

Europe against the Roma

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Abstract: The ancient hatred of Roma minorities is now being compounded in Europe by a post-austerity fear of the destitute 'scrounger'. Romani communities, many consisting of those forced by market economics and far-right politics to flee westwards from former 'eastern bloc' countries, facilitated in the latter 2000s by the free movement enabled by accession to the EU, now find themselves the victims of open hostility to 'foreigners' and state-sponsored removal. The author examines the variations of anti-Roma prejudice and state strategies in southern, eastern and western Europe, which send the Roma from pillar to post.

Keywords: anti-Gypsy, anti-Roma racism, Bulgaria, deportation, destitution, ethnic cleansing, nativism, Nomad State of Emergency, Operation Zeus, racial violence, Roma, Romania, xeno-racism

Any hopes of systemic change following the introduction of the 2011 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies are being systematically eroded.¹ Roma – largely unrepresented in parliaments, and whose vote is deemed insignificant by mainstream political parties – are particularly vulnerable at times of severe economic depression² and rising nationalism.

The roots of the present crisis lie in part in the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the division of Czechoslovakia in January 1993 which were disastrous for the Roma. Deprived of citizenship rights and in some cases

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rendered stateless, many left the countries of their birth, seeking asylum in other European countries, as well as Canada. Another factor destabilising Romani communities and sending them westwards across Europe has been the introduction of a market economy into the countries of former Soviet influence. For the manual jobs guaranteed to the Roma under the socialist command economy are no longer available in a neoliberal order, where state functions are privatised, full employment cannot be guaranteed, and racial discrimination in the labour market gathers pace. Since 2007 (following the Accession Treaty of 2005), the largest Roma communities in Europe (from Bulgaria and Romania) have the same right to free movement already guaranteed under EU directives to Roma citizens from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. And they have need of such a right today, as anti-Roma sentiment is on the rise. The ancient prejudice against the Roma is now combined with a very modern disgust with the destitute, as austerity digs deeper into the lives of the working and workless poor.

So now in western and northern Europe, where nativism is the guiding principle in establishing residence rights and restricting welfare, an incendiary racist rhetoric against the migrant poor co-exists with a more generalised class-based 'strivers versus scroungers' rhetoric. The Roma are caught up in both the public scapegoating of foreigners and determined accelerated deportation drives. They have joined the ranks of destitute migrants and failed asylum seekers in makeshift shanty towns and bidonvilles which governments are determined to be rid of. And by characterising all shanty towns as 'Gypsy encampments' emerging from a Roma lifestyle choice, governments are avoiding a discussion of the economic policies and immigration and asylum laws that give rise to destitution and shanty-ism.

The Roma face the worst of all worlds – hounded from the East by a rising tide of fascism and unchecked popular racism, despised in the South as part of a foreign influx, rejected from paths to citizenship and settlement in the North. Wherever they are in Europe, they face a variation of a pan-European, anti-Roma racism.

Southern Europe: anti-Roma racism implicit in anti-foreigner racism

In southern Europe, where nationalism is mobilised around the idea of protecting the nation from the immigrant invasion, anti-Roma racism is both woven into xeno-racism and runs in tandem with it. Attacks on migrant workers and the undocumented are frequent, as witnessed in April 2013 in the Peloponnese where a foreman at a fruit factory opened fire on twenty-eight Bangladeshi migrant strawberry pickers who were demanding their withheld wages. (In countries such as Greece and Italy, where there are scant procedures or structures to deal with racist violence, the undocumented find it difficult to access medical treatment following such attacks. It is non-state actors like Doctors Without Borders that cater for this excluded group.)³

Migrant or citizen, the Roma are also specifically under attack in the generalised anti-foreigner climate. The Greek police's controversial racial profiling dragnet Operation Zeus, under which, between August 2012 and February 2013,

almost 85,000 suspected foreigners were forcibly taken to police stations for verification of their immigration status, attracted international criticism. (It was found that 94 per cent had a legal right to remain in Greece.⁴) But less attention has been paid to a parallel racial profiling operation targeting the destitute, including those living in long-established Roma settlements which are today being dismantled on the grounds that they are 'gangster enclaves' – hubs for drug dealing and the illegal trade in scrap metal. Since at least December 2012, Roma (amongst others) have been forcibly evicted by the police from settlements in Rhodes, Lamia, across the Peloponnese and the Greater Athens area.⁵ The notion of the criminal Balkan Roma – whether Greek or Albanian – engaged in the widespread pillaging of public and private property for scrap metal at a time when 'native' Greeks are having to pull together against austerity, plays into the hands of the far Right.

The neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, which has eighteen MPs in parliament, is exploiting the economic situation in Greece, where nearly one third of the population lives in extreme poverty and where youth unemployment runs at 59.3 per cent, the highest rate in the EU. Fear is spreading across minority communities, as Golden Dawn demands national preference in all areas of social policy – employment, education, housing, the distribution of food parcels, and even in the donation of blood. According to Golden Dawn political candidate Alexandros Plomaritis, immigrants must be dealt with by reopening 'ovens' and turning them into 'soap'.⁶ In April, members of Golden Dawn, including MP Dimitris Koukoutsis, attempted to target foreign medics by storming the Kalamata hospital in the southern Peloponnese. (In a similar earlier incident at another hospital, four Bulgarian nurses were forced to flee.) This time, the neo-Nazi thugs were not successful, not least because they met opposition from a group of Roma who were at the hospital seeking help for the 22-year-old victim of a racially motivated attack.⁷ We are likely to see more such confrontations in Greece, where the Romani people and other minorities cannot rely on the police to curb Golden Dawn, or the criminal justice system to recognise the legal principle of self-defence. The Roma run the risk of criminalisation if they fight back.

Spain, with its indigenous *Gitanos* population, is often regarded as the model for integration of the Roma in Europe. But the arrival of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma, who as EU citizens have the right of free movement, has led to attempts to win local elections through appealing to fears of a barbarian-style invading Roma underclass. In the first case of its kind involving a serving politician, Xavier García Albiól, the Popular Party mayor of Badalona (a residential area of Greater Barcelona) is being prosecuted for inciting hate, discrimination and violence. The case, which is backed by SOS Racisme Catalunya, dates back to April 2010 when 15,000 municipal election leaflets were produced, showing photos of *Gitanos* and Romanians along with slogans such as 'insecurity', 'delinquency', 'vandalism'.⁸ This is how hatred is whipped up towards a section of bona fide European citizens – if they happen to be migrating from Romania and Bulgaria.

In Italy, in 2008, such anti-Roma scaremongering was incorporated into national legislation via emergency government decree. The story of the so-called Nomad State of Emergency started in Rome in October 2007, when an anti-foreigner outcry followed the sexual assault and murder of the wife of a navy captain. A 24-year-old Romanian Roma man was arrested, but the entire Romanian community was collectively blamed for the crimes. A first emergency decree, which allowed for summary expulsion, was introduced, but quickly withdrawn on a legal technicality and following a vote of censure in the European parliament. For no legal process was necessary, only an order from a prefect (the local representatives of the interior ministry) to expel the citizens of other EU states if they were judged a threat to public security.⁹ Subsequently, in 2008, the government declared a state of emergency in relation to the settlements of 'nomad communities' in five regions of Italy. The racist decree targeting the Romanians and the Nomad State of Emergency were followed by a proposal for a national census of the Gypsy population living in the 'nomad camps', which would include the fingerprinting of all Roma. Though the 'Nomad State of Emergency' was deemed unlawful, the register of the homeless people living in camps (the inhabitants of which also include migrants from North Africa and other refugees) was implemented in July 2010, and is ongoing (albeit without the fingerprinting).

Today, municipalities are responsible for collating data on the homeless and passing it on to the Ministry of the Interior.¹⁰ Presumably the register makes it easier for the immigration police to sweep up the Roma for expulsion. The deportation drive also has in its sights Romani families from the former Yugoslavia, who have lived in Italy for more than a decade, and who often have children who know no other country. Today, the dismantling of Roma settlements and the deportation of the legally resident Roma – citizens of other EU countries – continues; but on the duplicitous though lawful grounds that they have no means of livelihood and are an 'unreasonable burden on the state'. (EU citizens can be removed from the European country they have migrated to under the 'no recourse to public funds' principle, but this argument is duplicitous as destitute Roma in Italy tend not to claim welfare, surviving instead through begging.)

The 'cleansing of the Roma' has also become one of the central rallying cries of the Italian far Right. In April 2013 at a site in Milan, some 350 Roma, mostly from Romania, were evicted by the authorities on the pretext of security concerns and official inability to protect the Roma settlement from increasing hostility after the camp was targeted by Nazi-saluting fascists.¹¹ According to the European Roma Rights Centre, these scenes resembled the 2008 pogrom in Ponticelli, Naples,¹² and the 2011 razing of a Roma settlement in La Continassa, Turin.

