

State Policies towards Roma (Gypsies) in Black Sea Region

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Abstract

In proposed paper we will present, compare and analyze the state policies towards Roma in the Black Sea region. In the Black Sea countries for centuries are living in different Roma communities (in this case Roma used as summarizing cover name). Over the past two decades the topic of Roma and their numerous problems is one of the most topical in Europe. In the process of joining the European Union one of the conditions which the Union poses to the countries applying for EU membership was solving the numerous problems of Roma population. These problems lead to tensions, which create ethnic, religious and social conflicts, undermine the security and stability. This is the main reason why in some countries an active state policy towards Roma is implemented (Bulgaria and Romania), other countries who have hopes for EU future are prepared relevant state documents, without starting of specific actions (Ukraine and Moldova), third (Turkey) are currently taking action in direction of developing of policy for Roma inclusion. In other countries of the Black and Caspian Sea region (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), for which European integration is still a question of the future, the topic of Roma is not yet on the agenda, but if they continue on their way to the Europe, it will inevitably become increasingly relevant.

In the Black Sea countries since centuries live different Roma communities. In our article the designation Roma is used in its political sense, as stated in official documents of the European Commission, and namely:

“The Commission uses 'Roma' as an umbrella term that includes groups of people who share similar cultural characteristics and a history of segregation in European societies, such as the Roma (who mainly live in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans), Sinti, Travellers, Kalé, etc.

The Commission is aware that the extension of the term 'Roma' to all these groups is contentious, and it has no intention to 'assimilate' the members of these other groups to the Roma themselves in cultural terms.”¹

In various countries of the Black Sea, the communities summarizing designated as 'Roma' are called by their surrounding population in different ways, e.g. 'Цигани', 'Цыгане', 'Ћигани', 'Τσιγγάνων', 'Çingeneler', 'Boşa/Poşa', 'Qaraçılar', etc. Roma themselves are not a homogenous community, but heterogeneous entity comprising segmented communities with different hierarchically structured identities, who are not only speaking very different dialects of their language, but some parts of them have another, non-Romani mother tongues (e.g. Armenian, Arabic, Turkish, Tatar, Greek, Romanian, etc.).

Generally speaking, in the Black Sea countries the Roma communities are divided into three main divisions, which are designated as 'Dom' - 'Lom' - 'Rom'. Representatives of the first subdivision (Dom) live in Turkey and Azerbaijan, of the second (Lom) in Turkey, Armenia and Georgia, and the third, the biggest and for Europe the most important division, with self-appellation Roma (i.e. the Roma themselves, or real Roma), is widely dispersed all around the world. In the countries of Black Sea region Roma live in Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria,



Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Russian Federation and Georgia. Within these main divisions exist more or less closed endogamous groups and meta-group unions, often each with their own additional self-appellation.²

There are not precise data about the exact number of Roma communities living in the Black Sea region. The reason for this situation is the lack of adequate methodologies for counting them, including lack of clarity “Who are Roma?” (or who are “Цыгане”, “Çingeneler”, “Boşa/Poşa”, or any others equivalent denomination, that are used in individual countries).

The main problem is actually in lack of clarification which communities should be included in this category and how they should be counted in the census. Without resolving this issue all censuses data and statistics remain open to serious doubts. The difficulties come often from discrepancy between self-designation and designation by the others. It should be kept in mind that for large parts of the communities, defined by their surrounding populations as Roma (actually by surrounding population various other names are used, such as the mentioned above Цыгане, Çingeneler, Boşa, etc.), characteristic and typical is a phenomenon of “preferred ethnic identity”, i.e. phenomenon of publicly declared or even actually experienced another non-Roma identity. Other part are used to hide their identity from one or other reason (often because of past and present experience of discrimination and repressions) and prefer to entry in the census questioners another, different from their own, identity.³ Others prefer to use their own group's appellation and self-identify themselves only with their own subdivision and not with Roma community as a whole. All this make collecting of relevant data about the exact number of Roma communities living in given individual country extremely difficult and that is the reason why usually when speaking or writing about their numbers not only statistical data, but also various expert estimations are pointed.

In any case, the number of Roma in the Black Sea countries is significant, and their distribution across the countries is different, as seen from the table:

Countries	Official number (last census)	Minimum estimate	Maximum estimate
Bulgaria	370 908 (2001)	700.000	800.000
Greece	No data available	180.000	350.000
Romania	535 140 (2002)	1.200.000	2.500.000
Armenia	No data available	2.000	2.000
Azerbaijan	No data available	2.000	2.000
Moldova	12 280 (2004)	15.000	200.000
Russian Federation	182 617 (2002)	450.000	1.200.000
Turkey	4 656 (1945)	500.000	5.000.000
Ukraine	47 917 (2001)	120.000	400.000

