
Persecution and Politicization: Roma (Gypsies) of Eastern Europe

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Article

Roma, the largest ethnic minority in Eastern Europe, are perhaps the region's most misunderstood, most persecuted, and maligned minority. Since their migration from India approximately six hundred years ago, Roma have suffered economic, political and cultural discrimination at the hands of both communist and capitalist and both democratic and totalitarian societies. The post-1989 transition in Eastern Europe has created a huge ethnic underclass consisting of over 5 million Roma who by every statistical indicator - political, social, and economic (literacy, income, life span, infant mortality, diet, representation in government, access to health care and legal aid, education, employment) have the lowest status of any ethnic group in Eastern Europe.

Stereotypes abound, referring to the "genetic propensity for crime," and the media reinforces racism by regularly identifying the ethnicity of Rom suspects. In 1993, Jozsef Pacai, the mayor of the Slovak village of Medzev said, "I'm no racist, but some Gypsies you would have to shoot." Since 1989, pogrom and mob attacks against Rom neighborhoods have been reported in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Czech and Slovak Republics, coupled with deliberate non-intervention by authorities. Institutional racism is evident in police brutality and court prejudices.

Yet the picture is not all bleak. Despite huge obstacles, Roma have resisted assimilation and managed to maintain a strong identity. The post-communist transition has also encouraged the emergence of human rights movements among Roma and the formation of political and cultural organizations, parties and unions. These organizations have undertaken the huge task of encouraging a widespread and coherent political consciousness among Roma plus fighting discrimination in every arena of life, both institutional and informal. Finally, there has been a flowering of Rom culture, especially in the performance arts of music and dance. The above factors have encouraged the formulation of a public Rom identity in political and cultural terms.

It is important to note the great heterogeneity of European Roma groups with respect to settlement, language, dialect, religion, occupation, custom, beliefs, and class. In Bulgaria alone, there are over twenty different sub-groups. This phenomenon presents a formidable barrier to building a unified political movement. Furthermore, Roma are a unique people in Europe in that they are a diaspora people with no claimed homeland. Although India is their place of origin, they do not adhere to a notion of homeland, nor do they wish to establish an independent state. This lack of a territorial base has caused them to be viewed as outsiders lacking stability and permanence, the quintessential "other." Moreover, there is no "mother country" to champion their cause, and because of this, they are denied the status of "nationality" in many countries. In fact, according to Rajko Djuric, president of the International Romani Union, lack of territory has prevented Roma from taking part in current negotiations in the former Yugoslavia which may determine which ethnic group can live where. Lack of territory and lack of association with a national homeland has two results: on the one hand, Rom political demands are not viewed as threatening because they are not championed by any independent "nation;" on the other hand, these demands are often ignored precisely because no one except Roma are calling attention to them.

Early History

Linguistic evidence reveals that Roma are originally from northern India and that they migrated out

of the area sometime between 800-950 AD. Romani, the Rom language, is descended from Sanskrit and closely related to Hindi. Today Romani exists in many dialects, reflecting the paths of Rom dispersion. Some Rom groups, however, do not presently communicate in Romani, although it is likely that they did at an earlier time. Roma have always been bilingual and in many cases are multilingual. In the southern Balkans, Roma speak Romani plus the local south Slavic language or Turkish, Albanian or Greek.

Although scholars differ as to the first reliable documentation of Roma in Europe, we can say with certainty that Roma were established in large numbers throughout the Balkans by the fourteenth century. Most Roma settled on the outskirts of existing communities while others remained nomadic. Reported dates of a Rom presence include 1322 in Crete, 1348 in Serbia, 1370 in Wallachia, 1407 in Germany, 1418 in Zurich, 1419 in France, 1422 in Italy, and 1425 in Spain. Since this time, Roma have been indispensable suppliers of diverse services to non-Roma, such as music, entertainment, fortune-telling, metal working, horse dealing, wood working, sieve making, basket weaving, comb making, seasonal agricultural work, and middleman marketing. Many of these trades required nomadism. Roma are extremely adaptable in the area of occupations and they often practice two or three occupations simultaneously or serially.

