

Roma in the Balkan context

Clearly defining the scope of research and the identity of the population studied is particularly important in the case of Roma, especially when talking about the impact of conflict on the Roma communities and the size of these communities. While Roma may or may not be 'Europe's largest minority'⁵ the 'Roma universe' is so diverse that it is sometimes difficult to agree who, exactly, is the subject of different political statements, documents and projects.

Major approaches to Roma identity

So who are the Roma (or the Gypsies, as they are often called by majority communities, and often by themselves as well)? Currently there are several major views on Roma identity, ethnicity and nationhood, each of which is supported (and promoted) by different organizations in the context of their specific political agenda.⁶ These include:

- The Roma as ethnos and ethnic minority, by the International Romani Union (IRU);
- Roma intellectuals, who suggest that the Roma nation is currently undergoing a process of creation, and that this is the period of the Roma Renaissance;
- Nikolae George's idea of Roma as a trans-European nation without its own territory, alienated from the continent as a whole;
- Roma sometimes define themselves as a nation without a state or non-territorial

European nation, a vision developed during the 2000 IRU Congress in Prague. The Congress adopted a declaration demanding that international institutions grant them the status of nation without a state;

- The classical idea of Roma as a cultural minority, migrants etc.; and
- The version of the Roma as a social minority, underclass or in general as a socially vulnerable group is usually proposed by outside experts (Szelenyi, 2000).

The concept of an institutionally represented non-territorial European nation receives perhaps the broadest support, including from the EU. In practical terms, the claim for acceptance as a *nation without state* translates into demands for *representation* in the political bodies of the EU and its member states. The most prominent example is the European Roma Forum accepted by the Council of Europe with a Partnership agreement on 16 December 2004.⁷

The variety of approaches shown above suggests caution in choosing terms to describe Roma, because these terms can influence policies and social attitudes. The inclusion of Roma *en bloc* among the socially vulnerable (along with refugees, disabled persons etc.), creates the danger of social marginalization, deprivation or dilution of cultural self-identity, deprivation of the right to possess or enjoy group ethnic characteristics.

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⁵ Roma are not the 'largest ethnic group' in Europe. But they are one of the 'largest ethnic groups residing outside of nation-state borders', because Roma do not have a nation-state of their own. The numbers of Turks, Hungarians and other groups in such a position in Europe (living outside their state's borders) is almost certainly smaller than Roma. More Russians may live outside Russia (in Europe) than Roma – if 'Europe' is defined as the geographic expanse from the Atlantic to the Urals. But since many (perhaps most) Russians are not vulnerable, the statement that 'Roma constitute Europe's largest vulnerable minority' is robustly defensible.

⁶ This classification has been developed by Ilia Iliev, an anthropologist at Sofia University. "St. Kliment Ohridski" (unpublished paper by Ilia Iliev, presented at a working group on Roma integration within the Open Society Institute-Sofia (13 January 2006). See also Tomova, 2005.

⁷ The Forum, as its official site states, "is, at heart, a body of community leaders and policy experts who shall be elected by Roma and Traveller institutions across Europe". The sequence of tenses is important – the Forum is legitimized by the Council of Europe as an international counterpart, but is still to be legitimized by Roma populations. Legitimization mechanisms and electoral procedures (for example, the procedures for composing electoral lists) are still to be decided.

The debate over the size of the Roma population is a direct consequence of the lack of clarity regarding Roma identity. 'Counting the Roma' is not easy (if possible at all) given the flexible (or different) meaning ascribed to the term 'Roma' and the diversity of the 'Roma universe'. This is why it is only possible to talk about estimates. Estimates indicate that between 6.8 and 8.7 million Roma live in Europe, 68 per cent of whom live in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.⁸

Roma populations in the countries covered in this report have been estimated as follows:

- Albania. For political reasons, questions to identify respondent ethnicity were omitted from the 2001 census. Out of a population of 3.3 million, estimates of the Roma population vary from 10,000 to 120,000 people (ERRC, 1997). Expert estimates (Liégeois, 2006) put the number at between 90,000 and 100,000.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina. Expert estimates suggest minimum 40,000 and maximum 50,000.
- Bulgaria. Official data (from the 2001 census⁹) report 370,980 people of Roma identity or 4.68 per cent of the population. Expert estimates suggest minimum 700,000 and maximum 800,000.
- Croatia. According to official data (from 2001), 96.12 per cent of the 4.8 million population claim Croatian as their mother tongue, 1.01 per cent Serbian, other languages (Albanian, Bosnian, Hungarian, Slovene, Serbo-Croatian, and Romany) being the mother tongue of between 0.1 per cent and 0.33 per cent of the population for each group. The number of Roma in this census was 9,463 (0.21 per cent). Estimates range between 30,000 and 40,000 (National Programme for Roma).
- Macedonia. Official data from the 2002 census state that Roma number 53,879 or 2.66 per cent of the total population (2,041,467). Expert estimates suggest minimum 220,000 and maximum 260,000.
- Montenegro. Official data from the 2003 census state 2,601 people to be of Roma

identity. Approximately 20,000 Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (RAE) are estimated to live in Montenegro (World Bank, 2005b).

- Romania. Official data from the 1992 census count 409,723 Roma, or 1.8 per cent of the population. Data from the 2002 census suggests 535,250 Roma (2.5 per cent of the total population). Expert estimates suggest minimum 1,800,000 and maximum 2,500,000, making this group the largest Roma population in Europe and possibly the world.
- Serbia. According to the 2002 population census there are 108,000 Roma in Serbia, but unofficial estimates put the figure at between 450,000 and half a million (World Bank, 2005b; Antic, 2005), including 250,000 Roma living in 'mahalas' (illegal settlements) in the suburbs of the larger cities.
- Kosovo. Two per cent of the population (between 36,000 and 40,000) are estimated to be Roma (Living Standard Measurement Survey by the Statistical Office of Kosovo, 2000).

However, behind the numbers – whatever the estimates are – is the patchwork of various Roma groups defined differently by cultural criteria, heritage and level of integration. Furthermore, Roma – like other ethnicities in contemporary Europe – possess multiple identities, particularly in terms of vulnerability. Roma can also be refugees, internally displaced persons, disabled, unemployed, illiterate or all of these together. They can also be politicians, scholars or professionals. Roma in various countries, regions, municipalities, and subgroups display different social roles and positions, with different opportunities and social perspectives.

The most general distinction among Roma communities is the one between Muslims (Xoraxane Roma) and Christians (Dasikane Roma), who are divided into more or less autonomous groups within each community. Examples of subdivisions, differentiated according to various features (linguistic, skills, etc.) include the Erli, Gurbeti, Gabeli, Kovachi, Chergara, Romtsi, etc. in the countries of former Yugoslavia; Erlia, Dzambazia,

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⁸ One of the credible estimates of the Roma population is provided by Jean-Pierre Liégeois in Liégeois, 2006. Unless stated otherwise, the 'estimates' quoted in the paragraphs below and used later in the report are based on this publication.

⁹ <http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Census.htm>.

Kalaydzia, Kalderashi, Chilingiri, Vlaxoria, etc. in Bulgaria; Kaburdzi, Mechkara, Kurtofi, etc. in Albania; Leyasha, Kalderara, Ursari, Rumungari in Transylvania, Rudara etc. in Romania (Marushiakova and Popov, 2001b; Akim, V. 2002). Some of these groups appear in several countries, contributing to the belief that Roma are a 'trans-state entity' (like Kalderari and Vlahichki, ursari in Bulgaria and Romania; or Erlija, Valahi, Egyptian who appear in Serbia, Bulgaria and Hungary).¹⁰ Classification of these groups under an all-encompassing 'Roma umbrella' could deprive them of their distinct ethnic and cultural identities. All this makes general statements about the size of Roma populations extremely difficult (if impossible).

Historical roots

In the Ottoman Empire, Roma could move relatively freely because of their status outside of the two main population categories (Muslim or Christian). A great many of them continued in their nomadic ways within the boundaries of the Empire or out of its confines until the late 19th century. Others settled voluntarily and even took up agricultural activities in villages and big farms between the 16th and 19th centuries (Marushiakova and Popov, 2001a).