Resource: Table elaborated on the basis of Council of Europe's data.⁴

The figures from this table should be taken only as indicative, and some estimates (especially estimations of some Roma activists) are definitely overstated. Despite all these precautions, the official as well as estimated data clearly show, that the proportion of Roma population in the Black Sea region is relatively very high and can vary between 5-10% from total population, as is the case with Bulgaria and Romania, or to be less than 5% in case of Turkey and Greece, or even less than 1% in case of Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The arrival of the ancestors of the Roma communities in the Black Sea region is dated by historians only approximately, because of the lack of enough reliable written sources, and is pointed between the 9th -11th century. What is certain however is that from the 12th -14th century onwards they are already steadily accommodated in these areas (in particular in Transcaucasia, Asia Minor and the Balkans). Centuries long coexistence of Roma communities with local people led to their full integration among the local population

and to establishing of sustainable patterns of coexistence. Their full integration however is not as equal part of the general population in respective countries, but as second, or even third class citizens.⁵ The lower status of Roma population in the Black sea region countries was and is not reflected in their juridical status – de-jure they were since the times of Ottoman and Russian Empire full-fledged citizens, with only one exception of Principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, where they were included in the category of 'slaves'.⁶

Along with all this during the centuries lasting social stereotypes of Roma communities were formed, which are not outspoken negative, but rather revealing a dismissive attitude towards them as “inferior” ethno-social and ethno-cultural category. In other words, Roma are usually perceived by the surrounding population in the entire Black Sea region not so much as a “foreign” population, but rather as the “others”, as a community which does not create particular problems, at least until it “knows its place” and does not aspire for actual equality. Generally said the pattern of coexistence is rather to “live side by side”, but in no case “living together”. This traditional attitude has been dominating for centuries, it has been preserved in the modern era too in the process of formation of the new ethno-national states, and in many ways, including nowadays, is still leading.

At first glance, such an traditional attitude towards the Roma community does not presuppose that they are or can be a source of ethnic conflicts and serious threat to stability in the Black Sea region. But the history shows that in crisis situations Roma communities often become a kind of “scapegoat” and may be subject to ethnically motivated violence. Such development is possible also today. Profound illustration of this is the situation in Central and South-Eastern Europe, where after the fall of communist regimes in 1989-1990 severe socio-economic crisis started. The period of transition to democracy and market economy in the countries of the former “socialist camp” was extremely hard for large segments of the population in these countries, and reflected particularly acute on the Roma communities, who were the first who lose not only they working places, but also other elements of social security. In the countries, which undergone process of dissolution, and namely countries of former USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia appeared even problems with their citizenship and lack of respective Identity Documents. In regions of wars, and especially in former Yugoslavian Republics of Bosnia and Kosovo, many of Roma became victims of ethnic violence and were turned into refugees or internally displaced persons.⁷

Social and economic problems and associated with them exacerbated inter-ethnic relations in various countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe nearly everywhere led to massive anti-Roma public attitudes, which in many cases turned into ethnic conflicts in which Roma communities are the injured party. The best known in this regard were two waves of series of pogroms against Roma neighborhoods in different regions of Romania conducted during the periods 1990-1992 and 1993-1995. Together with this emerged and rapidly developed various nationalist and skinheads' movements that carried out sporadic attacks against Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and in recently also series of ethnically motivated killings, committed by members of the nationalistic “Magyar Garda” in Hungary, which received widespread media coverage.

Mass violations of human rights of Roma and worsening of overall public attitudes towards them combined with difficulties in socio-economic situation of large parts of Roma communities in Central and South-Eastern Europe and ongoing processes of asylum seeking, migration and labour mobility, led to requirement for solving of the so-called “Roma problems” into one of the key issues for the region. Therefore, in the process of EU accession (or by expressed desire for such accession) of most of these countries, addressing the problems of Roma was and still is one of the key conditions that they had to accommodate on the way toward Euro integration.

As a consequence of these requirements particularly in the Black Sea countries (Bulgaria and Romania) the respective states took an active policy towards integration of their Roma inhabitants.

In Bulgaria in 1999, the Government accepted a Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma into Bulgarian society, which was prepared by a group of more than 40 Roma organizations, led by the Roma



organisation “Human Rights Project”. Bulgarian gradually created institutional structures for implementation of this Framework program – firstly the “National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues”, renamed later to the “National Council for Cooperation on ethical and demographic questions”, that should work in close liaison with the especially created “Directorate for Ethnic and Demographic Issues” at the Council of Ministers.

In Romania in 2001 similar program was prepared by Western consultants. The model of preparing of such documents by foreign experts is widely used in the region, it was proposed also to Bulgaria, but was not accepted by the Roma organizations there, who decide to take this responsibility in own hands. This, prepared for Romania, program was adopted under the title “Strategy of the Romanian Government for improvement of the situation of Roma”, and Roma political parties and NGOs signed with the State an agreement for cooperation in its implementation. For this purpose, the “National Roma Office” was established with 42 branches in different administrative districts, which in 2004 was converted into a “National Roma Agency” at the Council of Ministers.

