



## Racism and Human Rights

Michael Teichmann

### **Genetic and cultural racism: definition and function**

"Traditional" or "genetic" racism is based on the notion of the existence of superior and inferior races. It generalises and judges actual or fictional biological differences, which are believed to correspond to some interior equivalents. During Fascism and Nationalism, this ideology was made into a doctrine of the state and served as a justification for inner-political genocide and wars of extermination.

Although the growing rejection of the term "race" after 1945 questioned the original racist concept, it did not question its basic function. As a consequence, "race" was replaced by "culture", which turned into the new motif of academic and social discourse. This cultural concept was based on the notion of an essential "other" and unchangeable nature of culture. The "new" or "cultural" racism played a central role in discussions on the integration and assimilation of ethnic minorities and migrants, suggesting the impossibility of these processes due to ethnic or cultural heritage. This ideology stated that it is not social factors such as unequal distribution of resources, or lack of education that cause social inequality, but unbridgeable cultural differences. As opposed to genetic racism, cultural racism is not based on a hierarchic social model. It claims instead that all cultures are equal, and that social inequality is a natural consequence, (and thus proof), of cultural difference. The notion of "racial purity" is replaced by the glorification of "authentic cultural identity".

Any form of racism practices an exclusion of others, which is realised either as unconscious racist prejudice or conscious ideology. Both genetic and cultural racism justify systems of domination, discrimination and oppression of minorities and those whose opinions differ from the accepted norm of the majority.

### **Roma and Sinti as victims of racist ideology in Western and Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1990**

Ever since their arrival in Europe, the Roma and Sinti have been victims of discrimination and racism, culminating tragically in genocide during National Socialism. The end of World War II did not mean a break in the continuity of violence and injustice. In Germany and Austria especially, the Roma and Sinti were politically exposed to an unofficial form of racism. In 1948, for instance, the Austrian ministry of internal affairs thought about an "expulsion of foreign and stateless gypsies", even though, or especially because, a majority of Austrian Roma and Sinti had become stateless during the Nazi regime, which had taken all their rights from them. In Germany in 1953, the files of Robert Ritter titled "documents of heritage" and "certificates of race" were offered to the newly established office of foreign affairs of the Bavarian criminal investigation department, whose staff included a former member of the SS. In both countries, the process of reparation was characterised by an extreme inequality towards the so-called "other victims" of national socialist genocide. Along with homosexuals and "a-socials", it was mostly the Roma and Sinti, and especially foreign Roma and Sinti originally deported to Germany as slaves workers, who suffered from this injustice. In 1953, their claims of compensation were postponed until after the German reunification.

It was not until the 1970's/80's that the majority population of Western Europe started to become more aware of injustice. This process was mostly rooted in initiatives by civil rights organisations of the Roma and Sinti. At the same time however, "cultural racism" as described above began to establish



itself and gradually replaced genetic concepts of race. The Roma and Sinti were now regarded exclusively as ethnic minorities, whose alleged foreignness was believed to stem from unbridgeable cultural differences.

In the Communist states of Eastern Europe, development took a different course. Socialist ideology had no room for the Roma and Sinti as an ethnic minority with its own culture and language. They were to be "released" from the misery of their "pre-socialist existence" and integrated into planned economy. Thus, the primary goals of national "Gypsy politics" were assimilation, settlement and education. (The only exception being Yugoslavia, where the Roma were granted national status in 1981). The assimilatory endeavours brought about little success. This fact can be explained as follows: cultural characteristics were denied in the same way as anti-Gypsy stereotypes were, even though they existed amongst the respective majority populations. The Roma and Sinti were regarded as a social group or "social problem". Ethnic awareness was equated with "wrong" awareness trying to cover up class differences.

This class system was the extreme opposite of the Western European definition of the Roma and Sinti as a cultural minority. Thus, in one case cultural factors were neglected in favour of social ones, while in the other case, social factors were neglected in favour of cultural ones. Evidently, both cases are characterised by racist constructions.

## **Roma and Sinti as victims of racist ideology and violence in Western and Eastern Europe since 1990**

In the course of the opening of the East, nationalism, fascism and racism grew continually throughout Europe. In Eastern and South Eastern Europe, the need for a redefinition of national identity offered the perfect ground for right-wing propaganda. Additionally, anti-minority and anti-Roma and Sinti stereotypes were suppressed even longer than in the West.

After the transition to market economy, which had not brought about the desired improvement in living conditions, aggression was frequently used against the Roma and Sinti. Increasingly, the understanding of the Roma as a discriminated social class was substituted by a partly "cultural", partly "biological racism".

