



## Current Situation

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According to serious estimates the total population of the Roma and Sinti in Europe numbers around 8-10 million people. Consequently, they represent the largest European minority without a state territory. Most Roma are living in the south-eastern European area. The largest communities are living in Slovakia (600,000) and in Romania, (about 2 million), demographically standing at about 10% of the population.

The Roma and Sinti are not a homogeneous ethnic group, not only in Romania are there around 30 different groupings who differ considerably in terms of way of life and language. The history of the *Kalderaš* – the best-known *Vlach*-Roma group – differs from the history of the *Sinti* in Germany, or that of the *Burgenland-Roma* in Austria. There are groupings that are spread all over the world, like the *Kalderaš* and the *Lovara*, and there are groupings that have been travelling within a certain territory since their arrival in Europe.

Relevant features are, beside their nomadic or settled way of life, the dialect variants, Romani competence, and also the level of marginalisation, assimilation and integration. These factors on the other hand influence the *romanipe* – the "Roma-being" – the fulfilment and the maintenance of the traditional culture of the Roma and Sinti, and accordingly, self-esteem within the Roma society. According to the view of the representatives of the "real Roma culture" (e.g. *Kalderaš*), the settled and assimilated Roma groups have broken with the *romanipe* and accordingly, in the inner hierarchy they are considered as "half-breed", and are therefore inferior. In most cases this view corresponds to the folkloric perception of the others, the non-Roma.

## Situation in eastern Europe

Eastern European Roma are separated by a de-facto, still existing "iron curtain" from western European Roma and Sinti. What the major part of the eastern European Roma population has in common is that they are living at the fringes of society, and they experience massive discrimination by the majority population. Racism by the state and by society are widely spread, the political influence of the Roma is quite small due to the already described heterogeneity. Segregation in schools and no integration within the school system are considered to be the main problems in the way the state is dealing with the Roma. The vicious circle in terms of a low educational level and social isolation, which are cause and effect of each other, is always evident.

As a consequence of the pressure exerted by the EU measures have been initiated in the candidate states in the past years to improve the educational situation and employment of the Roma<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, international agreements are increasingly ratified for the protection of ethnic minority groups.

Roma parties and Roma organisations try to make people aware of the problems Roma face, to counteract prejudices and discrimination and to introduce a process of re-thinking. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that in view of the high percentage of Roma in some eastern European countries,

<sup>1</sup> In 2002 in Hungary – for example – a **committee for Roma matters**, an advisory and consultative body, was founded which is presided over by the prime minister. Consequently, Roma specific topics can be discussed seriously at the highest political level. A specific aspect within Hungarian minority politics is represented by the system of communal self-administrations that form national bodies. The approximately 1,000 communal Roma self-administrations receive a state support of 2,700 € each. The communities are also obliged to provide a local infrastructure for the Roma organisations. In this context, however, the communities often explain that they can only act within their "range of possibilities".



their political influence still is very small. The reason for this situation can be seen not only in ignorance and missing financial support on the part of the non-Roma, but also in the missing solidarity between the Roma parties and the resulting low participation in the elections.

The traditional social structure of the Roma does not generally have an intra-group Roma awareness. Solidarity is in reference to the extended family and in a far sense to their own group. In particular in Romania and in Bulgaria<sup>2</sup>, the extremely high number of competing parties and organisations render it quite difficult to pronounce and carry through their interests in view of the majority society. Up to now it was not possible to merge all organisations under an umbrella association. Respectively, their political success is quite modest: the number of Roma district councillors in Romania increased slightly in the years between 1992 and 2000 (from 120 to 148). In comparison to 1992 (2), no Rom is the mayor of his community. In Hungary there are only two Roma mayors.

The missing political force of state parties and organisations led to an increase of Roma NGOs. The **Human Rights Project** that was founded in Sofia in 1992, and the **European Roma Rights Center (ERRC)** located in Budapest are to be mentioned as examples. In Romania there are about 100 NGOs involved in projects regarding conflict prevention, legal consultation, training of mediators and press reporting. In Hungary the **Legal Defence Bureau for National and Ethnic Minorities** offers legal protection in cases of discrimination.

However, it would be a mistake to consider the eastern European Roma only as victims of racism and discrimination. Some Roma groups still succeed in living according to their traditional culture. The traditional social structure of these groups is still intact, the cohesion within the group is very strong and is a cross-border one. Due to a network of contacts and information the members of the groups are able to find employment even in economically difficult moments. The Roma and Sinti have never been economically autarkic and always had to rely on their contact with the majority population, but always conserved the highest level of independence possible.

Without this ability to react on partly unfavourable conditions with flexibility and zest for life, that has been practiced for centuries, the culture and the language of the Roma and Sinti would have already been lost. The current problems that these particular eastern European groups have to face, are similar to those of the western European Roma. The pressure and the attraction of assimilation create a kind of maelstrom that mostly the younger generation can barely flee.

## **Situation in western Europe**

The portion of the Roma and Sinti whom have achieved a relative prosperity is considerably bigger in western Europe than in eastern Europe. Even if also in western Europe the major part is living at the fringes of society, their opportunities are significantly better to find acceptable living conditions. A well-established civil rights movement and a relatively well spread network of associations and organisations, in comparison with eastern Europe, contributes to the fact that the concerns of the Roma and Sinti are recognised in the light of media and politics.

Since the Sixties, Yugoslavian Roma have been emigrating to the west as guest workers during the work migration. Due to stays that have lasted longer than originally intended, over the years the members of families joined the others, which led to a transfer of entire extended families from their

<sup>2</sup> In Bulgaria there are currently 380 Roma associations and Roma parties.



original homes to the target countries of the west. Their status may be compared to that of other guest worker families. Generally, they have the nationality of the emigration countries, and in part they are socially established and integrated into their respective societies.

The situation of migrants and refugees from the former states of the eastern block however is quite different (especially for those from Romania, Bulgaria, Ex-Yugoslavia) who, since the opening of the east have been looking for humane living conditions, and mainly migrated to western Europe and to the USA. Many of them are residing illegally in their respective countries, a quite large number of them are stateless, others have limited residence permits and could be deported at any time. Only a few of them are recognised asylum seekers. Due to their uncertain and often illegal status, and consequently impossible integration into the employment market, it is impossible for someone affected to integrate into the majority population.

Furthermore, racism and xenophobia have been increasing since the Nineties, which mainly affect the Roma and Sinti. Resentment towards newly immigrated Roma also affects the already established members of the ethnic groups, which results in tensions within the groups and a low level of loyalty. A further aspect is, that so-called "autochthonous" (well-established) and "allochthonous" Roma are politically played off against each other due to their different legal status. In Austria for example, the autochthonous Roma who have been living in Austria for one century are recognised as a minority, the allochthonous Roma, on the other hand, are not recognised as such, irrespective of whether they have nationality or not. Accordingly they may not enjoy the rights and support for ethnic groups.

It is a common situation for all western European Roma and Sinti that they are put under enormous pressure to assimilate, the effect being higher the more hopeless the economic situation of the person is. The high relevance assigned to the family, and the extended families by the Roma and Sinti, stands in extreme contrast to the increasing dissolution of the core family in western industrialised countries. Ways to escape from this dilemma-between individualisation, neo-liberalism and the "throwaway society" on the one hand, and the traditional way of life, which in terms of profession counts on the reparation of craft and which considers critically the measurable pressure of performance on the other-are limited.

Minority rights for the whole of Europe, and the anti-discrimination laws which the Roma and Sinti representatives have been requesting for years, would be a basic pre-condition to counteract social isolation and enforced assimilation.



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