Initial curiosity about Roma by European people and rulers quickly gave way to hatred and discrimination in virtually every European region, a legacy which has continued until today. In the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, Roma were slaves from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As bonded serfs owned by noblemen, landowners, monasteries, and the state, they were sold, bartered, flogged, and dehumanized; even their marriages were strictly regulated. As slaves, Roma were an important labor and artisan source, providing skills in gold washing, bear training, woodcarving, blacksmithing, music, etc. Lautari (professional Rom musicians) serfs performed epics and accompanied armies into battle against the Turks. Some musicians belonged to a class of laborers known as laiesi who were allowed to roam in certain areas but were heavily taxed. Although slavery was abolished in 1864, patterns of exploitation have continued.

In other countries, Roma were viewed as outcasts, intruders, and threats, probably because of their dark skin, their association with invading Muslim Ottoman Empire, and their foreign ways. Despite their small numbers, they inspired fear and mistrust and were expelled from virtually every European territory. Bounties were paid for their capture, dead or alive, and repressive measures included confiscation of property and children, forced labor, prison sentences, whipping, branding, and other forms of physical mutilation. Assimilation was attempted in the eighteenth century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the reign of Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II by outlawing Romani, Rom music, dress, and nomadism, and banning traditional occupations. Similar assimilationist legislation was enacted in Spain from 1499-1800. In the twentieth century **persecution** escalated with the Nazi rise to power. Between 1933 and 1945 Roma faced an extermination campaign which is only now being historically investigated. Over 600,000 were murdered, representing between one-fourth and one-fifth of their total population.

Socialist Period

The socialist governments varied as to their specific policies towards Roma, but these governments were united in the drive for assimilation and settlement of the Roma. The goals were to make Roma into socialist workers, to disperse their extended families, and to destroy their social life. In the 1960's in Hungary, for example, thousands of Roma were recruited into mining, heavy industry, and the agricultural sector, usually performing the most dangerous and least paid jobs. In the Balkans, they were recruited into unskilled factory jobs, street cleaning, road maintenance, garbage collection, and state-sponsored musical entertainment. In order to survive, many entered the black market trade and/or became professional musicians in the second economy.

Nomadism was outlawed in Czechoslovakia in 1958 and in Poland in 1964. and drastic measures

were sometimes taken, such as shooting horses, removing wheels from caravans, and prohibiting gatherings. In other countries, settlement or resettlement was enforced by tearing down the old ghettos and assigning state housing which dispersed extended families. In the 1960s, the Czechoslovakian government tried a "dispersal and transfer" scheme whereby Slovak Roma would be forcibly relocated to Czech lands which contained a low density of Roma. The plan failed miserably so the government turned to coerced assimilation. In Hungary in 1964, a housing development plan was instituted to improve or destroy 2100 Rom settlements described as "shanty towns;" the results were, in part, positive. Ghettos, however, were sometimes recreated in more isolated locations, such as the 1988 attempt by Hungarian officials to transfer a larger Rom community in Miskolc to a remote site. Public outcry led to the abandonment of this project.

Czechoslovakia enforced the most drastic measures to stem Rom population growth by lowering the birth rate. Beginning in the early 1970s, government social workers encouraged Rom women to have government-paid sterilization by offering them monetary bonuses during economic crises. In addition, some women were sterilized without their consent after undergoing cesarean sections or abortions; there are cases of women in their twenties with one child who have undergone sterilizations without their consent. As a result, a far greater percentage of Rom women were sterilized relative to the entire population. In 1987, for example, 36.6% of women who were sterilized were Rom, while Roma represented 2-3% of the entire population. In 1989 nearly 50% of the women sterilized in Bmo were Roma. In 1979, Charter 77 and other human rights organizations accused the government of attempting to commit genocide of Roma through forced sterilization and the practice of forcibly taking Rom children from their parents.

Sterilizations with monetary incentives continued after the fall of communism until late 1990, when the Committee for Human Rights in Prague brought specific cases of forced sterilization before government prosecutors. Today Roma continue to suffer the effects of sterilization, but no health officials have been prosecuted.

Integration into state educational institutions was a major goal of the socialist governments, but they did little to accommodate for migrations and the fact that the language of instruction was, in most cases, a second language to Rom children. Children were often presumed to be retarded and tracked into special classes. In the 1980s in Hungary, over 40% of Roma were estimated to be functionally illiterate. As a result, the government established segregated classes and imposed severe penalties on parents who did not send their children to school. While the literacy of Roma indeed improved, segregation led to crowded and inferior classes. Elsewhere in the region, literacy also improved dramatically, but tracking into remedial and non-academic classes remained a problem.