In the case of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Roma were free to move around until Maria Theresa's attempts to settle them in the 18th century. After 1758 the Austro-Hungarian Empress issued a number of decrees to transform Roma into 'Újmagyarok' or 'New Hungarians'. Specially constructed sheds were to replace the tents where they used to live; travelling on horses or horse trading was forbidden. Roma children were forcibly separated from their families so they could be adopted by Hungarians. Joseph II, Emperor from 1765, continued the policy of forced Roma assimilation. He prohibited the Roma languages and traditional Roma dress. Roma music was allowed to be played only on holidays. Education and school attendance were made obligatory. (These forced assimilation policies were subsequently softened in the face of resistance from the Roma communities.)

Kosovo was a special case. Some Roma communities settled in the ethnic quarters of towns or villages; others continued their semi-nomadic way of life (seasonal nomadism) in various traditional or modernized modes. Roma communities there included the Romany-speaking Arli, Kovachi, Gurbeti, Gabeli (coming mainly from Bosnia) and Serbian speaking Gjorgjovtsi. Many scholars who study Roma issues consider Egyptians and Ashkali to be a separate subdivision of the larger Roma community: they are thought to be Roma who lost their Romany language and subsequently began to change their identity. After living as a distinct group, they tried to assimilate as Albanians (on the basis of a common language) and then rediscovered their ancient origins and distinct, non-Romani identity (Marushiakova and Popov, 2001a; Marushiakova et al, 2001).

Even before World War II, Nazi Germany adopted several decrees classifying Roma as inferior persons. During the first year of Nazi rule they were treated as socially alien persons. At that time Roma were equated with beggars, prostitutes, persons suffering from contagious or mental diseases or homosexuals. In 1943 they were designated a threat to the nation and were subject to sterilization and isolation in concentration camps (Fraser, 1992; Kenrick and Puxon, 1995).

Roma under socialism

State policies adopted towards Roma during the socialist period should be considered in the context of wartime legacies (the Nazi attempts to exterminate Roma as an inferior ethnic group), of the dominant ideology and political context. The major elements of the latter were (1) consolidation of the state around the Communist Party; and (2) the forced change of social class structures through rapid industrialization and the creation of a modern 'proletariat'. The response to the unfavourable demographic trends that began to take hold in many of these countries during the 1980s also has had a dramatic effect on Roma communities.

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¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that this is a far-from-complete list of groups and sub-groups. Only in Bulgaria alone, for example, there are more than 90 distinct groups and sub-groups. The purpose of this outline is not to provide a comprehensive list of groups, but just give an idea of the diversity of the 'Roma universe', which is often perceived as homogeneous.

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nist ideology. This distinction was, however, applied selectively: individuals (rather than Roma in their entirety, with their cultural specifics) were supported by the official ideology. Roma individuals were encouraged to become educated and participate in the social and political structures linked to the Communist Party, as well as to the new socialist proletariat. They were assigned the role of 'transmitting new thinking' to their communities, to help them adapt to the official two-class (proletariat and rural agricultural workers) division of society. Roma individuals may have been considered progressive, but not Roma groups with their traditional culture.

Assimilationist pressures also reflected attempts at state consolidation through rigid political and administrative controls that were incompatible with nomadism. There were also consequences of social engineering projects and of policies to integrate national minorities. Deliberately or not, the socialist states often replicated Maria Theresa's assimilationist policies, reflecting similar objectives of consolidating the empire. The tools applied – forced settlement, obligatory education, and state-supported 'religion' (in the form of communist ideology) – were also similar.

The socialist system's emphasis on equality led Roma to work together with members of majority and other minority communities. They spent their holidays together, visited the same sanatoria, and sent their children to the same schools. Universal, nominally free health coverage was available for all, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation. Survey results not surprisingly show a strong nostalgia for the socialist past among elderly Roma respondents, reflecting the memories of an era when unskilled Roma workers could afford to vacation with engineers; their children studied and played together; doctors distributed contraceptives and provided family planning consultations free of charge; kindergartens supported the raising of small children; and conscription into the so-called construction corps of the army¹¹ helped young Roma men receive the professional training needed for sub-

sequent employment. Roma children from distant border or mountain areas and children of socially disadvantaged families lived and studied together in school dormitories. Roma children could not drop out of school because laws on compulsory education until the age of 16 were strictly enforced.¹² In short, state socialism provided development opportunities for Roma, particularly in terms of access to employment, health care and education.

