

**Problems of Intellectual and Political Accountability in Respect of
Emerging European Roma Policy**

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The paper argues that, at the European level, the situation of Roma minorities represent a new policy issue. However, over the 1990s the level of understanding of this issue became increasingly distorted, reflecting more the interests of mainstream institutions than those of Roma people and communities. In particular, the Roma issue has been increasingly defined in cultural terms, as a matter of discrimination, rather than identifying the causes of and effectively addressing the considerable objective problems faced by many Roma people such as poverty, unemployment, poor housing, health etc. The role of scholars should be to develop methods and theories to aid policy makers' understanding of the complex conditions affecting the highly diverse people covered by the concept of 'Roma'. To date this has not been achieved, partly due to the blurring of boundaries between scholarship and political activism

I. Introduction

Roma policy can be considered as the initiatives and activities of institutions explicitly targeting Roma people, communities or populations. It is not new, but can be traced back over many hundreds of years – though, as Marushiakova and Popov point out, it would be better to refer to policy towards Gypsies or variants of Cigány etc. as the public use of the term 'Roma' is a fairly recent phenomenon.¹ In other words, when we are discussing how institutions relate to Roma today we are dealing with a subject with extensive historical antecedents, the understanding of which should inform our comprehension of contemporary developments.

In recent years a dramatic change has occurred in the scale and nature – briefly, the significance – of Roma policy, both within many states, as well as at the international level. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons (many of which this paper does not have time to discuss) this change has not received appropriate scholarly attention and so is not well understood. However, this has not prevented a large and growing number of commentaries on policy by those who falsely imagine they are able to accurately evaluate the subject. This is creating a tradition of superficial, inaccurate and

¹ E, Marushiakova and V, Popov, 'The Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) in Central and Eastern Europe (Historical and Ethnographical Background)' (unpublished)

misleading pseudo-analysis which must inevitably prove harmful, not only to Roma people but also for wider society.

II. Growth of the Roma Issue

In part, the growing significance of the Roma as a subject of policy is a result of quantitative change – in particular the dramatic increase in the perceived size of many national Roma populations, and thus of the Continental (and global) Roma/Gypsy population which has expanded by approximately five-fold since the Second World War.² This quantitative growth has inevitably affected the quality of State-Roma relations – particularly in former socialist states – which can be summarized as the unprecedented dependence of most Roma on public and other institutions to secure the benefits of modernization.

However, an even more significant qualitative development has been the emergence of explicit Roma political activity. This paper cannot discuss the meaning and methods of Roma politics in depth but wishes to point to two critical consequences of this development. First, the emergence of public Roma political activity means that Roma policy must now, to an unprecedented degree, take place in public and is thus subject to the same kinds of attention and critical analysis as any other subject of public debate. Second, Roma politics – which includes public Roma ‘representation’ – crucially changes the approach of institutions towards Roma policy, requiring them to seek Roma endorsement for their activities, but which, when achieved, allows for a more confident engagement than would otherwise be the case given the long tradition of failure and discontent which characterises Roma/Gypsies as a policy issue.

The rest of this paper discusses a specific, though increasingly important, area of Roma policy – the Roma-related activities of European institutions. It seeks to show the existence of considerable problems that can only be addressed by far greater scientific

² Contemporary population estimates for Roma are notoriously subjective and the problem is even greater when looking at past periods. Official estimates indicate a rise from 100,000 in Hungary in 1943 up to over half a million today and similar figures for Slovakia. In the Czech Lands the post-war Roma population has risen from ‘a few hundred’ to over 250,000. Reliable figures from Romania are unlikely to be found though it can be assumed that the same process effecting population growth in Hungary and Czechoslovakia (better health care and living conditions) probably operated throughout the whole communist bloc. The five-fold increase mentioned should be treated as an educated guess.

knowledge and political accountability. This conclusion requires scholars and Roma activists (and their supporters) to re-evaluate their activities if policy is to address the needs of Roma people and to prevent further deterioration in their circumstances that may produce catastrophic consequences.

III. European Institutional Engagement

European Roma policy is a relatively new phenomenon. Prior to 1990, European institutions (which did not include communist states) paid little attention to western Gypsies. The most significant developments took place within the EU (then the European Community) which, from the mid-1980s, took an interest in the issue of educational provision for Gypsy and traveller children. Research was commissioned from J-P Liegois who produced a substantial report on the subject in 1986 (extended until 1989). Since then a number of educational initiatives have been supported (and publicized through the magazine *Interface*). However, as Liegois conceded in 1998 “the situation as a whole is no better than it was” and the percentage of Gypsy children attending school no higher than the 30 to 40 per cent identified a decade and half earlier.³

