

Racism and violence in Northern Ireland: Romanian Roma driven out of Belfast

Written by Marie Breen-Smyth

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MARIE BREEN-SMYTH, JUL 1 2009

The Roma, Gypsy and Traveller Communities are the largest ethnic minority within the EU, and one that has been comprehensively failed by various initiatives to end racism targeted at them. But the troubles of the Roma predate the new expanded EU[1]. Throughout Europe, they have been marginalised[2]. In Romania, under Communism, following the targeting of Germans and the Jews from the 1940s onwards and their consequent exodus from Romania, Roma moved into the abandoned villages left behind. With the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War, however, those who fled returned to reclaim their abandoned homes and the Roma were moved out. Alongside other forms of discrimination, Roma discontent has been growing, and Roma have been organising and demanding their rights[3]. With an expanded EU, however, the free movement of labour across European member states meant that the Romanian Roma could move to newer pastures, and seek a better life. Some chose to move to the Celtic Tiger state of Ireland, and some to the slightly less prosperous but newly pacified Northern Ireland.

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House in Belgravia Avenue formerly occupied by a Romanian Roma family.

Northern Ireland in the bad old days had very little immigration, the tide was flowing in the other direction. But since the Belfast Agreement and diminutions in the level of violence, it became a more attractive place, first for Polish immigrants working in the building trades and in food processing, and then subsequently for those from other Eastern European states[4].

In spite of the abatement of violent death, peace in Northern Ireland does not mean loving one's neighbour, or integration of previously divided communities. It remains a comprehensively segregated society, with less than 5% of marriages are mixed – between Catholics and Protestants. Schooling is segregated, only in further and higher education do Catholics and Protestants mix – apart from the small but growing numbers of community-based integrated schools which are set up by parents. Housing is segregated and the high 'peace walls' separate Loyalist and Republican communities in Belfast and other urban areas. These walls and other interfaces are often the site of sectarian violence, which continues, albeit at a lower level. Sectarian attacks and beatings, including a number of fatal beatings continue. The UDA was blamed for the murder of Catholic father-or-four Kevin McDaid in Coleraine last month. And somewhere along the line, anti-Catholic elements within Loyalism discovered that Polish people tended to be Catholic, making them a target for abuse and attack, illustrated by attacks following a football match between a Polish side and a Northern Ireland team some weeks ago[5].

Racism has long been a feature of life in Northern Ireland, and there are historic links between some Loyalist paramilitaries and neo-fascist organisations in Scotland and England. The Ulster Defence Association enjoyed links with the National Front, for example. Latterly, Combat 18 have been active and recruiting successfully in Loyalist communities in Northern Ireland. Named after the initials of Adolf Hitler, the first and eighth letters of the alphabet, the British chapter of Combat 18 was formed by disgruntled members of the British National Party about a decade ago, but they also have chapters in Belgium and in various states within United States. They attacked a Catholic Church in Northern Ireland in July 2008, painting their name on it. Nor have the newly arrived immigrants been immune from the unwanted attention of their neighbours. In a survey conducted by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, nearly half of people questioned (51%) said that they would mind a little or a lot having a Traveller as a neighbour. This represented a ten percentage points increase in the result for the same question in 2005. Over a fifth (23%) said that they would mind a gay, lesbian or bisexual person living next door, compared to 14% three years ago. A further fifth (23%) said they would have the same problem with a migrant worker[6].

So perhaps the hundred or more Roma immigrants who were driven out of their homes in South Belfast saw it coming. Their attackers from the Loyalist Village area subjected them to four days of sustained onslaughts, breaking windows and daubing their homes in Belgravia Avenue and Wellesley Avenue, on the fringes of the Village, with racist slogans. Another Romanian Roma family was attacked in the Ballyhackamore area of the city, about three miles from the Village. Nor was sufficient police protection available, so families took shelter in a local church and the overflow was housed in a leisure centre. The attacks achieved their goal, and the attackers were exultant, celebrating their victory by travelling to West Belfast to desecrate graves in the Republican plot of the city cemetery. The church sheltering the fleeing families was subsequently attacked, by stones and other missiles. The home of a Polish family in Moygashel, County Tyrone came under attack and they were forced to leave. Windows in three houses were broken and a car was vandalised over the following weekend. The family included a young child, and so decided to leave having received a written threat telling them that they must leave the area.