In socialist countries, the cultural rights for minorities-such as schooling, radio broadcasts, and newspapers in the minority language - are often dependent on the official legal status of the minority, i.e., nation or nationality. In socialist Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, Roma were neither a nation nor a nationality, but rather part of a residual social category (i.e., "disadvantaged social stratum" (Hungary), "socially degraded stratum" (Czechoslovakia), "other nationalities" (Romania), "population of Gypsy origin" (Poland), which allowed them no access to the aforementioned rights. As Ian Hancock points out, one reason why East European governments deliberately categorized Roma in this way was that as a social group Roma could be blamed for their lot, but as a nationality, governments would bear some responsibility. Also, categorizing Roma as a social group legitimized government intervention to solve the "Gypsy problem."

In Bulgaria, the socialist government denied the existence of Roma while it simultaneously implemented assimilationist policies. As early as the 1960s, the government forced Roma with Muslim names to change their names to Slavic ones, as part of a "rebirth" or "Bulgarization" process for all Muslims. (This process was extended to ethnic Turks in the 1980s, and international attention ensued.) All public documents were altered, and the nationality designation "Gypsy" was changed to Bulgarian. Scholars were strongly discouraged from studying about the Roma and

collecting reliable information about them. In the 1970s mosques were closed in Muslim neighborhoods and circumcisions were curtailed. In the 1980s the Romani language was banned from public places and the wearing of shalvari (wide Turkish style pants) was prohibited. From the early 1970s, all music specifically identified as Rom or in the Romani language was prohibited from media and public performance. This ban included the playing and dancing of kjuček, a widespread Rom and Turkish musical genre. The zurla (double-reed oboe), an instrument played exclusively by Roma, was prohibited in both private and public settings. In 1985, the government prohibited the playing of zurla at the Pirin Pee regional folk festival, claiming that it was a Turkish instrument and hence not "purely Bulgarian," even though it is the most distinctive instrument of the region.

Fines were levied against musicians playing banned instruments or music and against the families hiring, the musicians. The government revoked state licenses to perform, and it imposed jail sentences when violations occurred. In spite of this, Rom continued to speak Romani at home, to use their Muslim names among kin, and to maintain their Rom identity. Musical forms thrived in private settings and through black market cassette distribution. This is a good example of the cultural resistance of Roma to controls placed upon them. Indeed, in Bulgaria, "wedding music," a musical genre heavily influenced by Rom, came to symbolize an anti-government youth resistance to state folklore.

The former Yugoslavia has been hailed by many authors for treating its Roma better than any other East European country. This comparison, however, is nothing to boast about, considering the deplorable assimilationist measures of other East European socialist governments and the fact that Roma were still the most oppressed group in Yugoslavia. Indeed, because Yugoslavia had one of the largest populations of Roma in Europe, with a few extremely large population concentrations (in Nis, Belgrade, and Skopje), the government did pay attention to Roma in important ways. In the early 1970s, the ethnic designation *tsigan* disappeared from print, radio, television, and official documents, and the designation Rom was substituted. Of course, in practice, the derogatory appellation *tsigan* continued to be used, but this change signaled some good will on the part of the government.

In 1973, Grattan Puxon, a former general secretary of the World Romani Congress, estimated that in Yugoslavia there were two hundred professional Roma working as doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc., a figure double that of 1953. He claimed that over 50% of Rom wage earners were industrial and municipal workers, 20% were farmers who owned their own land, and the rest self-employed artisans and traders. In the 1980s Romani language radio programs were introduced in Serbia, and a few hours of Romani language teaching was introduced in the primary grades in Kosovo and in Tetovo, a city in Macedonia. By 1990, Macedonian Roma also had a weekly 30-minute television show, although its regularity was uncertain.

From 1981 to 1991, the official political status of Roma in Yugoslavia was that of "nationality." Yugoslavia had a three-level system: the "nations" of Yugoslavia were Croats, Serbs, Slovenians, Bosnians, and Macedonians; the "nationalities" included Turks, Albanians and Hungarians; the rest were "other nationalities and ethnic groups," such as Vlachs and Jews. In practice, however, most of the republics which had their own constitutions considered Roma to be an "ethnic group." For example, in the 1981 Macedonian census, Roma were still considered an ethnic group, and this designation is precisely one of the factors which mobilized Macedonian Roma to political action in the 1980s.

