

The concept of vulnerable people
Case study on the Roma culture

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Motto: *In order to influence, you have to be in. There is no such thing as “outfluence”.*

I. Introduction

The European Union fights discrimination and violations of human rights since 2000 with two more tools, two directives: the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC) and The Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC). The first one deals with discrimination based on racial and ethnic origins and the second with discrimination resulting from religion, belief, disability, age or sexual orientation; both covering the field of employment and training. How do they work? Raising awareness on both sides, namely making the ones being discriminated conscious of their rights and obligations and changing the attitudes and behavior of the ones discriminating against others. This is a difficult task, as it is known that preconceived ideas are the hardest to be changed.

Considering the Roma in Europe, they are discriminated on more than one ground. The solution that the EU has come up with insists on tackling all forms of discriminations together. In my perspective, this way of approaching matters, though probably the best, leads to an extremely difficult methodology, due to the complexity of the data involved. The groups involved in this research have to be highly objective and impartial and very well trained in each sector where discrimination may be encountered (from the point of view of civilization, culture and legal matters). Moreover, training the number of specialists needed might also slow down the process.

Nonetheless, this attempt must be supported by the EU bodies, by the member states of the EU and by the civil society, if important steps towards solving the issue are to be taken. The impact of the directives, although they are not fully implemented in all the member states is encouraging, and the effect they had on accepting diversity as a good of the European society is even greater, even though there are still those who think that diversity sets them apart.

In continuance, I would like to add that decisions like adopting these two directives, taken at a top level, need to find a better way to reach the grassroots level. Trying to impose the decisions without taking into considerations particularities of different regions, domains and areas, could only damage the process. Understanding the causes of discrimination should be the first step in solving them. Noticeable is that EU directives transcend the European borders. For example, in Romania, laws banning discrimination on all grounds already exist and are coordinated with the European law.

The next concern is defining and understanding key concepts:

- Vulnerable people or groups are in general that category of society at risk of poverty or social exclusion, such as immigrants, disabled people, ex-prisoners, drug abusers, alcoholics, children, ethnic minorities (with a special concern on the Roma minority).
- Poverty is a characteristic of people whose income and resources are so inadequate as to prevent them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live. Because of their poverty, they might experience multiple disadvantages, through unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care and barriers to lifelong learning, culture, sports and recreation. Moreover, they are often excluded and marginalized from participating in activities that are the norm of other people, and their access to fundamental rights might be restricted as well.

(Joint Report on Social Inclusion, 2004, European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit E.2, page 10)

People experiencing poverty are often discriminated and socially excluded. The process of fully integrating them into a society is called Social Inclusion (*Those at risk of poverty and social*

exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life, and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live - Joint Report on Social Inclusion, 2004, European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit E.2, page 10.).

What is discrimination, and how many types of it are there? When discussing discrimination, we must differentiate between direct discrimination (*A person is treated less favorably than another has been or would be treated on any of the grounds covered by the directives*), indirect discrimination (*Which arises where an apparently neutral criteria or practice, whether intentionally or not, puts people of a particular race or ethnic origin, region or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation at a particular disadvantage, compared with others; this will constitute discrimination, unless it is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and if the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary.*) and harassment (*When unwanted conduct to any of the grounds covered by the directives takes place with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.*). (Definitions taken from *Equality and Non-Discrimination, Annual Report, 2004, European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit D3.*)

II. Tackling the situation of Roma in the European Union

A. History and origin

First of all, I would like to start by trying to give a clear image on the origin of Roma and their different types. The term Roma is too general to describe the varieties, if we may call them such, of people perceived as Gypsies. This term includes people who consider themselves Roma, Gypsy, Travelers, Manouches, Sinti and others. The diversity of the Roma groups and their communities involves not only different names, but different languages, cultures, religions and histories.

Although at times in history their origin has been disputed, it is now agreed upon the fact that Romani people came from India at the end of the first millennium AD. It is very difficult to establish concrete data about them, as they have left behind few written documents. The sources of information are the notifications of their existence in different empires, regions or countries which had to deal with their influx or transition. Although there are communities which have a sedentary culture, most of them, even today, are nomadic.

When I stated the Roma have been persecuted and discriminated on in more than one sector of life, I should have added that this has been going on for centuries. Perceived even from the very beginning as inferior to the populations inhabiting the territories they flew to, experiencing tolerance in the Middle Ages, but only for a short time, the Roma have been accepted less in the pre-Enlightenment Europe than they have in the countries belonging to the Ottoman Empire. After 10 months of documentation on countries belonging to the old member states, to new member states and countries due to join in 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria), a report sustained by the Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, starting from November 2003 and concluded in 2004, on the "Situation of Roma in an enlarged Europe", researchers have come to the conclusion that "The Ottoman Empire was a more tolerant realm than the Christian pre-Enlightenment Europe (...) the relatively higher members of Roma in areas of Europe today which formally comprised the Ottoman possessions would seem to bare this contention, although Ottoman authorities, as a matter of policy, discriminated against non-Muslims..." (page 7).

