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# A EUROPEAN DILEMMA THE ROMANIES

BY IRKA CEDERBERG

**An e-mail came to** the Romani Internet group to which I belong. Jan was desperately appealing for help for himself and his family, his wife Anna and their two children. For five years they had been traveling through Europe, as refugees from Slovakia.

“We have two wonderful children”, wrote Jan, “but we might have had a third.”

Seven years earlier, Jan and his wife Anna, then nine months pregnant, had been on their way home one evening when they were suddenly surrounded by a group of neo-Nazis who, without a word, began to attack them. Jan was brutally beaten. When the neo-Nazis discovered that Anna was pregnant they yelled, “Oh, you want to multiply, you rats, and sully our white Slovakian race! We’ll finish what Hitler didn’t have time for!” One of the neo-Nazis kicked Anna in the stomach repeatedly until she fainted.

Jan and Anna woke up in the hospital, where they were informed that their child had not survived. During the police investigation, Jan heard one of the policemen say that now at least there was one less Gypsy in the country.

“Throughout Slovakia, Romanies are subjected to racial discrimination”, wrote Jan. Restaurants and public premises have posted signs: “Gypsies not allowed.” Employers say “no Gypsies”, without enquiring into the applicant’s qualifications. On the bus, Jan has seen other passengers wipe off the seat with a handkerchief after he has left it.

“A Gypsy can be as clean as crystal and dress like a prince, but to them we are all base dogs.”

In the schools, Romani children are placed in special classes because other parents do not want their “white” children to be taught together with Gypsy children.

“So I asked myself: What kind of future can I offer my children? Should I teach them to close their eyes to what is going on? Should I tell them not to take it to heart, as my parents said to me?”

“No. I do not want my children to need to fear, to learn to close their eyes. To have to bring up one’s children in a place where people hate us so much that they even want to kill us is not human. I want to be free, without fear for my family, so that our children have no reason to be afraid in the playground and at school. Do we Romanies not have a right to a normal life?”

**About one month** after the assault, the family became the victim of another attack. A gasoline bomb was thrown through their window and the curtains caught fire.

“We would have endured their insults, discrimination and threats. But now we decided we had had enough. They had killed the child we expected and had ruined our home. We decided to leave our country for good.”

After three years in Holland, the family’s application for asylum was turned down. They could not return to Slovakia, for they were now stateless. Now began a classic, ambulating Romani life, lived in a trailer.

As illegal immigrants they were employed temporarily by farmers in Italy, France and Spain. They often went hungry and cold, and sometimes they were forced to flee from villages when people chased them away.

For five years in the 1990s, this stateless refugee family from Slovakia drifted around Europe – the heart of civilization. A gruesome parallel can be drawn with the centuries of persecution that their ancestors had endured. Today there is no bounty on Romanies. But the risk of having one’s nose cut off is as great as it was in medieval times.

Just then, this stateless Romani family had found a little breathing space. For the moment, their children were healthy and were attending school, wrote Jan. But how long would it last?

It was in Sweden that the family had found breathing space. They were living in a Swedish refugee facility. They had come to Sweden because someone had said this was a safe country. Anna’s life had just been saved, after a suicide attempt. But now their lawyer had informed them that they had no chance of being allowed to stay here.

**I made contact** with the family, and after visiting them in the refugee facility, I wrote an article about their situation. It appeared as a full-page feature article in the Swedish evening paper *Expressen* under the headline “A decent life, Göran Persson?” (April 3, 2000). Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson a few months previously had hosted his famous International Holocaust Conference which primarily focused on anti-Semitism, ignoring anti-Gypsyism almost completely.

Finally – the family was granted asylum in Sweden. This happened almost a decade ago. It is extremely doubtful whether Jan and his family would have been allowed to stay today, given Sweden’s current stone-cold asylum policy.

The world’s total Romani population numbers fifteen to twenty million. There are Romanies living in practically every nation in the world, except perhaps Iceland and Malta. About six to eight million are said to live in East and South Europe. It should be noted that while most Romanies live under miserable conditions, as is evident in the reports discussed below, this definitely does not apply to all Romanies. There are among them well-educated professionals, academics, researchers, physicians, politicians, artists, writers, and musicians. But for many of these, their careers have cost them their Romani identity. They have had to change their names, for instance, or take other measures to disguise the fact that they are Romanies.

The European attitude to Romanies resembles, in many respects, the attitude that Europeans adopted, for centuries, towards Jews.