Together with the negotiations for accession to the European Union a tendency to coordinate the efforts of individual countries in Central and South-eastern Europe for solving the problems of Roma in the region and for their overall social integration has been born. It's about the initiative of the network the Open Society Foundations and the World Bank to endorse the solution of the Roma issues into priority task in selected countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe in the process of their European integration. After a series of preliminary meetings on 02.02.2005 in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, the governments of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Macedonia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro signed the Declaration, which announced the beginning of the “Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005 -2015)”.⁸

According the initial idea the “Decade of Roma Inclusion” is a general conceptual framework in which individual governments should include their activities in regard of Roma in six major priority areas (education, health, housing, employment, protection against discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities, preservation and development of Roma culture and identity), each with own main objectives and specific tasks, responsible institutions, timing and means of financing (mainly from different pre-accession and accession programs, and much less from the state budget).

Following the inclusion of most of the countries of Central Europe in the European Union in 2004 and of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 the “Decade of Roma Inclusion” has lost its importance and the problems of Roma in the region have gained new European-wide dimension. This became particularly clear in recent years after the public scandals in connection with the mass deportations of Romanian Roma from Italy and Romanian and Bulgarian Roma from France (in fact the entry of Bulgaria in this context was more a political decision because actually from France were deported only few hundreds people).⁹ Attempts by some governments to determine the problems of Roma in Central and South-Eastern as an Europe-wide problem and to transfer the overall responsibility for their solving to the European Union (particularly active in this respect was firstly Czech Republic and now Romania), however, appeared to be unsuccessful, and in April 2011 was adopted an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020.¹⁰ This EU Framework on Roma integration is to be adopted by the end of June by the Heads of States. According the expectations it will help guide national Roma policies and mobilize funds available at EU level to support inclusion efforts. By the end of the year, each Member State will have to present its national strategy to foster better integration of their Roma communities.

According to this strategic European Union framework, National strategies for Roma integration in the respective countries should be implemented and should include the main priorities of governmental policies, which are already confirmed - education, health, housing and employment. It is particularly stressed that these key priorities should be implemented in an inseparable unity with cross-cutting themes of combating poverty and social exclusion, discrimination, anti-gypsy prejudice, the development of Roma culture and upholding gender equality.

Similar (at least as a trend, albeit in much reduced size) is the situation with the state policy towards Roma in other countries of the Black Sea region and in particular in Ukraine and Moldova, where part of the political elites are willing to lead their countries towards European integration. Since the question of possible future integration of these countries into European Union remains without clear answer (at least for the foreseeable future), the impact on them in terms of the need for a special state policy towards Roma is done not through the European Union channels, but via other European structures (mainly through the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). Under these conditions in 2001 the Government of the Republic of Moldova adopted the Decree № 131 “About certain measures in support of ‘Gypsies/Roma’” and in 2003 in Ukraine the “State Committee on nationalities and migration affairs” at the Council of Ministers adopted special “Program for social and cultural revival of the Roma in Ukraine”. So far, these government initiatives, however, still remain without further development and without backing up with real content and concrete measures.

In recent years, in connection with the activation of negotiations for Turkey's accession to the European Union, the topic of Roma and their problems came to the fore in the public domain also in this country. This is the increased interest in the Roma issue that could explain the drastic differences in the number of Roma, according to various estimates (resulting mainly from human rights and humanitarian NGOs). First, only few years ago, the estimates were about 500,000 Roma inhabiting Turkey, then it has already begun to talk about 1 to 1.5 million, then about 2 to 2.5 million, and today the number pointed out are often about 3-5 million. It is worth noting that authorities in Turkey have launched pre-emptive policy towards Roma communities - even before this requirement was put before the official institutions, in many places, several Roma associations became into being, political parties and local authorities began to initiate community programs for Roma in different spheres including employment, education, various cultural activities and now already it is said that for the first time in the history of Turkey after the forthcoming elections there will be Roma among members of parliament.

In other countries of the Black and Caspian Sea (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), for which European integration is still a question of the future, the Roma issue is not yet on the agenda, and there are only limited special measures conducted, such as, e.g. solving of issues with lack of identity documents. However if also these countries will continue their way in this direction, the Roma issue will inevitably become increasingly relevant and will come on the political agenda also there.

Notes

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8. Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005 -2015). <http://www.romadecade.org/>.
9. Marushiakova, Elena and Vesselin Popov. 2006. *De l'Est a l'Ouest. Chronologie et typologie des migrations tsiganes en Europe*. *Etudes Tsiganes* 27-28: 10-26.
10. European Commission Publishes Progress Report On Roma Inclusion 2008-2010 – FAQs. <http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/35343>.

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