Of course, these elements of socialist reality had their ugly face. Being dominated by Roma children, dormitories often turned into instruments of segregation. The construction corps witnessed drastic abuses and exploitation of their conscript labour. Services provided by socialist welfare states were least likely to reach the isolated rural settlements where many Roma lived. Still, from the perspective of today's marginalization, patterns of socialist integration that collapsed during the first years of transition were not without redeeming qualities.

Roma and the conflicts in the Balkans

History shows that minorities are often among the first casualties of war, and the wars of Yugoslav succession were no different in that respect. The status of Roma as a huge 'diaspora without a state behind it', without state resources, religious or educational institutions, meant that Roma were generally victims of the military initiatives of other ethnic protagonists. As such, they were subjected to merciless ethnic cleaning at the hands of virtually all warring parties. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Roma communities were smashed among the combat forces of Serbs, Muslims and Croats. After the cleansing of Kosovar Albanian settlements before and during the events of 1999, Serbian security and military forces permitted Roma to pillage property and bury the dead without observing the appropriate funeral rituals. The Kosovo Roma then fled from Kosovo together with the Serbs after the intervention of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, and now face the prospect of

¹¹ The engineering units responsible for maintenance and construction of military infrastructure were often used as a source of cheap labour on various construction sites. These units were dominated by ethnic minorities, whose first months of service were devoted to professional education and vocational training.

¹² This is exactly the pattern applied in countries like the United States where 'individual democratic rights' are not interpreted as 'the right to forego a basic education'.

long-term conflicts (even blood feuds) with Kosovo Albanians. Roma from Kosovo and to some extent from Bosnia therefore find themselves in particularly difficult situations, more so than in Croatia or other Balkan countries (Marushiakova et al. 2001).

The first wave of refugees took place in March of 1999, when hundreds of thousands of Albanians were expelled *en masse* from Kosovo. Many were pushed into refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania; from there certain groups were sent to Central and Western Europe, to the United States and to Australia. Many Rom, Egyptians and Ashkali also shared this refugee wave. A second, much larger wave of Roma refugees took place in July 1999, when most of the non-Albanian population of Kosovo left (again *en masse*) for Serbia, as well as for Montenegro, Macedonia or Western Europe. The vast majority of them live today as IDPs. In 2000, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered 27,419 Roms and Egyptians as IDPs in today's State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Roma organizations assess that up to 80,000 live as IDPs (including about 8,000 - 10,000 in Montenegro), and about 6,000 in Macedonia. There are also about 150-300 Roma refugees from Kosovo in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³

Reports from international organizations (mostly UNHCR) suggest that some 30,000 - 35,000 Roms, Ashkali and Egyptians live in Kosovo in different administrative units and some IDP camps. In Prishtina, for example, out of more than 10,000 only 140 remain; in the southern part of Mitrovica out of around 10,000, a few hundred Roms and Ashkali might remain; in Gjilan 350 persons remain out of an earlier figure of 6,500 (UNHCR/OSCE, 2000; UNHCR/OSCE, 2001).

Perhaps the heaviest burden felt by displaced Roma is the rejection they experience from neighbouring communities. Residents of many localities have spent a decade or more accepting refugees and IDPs, and in many places displaced Roma are victims of a double stigmatization. Facing this hostility, displaced Roma often seek shelter with other Roma, living with relatives or friends in some of the poorest parts of the Balkans.

The construction of temporary accommodations (*bidonvillas*) next to the dilapidated homes of their hosts is not uncommon. However, because outsiders do not notice these additions to the Roma ghetto (which was 'always there'), they can easily fall outside of the scope of efforts to address the problems of the displaced.

Their status as a 'diaspora without the state behind it' means that for Roma international and European minority protection frameworks cannot be automatically invoked on their behalf. This contrasts with the case of other refugees and IDPs—whose very definition hinges on the existence of at least titular nation-states. In fact, the more comprehensive application of minority protection standards to the Roma began only in the late 1990s. Since Roma were not recognized as an ethnic or national minority until the 1990s, the challenges facing them have been treated not as 'minority protection' issues but as 'social protection' issues.