Since 1990 there has been an explosion in the Roma-related activities of European institutions demonstrating that deepening European engagement with the Roma issue is fundamentally linked to objective circumstances in transition states. The rapid pace of change and the wide range of activities mean they cannot be reviewed in a few hundred words. Furthermore, the novelty of the process and the notable absence of evaluation of initiatives mean that the best this paper can do is to indicate the intellectual context to these activities by examining the documents produced by European institutions purporting to articulate how they conceive of the Roma as a policy area. This is done with specific reference to the two Roma reports of the OSCE’s High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), published in 1993 and 2000 respectively, and the 1995 report ‘The Situation of Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) in Europe’ written by Ms Josephine Verspaget for the Council of Europe.⁴

³ J-P Liegois, *School Provision for Ethnic Minorities: The Gypsy Paradigm*, University of Hertfordshire Press, 1998: 15-17

⁴ Roma (Gypsies) in the CSCE Region, High Commissioner on National Minorities (Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials 21-3 September 1993)

IV. Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

The perceived potential for ethnic conflict in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of communism inspired the OSCE (then the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) to take an interest in minority issues. Concern for the ‘particular problems of the Roma’ was explicitly included in the organization’s Charter for a New Europe.⁵ In 1992, the office of High Commissioner on National Minorities was established to provide ‘early warning’ and expert management of potential conflict situations. In the following year the HCNM produced his first report: ‘Roma in the CSCE Region’.

While accepting a trans-continental dimension to Roma, the report gave overwhelming priority to the problems in transition states. Identification of the circumstances of Roma people and consequent policy challenges were firmly rooted in the wider economic, political and social context of transition noting that “material hardship associated with economic recession... have hit the vast majority of Roma particularly hard” (p.6). The HCNM also correctly observed that “Roma comprise an extremely heterogeneous set of communities that are perhaps best understood in their own specific circumstances” (p.3). He also identified the crucial political/cultural dimension to policy arguing that policy should be based on “objective analysis of community need” within individual states, and that “intra-community tension [Roma – non-Roma] should not be exacerbated by (the appearance of) favourable treatment of one group over another”(p.12).

The second, far more voluminous (175 pages), HCNM report was not researched and written by the politically accountable High Commissioner himself but by an American law professor with no known expertise in the Roma issue. Despite the HCNM noting in the Foreword that, since 1993, in contrast to other social groups, the circumstances of Roma had continue to deteriorate, the report itself largely ignored the transition context, in particular problems associated with economic restructuring. Instead the report

Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area, Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, March 2000

G, Verspaget, The Situation of Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) in Europe (Report adopted by the CDMG (Council of Europe) 5 May 1995

⁵ Paragraph 40. See Minority Rights in Europe – Policies and Practises of in CSCE Participating States, Minority Rights Group, 1991

developed the notion that the Roma issue is essentially a cultural problem of prejudice towards Roma on the part of non-Roma. The assertion that “discrimination and exclusion are fundamental features of the Roma experience” replaced analysis of the haphazard collection of diverse data which are placed alongside extracts from a variety of international agreements. The ubiquitous and uncritical assertion of racism is conveniently undemanding: ‘the Roma’ are an ethnic minority, they exhibit manifest inequality *ergo* their problems are a product of intolerance and prejudice. This approach inevitably leads to superficial and naïve policy responses revolving around greater governmental commitment and Roma ‘representation’ in the policy process, yet no enquiry was made as to why governments are clearly not sufficiently ‘committed’ or whether further politicising Roma policy may not actually increase obstacles to the development of effective policies.⁶

V. Council of Europe

While the fundamental weakness of the second HCNM report lay in its failure to develop any serious analysis of empirical data, this problem was considerably compounded in the work of Josephine Verspaget for the Council of Europe by a crass disregard for the facts themselves. The number of errors in her 1995 report ‘On Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) in Europe’ are too numerous to list, but this paper notes a few of the worst examples.

The tone of the report is set from the start with the statement that “The people known as Gypsies...came from Northern India 700 years ago in a long march that took them from the Middle East to Egypt and from Turkey to Andalusia. Their language is Romani” (p.1). In fact, there is no historical evidence to support the idea of a ‘migration’ and even those scholars who do believe that Roma/Gypsies ‘come from India’ do not accept such a rapid movement across Asia. The homogenisation of what is obviously a highly diverse group is the central theme of the report. The same old myth of Roma being permanent victims of persecution is trotted out and statements such as “Gypsies generally marry very young...and mixed marriages with non-Gypsies are very rare” are

⁶ Whilst the first HCNM report considered Roma participation to be of practical importance, the 2000 report promotes a far more ambiguous and contentious role for Roma politics arguing that “Roma face special challenges in their efforts to participate in the fundamental promise of democracy – the right to self-government” :128

left unqualified (p.2). Ms Verspaget was so confident in her ultra-conservative conception of Roma that she felt able to condemn their watching television as this creates “an identity crisis and a profound sense of rootlessness” (p.5), which is rather ironic. The essentialization of Roma is completed with the assertion that “in the Gypsy idea of society the individual exists and is defined *only* in relation to the group” (p.6)(my italics).