As early as 1948, Roma of Yugoslavia began to organize politically and culturally. In Macedonia they obtained seats on the Skopje town council and formed their own cultural association, Phralipe (Brotherhood). During the socialist era, Rom social and cultural organizations such as soccer teams, boxing clubs, drama clubs, and music and dance ensembles proliferated in Skopje and Belgrade. The amateur Rom folk music ensemble of Skopje, also called Phralipe, traveled throughout Europe to rave reviews.

After the Earthquake of 1963, Shuto Orizari (locally known as Shutka), a neighborhood outside Skopje, quickly became a center for Rom cultural and political life. Many Rom moved there from Serbia, Kosovo, and from other parts of Macedonia, and the population reached 40,000 by the 1980s. A Rom town council was formed and a representative was elected to the Macedonian Assembly. There were, however, many negative consequences for Roma who were politically active. Faik Abdi, a town council member from 1969-1974 (and later president of the first Macedonian Rom political party, see below) had his passport confiscated for five years, meaning that he could not travel outside Yugoslavia during that time. In the greater Macedonian society, discrimination in employment and social services continued.

In order to understand the emergence of Shutka as a site of relatively successful political organization, one must consider the larger historical context of European Rom political activism and the role of Yugoslav leaders. In 1971, the first World Romani Congress was organized in England, and its chairperson was a Serbian Rom, Slobodan Berbeski. The second Congress in 1978 in Geneva led to the formation of the International Romani Union, which today claims over seventy regional and national Rom organizations in some twenty-eight countries. The third Congress took place in Göttingen." The fourth Congress took place in 1990 in Warsaw, a site selected to highlight the emerging leadership role of East European Roma, and Rajko Djuric was elected president.

Post-Socialist Period

Population figures for Roma are contested for several reasons. During the socialist period, censuses figures were inaccurate because often Rom was not listed as a separate nationality, and many Rom had no fixed addresses. In some regions, Rom listed themselves as members of other ethnic groups due to fear of persecution or due to successful assimilation. In Bulgaria, for example, some Roma identify as Turks and in Macedonia, some Roma identify as Albanian. These statistical problems persist in the post-socialist period as Rom political groups claim higher numbers while government officials claim lower numbers. The following figures are gross approximations, based on recent publications: Albania 850,000-1 million; Bulgaria 1 million; Yugoslavia 800,000; Croatia 50,000; Bosnia 100,000; Macedonia 220,000; Greece 80,000-140,000; Hungary 450,000; Poland 70,000; Romania 2.5 million; Czech Republic 200,000; Slovakia 500-600,000.

Since the 1989 revolutions toppling the socialist governments of Eastern Europe, harassment and prejudice towards the Roma of Eastern Europe have intensified along with a sharp decrease in economic status. A 1989 poll found that more than half of Hungarians think Roma receive too many benefits; seven out of eight Hungarians are opposed to subsidized housing for Roma; two thirds favor segregated housing; two-thirds favor tougher police responses to Roma; and one-third favor forced repatriation to India. A 1991 Times Mirror survey found that Europeans in overwhelming numbers expressed contempt for Roma, e.g., 59% of Germans, 91% of Czechoslovaks, 71% of Bulgarians, 79% of Hungarians, and 50% of Spaniards. A second poll conducted in 1991 by Freedom House and the American Jewish Committee found that 78% of Hungarians, Poles, and Czechoslovaks preferred not to live with Roma. A third 1991 poll reported that 41% of Romanians felt that Roma should be dealt with negatively. In 1993, Helsinki Watch reported that 10% of Hungarians would like to see Roma exterminated. In December 1994, the Center for Empirical Studies in the Czech Republic reported that 46% of Czechs were in favor of Roma as an ethnic group being subjected to stricter laws than the rest of the population.