Eastern/central Europe: violence and flight

If, in southern Europe, the far-right position on the Roma is implicit and couched in language about poor migrants, in much of eastern Europe, there is nothing

camouflaged about anti-Roma racism. It is explicit in the growth of nationalist and far-right parties like ATAKA, which campaigns against the 'Gypsification of Bulgaria'. In the February 2013 general election, it won 7 per cent of the vote and has twenty-four seats in the Bulgarian parliament. An estimated 10 per cent of the Bulgarian population are Roma, giving them the balance of power in certain political constituencies. But civil rights campaigning and voter registration can be dangerous endeavours and incur nationalist wrath. In July 2012, Malin Iliev, a 59-year-old Romani candidate in the municipal elections for the Euroroma party, died a month after sustaining critical injuries when his arm was ripped off in a bomb explosion outside the Euroroma party headquarters in Sandanski.¹³ At the time, interior minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov claimed that the murderous attack was not politically motivated but a 'purely criminal act'.¹⁴ However, soon afterwards, four men, described as 'ultra-nationalists', were arrested for the crime.

In much of eastern and central Europe the police may also be implicated in anti-Roma violence. NGOs, including the European Roma Rights Centre, have lodged a case at the Constitutional Court in Slovakia to bring about a change in legal attitudes following an incident involving an off-duty municipal police officer who shot dead three Roma and injured two others in the village of Hurbanovo in 2012. The officer was sentenced to just nine years in prison with psychiatric treatment. A psychologist, when called to give evidence, advised that the sentence be served in an open centre as the need for psychiatric treatment was more important than punishment.¹⁵ The issue of racial motivation for the triple murder was not even examined in the courtroom, despite the fact that during the trial the accused frequently spoke of his calling to 'solve the Roma problem' and to 'finally deal with the Roma in Hurbanovo'.¹⁶

Another way that the Slovakian authorities are trying to 'solve' the Roma problem is through the creation of segregation walls, cutting off Roma from their 'native' neighbours. At least eighteen such walls have been built since 2008, the latest in Košice, Slovakia's second-largest city and designated a European Capital of Culture for 2013.¹⁷

But it is in the small villages of Hungary, sometimes controlled by mayors of the far-right Jobbik party (which has forty-three MPs in the Hungarian parliament), where anti-Roma racism is clearly out of control. Here it is compounded by the rise of paramilitary forces in the shape of the black-clad militia of the Civic Guard Association for a Better Future (a revival of the Second World War fascist militia, the Arrow Cross) and the neo-Nazi Outlaw Army which patrols Roma neighbourhoods armed with whips and axes, singing war songs, bellowing abuse, shining floodlights into the windows of Roma families at night and carrying out random inspections of yards and living accommodation for cleanliness.¹⁸ Linked to this is an ominous growing nostalgia for Hungary's nationalist past. As the ruling party Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) incorporates some of Jobbik's policies, those who speak up for Roma and against anti-Semitism can find themselves accused of treachery and hounded out of public life. And a recent measure, to allow

government personnel to inspect people's houses for orderliness as a prerequisite for social assistance payments, is clearly aimed at the Roma.¹⁹

Just as in southern Europe, the countries in east and central Europe have no basic structures to support the victims of racist violence. Nor do the media investigate atrocities. A crucial trial (as serious as that of the National Socialist Underground in Germany) took place for over two years at the Pest County High Court, with barely any coverage in Hungary or abroad.²⁰ Some 160 witnesses were called to give evidence against four neo-Nazis charged with twenty attacks in nine small towns and villages in central and eastern Hungary (during which six Roma, including a 4-year-old child, perished) and with forming a private army to ignite civil war. The Roma survivors of the attacks not only bore the grief of bereavement, but also total impoverishment due to the absence of any official victim support. An 11-year-old child saw his mother murdered. Another family lost their father, the sole breadwinner for the family. Today, most of the families live in abject poverty. Electricity has been cut off as they have no money to pay the bills. A family of six eke out an existence without drinking water. Only support from artists, writers and civil society is making it possible for the Roma victims of the neo-Nazi serial killers to heat their homes.²¹ In August 2013, three neo-Nazis were sentenced to life imprisonment for the murders and a fourth man received a thirteen-year sentence.²² The government has announced that the victims will be compensated, but no details of the compensation package have, as yet, been announced.