In this respect, the fire attack by 150 skinheads on the residence of Romanian Roma, asking for asylum in Rostock in 1992, which was tolerated by the police and cheered at by hundreds of neighbours, represents dozens of other acts of violence against Roma and Sinti. In Czechoslovakia alone, more than two dozen Roma were killed because of racist attacks in the 1990s. Politicians, police and courts are often characterised by their obviously reserved attitude. In Romania, the situation was and still is worse. The most tragic attack on a Roma community took place in Hadareni in 1993 with three Roma being killed and 13 houses burned down. The newspaper "România Libera" praised the non-Roma's "self-administered justice", and pointed to alleged unbridgeable differences in culture and society: "On the one hand honesty, love of work and piety, on the other sneakiness, arrogance and aggressive impertinence."

Yet, the killings, arson attacks and other severe acts of aggression including organised attacks merely represent the tip of the iceberg. Strict every-day exclusion characterises the life of the Roma. Denial of entry into discos, restaurants and other public places are common. At school and at the workplace,



the Roma suffer systematic discrimination. Their unemployment rate is as disproportionate in number (between 60% and 80%) as that of the Roma who are obliged to attend special schools for "mentally retarded" children. According to a report by the **European Roma Rights Center (ERRC)**, the probability for a Roma child in Ostrava (Czech Republic) in 1998 to attend a special school was 27 times higher than for a non-Roma child. In 1998, 75% of all Roma children in the Czech Republic attended special schools. The following statistics, established for Hungary, are also indicative: in 1974, 26% of all children taught in special schools were Roma; in 1985, it was 40%. By 1997, it was already 68%. School authorities mostly justified this praxis by claiming that cultural and linguistic barriers made it impossible to integrate Roma children into the main school system.

The effects of such educational exclusion are evident: those graduating from a special school hardly have any access to further studies. Right from the start, they thus have a hard time finding a job and integrating themselves into society. In the case of the Roma, the situation is further complicated by racist prejudices and stereotypes<sup>1</sup>. According to a survey by the **Centre of Urban and Regional Sociology**, carried out in Romania in 1997 (CURS), 67% of those questioned had an openly anti-Roma attitude while 27% did not care about them at all.

The increase in ghettoised Roma settlements with a mostly poor supply of electricity and water, additionally widens the gap between Roma and the majority population, further complicating their access to jobs and education. These unbearable living conditions are the main reason that among Eastern European Roma, the rate of infant death is about 3 times higher, while life expectancy is about 10 to 15 years lower than average.

Due to social and hygienic conditions as well as insufficient medical supply (lack of health insurance, insufficient public transport, racism within the health sector), contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis and infantile paralysis almost exclusively affect Roma settlements.

The strict separation of the Roma from the rest of the villages further emphasises the idea of the Roma's alleged strangeness. In the eyes of many non-Roma, this serves to verify the prejudice of an unbridgeable cultural difference, which, most visible within the closed settlements, is held to be a self-imposed reason for social inequality.

Over the past years, racism by the state and by society has caused many Roma to apply for asylum in Western Europe and North America. This in turn drew international attention to their situation in Eastern Europe. In August of 1997, there was a wave of emigration of Czech Roma to Canada. Within a very short amount of time, 1,300 Roma applied for asylum there. Just before, there had been a report by a Czech private broadcasting station, in which Czech Roma who had emigrated to Canada praised the country as a social paradise. In turn, some right-wing politicians publicly welcomed the fact that the Roma had to leave the country due to continual discrimination. The mayor of an Ostrava district even promised to pay two thirds of the flight price to those Roma willing to leave.

Over the course of time, there has been tensions between the countries of origin and destination, in some cases leading all the way to the introduction of required visas for certain citizens. Great Britain, Finland, Belgium, Ireland and Denmark, for instance, started to require visas from Slovaks in order

<sup>1</sup> In the Czech Republic, thousands of Roma were literally excluded by law from the labour market and thus not entitled to social support by the state. After Czechoslovakia had dissolved, those Roma living in the Czech Republic who were originally from Slovakia were not granted citizenship. In 1999, an amendment finally brought about a satisfactory solution to the problem.



to keep Slovak Roma from emigrating. This in turn led to the fact that the original victims of the state's catastrophic minority politics were blamed for their own negative image in Europe. In the year 2000, a group of Hungarian Roma from Zamoly managed to receive asylum in France with the help of a non-governmental organisation. They claimed to have been victims of permanent persecution, threats of assassination, arbitrary removal and vandalism in their country of origin. By its decision, France thus acknowledged the fact that an ethnic minority is being persecuted in a state applying for EU membership. In a quickly launched campaign, the Hungarian government tried to prove this to be a wrong judgement. In spite of numerous reports about the human rights situation in Hungary, criticising institutionalised racism toward the Roma and Sinti over several years, public authorities denied the reality of violence and discrimination.

