

The Roma/Gypsies: “Outcasts” of Europe

Written by Gabriela Marin Thornton

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GABRIELA MARIN THORNTON, FEB 16 2015

In January 2013, Zsolt Bayer, a founding member of Hungary’s ruling Fidesz party, said that: “Most Gypsies are not suitable for cohabitation. They are not suitable for being among people. Most are animals, and behave like animals... Animals should not exist” (‘Leading Hungarian journalist...’, 2013). Zsolt Bayer was talking about the Roma, who are the largest and, arguably, most discriminated minority in Europe. In today’s Europe, Roma – or the Gypsies as some people still call them[i] – are used by most European right-wing parties to strengthen their political base. However, due to the high level of discrimination to which the Roma are subject, in some European countries they are used by all political parties to gather electoral support. Therefore, two important questions arise: who are the Roma, and why are they so easily used by European parties to gather political support?

Who are the Roma?

According to the European Commission (2012: 12), there are six million Roma in the European Union, the majority living in Eastern Europe. Amnesty International (2012) estimates that with 1.85 million Romani, Romania is home to the largest Romani population in Eastern Europe, followed by Bulgaria (750,000), Hungary (700,000) and Macedonia (197,750). A report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2011: 10) lists Roma as a “vulnerable group”, and states: “Anti-Gypsism is one of the most acute problems for many European societies.”

Angus Fraser (1995: 46) argued that the Roma first entered Europe through the Byzantine Empire, and the first reference to them occurred around the year 1068. Linguistic and genetic data show India as the Roma’s country of origin. Romani groups started their migration from India, and have since scattered across Europe. Romani languages are located within Indian languages (Petroni and Serva, 2008: 13). In the 1980s and the 1990s, scholars such as Okely (1983) and Lucassen, Willems and Cottaar (1998) questioned the idea of Roma’s Indian origin. However, “the most recent DNA discoveries point clearly towards a common Indian origin of most Romani sub-groups. Genetic work conducted by Iovita and Schurr (2004); Morar et al (2004; 2013); Kalaydjieva et al (2005); Gusmão et al (2010); Pamjav et al (2011); Salihović et al (2011); Mendizabal et al (2012); and many others show that Roma are a founder population that originated in India” (Marin Thornton, 2014: 109).

Referring to the Roma of Eastern Europe, Zoltan Barany (2002: 3) argues that: “For seven centuries East European Gypsies have languished at the bottom of social, economic and political hierarchies. Over those seven centuries, empires, authoritarian and totalitarian states have come and gone, but in all of them the Roma occupied the lowest rung on the social scale.” In 16th century Western Europe, after a period of being treated as pilgrims, the marginalization of Roma started too. For centuries the Roma were persecuted, deported, enslaved and ultimately incinerated in Nazi ovens. In and of itself, the Roma story has not been the story of the powerful. It is a story of the ones that have done whatever they could in order to survive in a very adverse environment.

Today there are numerous non-governmental, governmental and European organizations that strive to improve Roma’s education and socio-economic conditions. However, despite their efforts, Romani communities have yet to see real improvement. In August 2014, František Tanko, the chairman of the Roma Union Party in Slovakia (SRÚS) claimed that: “Nothing has changed for the Roma in 22 years and millions of euros from the EU funds have never reached the Roma as they were meant to” (‘Roma leader says...’, 2014). Most Roma live in poverty and are subject to high levels of discrimination.

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Politics and Ethnicity: The Roma

Scholars who are skeptical about the role played by ethnicity in international politics need to take a close look at how the Eastern European Roma have recently changed politics in the European Union. Poor economic conditions in Eastern Europe prompted significant Roma movement towards Western Europe. Because of this Romani migration, the right of EU citizens to free movement has come into question in some Western EU member states such as Great Britain, France and Italy. It happened despite the fact that any Romani person who lives in any EU country is an EU citizen and has the right to free movement.