**According to German** historian Wolfgang Wippermann, the term anti-Gypsyism was coined in connection with post-war Holocaust research. The historical parallels between anti-Semitism and anti-Gypsyism are numerous. Like the Jews, the Romanies have been seen as an alien people, have been viewed with distrust and fear, surrounded by mythmaking. Romanies and Jews have been attacked and demonized from pulpits, in popular culture, in literature, and, lately, not least in the media.

Anti-Semitism is, without a doubt, still strong in Europe, but many consider racism against Romanies, anti-Gypsyism, far more prevalent. A German opinion

poll held approximately one year ago showed that while 20 percent of the population held anti-Semitic attitudes, more than 60 percent expressed anti-Gypsyist opinions.

Unlike anti-Semitism, anti-Gypsyism has always remained more or less *salonfähig*. One reason for this is a lack of knowledge about Romani culture and history. When, in the early 1990s, thousands of Romanian Romanies applied for asylum in Germany, neither politicians nor mass media had any idea of the conditions they endured. No-one was aware that for five hundred years – up until 1864, in fact – the Romanies had been slaves in their home country.

Wolfgang Wippermann, who specializes in the fate of the Romanies under Nazism, has an additional explanation. Not until the 1980s did West Germany acknowledge that the Nazi extermination policy had been directed as much against Romanies as against Jews. The consequences of this denial of racist genocide can be felt today, Wippermann claims. When it comes to the Romanies, there is no general European acknowledgement of guilt; the majority of the population has not become engaged in fighting prejudice and anti-Gypsyism.

Europe’s Romanies have never held a position of power and have never been given a state of their own. The prejudices against them are centuries old and deeply rooted. After one thousand years of being part of the European political region, the Romanies are still seen as alien. Those in power have never had to rely on good relations with the Romanies, and so racism against them – anti-Gypsyism – has been allowed to flourish.

The old communist regimes in East and Central Europe thought racism was something unique to the USA and to apartheid South Africa. Officially there was no anti-Gypsyism; racism was forbidden by law. But when the Eastern bloc dissolved, Pandora’s Box snapped open. The economic system collapsed. A large number of people became unemployed. Poorly educated Romanies, who had depended on state-owned and collective workplaces, were among those worst hit. When large sections of the population were hit, as well, Romanies became scapegoats. Skinheads appeared in the streets, threatening everyone who looked “foreign”. Xenophobic and fascist parties multiplied. In many countries, they made it into parliament.

In January 2004, a few months before the EU was to admit ten new members, eight of which were East and Central European countries, European media was gripped by panic. The British popular press initiated an unprecedented witch-hunt, painting vivid pictures of hordes of impoverished East European Romanies swarming into the country.

**On January 18** 2004, the *Sunday Times* proclaimed that East European Romanies were just waiting for the day of the EU’s eastern expansion to start out towards the West. *The Sun*, Rupert Murdoch’s tabloid, claimed that tens of thousands of “Gypsies” were standing ready to stream into England. The following day, the number of Romanies prepared to “stream in” had, according to the *Daily Express*, grown to 1.6 million. And on February 5 2004, the *Daily Express* front page thundered in fat headlines: “GYPSIES YOU CAN’T COME IN.”

The British newspapers were clearly conducting a hate-campaign against people of Romani ethnicity. But no protests against this media witch-hunt were heard from politicians in Great Britain or other EU countries. Instead, the Labour government, led by Tony Blair, found it necessary to introduce restrictions on welfare benefits for jobseekers that came to Great Britain from the EU's new member countries. This could be seen as a silent endorsement of the British media's anti-Romani campaign.

Many Romanians had nursed high hopes concerning the EU expansion. The European Union had, after all, clearly demanded that the new member states guarantee the human rights of their large Romani populations. The new members were to end discrimination against Romanians in the labor and housing markets; in particular, they were to stop placing Romani children in separate, inferior school classes. Poorly educated, unemployed Romanians from the old, now-defunct centrally governed economies hoped for a chance to make better lives for themselves in EU's free labor market. Romani activists expected the EU to constitute a platform that would allow Romanians to participate in European politics. Romani voluntary organizations were hoping for greater support in order to further their cause.

There was awareness, within the EU, of the serious situation faced by Romanians in the new member countries. Fair treatment of the Romani minorities was made a requirement for admission into the EU. The pressure exerted was, of course, partially motivated by self-interest. The better the living conditions of Romanians in their homelands, the less likely they were to move to the richer EU countries.

The applicant countries made an effort to live up to the EU's stringent demands. They passed legislation against discrimination and established institutions for Romani self-government. The EU invested about 55 million euros in measures that were meant to improve the conditions of Romanians in the applicant countries.

