

## Roma's dilemma

Europe battles to fix plight of marginalized citizens

**Imagine being poor and not having identification, an education, a job, social support, access to health care or legal representation. Imagine facing verbal abuse, forced evictions, property destruction, police intimidation and physical assault on a daily basis, not because of something you did or did not do, but simply because of your ethnicity.**

That is the stark reality for many of the 10 to 12 million Roma people living in Europe today. Roma is an umbrella term for groups sharing similar cultural characteristics and a history of persistent marginalization in European societies. Names for these groups include the Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Ashkali, Kalé and others.

"Roma are one of the largest ethnic minorities in the EU, but too often they are Europe's forgotten citizens," said Vladimír Špidla, the European Commission member responsible for employment, social affairs and equal opportunities. "They face persistent discrimination and far-reaching social exclusion," he said, commenting on a 2008 EC report on the Roma.

Random acts of violence against the Roma throughout the European Union in 2009 again brought light to the centuries-old problem — that being Roma is a social disadvantage. That is what 77 percent of Europeans said in a

2006 poll conducted for the EC by a team from Belgian TNS Opinion. The group is the world's largest custom market research company.

"The EU and member states have a joint responsibility to end this situation," Špidla said. "We have the tools to do the job — now we need to use them more effectively."

Living mostly on the margins of society, the Roma are among the most deprived communities in Europe, Amnesty International reports. A U.N. Development Program, or UNDP, report on the situation in five Central European countries found that "by measures ranging from literacy to infant mortality to basic nutrition, most of the region's Roma endure living conditions closer to those of sub-Saharan Africa than to Europe."

Linguistic and genetic evidence suggests the Roma people migrated from India to various parts of Europe between the 14th and 16th centuries. Because of their different appearance, customs and language, the Roma were initially viewed with curiosity. But that quickly gave way to intense hostility and xenophobia. They were enslaved until the 19th century in what is now Romania and were treated as outcasts elsewhere in Europe.

During World War II, the Nazis killed as many as 1.5 million Roma. After the war, most Roma found themselves living in the former Eastern Bloc. They were subject to discriminatory practices such as forced sterilizations to limit family sizes in Czechoslovakia and bans on their music and language in Bulgaria.

Twenty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, many Eastern European countries are still struggling to find solutions to their Roma problems; most of those countries are now part of the EU. Some Roma migrated legally to Western Europe, which led to friction between them and local populations. Until problems concerning the Roma emerged in their countries, Western Europe



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Turkish Roma rest amid the debris of their demolished shack in Istanbul's Sulukule neighborhood, demolished by city officials in May 2008.



A Roma boy sits outside the blazing wooden shack that was his home in a Sarajevo, Bosnia, suburb. The Roma refused to move into city housing projects by June 1, 2009, so officials evicted them. The Roma burned their shacks.

had associated the issues with former communist regimes.

“Most of these people are European citizens. And the Roma have, since the Middle Ages, been part of Europe. Yet they still represent the largest ethnic group facing extreme poverty, social exclusion and discrimination on our territory,” EC President José Manuel Barroso said at the first-ever European Roma Summit in September 2008. “Most of their population, which is in the millions, lives in conditions which are simply not acceptable in 21st-century Europe.”

### The perception

Marginalized by society, some Roma resort to crime or begging to feed their families. The lure of a better life leads some Roma into the human-trafficking business across Europe. Some are trafficking Roma children, who end up on the streets of European cities begging or committing petty crimes such as picking pockets and robbing people at automated teller machines.

In Madrid, for example, police estimate that 95 percent of children under age 14 picked up for stealing are Roma, the BBC reported in September 2009. More than 1,000 Romanian Roma live in the many camps outside the capital city.

But poverty and lack of opportunity are not unique to the Roma. Unique to the Roma is the overwhelming extent to which these problems affect them and the disproportionate discrimination and mistreatment to which other groups subject them. Yet, some people see the Roma as unwilling fellow citizens.

“Gypsies [Roma] don’t work, but have eight or nine

children, and then get all this money from the state to live on,” Hungarian farmer Imre Madach said during an interview with the United States’ National Public Radio, or NPR. “And this state sucks the blood out of the Hungarian working people in high taxes to pay them. It’s just not fair. So, of course this sharpens the social tensions.”

The farmer’s opinion, common in Europe, was stated after a particularly vicious nighttime attack. Someone gunned down Maria Palogh, a single Roma mother, and her 13-year-old daughter, Ketrin, in their home in Kisleta, Hungary, in August 2009. The mother died, and the daughter was critically injured. In a similar attack, Robert Csorba and his 5-year-old son, Robika, were shot dead in February 2009 while fleeing from their home — set ablaze by a Molotov cocktail — in Tatarszentgyorgy, Hungary.