On the one hand, the 1989 revolutions have drawn attention to the plight of Roma, but on the other hand prejudice against Roma and stereotypification of them has increased. They have been scapegoated for all the ills of post-communism: rising prices, unemployment, increase in crime, rise of the mafia, and scarcity of goods. The war in the former Yugoslavia has produced ethnic cleansing of Roma (both Muslim and Christian) as undesirables. High rates of Rom unemployment of up to 80% in some regions have resulted in a huge refugee population in Western Europe, and these refugees have been singled out in numerous violent attacks. Thousands of Roma have begun to be deported from Germany. the objects of a \$20 million payment from Germany to

Romania which was designed to convince Romania to take back its Roma. Unfortunately, little of this money seems to be used for Rom social services.

A destructive cycle of poverty, unemployment, lack of education, distrust of the new governments, and loss of hope has set in for many East European Roma. All of these problems have their roots in the socialist period and earlier. Throughout the region, unemployment, is much higher among Roma than the majority populations because Roma are the first to be laid off. In addition, they face discrimination when seeking employment and in receiving assignments and promotions. In the Czech republic, employment offices issue job lists which specify "no Roma." Under socialism, Roma were concentrated in unskilled state enterprises which have closed. Some Roma have been moderately successful in the trading and musical professions, but the majority are unemployed and poor. Nevertheless, many non-Roma continue to believe that Roma are rich and control many commodities. This image is fostered by the media which regularly reports on "ypsy barons" while neglecting to report on the abominable living conditions of most Roma.

Housing for Roma is generally of a much lower standard than for non-Roma. In Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Macedonia and Hungary, many families live in overcrowded houses with over ten people to a room. Sanitation, water, garbage collection, electrical, heating, and telephone services are vastly inferior to those provided in other neighborhoods. Segregation remains a problem and Roma encounter hostility when seeking to move. In Slovakia, for example, Roma face huge bureaucratic hassles when applying for new or improved housing. Roma are often prevented from receiving new housing by non-Roma who don't want them as neighbors. Helsinki Watch reports that in Svinia, Slovakia, the liquidation of the old ghetto resulted in the creation of a new one in two apartment houses and adjoining shacks. Because the government did not build enough housing, about twenty people live in every two-room apartment. The buildings are falling apart, sewage does not work, and pipes freeze in the winter. Conditions such as these result in severe health problems, especially for children, and a life expectancy for lower than for non-Roma. In health care Roma also face discrimination. In Slovakia, there are segregated maternity wards in certain hospitals, where Rom women have to sleep on stretchers on the floor even if there are available beds in the non-Rom ward.

Some countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria have instituted social welfare payments to unemployed Roma, but there are severe problems with the distribution of payments and goods. Due to corruption of the government system, many poor Roma receive little or no help. With few trained social workers and a lack of Rom ombudsmen, abuses in the system are hard to redress. In large Hungarian cities, however, Rom intermediaries are making some progress. On the other hand, in 1993 Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar of Slovakia recommended decreasing family allowances by reasoning that Roma constitute a "socially unacceptable population" with a high birth rate of "children who are poorly adaptable mentally, poorly adaptable socially, children with serious health disorders, children, simply who are a great burden on this society."

Most Roma receive an education inferior to non-Roma because of segregated schools. Schools in Macedonia and Bulgaria which have a high percentage of Roma are poorly equipped and the teachers often give up before they start. Students are tracked away from academic subjects into technical fields. In the Czech and Slovak Republics, a high rate of assignment of Roma to special schools for mentally disabled children persists. Some Rom children quickly fall behind others because of the language problem; many do not attend school because their parents are too poor to clothe them properly Others attend irregularly because of migration or because they believe that school will be of no help in finding a job; those who attend regularly face discrimination and derision by both teachers and non-Rom students.

Here again, there is some progress being made. In 1993 Hungary allocated \$200 per year for every Rom student above the per capita student allocation, and in Bulgaria stipends are being given to talented high school students to prepare them for college. A similar initiative in Hungary led to the opening of a secondary school in 1994 designed to train teachers and develop an intelligentsia. In

the Czech Republic, pre-schools have been opened to aid in the learning of Czech; in some schools in Bulgaria and Macedonia, Romani is taught as an extra class in elementary school. One problem which has hampered the introduction of Romani in schools is the lack of standardization of the language and the lack of textbooks and dictionaries. Such materials have recently been developed in Hungary and Bulgaria. Another problem is the lack of trained teachers who speak Romani; in Bulgaria, the government has sponsored seminars to train such teachers.