Elsewhere in the East, the problem of rising fascism is compounded by weak political leaders building up electoral support by incorporating nationalist messages on the back of anti-Roma racism. In Summer 2013 in Slovakia, more than 400 mayors signed up to the *Zobudme sa!* (Let's Wake Up!) movement to coordinate a programme of demolition of Roma settlements – after first redefining them as waste dumps.²³ This repeated a pattern already established in the Czech Republic where, in 2011, mayors from fifty-one communes met in the East Bohemian town of Nový Bydžov to discuss how to deal with 'transients, loiterers' and 'socially unadaptable citizens'.²⁴

In the Czech Republic, Roma are frequently referred to as 'inadaptable', despite the fact that this was the term used by Himmler in 1942 when he gave the order to deport all remaining Roma and Sinti to Auschwitz because they were 'inadaptable people'.²⁵ The message is not lost on the far Right, which created a Facebook page in June 2013 entitled 'Protest Actions against Inadaptable Citizens', issuing a call to activists to rally in the south Bohemian city of České Budějovice. This resulted in an estimated 800 neo-Nazis from all over the country travelling to the area and using Molotov cocktails, stones and broken glass to attack a counter-rally of Roma and their supporters on a housing estate on the outskirts of the city. It took the riot police – who were severely criticised for their failure to stop the neo-Nazis marching on the housing estate – several hours to bring the far-right rioters under control.²⁶ Since then, the far Right has put in applications for a

further thirteen demonstrations in 2013, including in Vitkov where the fascists firebombed a Romani home in April 2009 in an attack which left a 3-year-old girl handicapped for life with 80 per cent burns.

Western and northern Europe: closing the doors

The countries of western and northern Europe, which pride themselves on their tolerance and enlightened views, are joining the ideological anti-Roma attack – down a different path. Here the view, first promulgated by centre-right but also now by centre-left parties, is that too much diversity, too many claims for cultural differences to be observed and too much liberal leeway harm the core cohesion of society. In such an atmosphere, and at a time of austerity, there is no room for understanding a forgotten ethnic minority, which has had to cope with ostracism and violence for generations. Rather its members are viewed as representatives of a barbarian underclass with a backward and criminal culture and lifestyle. Mayoral action against the shantytowns and bidonvilles is not confined to Slovakia and Italy, but takes place across Europe, in similar riot-police-led demolition efforts that look increasingly like a coordinated pan-European campaign.

Socialist President Hollande came to power in France promising a better deal for the Roma; if shantytowns were to be demolished, the Roma would be rehoused and reintegrated, he declared. But Hollande and interior minister Manuel Valls have approved the destruction of the shantytowns which are home to the Roma on the grounds that they adversely affect the lives of the French working class living near to them.²⁷ Following six raids in the summer of 2012, an estimated 1,000 Roma were deported to Bulgaria and Romania, although the exact figure is hard to establish as statistics do not record ethnicity. To do so would suggest discrimination, which is unlawful!²⁸ After a recent bout of deportations of Roma, Christophe Crépin of the main police union, UNSA Police, declared ‘We salute the firmness of Mr Valls in his Roma policy ... These are people who sell themselves, who racketeer, who construct criminal networks, and their way of life is totally incompatible with that of our modern societies.’²⁹

Without doubt, at the EU level, there is acute awareness of the ratcheting up of popular hate against the Roma in countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary. But the EU countries are not prepared to adequately fund the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies or to prioritise social justice and an end to structural violence against Europe’s most marginalised minority. Terrified of further Roma migration westwards, as well as the possibility of renewed conflict in the western Balkans, countries are putting up the barricades.

We can see how French interior minister Valls is clearly influenced by the rising moral panic. During an interview with *Le Figaro*, he said that around 20,000 Roma migrants from Bulgaria and Romania, living in some 400 camps, had no interest in integrating into French society ‘for cultural reasons or because they are in the hands of begging or prostitution networks’.³⁰ We can see it in the UK in the

tabloids' vilification of the Roma and in Operation Cherfornak, the Metropolitan police's 'voluntary deportation' drive which led to the removal of Romanian Roma encamped in London's Park Lane. We see it in Germany in the rhetoric deployed by politicians against migrants from Romania and Bulgaria³¹ and in the increasing returns by Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark of Roma, Ashkali and Balkan Egyptians to Kosovo, and of Roma to Serbia. This despite the fact that they have no homes to go to, that many of their children have spent nearly their whole childhood in western and northern Europe and do not know the language of the country they are being returned to.³² We see it in Norway, where the Progress Party and Conservatives – responding to local government demands to deal with the 'mass invasion of beggars' – have announced that they will make a ban on begging a central issue in the September general election.³³ Already the Oslo municipality has issued regulations prohibiting people from sleeping in parks and by the roadside.³⁴

