, moreover, is not just the story of one village. Across Hungary, alongside Roma poverty, reports reveal more groups affected by poverty and marginalisation. Already in 2001, the World Bank [reported](#) [22] the emergence of a group of 'long-term' poor in Hungary who include households with more than three children, single parent families, and single older females, whether of Roma background or not. Reports from Tarki, the Social Research Institute in Budapest, also suggest that



poverty is most strongly associated with geographical regions in Hungary. Worst affected are the former industrial parts (Northern Hungary in particular) and also some densely populated areas in Southern Transdanubia. Although these parts are historically heavily populated by Roma minorities, other people in these areas suffer too from high unemployment, lack of infrastructure and low-quality childcare. On this score, for example, it is [shown](#) [23] that only 6% of all the nursery places available in Hungary serve the North-Eastern region where 13% of Hungary's children aged 0-2 live. At the same time, 41% of the places are offered in Central Hungary where only 29% of this age group live. This was epitomised in the documentary film *Vortex*, where the social worker charged with helping families breaks down in tears, lamenting the lack of resources and desperate situation of families she attempts to help. The choice of the title, *Vortex*, becomes painfully poignant. Nobody left in the village seems able to escape the debilitating consequences of poverty.

So what can be done? Recognition of a history of the effects of discrimination is a vital process. Ongoing research and campaigns such as the recent Amnesty report and campaign should be supported and the results disseminated. But as a first step, we need to recognise the heterogeneous and hybrid nature of Roma communities and the multifarious contexts within which they live. Secondly, if we are not to add fuel to far right groups by describing a whole minority ethnic grouping as 'victims' which can so easily, especially in the current climate, get translated into 'hapless parasite', we must continue to point out the truth. Not all Roma people are in a vulnerable position, by any means. Equally, that vulnerability is something that can happen to us all. Certain political parties, groups, and the media, most frequently in Central and Eastern Europe (although now also in France and Italy) tend to attribute the term 'Roma' or 'Gypsy' to anyone in visibly dire circumstances who they are tempted to perceive as undeserving. But the cycle of poverty and discrimination is not an inherent immovable trait of certain minorities, but a human condition wrought by political regimes, financial climates, societal circumstances, inequality as well, no doubt, as 'the devil that is the human heart'. It's only through recognising the problems faced by Roma alongside those of their fellow countrywomen and men that we will really understand how to combat Europe's despicable history and current negative attitudes.



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[4] http://ec.europa.eu/news/eu_explained/110103_en.htm

[5]

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR27/001/2010/en/7ee79730-e23f-4f20-834a-deb8deb23464/eur270012010en.pdf>

[6] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Juj5N_Hm0Og

[7] <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR27/001/2010/en>

[8] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/19/france-begins-roma-deportations>

[9] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/11/AR2010101106428.html>



[10]

http://articles.cnn.com/2008-07-21/world/italy.drowning_1_roma-sunbathers-bodies?_s=PM:WORLD

[11] <http://erionet.org/site/basic100089.html>

[12] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11582589>

[13] http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9174000/9174918.stm

[14] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00556.x/pdf>

[15] <http://www.politicalperspectives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/vol-4-2-2010-Uccellini.pdf>

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http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/25f8300044b547838c198ef55cb546a4/ARI146-2010_France_Deporting_Rumanian_Bulgarian_roma.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=25f8300044b547838c198ef55cb546a4

[17] <http://www.france24.com/en/20091203-2009-face-off-plan-espoir-banlieue-hope-for-suburbs>

[18] http://www.mfa.gov.hu/kum/en/bal/european_union/eu_pres_2011/priorities.htm

[19] <http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/JEMIE04Walsh30-07-01.pdf>

[20] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/03/romania-shirking-roma-responsibilities>

[21] <http://www.economist.com/node/13871359>

[22] http://earthtrends.wri.org/povlinks/poverty_resource.php?poverty_resource_ID=2145

[23] http://www.tarki.hu/en/research/childpoverty/case_studies/childpoverty_hungary.pdf

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