NPR reported at least nine arson attacks, eight shootings and two assaults involving hand grenades on Roma communities in Hungary since 2008. Violence against Roma flared up in the Czech Republic, Romania, Ireland and elsewhere in 2009.

In Italy, there were waves of arson attacks, mob violence and forced evictions against Roma (largely from Romania) living in camps in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Italian authorities adopted “security” measures that appear to be discriminatory and that disproportionately affect the Roma, Amnesty International reported. Similar accounts of discrimination are widely reported in Ireland, England, France, Spain and Greece, too.

In Kosovo, more than 200 Roma families have lived in lead-contaminated camps in North Mitrovica since 1999, Amnesty International reported. Despite reports in 2001 by the World



People warm up around a fire at a Roma settlement in Palaiseau, south of Paris, in September 2008, as European Union and Roma representatives met in Brussels to discuss improving Roma living conditions.

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Health Organization and others that the degree of lead contamination in the blood of both children and adults is one of the highest in the world, the Roma continue to live in the camps.

“There is no country where the situation of the Roma is good,” Špidla said in an August 2009 story on the EUobserver Web site.

Instead of condemning those practices and working to end them, some political parties use anti-Roma rhetoric for political gain.

Far-right political parties and extremist organizations usually exploit the anti-Roma sentiment. The Ataka (Attack) party in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian National Union, the New Right party in Romania, the Slovak National Party in Slovakia, the Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) Party in Hungary and the associated Hungarian Guard are some of these groups. So are the Northern League Party in Italy and the Workers’ Party in the Czech Republic.

Another political scheme that preys on the Roma is vote buying. In the summer of 2009, some Bulgarian and Slovakian political parties bought Roma votes with cash, chickens, sugar, cooking oil and other staples, reported London’s *The Economist* newspaper, the Boston-based globalpost.com Web site and *The Slovak Spectator* newspaper.

### Breaking the cycle

Reports of Roma abuse and social exclusion have long been a concern of international organizations. The United Nations, EU, UNDP, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations are working with nations to put an end to the discrimination and to integrate the Roma into mainstream society.

Although efforts have so far met with limited success, it is crucial to acknowledge and build on them. These include:

- The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 to 2015. Launched by the EC, World Bank and Open Society institute, the initiative brings together governments and NGOs to draw up national action plans for improving education, health care, housing and employment opportunities for the Roma. A central pillar of the measure is the Roma Education Fund. Managed by the World Bank, it aims at closing the educational gap between Roma and non-Roma, including the desegregation of education systems. The fund administers the largest Roma university scholarship program and supports research, studies and evaluations that contribute to effective policies for Roma inclusion in national education systems.
- The European Roma Rights Centre. This group protects Roma human rights and engages in strategic litigation. Its greatest achievement is the 2008 European Court of Human Rights ruling on a case in the



Mariska, mother of Roma murder victim Maria Balogh, reacts at her daughter’s funeral in Kisleta, Hungary, on Aug. 7, 2009. Hungary’s estimated 600,000 Roma fear attacks by right-wing extremists.

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Czech Republic that determined the segregation of Roma children in schools constitutes unlawful discrimination.

- EU Roma Summit. Organized by the EC and held in Belgium in September 2008, it was the first time high-level EU institutions, national governments and civil society organizations met to discuss the situation of Roma communities and to find ways to help them. The 2nd EU Roma Summit will take place in Córdoba, Spain, on April 8, 2010, which is International Roma Day.
- The EU Platform for Roma Inclusion. Launched in April 2009, this forum creates an EU-level framework for cooperation among governments, universities, research institutions and NGOs to offer Roma people real opportunities in mainstream education, employment and housing. All 27 EU member states — and candidate and potential candidate countries — participate. The Roma Education Fund, European Roma Policy Coalition, Open Society Institute, European Roma and Travellers Forum and the Network of European Foundations represent civil society groups. Participating international organizations include the OSCE, World Bank, UNDP, Council of Europe and the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005 to 2015.

The initiatives are necessary first steps in the effort to fully integrate the Roma into mainstream society and empower them to lead productive and successful lives, George Soros, founder of the Open Society Institute and the Roma Rights Centre, said at the opening of the first EU Roma summit.

Špidla supports a joint commitment to resolve the issue. “In the 21st century, the situation of the Roma is a stain on Europe’s conscience,” he said. “The problems are multiple and complex, but we have the tools to improve inclusion — with legislation, funding and sharing policies that work.

“We now need a joint commitment at local, regional, national and European level to put these tools to better use and guarantee a better future for Roma communities across the EU,” he said. “The situation will change only if all are committed.” □