So Roma were discriminated against whether they lived in the eastern or the western part of Europe. I would like to quote Dr. Thomas Acton (Professor of Romani Studies) who stated that "When Romani people from Eastern Europe meet Romani people from north-western Europe

today, it is the descendants of the survivors of slavery meeting the descendants of the survivors of genocide”.

Under socialism, in Central and Eastern Europe there was a strong effort to assimilate the Romani communities. Part of this process has been successful, including people in society and opening their door to training and education, but part of it has never reached its goal, as it was not homogenous. This can be seen even today, when in universities we study side by side with students of Roma origin which have joined the so-called “Roma elite” and still fear and socially exclude the Romani population living at the edge of poverty in inhuman housing conditions in ghettoised areas of towns.

Ethnic cleansing, forced sterilization for women and men, removing children from their families and placing them under the state’s care were just some of the solutions socialist officials came up with after World War II. Moreover, after 1989 there was an incredible outbreak against Romani, culminating with the campaign of ethnic cleansing sustained by the Albanian ethnics in 1999.

At present, as the Report on “The situation of Roma in an Enlarged Europe” states, the anti-Romani sentiment is present in almost every European Society. The issue of Roma is now one of the most controversial in human society.

B. Key Domains

Considering all the damage that preconceived perceptions do to the not-so-solid European Social Model (although there are programs and policies initiated by the EU, the process of integrating the excluded people is still going on slowly, due to factors such as: mentality, fear of change, or, sometimes, sheer indifference) one of the goals of the EU is to reform this model, to modernize it by focusing on people, investing in them and supporting them with programs that offer not only information and proper training, but the financial means to achieve the change as well.

This way, the Lisbon Agenda, which promoted “a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy”, taking special interest in fields like: education and training, active employment policy, modernizing social protection, promoting social inclusion, has been improved in February 2005. The new social agenda focuses on building confidence, presenting the means and conditions for success, moving towards full employment and launching an Open Method of Coordination for a more cohesive society. I would like to also point out that if those concerned with the improvement of the situation of Roma are well-informed about European directives and social agendas, they can use those documents to their advantage.

Education

The case of Peter Lazar, born in a small village near the Romanian border.

By the age of 6, he was sent to one of Hungary’s state homes, known for its reputation of dumping grounds for Roma children. Perfectly conscious of his situation, he realized that he can make a difference only through education. He was the only Roma student graduating from the Zsambek Teacher Training College. After graduation, he returned home and set up his own boarding school where the local Romani children could receive basic education and also take up responsibility for the place they live in (teaching them how to help out with the domestic work). Not only has the program built up confidence between the children, but their parents have finally realized that they want a different future for their children, “education being the only way they can escape from this life”. What Peter Lazar has brought back to his town has significantly reduced the gap between his Roma community and the non-Roma communities around.

This example is a good start, but one must have in mind that this was a school for Roma children, so they were still segregated from non-Roma children. Education is, nonetheless,

extremely important, but all this must eventually culminate with the coexistence of Roma children and non-Roma children in the same classroom.

Racial segregation in education is reported all over Europe and discriminatory schooling goes on even in Europe's most advanced and democratic countries. For example, in France, a high number of Romani children are in special public schools for children with learning or adaptation difficulties (*The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged Europe. European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit D3, Page 19*).

Another example is Denmark, where "schools for Romani pupils who cannot be contained in normal or special classes" exist (*The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged Europe. European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit D3, Page 19*).

The situation is obviously far worse in new member states, considering the fact that after the 2004 enlargement, the Roma have become the largest minority in Europe, the new member states have brought to the EU a package of problems concerning Roma and relative to almost every aspect of life. For example, in the Czech republic, 75% of the Romani children were schooled in special schools (*The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged Europe. European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit D3, Page 19*), in Slovakia, more than half, and, in some areas all the Romani children are in special schools (this information results from a report made during the school year 2003-2004). Hungary has taken modest measures, but there is still much to be done. Special schools are for mentally ill children, and, for the greater majority of Roma, children have no such problem.

What is extremely worrying, is that although the officials pass laws regarding the discrimination and segregation of children in Roma schools, they have very little impact. It is more than obvious that adopting laws at a national level or ratifying treaties and accords of the EU without a good, solid background to support them is not the solution to combat this problem.

