



IRU

INTERNATIONAL ROMANI UNION MAŠKARTHEMENGO ROMANO JEKHIPE

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The Roma Question

Migration and Countries

Roma have lived for centuries in Europe, and it should not be necessary to actually have to say that they are true Europeans. When they arrived, most nations did not even exist and the concept of country as a nation did not exist.

Roma have lived for centuries in Europe, without borders but with a culture that they have not given up with their own language and traditions. Having a different culture within a country does not mean that one is not citizen of one's country. They are actual citizen of the countries they live in, often proud ones, have papers, pay their taxes, work, in fact, like everyone else.

Roma are citizens. They have the same duties and rights as others from the same country. But what does this mean in the facts? Are they citizen or are they discriminated? There is little need to speak about what actually happens, to speak about the facts in Europe or about what the issues and social problems are. Whether the countries' constitutions and laws are respected or whether the recommendations and European Union directives are applied would be futile.

The question is another one. One always speaks about a Roma problem, but what about the problem that European nations seem to have about Roma? That, after more than a thousand years, Europe seems to have an issue with a transnational minority? Are European nations only doing lip service to the principle of diversity and integration? Or are they just engaged in alibi exercises while thinking that Roma are actually an "issue"?

In most countries, where Roma live side by side with the general population, the question is what are the governments doing to further integration, to improve the situation? Which programs are they engaged in? We have to remain critical and keep an open eye for those misbegotten policies and programs that existed and unfortunately continue to exist.

The currently burning question, especially after the events in Italy, is why Roma immigrate to other countries. An actual monitoring and thorough analysis I actually required, as de facto, Roma are no less but no more mobile than the rest of the population. Both Roma and non-Roma seek places where their life is better, but also where the life of their children might get better than the places they used to live in.

Roma are not more "mobile" than other Europeans. There is a small percentage of Roma who has been traditionally travelling, but the vast majority was always sedentary, and this for centuries. Looking backwards into European history, we easily see that it is a human constant to seek a better place, a better live. After all, would we have Germans, Slavs, and many other Europeans in nowadays Europe if they had not migrated away from their original homes? Not to speak about wars and other extreme situations that force or forced entire

populations to migrate. The last example thereof is the war in Kosovo that de facto cleaned the country of its Roma population.

Unfortunately, nationalism, especially the thoughts that are profoundly ingrained nowadays in Europe, that a nation is one "race", have found their expression in extremism, populism, in various movements such as the Skinheads and the Neo-Nazi groups. And in such states, defined along often false "ethnic" line, Roma have no place. This phenomenon is not limited to Europe but can also be seen in other countries, such as the USA and Canada.

Most European nations do not even attempt to better the situation. To improve the general situation of Roma or even to make them "feel" at home is often an empty promise. Politics towards the largest European minority is often improvised, passive or at most reactive, and most of all, populist. It seems almost that Roma are perceived as a threat that being "different" is a threat to one's country. Does the population fear integration? Fear that Roma could take their jobs? Is this the reason why many countries tend to send Roma to "special" schools (read schools for mentally retarded)?

Actually, one should create programs not only for Roma, but foremost for the general population, to realise that their myths about country and nation are actual myths that prevent true integration of all minorities within one country. The barrier between the population and Roma has to be broken.

What are countries actually doing to further the acceptance and integration of Roma or of the integration of people with a different culture? They are not demons, are not bandits, are citizens.

On the Roma side, the Roma need to know and believe that the cultural differences and old prejudices are not preventing them from being citizens of the countries they live in. Should this belief in integration fail, then Europe will be facing a major migration in the coming years.

Europe and the Roma Question

At a time where many nations, especially from Eastern and South Eastern Europe are being integrated into Europe, at a time where people are being told they are Europeans, subjects to the same rule of law, to the same rules, one should not forget that Roma are Europeans. They are so because this is their history, but also because they are citizen of the countries they live in.

But there are member countries in the European Union who are advocating the "identification" of Roma in their passports. Are we going towards a Europe where the laws and freedoms are only valid for the general population but not for selected minorities? Is it not this reminiscent of Apartheid, of segregation or of worse? This is certainly not written anywhere in the laws.

Practically, however, European law is not respected by European countries. What else can one say when a European citizen from Romania or Bulgaria, such as in Italy currently, is being deported for the sole "crime" of being Rom? And what are European institutions saying to this?

Actually and rationally, these Roma migrants are not migrants. They are exercising their rights as European citizens. The rights to travel and to live, the right of establishment as enshrined in the European principles.

The Italian situation actually shows that these principles are trampled in total impunity by a European government, that their actual laws are being disregarded, and we, as Roma, ask what the consequences of tolerating such a behaviour are going to be for Europe.

Migration and EU Policies

European policies on migrations are written in many documents and these policies should be respected, also when the emigration is illegal. Controls exist and should and are enforced on illegal immigration from other countries.

But what are migrants in integrated Europe? Are Roma from Europe defined as migrants? Other Europeans from Europe are at least not perceived as such. Nobody (or nearly so) says

that other non-Roma from the EU are actually migrants. Migrants tend to be defined as people from non-EU countries who come to Europe. As such, Roma should not be considered as migrants, for there is no legal basis for this, but rather should be considered as the other Europeans are.

The discrimination arises from the fear of the “others”, of people who are “different” and is often based on stereotypes. Italy is again such an example, where Roma are defined as “travellers”. This definition stems from the Mussolini times, from the 1930’s.

If Europe continues to define people through old and inaccurate stereotypes, if Europe continues to see Roma as travellers, then, chances are that they will continue to look at them as illegal immigrants.

Migration, Language and Xenophobia

In countries defined (albeit often totally arbitrarily) by a race and culture, a different culture, language, is often perceived as a threat. This is natural, although one should bear in mind that these countries did not exist as such 200 years ago, and that in most case, their languages were unified even more recently. Confronted with another culture, the reaction is often open xenophobia.

When groups of people of a different culture settle in a different country, the initial reaction is often one of rejection. “We do not want them here”... The smaller the country, the more strident the reaction. This is understandable, for if one’s identity depends on ones appurtenance and culture, aliens are a threat.

Europe needs a thorough discussion and a thorough program to counter these tendencies. These tendencies are all too visible say when a few Roma speak Romanes in a public place. Those who do not understand almost immediately have a fear reaction, are identifying them as dangerous aliens. This although we have many different languages in Europe and always had/have.

Not speaking the local language is a source of discrimination, be it at the airport, with the local authorities, but also when seeking work. The new (i.e. post XIXth century nations) actually do not tolerate diversity and require their citizen to speak a unified language. Stuck into language, restricted into one culture, most people feel threatened by another culture and language.

So education, more education, knowledge, openness, and respect about one’s and other’s cultures needs to be furthered, especially in a global world as we know it nowadays. Without this, there is no better future, no chances of improvement.

This will require a political will, this will require changes, but without this, there will be no improvements.

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