But some Romanians voiced skepticism. They pointed out that when it came to the treatment of the Romanians, the "old" EU had many skeletons in its closets, too. Focusing attention on the Romanians just before the expansion of the EU did not mean that their situation would improve. How could EU membership change centuries of prejudice?

And what were the final results? Even though there have been noticeable improvements in several countries' healthcare and educational sectors, critics maintain that these have had little impact on the everyday lives of the Romanians. Romani organizations claim that the EU's monetary contributions often ended up in the wrong hands. The EU has been criticized for not cooperating directly with the Romanians and their various organizations.

Today, the Romanians are every bit as poor and marginalized, as unemployed, and as poorly housed as they ever were. They are as far from leading the normal lives of citizens in their own countries as they were before the EU's expansion.

In the West European nations, where Romanians have been a much smaller minority than in the east, anti-Gypsyism has smoldered for centuries. The recent expansion of the EU has given it added mo-

mentum. The expansion allowed citizens of new EU countries such as the Czech Republic, Romania, and Hungary to travel freely within the EU. The financial crisis that began to spread across the world in the fall of 2008 has led to worsened living conditions for everybody, but especially for Romanians.

In recent years, Europe's increasing anti-Gypsyism has been marked not only in the rhetoric and activities of the growing hosts of racist and neo-Nazi parties and organizations. These are, in fact, encouraged by leading politicians in a number of countries. In Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Italy, the tone has hardened alarmingly. To paraphrase a Slovakian Romani: If, a few years ago, you had accused a politician of being a racist, he would have responded with vehement denials. Today, the politician will say: certainly I'm a racist.

During the last two years, at least ten Romanians have been murdered in Europe for ethnical reasons. Romani settlements are being demolished. Pogroms are on the rise.

The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that all persons must be granted the nationality of the state in which they were born, if they otherwise would be stateless. An estimated 640,000 people are stateless in Europe. This is a hidden and neglected problem that affects, not least, Europe's Romanians.

**There are no** reliable figures as to how many Romanians are stateless, although estimates place the numbers at 10,000 in Bosnia, 1,500 in Montenegro, 17,000 in Serbia, and 4,090 in Slovenia. These are persons who were previously Yugoslavian citizens but who became stateless when Federal Yugoslavia dissolved. Those who failed to apply for citizenship in the new state within a set period of time were erased from the population registers. Romanians who moved to other countries lost citizenship in their countries of birth.

In other countries, the authorities have introduced legislation and regulations aimed at ridding the nation of Romani citizens. When, in 1993, Czechoslovakia was divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Czech Republic planned to introduce strict regulations on citizenry which would, in practice, have rendered the majority of the country's Romanians stateless. Intervention from the Council of Europe forced them to soften the law, but its intentions were indisputable.

Many Romanians in Latvia and Estonia are also without citizenship.

In the spring of 2005, two years before Romania and Bulgaria had joined the EU, the EU Commission published a report on the Romanians' situation in the expanded European Union. "The Situation of Romanians in an Enlarged Europe" described both the Roma – mostly dismal – history in Europe, and their present problematic situation.

According to the report, there is, throughout Europe, a lack of understanding of the Romanians' extremely vulnerable position. The treatment of the Romanians is described as "one of the most important political, social and humanitarian questions in today's Europe". The report stresses the need for forceful legislation

against anti-Gypsyism in all EU member states, old as well as new.

**The growing anti-Gypsyism**, and the violence against Romanians, has caused a good deal of unease within the Union. The violence in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary has been condemned, but the growing racism in Italy has remained largely unnoticed. Despite long series of analyses and reports, no concrete measures against anti-Gypsyism have been forthcoming.

In 2003, the UN's Development Program, UNDP, presented alarming figures. These were based on interviews with more than 5,000 Romanians in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, countries that are home to approximately 7.5 million Romanians – perhaps 80 percent of all the world's Romani population. UNDP studied such factors as child mortality, income level, and access to food and education. The conclusion was that the Romanians were "the poorest of the poor" and often lived in conditions that were far worse than the poorest levels found in the developing world. In many respects, the Romanians had apparently fared significantly better during the communist era, the report continues, although those advances had often required turning their backs on their cultural and linguistic identity. Now, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, 30 percent of Romanians in the countries investigated are dependent on public welfare. A mere 20 percent have steady employment, while another 20 percent work on the black market. One of six does not get enough to eat and one of two goes hungry for at least a few days each year. Every third child never completes elementary school and two out of three drop out at the intermediate level. Romani children are routinely placed in schools for mentally handicapped children.