Researchers' suggestions for tackling the issue are along the lines of the following:

- Strong legal and administrative structures
- Eradicate barriers to regular schooling
- Integration, abolishing segregation
- Substantial and comprehensive support
- Informal and formal curriculums, including anti-racism issues
- Assuring racial equality
- Enhanced preschool education for Romani children
- Promoting good inter-race relations
- Acknowledging the contribution of Roma to society
- Providing cultural education about Roma

The Romanian Access to Education for the Disadvantaged Groups Project, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Research, ETUCE – The Non Discriminatory Quality Education for Roma Children Program, International Helsinki Federation (which promotes Roma and Sinti participation to effective policies on unemployment and education) and the participation of NGOs at all levels are a few examples of good practice.

Employment

For this domain, it is very important to have in mind the European Employment Strategy (EES), the key tool of the EU. Perhaps it would have been more logical to start up with employment instead of education, the first one being an important wheel to the social inclusion mechanism. Households where both parents are unemployed are more likely to face the risk of poverty. Concerning the Roma, they face a multiple threat, due to their ethnic origin. It is extremely worrying to be discriminated against and to be at the inferior limit of poverty as well. The chances of Romani people are largely reduced when they are refused access to jobs. Statistics show that 87.5% of the Slovak Romani are unemployed, half of the Spanish Roma at working age

have no stable or legal jobs, and, in the Czech republic, 50 up to 80% of Romani people are estimated to be unemployed.

Romani women face a double discrimination. First, of origin discrimination, and second, of gender discrimination (the medium rate of unemployment ranging between 50% and 80% out of which men consist 10% and women 90%). Also, due to the research initiated by the EU, it has been pointed out that 80% of Roma have an income below national poverty levels, in countries like Poland, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. The question still remains: has the European Employment Strategy worked? Has it reached its goals of: establishing every year a set of guidelines consisting of common priorities and managing to put together conclusive and coherent national action plans for employment; or offer a clear examination through Joint Employment Reports of how each national Action Plan functions and how it could function better; or, further more, are the recommendations of the council taken into consideration at a national level?

What can be done for a better implementation and monitoring of the employment policies and strategies at the member-state level for the particular areas where Romani unemployment and poverty are dominating? First of all, employers should be financially encouraged to hire Romani workers. Second, there should be a better implication of local officials. Thirdly, more workplaces should be created. Fourthly, training should be provided for those who want to specialize in a certain field or for those who have been unemployed for a long time or, even worse, for those who have not been employed at all and, finally, the Romani population should take up a more active role, namely really concern themselves with matters that are of immediate interest for them.

For example, in Austria, the Mri Buti Project has aimed at helping Roma find work through guidance and counseling; or, in Hungary, training programs at a local levels were organized or, German-Roma were tested so as to be qualified as mediators, or, in France and in Ireland, the implication of Roma in society has made a step forward towards helping them establish new businesses.

Housing

The issue raised by housing for Roma communities is essential to the process of reintegrating them in society. This area is poorly developed both from a legal point of view and from a practical one. Although the European Race Directive bans discrimination in housing resulting from race or ethnicity, the EU has still few means and measures in facing and dealing with the problem, as there is no specific Directorate General in the union to address the housing issue for Romani.

Moreover, there is a constant concern of funding and, although the PHARE program has proven helpful, there are still enormous gaps between what needs to be done and what is actually being done. In some countries, the Roma housing situation is not even considered as integrating in the housing policy. In those countries, the political officials refuse to acknowledge the issue as crucial for future strategies.

Action needs to be taken so as to offer the Roma community the minimum standard of life and to overcome this extremely sub-standard housing. The report made by the EU on the situation of Roma has shown that 45% of the Roma households in Hungary and Slovakia, and 65% in Romania and Bulgaria have no inside toilets. Of these, 45% have no running water. Furthermore, the Roma are usually ghettoized and separated from the rest of the settlements by situating them far from the city and not ensuring access to it by proper roads. The locations are characterized by: uncertainty of ownership, lack of security, inadequate or absent electricity, lightning and water, waste removal, transport services, prevalent diseases and/or threats of epidemic, violent police raids (*The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged Europe. European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit D3, Page 25*).

The solution to this problem could be quite at hand, if the proper funding were available and the proper will was found. Examples of good practice exist (social housing) and the PHARE

program has provided financing for infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the EU has established that during the period 2007-2013, it will address the issue adequately.

