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# The Plight of the Roma in Europe



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January 11, 2023



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### Introduction

The following is a brief historical account of the Roma, along with a description of the current situation of the Roma in Europe, supplemented with facts from crisis areas and some examples for better perspective.

This report is based on the last 7 years of the study and contact with Roma or people connected with their situation in Europe.

Reports published in newspapers, on television and via social networking platforms have also been used to compile this report.

### A brief historical overview

Before focusing on their plight on modern Europe, it might help to understand the background of their historical and continuing migration.

### Roots of the Roma

According to the latest research reports, the roots of the Roma go back about 1500 years when they inhabited their core geographical area in the state of Rajasthan, India.

Ethnically in this region, the Sikligar, Chauhan, Sansi, Gurjar, Dom and Banjara clans are the anthropological groups that reach into these regions of the states of Rajasthan, Punjab and Kashmir. The roots of most Roma go back to these clans.

The docudrama film *Latscho Drom*, directed by Tony Gatlif, is worth mentioning. In a kind of cinematic poem, he describes the journey of the Roma from India to Europe.



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Kalbeliya is a traditional Roma dance, which shows, even today, the influence of traditional Indian folk-dance forms. In fact, the Kalbeliya are a nomadic community based in the region of Barmer, Jodhpur, Ajmer, and Jaipur – all in the state of Rajasthan, India.

Snake worship and dance formations as income-generating activities are a foundation of Roma culture drawing upon distant ancestral Hindu traditions.

The linguistic connection of the Roma with India has also been academically proven. The Romani language has its origin in northern India - in Punjab, Rajasthan and other regions in the north-west of India.

Professionally, the Indian ancestors of the displaced Roma were musicians, metal craftsmen, traders, horse breeders and traders, herbalist healers, entertainers, artists and puppeteers.

### [Why did the Roma emigration occur?](#)

The Roma emigration was the result of a series of political upheavals, loss of local power to new rulers and cultural forces to whom the Roma ancestral professions were no longer needed, outsourced, or not seen as culturally or religiously desirable.

The native ruling class decayed, gradual changes lead to an historical singularity, territorial boundaries shrunk due to violent assaults especially from the Islamic marauders from the West Asia, and as a result the Roma's ancestors became the new untouchables, the infidel outcasts. Without their own rulers, they became superfluous.

Between 800 and 1000 years ago, the spatial transmigration of the Roma ancestors began across what is now Afghanistan and Iran and via Egypt and Turkey, to reach Europe some 600 years ago.



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The Roma faced random travails, persecution and exploitation on their centuries long escape and peregrination through West Asia and Northern Africa, while also picking up several cultural traits, practices and ideas from the peoples they encountered. However, Europe is where the systematic exclusion began. Europe is where the prejudice, persecution, harassment and even genocide of the Roma under National Socialism reached its peak.

What are the circumstances in Europe today? The following sheds some light on the core areas of the Roma's challenges in Europe, with facts.

### The Roma in Europe today

It is fair to say that in modern times, the Roma in Eastern Europe experienced a comparatively better situation during and until the end of Communism than after the fall of Communism.

Over time, the difference in their quality of life is marked by a stark contrast: after the fall of Communism, even today in times of crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, there are two groups among Roma migrants: older Roma residents and newcomers.

The first group is marked by integration into the labor market and therefore a slightly improved living situation and social advancement of individuals. Compared to this group, the second group of Roma newcomers from crisis areas, as well as from Eastern Europe, suffer greater exclusion and discrimination, both of which have reached new levels.

Let us look at the country-wise situation of the Roma in Europe.



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## Bulgaria

Anti-Zinganism (phobia and hatred for the Zingar – an epithet for the Roma) here has experienced a spiral of violence, exclusion, and harassment, fanned by political disinformation actively propagated by the media.

In the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government in Bulgaria corralled the Roma into ghettos in the residential districts via a stringent and systematic policy of control and exclusion.

Virtually imprisoned and denied free movement and access to basic public goods, their access to fresh water, food and medical care became almost impossible, worsening the situation of the affected Roma. Only authorities and doctors had access to Roma ghettos according to their own sweet will.

## Germany

The situation in other parts of Europe is not much different. In Germany itself, the Roma were blamed for the COVID-19 outbreak. Social media turned the spiral of accusations upwards; it became a favorite topic for right-wing extremist groups in Germany, especially in Berlin.