In the Czech and Slovak Republics, Roma face discrimination in access to public and private transportation, stores, restaurants, theaters, sports facilities, and discos. Often signs are posted saying, "No Gypsies allowed." Sometimes Roma are denied entry; in other cases they are not served once inside. Owners and managers of these enterprises are neither fined nor censured for this breach of human rights. In Bulgaria, discrimination in the army has taken the form of using Rom conscripts for the labor corps, while using non-Roma for military exercises.

The most disturbing manifestations of the renewed hatred of Roma have been the numerous incidents of individual, mob, and police violence against them. Helsinki Watch and other human rights groups have documented over a hundred such incidents from 1990 through 1994, with twenty deaths and the destruction of over four hundred Rom dwellings just in the period of 1990-1991. Violence has occurred in virtually all countries, but the highest rates appear to be in Romania, followed by Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria. Most of these attacks receive no publicity, but the program in 1993 in Hadareni, Romania, in which three Roma and one Romanian were murdered, received much press attention, both in Romania and abroad. In an altercation on the street in Hadareni, dozens of Romanians attacked four Roma. While fleeing, one Rom fatally stabbed a Romanian. The Romanians, joined by most of the 750 non-Rom village residents, lynched three of the four Roma; the fourth fled. Then the Romanians went on a rampage, burning thirteen Rom homes and ransacking four more. Amnesty International criticized Romania for the killings and claimed the police handcuffed two of the Roma and allowed the crowd to beat them to death. Additionally, the police took no action to prevent the looting and burning of the Rom houses. In 1994, a group of forty Romanians set fire to 11 Rom homes in the village of Racsa after two Roma were accused of killing a Romanian shepherd. Extremist groups, such as Gypsy Skinners in Romania and Basta in Bulgaria have formed in Eastern Europe with the express purpose of killing and harassing Roma. A leader of the Gypsy Skinners said the group plans "to skin the Gypsies,...take their eyeballs out, ...and there will also be some hangings."

In Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, skinhead groups regularly roam villages and city neighborhoods looking to beat up Roma, Jews and foreigners. They also distribute hate literature and music. Istvan Csurka, former vice-president of Hungary and chief ideologue of the Democratic Forum Political Party, recently defended the skinheads: "We must put an end to the sick practice of blaming the skinheads: "We must put an end to the sick practice of blaming the skinheads for everything that is wrong...while accepting with understanding other sickness, crime, and cultural crimes. It is no longer possible to ignore the fact that there are genetic reasons behind the degeneracy. We must realize that the disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged strata and groups have been living with us for too long, among which the rigor of natural selection does not function because it has no meaning."

Police complicity in mob violence as well as police brutality have become evident throughout the region. In Bulgaria in 1992, police surrounded a Rom neighborhood in Pazardzhik, violently attacked people, conducted abusive searches, damaged property and confiscated goods and money. Although Bulgarian president Zhelyu Zhelev ordered an investigation, the case was closed, based on the assumption that no human rights abuses occurred. Police often beat suspects before they are charged or while awaiting trial. In 1993, 60 Bulgarian police officers raided the Rom neighborhood of Novi Pazar, looking for criminal suspects. Helsinki Watch reports that in some localities in Slovakia, whenever a petty theft occurs, the police immediately go to the schools, pick out Rom children, and bring them in for questioning without their parents. In Slovakia, village police often impose curfews on "Gypsies and other suspicious persons."

There is no doubt that racism fans the flames of anti-Rom sentiment. Having South Asian physical features, Roma are darker than most Balkan peoples and thus readily identifiable. Xenophobic nationalist organizations target Roma as a threat to national and racial "purity." Centuries of stereotyping also play a significant role in anti-Rom sentiment which gives rise to individual and group violence. One of the most common stereotypes is that Roma are criminals. In fact, the word *tsigan* in many European languages means thief or cheater, similar to the English verb "to gyp" (from Gypsy), meaning to cheat. The media reinforce these stereotypes by reporting the ethnicity of Rom criminal suspects while withholding the ethnicity of others. In fact, according to the Project on Ethnic Relations 1992 Report on Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, the rate of conviction for theft is no higher among Roma than the national averages, and the rates for murder and rape are far lower. The few reliable studies of "Gypsy criminality" strongly question the stereotype; a 1982 Hungarian study concluded that while crime by Roma is twice that national average, less than 1.5 percent of Roma commit criminal offenses. A 1991 Hungarian survey claims that the rate of criminal behavior in poor Rom neighborhoods is not higher than the rate in poor non-Rom neighborhoods, suggesting that the most important factor to consider is poverty, not ethnicity.