The following statements by high-ranking Hungarian politicians, holding the Roma themselves responsible for their miserable social conditions, are symptomatic in this respect: In a radio interview, prime minister Viktor Orban (in office until 2002) explained: "The Roma in Hungary had better try to learn something at school and work harder." He thus agreed with his labour minister, who in turn had declared that the Hungarian "government has done more to help the Roma than the Roma have done to help themselves." Hungarian media even speculated that the Russian secret service might have motivated the Roma to emigrate and financed them on their way. This example is relevant as it illustrates the way in which prejudices are passed down throughout the centuries – such as the Roma's alleged spying activities – and still remain deeply rooted within the majority population.

It is rather exceptional for Eastern European refugees to be granted asylum by the West. In most cases, they are rejected with the explanation that there is no proof of persecution suffered by the group, or by the individual, as a consequence of their ethnic heritage. Even Roma refugees from Kosovo hardly stand a chance to be granted asylum in one of the EU member states. As they cannot be sent back to Kosovo due to obvious imminent danger, they are merely allowed to stay for short periods of time. Refugees presently living in Germany, however, are threatened with expulsion. At the end of the year 2001, the ministers of internal affairs asked federal minister of internal affairs Schily to: "(...) work towards the goal of being able to move Yugoslav citizens without permits of residence, among them non-Albanian minorities from Kosovo, back to the remaining area of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia."

This style of politics is also responsible for the fact that the greatest crime committed against the Roma ever, since World War II, according to the **European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)**, is hardly even noticed by Western European politicians. The Rom E. V. situated in Cologne estimates that since June 1999 more than 100,000 Roma have been expelled from Kosovo, 15,000 houses have been destroyed and plundered, and 40,000 Roma have been physically wounded or psychologically traumatised. About 1,000 of them have been killed by ethnic-Albanian nationalists or have died in camps due to lack of medical treatment.

## Summary and prospective

The sole objective can be to create public awareness for the racism towards the Roma. To pass European wide anti-discrimination laws, to recognise the Roma as an ethnic minority, to improve their educational and vocational situation and to provide for a higher willingness to inform the respective majority population about the Roma's history would only be first steps in this direction. It is apparent that this cannot be an immediate development, as the omissions of the past decades are too many and the mistrust within many Roma is too deeply rooted.



However, it should be mentioned positively that the number of Roma associations, of projects and organisations dealing with different problems is steadily increasing. It is still to hope that the numerous positive approaches lead to a common political way which meets international response. If inactivity and ignorance continued to prevail and serious violations of human rights continued to be committed, deep social tensions would be the consequence which would neither be the objective of the EU nor of the EU candidate states.



## References

- Berliner Institut für Vergleichende Sozialforschung e. V. (ed.) (2000) *Die Roma. Eine transnationale europäische Bevölkerung*, Berlin.
- Fonseca, Isabell (1996) *Begrabt mich aufrecht. Auf den Spuren der Zigeuner*, München.
- Fraser, Angus (1992) *The Gypsies*. Oxford.
- Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (ed.) (1998) *Bausteine. Zwischen Romantisierung und Rassismus. Sinti und Roma - 600 Jahre in Deutschland. Handreichung zur Geschichte, Kultur und Gegenwart der deutschen Sinti und Roma*, Stuttgart.
- Memmi, Albert (1978) *Rassismus*. Frankfurt.
- Mirga, Andrzej / Gheorge, Nicolae (1998) *Anerkennung als Nation oder Minderheitenrechte?. Pogrom 199*, pp. 23.
- (1999/3) *Ost-west Gegeninformationen: Roma in Ost- und Südosteuropa*. Graz.
- Project On Ethnic Relations (ed.) (1997) *The Roma in the twenty-first century: A policy paper*. Princeton.
- Project On Ethnic Relations (ed.) (2001) *Leadership, representation and the status of the roma*. Princeton.
- Rommel, Franz (1993) *Die Roma Rumäniens. Volk ohne Hinterland*, Wien.
- Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Center*. <http://www.errc.org>, Budapest.
- Romnews*. <http://www.romnews.com>.
- The Patrin Web Journal*. <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/patrin.htm>.
- Vossen, Rüdiger (1983) *Zigeuner. Roma, Sinti, Gitanos, Gypsies zwischen Verfolgung und Romantisierung*, Hamburg.
- Wippermann, Wolfgang (1997) *Wie die Zigeuner. Antisemitismus und Antiziganismus im Vergleich*, Berlin.
- Zimmermann, Michael (1996) *Zigeunerpolitik im Stalinismus, im "realen Sozialismus" und unter dem Nationalsozialismus (FKKS [Forschungsschwerpunkt Konflikt- und Kooperationsstrukturen in Osteuropa])*. <http://www.uni-mannheim.de/fkks/fkks11.pdf>, Mannheim.