The expected numbers of Roma refugees were much lower. The influx of greater numbers was partly driven by arbitrary rounding up and deportations of Roma by governments such as France [see section on France].

On Roma Day (August the 4th of each year) in 2022 there was an interview in Berlin, with the question of what anti-Zinganism meant. It was the clichéd media tactic of seeding the



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popular discourse with a narrative impugning the Roma as bringers of criminality and disease. This narrative was not uncommon during the pandemic.

Racism against the Roma has always been a problem in Europe since the Roma are usually distinguishable by their outward appearance.

The assault on the safety and well-being of the Roma can be found in areas of life such as access to governmental and non-governmental benefits, education, and employment. Access to housing and healthcare is another area of discrimination.

Demanding legal documents where it is known that the Roma cannot have such documents due to their living situation is a common case of everyday exclusion and harassment by the state's law enforcement apparatus.

Along the lines of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, the “**Roma Lives Matter**” campaign was an opportunity to focus on the systematic state-abetted persecution of these often-stateless marginalized community across Europe. After the death of Stanislav Tomas in the Czech Republic, the willingness to protest increased.

### The Ukraine

Even during these times of the war in the Ukraine, there is discrimination among war refugees. A distinction is made between first- and second-class refugees. Perversely concordant to the pathetic living conditions of the Roma in the Ukraine, there was preferential treatment in terms of allocation of a place to sleep for refugees: Ukrainians/Slavic /Caucasians first, then the Roma.



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### Greece

In Greece, an incident occurred at a petrol station: a €20 gasoline invoice was allegedly not paid by a Roma youth. During a police chase, the young man was shot in the head and killed. This spurred a reaction, as more Roma took to the streets under the "Roma Lives Matter" banner, and it gave a boost to other current demonstrations against state incompetence and arrogance in Athens.

### Romania

Conditions in Eastern Europe today are just as bad as in Greece, especially the situation in Romania. Despite regulations for political co-determination, discrimination takes place. The number of the Roma community in Romania is estimated at 1.5 million people.

Despite the architectural beauty of Roma villas, their living conditions are just as desolate as in Bulgaria. When many Transylvanian Saxons left Romania after the fall of Communism, the Roma moved in to settle there.

Moreover, they have residential areas in the villages and towns. These ghettos need better access to water, electricity and renovation of housing construction.

Thus, lack of employment and the influx of more Roma refugees from the east are added problems, fueling the journey westwards.

Here, too, there are 2 generations of Roma migrants – one, due to flight from the warzone in the Ukraine; and the second are Roma who have been resident for a little longer.





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## France

In France, the situation is no better. In a suburb of Paris, the mass eviction of Roma from many ghettos that had been created began during Sarkozy's time hardly made the news internationally. This rendered multitudes of Roma people homeless during the winter of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A typical picture of Roma destitution in their ghettos: A 20-year-old couple lives in an anteroom; a double bed, a wood cooker, and a gas cooker - that is a piece of Roma prosperity. They get their water from a nearby hydrant. The Communist-oriented municipal government of the suburb with 38 thousand inhabitants considers two thousand Roma a 'burden'.

Only 25% of Roma children go to school. Now, with the eviction of the camps, the children's opportunities are lost. Homeless people in France are treated better than the Roma, who are often forcibly rendered homeless by state apparatus.

Moreover, it became socially acceptable in these times to recycle old prejudices against the Roma in France. They are called "dirty gypsies", criminals and carriers of disease, and people who know no ethics or morals.

There is a rule in France that a municipality with more than five thousand inhabitants must provide parking space for vehicles. Yet, no space is found to resettle evicted Roma residents. It is estimated that the Roma, travelling in caravans, number about 250,000.

On the one hand, these regulations are not observed, on the other hand, there is a system of control here, a so-called travel guide for the Roma. If evidence of residency cannot be provided, and if the pitch has not been paid for, they will be evicted.



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A few Roma, including Django Reinhardt and his successors in music, who created a fusion of traditional Roma music with new musical trends, sometimes speak about the plight of the Roma in France.

### Slovakia

In Slovakia, there were and are attempts to integrate the Roma into the labor market. Due to the shortage of skilled workers in Europe, there are good opportunities here. 33% of Roma here have a job, 60% of Roma youth aged 16 to 24 are without a job or education. Others do not have any vocational training or a trainer on their assigned jobs.