A acute problem regarding Rom citizenship has arisen since the breakup of Czechoslovakia. During the communist period, many Slovakian Roma were brought to Bohemia as unskilled labor, and since the breakup, many of their relatives have joined them. Now the Czech Republic refuses to recognize them as citizens, but rather insists they must apply for citizenship, with the stipulations of documented permanent and continual residency for two years and lack of a criminal record for five years. Many Roma have no documents and do not have the money to obtain them. Those that have criminal records have no chance to become Czech citizens. The matter is further complicated by the fact that these Roma are not welcome in Slovakia either.

Although Greece does not share a socialist history with the nations of Eastern Europe, the problems of Greek Roma are surprisingly similar to their Balkan neighbors. In spite of the fact that Greek citizenship was acquired by Roma in 1979 and that Roma are an official minority group, Roma are subjected to an assimilationist government policy. Human rights activists allege that some municipalities prevent Roma from settling and refuse to register them as citizens, thereby excluding them from government services. In 1992, a case of unlawful arrest and detention of almost all of the Rom male inhabitants of Megara by the police caused a human rights protest. There are no schools in Romani, and illiteracy remains a significant problem. Rom involvement in Greek politics is almost non-existent. As elsewhere, most Roma are landless and rely on trade and music for income.

Since 1989, Roma have begun to respond to violations of their human rights by organizing parties, unions, and clubs, as well as demonstrations and lobbying efforts. In 1993, a large demonstration was held in Eger, Hungary, to protest skinhead attacks against Roma. In Hungary alone, there are over 150 Rom organizations, yet none have any representatives in parliament. In Macedonia, there are two Rom political parties with one representative in parliament. Bulgarian political parties based on ethnicity are prohibited. A persistent problem is the fragmentation of Rom political groups and their lack of unity.

Nevertheless, Rom leaders have emerged and are bringing the plight of Roma to international audiences, such as at the Council of Europe, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations, etc. Efforts are now being made to create a European Rom parliament. In 1979, the International Romani Union, comprising over seventy Rom organizations in twenty eight countries, was given observer status in the UN Economic and Social Council. Since 1990 the IRU has held a summer Romani language school in different European cities. Unfortunately, now the IRU seems to be disintegrating, and a breakaway organization - the International Roma Federation - was formed in 1993.

Rom organizations have successfully lobbied for nationality status in Hungary, the Czech Republic.

Romania, and Macedonia. Other improvements include the introduction of Romani classes in Bulgaria and Macedonia; the introduction of Romanology department in universities in Macedonia and the Czech Republic; the creation of special agencies to deal with minority affairs; and the personal concern of heads of state in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. In Bulgaria, the Human Rights Projects, funded by the German Marshall Fund, gives legal aid to Roma involved in violent attacks. There is a long way to go in the areas of housing, employment, education and protection of human rights.

Since 1989, there has been a flowering of public expression of Rom identity. Despite being subjected to years of assimilationist policies, most Roma are aware of and proud of their Rom identity. Romani is a living language, spoken by millions of Rome. Extended family kin structure is relatively healthy, and some older occupations - such as metalworking - are being revived. Rom concerts, festivals, radio broadcasts, and even Rom businessmen's gatherings can now be found in Eastern Europe. Perhaps music is the most visible marker of Rom cultural identity, with significant Rom influence in both folk and popular music scenes, and with large Rom music festivals annually held in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Slovakia, and Hungary.

In conclusion, Roma have experienced a history of discrimination and persecution in every country of Eastern Europe both before and during the socialist period. It is particularly striking that the post-1989, post-socialist period of the supposed rebirth of democracy has ushered in a reign of increased harassment and violence. Roma, however, are fighting back politically and institutionally, as the proliferation of Rom organizations and parties attest. At the same time, Rom culture is flourishing, encouraged by public displays at festivals and gatherings. In future, as Roma become more united, their problems will hopefully receive more attention, and their cultural contributions will hopefully be recognized.

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