In the May 2014 EU parliamentary elections, right-wing parties did not win in all EU member states, but there is no question that in most European states xenophobia has been on the rise. In Western Europe, the rise in xenophobic discourses has been linked partially to the influx of Eastern Europeans, more precisely the influx of Roma from Romania and Bulgaria. By making use of xenophobic discourses, European right-wing parties have used the Roma to strengthen their political base. In France, extreme-right parties such as Mouvement National Républicain and Parti de la France, as well as the National Front, use such discourses in the form of hate speech to promote an anti-minority agenda (RED European Network, 2012). In 2013 the National Front planned to make the Roma issue a central campaign theme for the municipal elections in the hope of scoring more votes against President Hollande (Ponthus and John, 2013). Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of France’s National Front, accused the Roma population of being “habitual thieves” (‘Jean-Marie Le Pen fined...’, 2013). Le Pen called the Roma community in Nice “smelly” and “rash-inducing” (Bielfsky, 2013). On September 25, 2013, BBC News quoted French Prime Minister – then Interior Minister – Manuel Valls as saying: “The majority [of Eastern European Roma] must be returned to the borders. There is no other solution” (‘French Minister Valls...’, 2014). In January 2014, a French MP was caught on camera stating that “Hitler maybe didn’t kill enough of them [Roma]” (Jivanda, 2014).

Italy and Great Britain do not look better for Roma either. In Italy a report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2012: 8) found that:

“The use of racist and xenophobic discourse in politics appears to be increasing, targeting Blacks, Africans, Muslims, Roma, Romanians, asylum seekers and migrants in general; in some cases the remarks made were followed by acts of violence against these groups. Migrants are regularly equated with insecurity and racist or xenophobic discourse reflects or leads to discriminatory measures and policies; these factors fuel racial discrimination, xenophobia and racism within the population at large and tend to give legitimacy to these phenomena. Sensationalist articles continue to appear in the media and many Internet sites contain messages of racial hatred and even incitement to racist violence.”

In Great Britain, the opposition against Roma is compounded by that against Romanians and Bulgarians. A 2013 Institute of Race Relations report on racial violence states that: “political parties have vied with each other to prove to be ‘tougher’ on issues relating to ‘race’, immigration and asylum, in part as a strategy to ensure that voters do not turn to far-right groups. Arguably though, the opposite has happened, with far-right groups benefiting from having their core messages legitimized” (Burnett, 2013: 4). UKIP’s leader Nigel Farage makes extensive use of anti-Roma discourses to gather political support (Riley-Smith, 2014).

In Eastern Europe, anti-Roma discourses have strengthened the position of right-wing parties, such as that of the Jobbik party in Hungary. Jobbik propaganda against the Roma characterizes them as criminals and lazy (Hajba, 2013). However, not only right-wing parties are using discriminatory speech to gather support. The report on Hungary by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks’, also “puts forward concerns about the deterioration of the situation regarding racism and intolerance in the country, with ‘anti-Gypsyism’ being the most blatant form of intolerance, including violence targeting Roma people and paramilitary marches and patrolling in Roma-populated villages” (‘Human rights report sees danger’, 2015).

In the same vein, in Slovakia, “Roma are perceived as a social burden by a significant part of the Slovak population” (The Center for Civil and Human Rights, 2008: 2). The Slovak media continues to portray the Roma in a negative way (The Center for Civil and Human Rights, 2008: 2). In Romania “anti-Roma rhetoric emerges from politicians

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across all three major political parties – the left, the right and the Liberals” (Bird and Candea, 2014). And right-wing parties in Bulgaria are calling for the creation of *concentration camps* for Roma (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2014).

Why the Roma?

In Europe, Romani discrimination is rooted in the power differentials between the Roma minority and the non-Roma majority. Since their arrival in Europe, the Roma have not been part of any kind of European power structure. Historically, the balance of power between the Roma and non-Roma has been significantly tilted in the non-Roma’s favor. The Roma have become what Norbert Elias and John Scotson called “the Outsiders” (Marin Thornton, 2014: 106). As Outsiders, the Roma have come to be portrayed as thieves, beggars and/or sub-human. Their exclusion from power structures has led to very poor socio-economic conditions. Such conditions made the Roma easy targets for right-wing, and, even centrist political parties in Europe. It also impacted their capacity to defend themselves. Furthermore, the Roma issue has several times created rifts between Brussels and countries such as France (Traynor, 2010). Beyond that, Romania and Bulgaria seem to have been excluded from the Schengen space because they have large Romani populations on their territories (Sage, 2013).

The economic and social stresses in Europe make it all-too tempting for nationalist parties to use the Roma as a wedge issue to win votes. To prevent this, Romani NGO’s, and other pro-Roma organizations, must develop strategies to better integrate the Roma into the European mainstream.

[i] Throughout this article, I use the term “Roma” to “refer to the many different sub-groups of Roma, belying the common assumption that the Roma are a single homogenous minority” (Amnesty International, 2012). I use Romani as the adjective form of Roma.

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