And we see it in the way that Prime Minister David Cameron has whipped up hostility against Romanian and Bulgarian so-called 'benefit tourists'. It is there, too, in the letter from the British, Austrian, German and Dutch interior ministers sent in April 2013 to the Irish president of the EU's Justice and Home Affairs Council, demanding further restrictions on poor EU migrants who travel across visa-free borders to 'abuse' social welfare systems. The coding is clear: for 'poor Romanians and Bulgarians' read 'Roma'.³⁵

De facto statelessness

In her consideration of the plight of refugees during and after the second world war, Hannah Arendt wrote that 'the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them'.³⁶ What the current onslaught against the Roma throws up today is the issue of *de facto* statelessness.³⁷ In the absence of state protection, civil society must move to protect the vulnerable, particularly the Roma children. Many are in families displaced during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and have lived in other European countries for decades, often rightless and paperless. In Greece, a law known as the Ragousis law, passed three years ago, took the first timid steps in reforming citizenship laws, allowing second-generation migrants the right to apply for Greek citizenship. Recently it was struck down, ruled unconstitutional by the Council of State in a decision that has left an estimated 200,000 children in limbo. Nineteen migrant rights groups, supported by the journalists' union ESHEA, have issued a joint statement accusing the government of 'adopting a right-wing agenda' and that the only group applauding the Council of State's decision is Golden Dawn.³⁸ But the deputy interior minister, Haralambos Athanassiou, remains unrepentant, stating that the Ragousis law will be replaced with legislation requiring migrants to show a 'genuine bond' with Greece and prove assimilation into Greek culture.³⁹

Meanwhile, in Italy, an ugly and incendiary hate campaign, including death threats, has been launched against the country's first Black cabinet minister. Cécile Kyenge, a naturalised Italian citizen originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is Italy's first Black minister for integration. This has been no cause for celebration for the rightwing Northern League, with one politician accusing her of seeking to 'impose her tribal traditions' on Italy,⁴⁰ while another wrote on Facebook, 'Won't someone rape her, just to make her understand what victims of this terrible crime feel'.⁴¹ While anti-Black racism is central to this ugly campaign, the racist hysteria against the presence of a Black woman in parliament is also related to the integration minister's tentative proposals to reform Italian citizenship laws, so as to open up a route to citizenship for the children of migrants, such as the Romani communities from the former Yugoslavia who, in future, would be allowed to apply for Italian nationality when they reach the age of 18.⁴²

Europe's Roma are caught – between the policies of eastern, southern and northern Europe and between the state, the far Right and a new pan-European racism. As they are shunted from one country to the next, Europe takes on all the characteristics of a huge open prison.

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- 35 The Conservative interior minister Hans-Peter Friedrich told other EU state interior ministers at a meeting in Luxembourg that he wanted 'to throw out without much of a to-do; those illegal immigrants who appear to be in Germany just for the social system and come specifically from Romania and Bulgaria'. This was represented in the media under the headline 'Germany to deport poverty immigrants'. See *Spiegel Online* (7 June 2013), *op. cit*.
- 36 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, Schocken Books, 2004 [1951]), p. 370.
- 37 In 2011, the UNHCR conducted a project mapping statelessness in Greece, Albania and Italy which drew attention to the specific problems associated with the Roma population of Greek origin. Roma children born outside hospital are often not registered on the municipal roll (or, if registered, incorrectly). The Roma community of Albanian origin often live in conditions of illegality. Many children are either registered under a false name, or not at all. Email correspondence with Xenia Passa, Protection Associate, UNHCR Athens, 10 July 2013.
- 38 'Migrant groups slam government over Greek citizenship law', *ekathimerini.com* (2 July 2013), available at: http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsit1_1_27/02/2013_484682
- 39 *Ibid*.
- 40 Northern League MEP Mario Borghezio described Italy's current government as a 'bonga bonga government' at the same time as making these comments about Kyenge. He was subsequently expelled from the Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group of the European Parliament.
- 41 Dolores Valandro, a councillor from Padua, was subsequently expelled from the party. Sarah Gates, 'Dolores Valandro expelled from Italian party after calling for rape of Italy's first Black cabinet minister', *Huffington Post* (13 June 2013), available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/13/dolores-valandro-rape-cecile-kyenge-facebook_n_3435633.html
- 42 See Daniela Di Rada, 'Roma statelessness in Italy - field research reveals long-awaited data', European Network on Statelessness (3 April 2013), available at: <http://www.statelessness.eu/blog/roma-statelessness-italy-%E2%80%93-field-research-reveals-long-awaited-data>