Inevitably the report’s assessment of policy challenges (facing European institutions) considerably diverged from reality. According to the report, Roma unemployment is caused by ‘communism’ and “a policy of forced assimilation of Roma populations through banning nomadism ... with the resulting destruction of traditional Roma society” (p.3). Apparently, apart from killing many tens of thousands of Roma/Gypsy people, Nazi genocide had no effect on the social and economic status of Roma because “until the end of the Second World War Gypsies fulfilled a specific function in the rural world having a number of traditional jobs...all of which were compatible with their nomadic lifestyle” (p.4). Contemporary governments are released from responsibility for the growing number of Roma asylum seekers because, as the report notes, “the increase in mobility since 1990 must not conjure up pictures of a ‘tidal wave’ of Gypsies sweeping over the West, it is merely a return to the normal mobility of Gypsies” (p.13).

VI Problems of Accountability

It appears that during the 1990s the level of understanding about Roma people, their circumstances and the political and policy challenges these represent actually declined at the European level. How can we account for this perverse development when we would assume that greater information and discussion should lead to a more accurate understanding of a subject?

The Challenge for Scholarship

Part of the explanation lies in the nature of Roma as a subject. Given widespread dispersion and fragmentation and their existence as small minority communities within a wide variety of different societies and mainstream cultures, ‘the Roma’ are a particularly difficult social group to conceptualise accurately. European institutions,

such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe, which (unlike the EU) have a pan-European membership and remit have particular problems in processing a vast and rapidly expanding volume of information in order to achieve a coherent overview of the subject. It is the task of scholarship to develop methods and theories to facilitate this process and the creation of these tools should be a priority for scholars in the coming period. Only when scholarship is sufficiently developed will it be possible to effectively counter the inaccurate and misleading assertions of policy-makers and thus contribute to the development of better policy.

The Weakness of Roma Politics

In addition to limited intellectual accountability, the Roma issue suffers from an absence of political accountability. The phenomenal quantitative increase in the number of Roma organizations and individuals engaged in public political activity over the last decade has precisely coincided with the dramatic decline in the living conditions, social status and life chances of most Roma people. The obvious conclusion is that Roma politics is ineffective in promoting the interests of Roma people. The growing number of national case studies demonstrates how and why Roma have not been successful in creating effective interest representation even in states where they form a significant part of the population.⁷ At the European level Roma possess no apparent political weight and it is implausible that they could themselves constitute an influential lobby.

Clearly the growing political significance of the Roma issue does not reflect the political capacity of Roma people and must therefore be driven by other political actors. Those who care about Roma policy must recognize that politics is fundamentally about power – specifically, relationships of power between different interests. As the Roma issue comes onto the political horizons of ever more interests, they exploit it for their own ends. This observation has profound implications for Roma politics, not least in the recognition that whilst emphasizing Roma ethnic ‘difference’ may help create a degree of inter-Roma solidarity, it can also erect barriers to solidarity between Roma

⁷ See, E Marushiakova and V Popov, ‘The Gypsy minority in Bulgaria’ (unpublished); M Vasecka, *The Roma*, Institute for Public Affairs (Bratislava), 1999; D Crowe, ‘The Gypsies of Romania since 1990’, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.27 no.1 1999: 57-67; Z Barany, ‘The Roma in Macedonia: ethnic politics and the marginal condition’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.18 no.3, 1995: 515-531; M Kovats, ‘The good, the bad and the ugly: three faces of ‘dialogue’ - the development of Roma politics in Hungary’, *Contemporary Politics*, vol.3 no.1 1997: 55-71

and non-Roma, as well as providing an intellectual justification for exclusion and segregation. In the context of this paper, the manifestly inadequate work of Ms Verspaget has led to her enjoying the distinguished position of Chair of the Council of Europe's Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies since its formation in 1996 (as a direct consequence of her report discussed above).

VII. Scholarship and Politics

Finally, it needs to be recognized that there is a relationship between the limitations of scholarly and political accountability. Given the way Roma-related scholarship has developed and the importance many of those involved attach to addressing the considerable economic, social, cultural and political problems faced by Roma people, a tendency has developed for scholars and others to turn a blind eye to the inaccuracies, inconsistencies and contradictions increasingly manifest in political and public debates. I believe those who wish to see real improvements in the lives of Roma people need to continually and critically evaluate how they understand contemporary political developments and to follow the advice given to me by Thomas Acton when I began work in this area – “if you want to help the Gypsies, tell the truth”.

Biographical Note

Dr Martin Kovats is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, UK. He has published a number of articles in Britain and Hungary on Roma political development and has recently completed a research project investigating the operations of Hungary's unique mechanism for minority representation, the minority self-government system. Dr Kovats' work focuses primarily on the implications for Roma politics and policy in central Europe of EU enlargement. He is currently working on a book on Roma politics.