The costs of integration are considerable, but the situation here is only slowly improving. The University of Bratislava brings many economists into society, but there is a lack of staff to implement policy recommendations. The number of Roma in Slovakia is 500,000. Here, too, one may say that under Communism they were integrated, but since the fall of Communism, the Roma seem to be on the side of the losers and those excluded from new power-equations and distributive justice: A ghetto emerged from the development of a residential area where military, police and Roma were housed. Today, only the Roma are left. There is poor water supply and the housing situation is worrying.

In addition, many Roma migrants came in from Serbia, the Ukraine and Romania through the labor exchange. When low-wage companies came to Slovakia there was another opportunity for the Roma. US Steel and Whirlpool are companies that hired Roma in the first stage during seasonal peaks. Other companies still kept a low profile, while companies that hired Roma reaped the benefits of good image-building under the codeword “integration”.

Out of 800 employees, 200 Roma have been hired. Previously, they worked in the automotive supply industry, but after the pandemic there were layoffs. Manual work is



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where you find Roma - and there are poor promotion prospects here. One will not find Roma in office management or white-collar settings.

### Spain

In Spain there are seventy thousand Roma, called Gitanos. Thirty thousand of them live in Andalusia. In 1425 CE, they had crossed the Pyrenees into Spain. The so-called “Little Egyptians” were allowed to cross the border during that era. With the passage of time, the laws changed, and state-supported persecution began.

Six hundred years later, the Roma are still living in needy conditions, although they are recognized as equal citizens by law. According to the Spanish government, all Spaniards have a right to housing. Institutional and housing problems are nevertheless a challenge for the Roma in Spain.

70% of Spanish Roma over 16 years of age are illiterate. Roma women provide a glimmer of hope here; 80% of university students belonging to the Roma people are women. Educational opportunities are higher for women than for men.

Professionally, jobs for the Roma are rare, mainly as agricultural laborers, scrap dealers, antique dealers and in the world of arts. 51% of Roma over the age of 16 are daily wage earners - they must work until the age of 65 to make ends meet, while most Spaniards do not work that long, with only 15% of them being employed for an indefinite period.

### Ameliorative recommendations

Public administrations would have to implement more proactive social policies focused on restorative justice for the Roma. They must address sensitive issues openly and promote the positive recognition of the Roma.



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### Reform media narrative and political propaganda

The media's social narratives should develop more investigative diligence and become aware of a moral duty towards Roma. Cultivating competent Roma representation and providing access to fora in mass media should be made available on a priority basis.

### Increase youth engagement and interaction

Meetings among young people should be a way to reduce prejudices and make Roma cultural values more transparent to the new generation. Here, patience and trust are a great prerequisite in wanting to go down these paths.

### Educate Roma children

Disadvantage usually begins in childhood for the Roma. Poor language skills mean that Roma schoolchildren are then placed in special classes. Only a few make it through the 9th grade. In marginalized communities, few women find employment.

### Avoid scapegoating during times of crisis

After 600 years in Europe, prejudices against the Roma minority still exist, and they inevitably rise to the surface and are magnified when a relatively homogeneous society goes through a crisis. Fear and despair are the fertile soil of hatred, violence and exclusion. Disease and criminality are attributed to the Roma.

### Enforce their labor rights

They are still simple and low skilled low wage jobs for the Roma, but few have permanent contracts, and fewer are the opportunities to obtain a good school certificate. Models such



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as integration into the labor market, youth exchange, neutral media reporting and an end to perpetuating prejudices in society are still a long way off.

### Build social capital among Roma

Between first- and second-generation Roma, the first generation does not necessarily want to share the little that has been earned with the Roma who come from crisis areas. There are a few prominent Roma individuals who have achieved social status in the artistic field.

### Distributive justice

There are still too few social workers who can address the exclusion of Roma in receiving their fair share of government benefits through state agencies. The Council of Europe estimates a total of 10 to 12 million Roma citizens across Europe.

### Social trusteeship

It requires trust on both sides, those who are Roma and those who see them as Roma. Understanding culture on the one hand and preserving culture and being open to change on the other is a continuing challenge. There are 600 years of mistrust to overcome; it seems to be a generational task.

### Moderating vicious trends on social media

The beginnings are there, but more commitment is needed. In this age of social networking, an opportunity has been missed so far, and there is a dire need to prevent this technology from mainly becoming viral conduits of false propaganda and hate speech.