In 2007, UNICEF, the United Nations' Children's Fund, released a report on the living conditions of Romani children in Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, and Romania. Of these 3.7 million Romanians (the majority living in Romania and Bulgaria) close to half, 46 percent, are children. According to the report, a great majority of these live below the poverty line and lack access to education and healthcare; their housing is sub-human. In Romania, two out of three Romanians live below the subsistence level and one in three live in ghetto-like settlements, often without running water.

The European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights, FRA, has the task of collecting data and information about human rights, assisting member states with advice, facilitating a dialogue with civil society and creating awareness about human rights issues. The FRA cooperates with the Council of Europe and other organizations and institutions on human rights.

In the spring of 2009, the FRA presented a study of the EU's immigrants and ethnic minorities, in an attempt to gain an overview of the occurrence of racism in the Union. This is the first investigation of its kind to include the entire EU. Approximately 25,000 persons in all 27 member countries were interviewed. The study shows that discrimination, harassment and racist violence are far more common than is registe-

red in the nations' official statistics. Not surprisingly, Romanies and Africans are the most exposed. They experience racism and discrimination on a daily basis. They question the police and the authorities' capability and willingness to defend them and therefore rarely report it when they are victims of crime.

Of those interviewed, 55 percent believe that ethnic discrimination is wide-spread in their own country and 37 percent have personally experienced discrimination within the last twelve months. 12 percent have, during the past year, been victims of racist violence and 80 percent of these have not bothered to report the violence to the police. Among the Romanies, as many as half of those interviewed report instances of discrimination.

In November 2009, the FRA released another report, which describing the situation of Romanies who have sought better lives by moving to other member countries. Not surprisingly, the report shows that the right of EU citizens to move freely within the Union does not extend, in practice, to those belonging to the Romani minority.

**Together, these reports** arrive at an unequivocal conclusion: racism against Romanies is on the increase throughout Europe. Many Romanies live in constant fear of racists, and draw comparisons with the atmosphere in Germany during the 1930s. Why,

then, is nothing being done?

The Romanies come by the thousands from the EU's new member countries, searching for a more tolerable existence in the old member states. One sees them, often, begging in the streets of London, Berlin, Oslo, Stockholm, and Helsinki. In many countries, the police suspects that the begging is organized by criminal gangs, something, however, for which no-one has yet found any proof.

In Helsinki, the population has reacted with horror to the growing number of beggars in the streets, most of whom come directly from Romania. The Finnish police has cold-bloodedly demolished a number of temporary dwellings that the Romanian Romanies had erected in the outskirts of Helsinki. The Romanies were offered no alternative dwellings, which led to sharp critique from, among other sides, the United Nations' Human Rights Council UNHCR.

It is not illegal to beg in either Finland or Sweden. Other EU countries have passed legislation against begging. The begging Romanies present a growing problem that has yet to be solved.

On September 16 2008, during the French Presidency, the European Commission held its first-ever summit on the Romanies. The immediate motive was Italy's infamous fingerprinting and registration of Romanies, as well as pogroms in Naples and other places. The participants made up an impressive group: five EU Commissioners, government representatives

from the member countries, the Council of Europe, OSSE, the World Bank, the UN, and many others. The tone was urgent. "The dramatic situation of the Roma in Europe cannot be solved in Brussels", said the Commission's chairman José Manuel Barroso, who also said, "This must not become just another discussion meeting".

Nevertheless, the summit became just that. Its only result was the decision to hold another summit meeting in 2010.

But now, at least, the Romani issue is on the EU agenda. After the summit, the Commission created a platform for the inclusion of the Romanies – not a formal institution but, it is claimed, an arena for the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and examples of good practice. There is, thus, as yet, no suggestion or common strategy for the solution of the Romanies isolation; merely the creation of a new discussion club.

In October 2009, Valeriu Nicolae and Bernard Rorke from George Soros's Open Society Institute published a skeptical commentary on what the EU had achieved at the previous year's summit. During that year, they write, despite all the bombastic assurances of engagement in behalf of the Romanies, violence against them had increased dramatically.

The principal responsibility for protecting the Romanies still rests on the national level, Nicolae and Rorke continue, in spite of all the assurances of supranational EU engagement. And, as the authors point



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out, the situation on the national level is alarming in terms of, for instance, school segregation, increasing racist violence and pogroms, as well as a growing number of racist statements made by local and national politicians. The fact that the Commission, after the first summit of 2008, established a platform for cooperation between EU institutions and civic society which should be capable of producing a strategy for the integration of Romanies and suggesting forceful measures against anti-Gypsyism, they term a positive sign. But neither strategy nor suggestions have yet emerged; nor has the Commission specified how the platform is to function or what its objectives are to be, write Nicolae and Rorke.