Local residents in Belfast opposing the attack organised a rally in support of the Roma families. Whatever their effectiveness in providing political space for those who wished to express opposition, it was too little too late for the Roma families driven out of Belgravia and Wellesley Avenues. Without a robust police response to their victimisation, and sensing their ongoing vulnerability, they were adamant that they wished to return to Romania. It couldn't be as bad as Northern Ireland. The organisers of the rally received threats.

Meanwhile, a separate message by 'Loyalist Combat 18' was circulated by mobile phone text message and email. The message read:

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Romanian gypsies beware, beware
Loyalist C18 are coming to beat you like a baiting bear
Stay out of South Belfast and stay out of sight
And then youse will be alright
Get the boat and don't come back
There is no black in the Union Jack
Loyalist C18 'whatever it takes'.

Two pipe bombs, apparently intended for use against the immigrants, were uncovered in south Belfast, along with a quantity of ammunition. Subsequently both the main Loyalist paramilitaries announced their intention to decommission their weapons, although this will not decommission the stones and other missiles used by their fellow Loyalists to attack their neighbours from Eastern Europe, or decommission the bigotry that motivates such attacks. In any case, it is too late for the Roma of Belgravia and Wellesley Avenues. By the end of June, about a hundred Roma were returned to Romania.

The police have been strongly criticised for failing to protect the families, although arrests were eventually made. The Police Service of Northern Ireland's Chief Constable, Robert Murdie commented: "I feel that we all should be ashamed that such attacks are happening, not just in Belfast but right across Northern Ireland." As someone from Northern Ireland, I am indeed deeply ashamed. But as a citizen, I want the police to respond immediately to calls from immigrant workers under attack, I want a robust response to situations where there is a danger that people might be driven from their homes, and I want the full rigour of the law applied to those who conduct such attacks. Although these recent attacks seem to emanate from Loyalist areas, there is no basis for complacency about attitudes in Nationalist areas either. Nor is there any room for police complacency. In 2007, an inspection of criminal justice responses to hate crime in Northern Ireland by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland found that awareness of policies and procedures to deal with hate crime varied both among police officers and from one policing district to another[7].

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[1] Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs (2004) European Commission *The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union* Available at <http://www.errc.org/db/00/E0/m000000E0.pdf> Accessed June 30th, 2009.

[2] For excellent information on Roma populations throughout Europe, see <http://www.romarights.net/content/romani-people-country> Accessed June 30th, 2009.

[3] See <http://www.romarights.net/content/traditional-roma-protesting-romania>

[4] Recruitment and Employment of Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland: A Literature Review Sarah Toucas and Agnieszka Martynowicz Institute for Conflict Research, 2008 Available at <http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/LiteraturereviewagenciesfinalICR.pdf> Accessed 30th June 2009.

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[5] Jarman, N. Hate Crime in Northern Ireland: An Overview Institute for Conflict Research, 2004. Available at <http://www.conflictresearch.org.uk/cms/images/stories/NIACRO%20Hate%20Crime%20Paper%20Jan%202008.doc> Accessed 30th June 2009.

[6] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. (2009) Equality Awareness Survey, 2008. Belfast, Equality Commission. Available at <http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/ECSurvey2008.pdf> Accessed 30th June, 2009.

[7] Available at [http://www.cjini.org/NewsAndEvents/Press-Releases/2004-\(1\)/April/Criminal-justice-agencies-committed-to-addressing-.aspx](http://www.cjini.org/NewsAndEvents/Press-Releases/2004-(1)/April/Criminal-justice-agencies-committed-to-addressing-.aspx) Accessed 30th June 2009.