Healthcare

Racial and ethnic discrimination in this domain is explicitly prohibited in the EU race directive. One must have in mind how housing, healthcare and employment could work together for a better future. Poverty and a poor level of accommodation among Romani communities, plus discrimination in the provision of health services can lead to a high rate of transmittable diseases (Tuberculosis and Hepatitis). These factors can largely reduce life expectancy among the Roma community. It is surprising to see how little attention is given to such an important sector, considering that tackling healthcare is one of the main subjects for the European Anti-Discrimination Agenda.

Two important issues to be dealt with regarding healthcare are: drug usage and the sexually transmitted diseases. Due to the lack of funding for a program to inform and educate the Roma community in this direction, cumulating also the lack of statistics and sufficient and comprehensive data, the exposure and risks of contracting life-threatening diseases is high. The Romani people are vulnerable to drug use and abuse due to their segregation from the other settlements, their socio-economic circumstances, their poor access to information, education and public health structures. Moreover, these factors also limit the access to proper treatment and addiction support agencies.

Regarding the risk of contracting a sexually transmittable disease, I must add that the factors enhancing the situation are among the following:

- Lack of proper hygiene (due to poor housing conditions)
- Poor information and education on this subject
- Commercial sex work

All this can lead to the dissemination of diseases not only to Roma communities but to others as well.

The EU must take consistent steps towards eradicating the health issue, healthcare indicators must be developed regarding Roma, Gypsy and Travelers groups, the Community Action Plans should have better funding (in 2003, the €50 million was not enough) and it should sustain the NGOs and other organizations' initiatives of raising awareness. For example, in Romania, the mediators in education, concept initiated in France, was extended to healthcare. These mediators were trained so as to provide the link between the Roma families and public health services. The work that has been done regarded: child vaccination, anti and post natal care for mothers, education on contraception and family planning. The mediator's work led to the identification of contagious diseases and to the gathering of more detailed data, although the resources were still very low (research conducted by Romani CRISS from Romania).

III. What can be done (at a European, Member State and Civil Society level)

Mainly, there are a lot of things that can be done, but we must consider the financial possibilities and the future outcomes of the actions. Therefore, although the steps are small, they are to be taken carefully. For a coherent and coordinated process, the EU Member States and Civil Society should work together, yet there are specific matters that should be addressed by each one separately.

At a European level, a slight regression can be seen in the previous and existing policies and programs. More attention should be given to improving the internal coherence and efficiency of the EU, plus, enhancing the role and responsibility of the EU Commission. Moreover, active involvement in policy making implementation and assessment should also involve Roma people,

as this could have a better impact on the policies and could be the key to sustainable initiatives. The deficient data collection has to be addressed and more attention should be placed on monitoring the evolution of the program as well as good human rights monitoring. The EU should also concern itself with fining those member states that have failed to transpose the race and employment directives into national law and also monitor how the national action plans on inclusion address the issue of the Romani people. Finally, although the EU should function as a source of financing and initiative, it should not be left alone, as full involvement of the Member States is needed too. The EU is like a guardian and innovator, and so it should enhance and enforce its analytical powers for a better coordinated development of programs and policies.

At a Member-State level, the following improvements should be taken into consideration: the recognition of the Roma minority, better implementation and disposition of EU directives and anti-discrimination law, including the Roma in governmental structures and national action plans and, lastly, apply a better ethnic data collection.

Civil society refers to how ordinary people can involve themselves in solving the Roma problem. It is essential that Roma organizations and NGOs become dialogue partners, so as to better link Roma communities to the others. Moreover, everyone should work on reducing the impact that prejudice and stereotypes have on their perception. Noticeable at this level is the impact of the NGOs and their networks in collecting data and of keeping in touch, first hand, with the situation the exclusion of Roma people causes. To sum up, raising awareness, changing attitudes and encouraging diversity can be met if Roma rights activists, training programs, workshops on human rights, conferences against racism and involvement at all levels of society are combined together.

IV. Conclusions

Analysing the situation, consulting EU sources and reports and also being in direct contact with the issue led me to a practical and simple conclusion. This conclusion does not include the retelling, in short, of what I have just stated in the paper, as this has already been done at the end of each chapter or subchapter. My conclusion actually proposes a solution that has probably been taken into consideration by now in the EU.

It deals with involving both the people that are discriminated on (the vulnerable groups, again with a special concern on the Roma community) and the ones that can do something about reducing the discrimination and even abolish it (governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, Civil Society, and, last but not least, the EU as a whole).

The idea is that of a “meeting point”. Coming from two opposite directions, they should meet half way, being able to make compromises, sustain objective dialogues, leading to an increased awareness and acknowledgement, or even solving of the issue.