**EU's leading politicians** have, as far as they possibly can, tried to keep the Romani issue at the national level. To criticize other countries' minority policies is a delicate matter. The question is how long the EU can refrain from passing forceful censure on Italy, Hungary, Great Britain, the Czech Republic, and other member states where anti-Gypsyism is on the rise.

Increasingly, the world's Romanies organize across national borders, a development that has been facilitated by the Internet. Already in 1971, the International Romani Union was established; approximately 70 Romani organizations from 28 countries have joined. The Union chose a Romani national anthem, "Djellem, Djellem", and a flag common to all the world's Romanies. In 1979, the UN granted the International Romani Union NGO status.

Growing anti-Gypsyism is one acute problem faced by the Romani organizations. Other important issues concern culture and the Romani language, Romani Chib. The Romanies are trying to reach consensus on the development of a standard language that can be understood by all the world's Romanies, based on all the 60 or so variants of that language. Today, there is a new ethnic consciousness among the Romani people who for much of their history have been forced, through fear of persecution, to hide their identity – a situation that, in some places, continues today.

**Romanies have grown** tired of always being described as a problem, as criminals and parasites. They are equally sick of the romantic Hollywood image of the carefree Gypsy. Romani activists now claim that if there is a problem with the Romanies, the problem is ethnic – not social.

But do they wish to be viewed as a unified nation, a Romanistan – albeit a nation without its own territory – or is their goal, rather, some sort of trans-nationalism? These are questions that are discussed among the Romanies. And who is to represent them in the various international agencies in which they participate, with increasing frequency? Should their representatives be "the elders", leaders appointed in traditional fashion; or should they be elected in a more democratic manner, as many young Romanies demand?

Would it be advisable to establish an EU citizenship, as suggested by the International Romani Union? This implies the obsolescence of the concept of the state;

after all, nationalism often leads to persecution and war. The principle here is a Europe consisting of human beings, not of states.

In May 2002, the World Romani Congress in Poland proclaimed a Romani nation – a nation without territory – and, as such, demanded greater Romani representation in the UN and the European Parliament.

In 1944, economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal published the book *An American Dilemma*, in which he discussed the situation of blacks in USA. He described the contradiction between the United States' official ideals – freedom, equality, and justice – and the racism that was in reality practiced in that country.

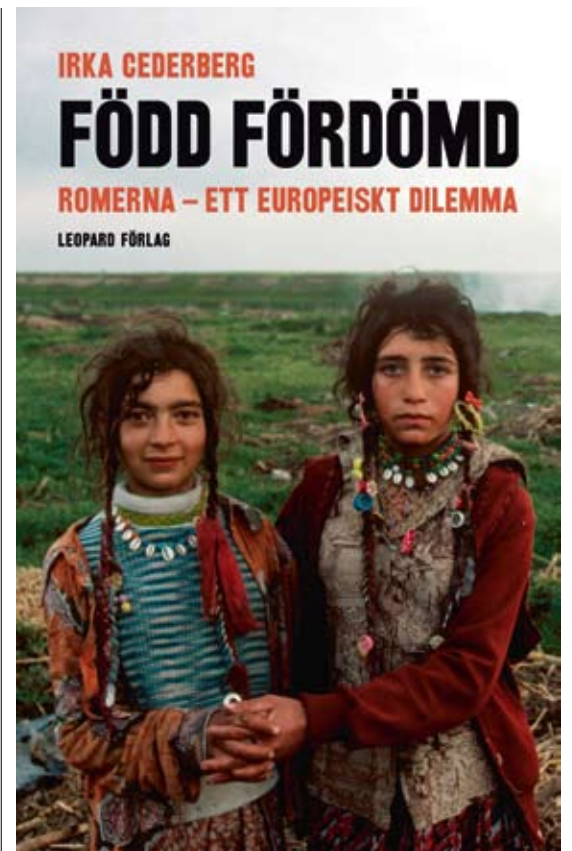
Time has come to speak of *The European Dilemma* – the contradiction between Europe's lofty ideals and the Europeans' treatment of their largest minority, the Romanies. In Europe, the Romanies number between ten and twelve million. Ever since their first arrival in Europe, a thousand years ago, they have been discriminated against and persecuted. And this persecution continues to this day. And yet lofty ideals, human rights and equality before the law are also revered within the European Union.

The Romanies are a people in Europe, the largest European minority without a territory. As boundary crossers with multifaceted experiences from most of Europe's countries, they may very well be "the only true Europeans" – as Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass calls them.

In Europe, millions are born condemned – this is a European dilemma. ✘

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