Methodological implications

This brief historical review shows that Roma vulnerability is linked to non-acceptance and lack of respect from society for their cultural specifics – but only in part. Roma were victims of forced assimilation under the Hapsburgs and state socialism not just because they were Roma, but also because assimilation served the imperial or ideological interests of ruling elites. Roma were victims of ethnic cleansing not because they were Roma, but because they were different, and these differences did not serve the designs of local warlords and paramilitary leaders. Roma vulnerability today is a reflection not just of the above mentioned, but also of displacement, and weak education and skill backgrounds that leave them uncompetitive on many labour markets.

This complexity has implications for the sampling and data collection methodology underpinning this study. Any sample needs a clearly defined representative population. The uncertainties associated with defining Roma populations described above preclude random sampling, so a 'pyramid' sampling model was used instead.¹⁴ This model is based

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¹³ OSCE/ODIHR 1999. However different sources cite quite different numbers, which generally oscillate between 120,000 and 150,000 for the time before the Kosovo crisis in 1999. For more detailed information see <http://www.ian.org.yu/kosovo-info>, where data from June 2005 with tables with different groups' population distribution by municipality and settlements are available.

¹⁴ For details see the Methodological Annex.

on the premise that national census data provide adequate pictures of the structure and territorial distribution of the individuals who identify themselves as Roma. This Roma sample was taken as representative of the Roma population living in 'Roma settlements or areas of compact Roma population'. Those settlements and areas were defined as settlements where the share of Roma population equals or is higher than the national share of Roma population in the given country, as reflected in the census data.

Such an approach has its pluses and minuses. The samples based on municipalities with average and above-average shares of Roma population are not fully representative for the entire Roma populations of the countries covered in this survey. They do, however, cover roughly 85 per cent of Roma in each country. On the other hand, this sampling methodology may under-represent those Roma who are dispersed and integrated among other communities, and do not self-identify as Roma because of stigmatization. These individuals together with assimilated Roma fall out of the scope of the research, either because being assimilated they don't meet the criterion of 'being Roma', or because they don't meet the vulnerability criterion. In this way, the data from the Roma sample collected here reflect the views of Roma respondents who are visibly distinguishable by outsiders, and who do not deliberately conceal their distinct identity. This population is not necessarily underprivileged (or falls under the category of 'underclass') but many of its members are clearly vulnerable.

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This combination of ethnic and socio-economic markers suggests that in fact the survey data largely reflects the profile of the 'Roma ethno-class', melding ethnic and social criteria. The term "ethno-class" is not new in social anthropology; different studies apply the term *ethno-class* to different groups. For example in Sub-Saharan Africa, Hutus and Tutsis in the Congo and Black Moors in Mauritania are referred to as 'ethno-classes'. In

Namibia and Zimbabwe, *Europeans* are also defined as an ethno-class. A similar approach is applied by Graham Smith and Andrew Wilson in regards to Russians and Russo-phones in Estonia (Smith and Wilson, 1997). At least in Africa, ethno-classes are not synonymous with underclass status. Applying the concept to Europe, the 'Minorities at risk' project (which deals with national and ethnic minorities) explicitly treats Roma as an ethno-class in the Balkans as well as in Slovakia (MAR, 2005). Serbian sociologists and experts on Roma issues also use the 'ethno-class' concept in a 2002 survey conducted in Southern and Eastern Serbia.¹⁵

A particular combination of ethnic, socio-economic, behavioural and outsider identification markers makes the concept of ethno-class particularly applicable to Roma. An "ethno-class" in this context is broader than an 'underclass'. The 'ethno-class' paradigm also captures Roma attitudes vis-à-vis their own community and other communities, the *Gadjé*. And it reconciles group identity with the desire to escape group identification – a strategy often adopted by better-off Roma individuals.

Being an ethno-class may be a common destiny for ethnic groups without nation-states of their own. This paradigm could be applied not only to Roma, but also to other ethnic groups that: (1) self-identify as members of an ethno-class and as socially disadvantaged, excluded, with a suppressed traditional culture; and (2) are perceived by the surrounding communities as an ethno-class as well.

Outlining the determinants of the vulnerability risks Roma are facing is one of the report's major objectives. This should be done in order to distinguish vulnerability risks that are attributable to group identity from those that are group-neutral. Since addressing these risks requires different policies, the analysis is expected to contribute to the design of better targeted and more adequate vulnerability reduction policies.

¹⁵ Forty-three per cent of 2,137 survey respondents classified Roma as an ethno-class. See Dordevic 2004.