



Is this a stereotype?

*A tool for fighting stereotypes towards
Roma*



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Appendix

The representation of Roma in Media, by Karin Waringo, Chief Executive Officer of the European Roma and Travellers Forum, kindly authorized for Dosta! campaign



Stereotypes and prejudices

Stereotypes and prejudice are means for categorizing the world around us.

According to the definition of the Cambridge Dictionary, stereotypes are "a fixed idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong"; according to the same dictionary, prejudices are "an unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough thought or knowledge". In other words, stereotypes are preconceptions and clichés, while prejudices are irrational feelings of fear and dislike. They can be understood as filters which somehow protect us against information overflow and allow us to judge people without knowing them personally or only superficially: they limit our view on what the reality is.

In this sense one could argue that stereotypes and prejudice have a positive function as they enable us to make decisions quickly. Very often, however, stereotypes are used to justify and support the beliefs and values of the majority population. The 'common' is perceived as the 'normal' and things done by distinct social groups or minorities are devaluated when they do not conform to these 'norms'. One of the most striking elements of stereotypes and prejudice is that they are usually **created by the powerful and applied to the weak**, who cannot control the way they are perceived by others nor are they able to change these perceptions. A common saying has it that stereotypes are usually true. Whenever a true aspect of a stereotype is found this aspect justifies and reinforces the stereotype.

Politicians and media very often make use of stereotypes. Playing with negative feelings or fears is a good way to win an election or to sell a paper. People normally use stereotypes to define and justify the status quo. The ones who suffer from stereotypes are not those whose fears are exploited but those being presented in a negative light, the stereotyped.

Anti-Tsiganism, anti-Gypsyism, and Romaphobia

Anti-Tsiganism, anti-Gypsyism, and Romaphobia essentially mean the same thing:

... a distinct type of racist ideology. It is, at the same time, similar, different, and intertwined with many other types of racism. Anti-Gypsyism itself is a complex social phenomenon which manifests itself through violence, hate speech, exploitation, and discrimination in its most visible form.

[...] Anti-Gypsyism is a very specific form of racism, an ideology of racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and of institutionalised racism. It is fuelled by historical discrimination and the struggle to maintain power relations that permit advantages to majority groups. It is based, on the one hand, on imagined fears, negative stereotypes and myths and, on the other, on denial or



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erasure from the public conscience of a long history of discrimination against Roma¹.

The three terms do not vary in content but in usage. While anti-Gypsyism is the term most often used on the international level some Roma, especially those from Eastern Europe, prefer the term anti-Tsiganism as Tsigan is the term used in their region. Both terms, Gypsy and Tsigan, are pejorative in nature, which is why some scholars prefer the term Romaphobia.

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Gypsyism

All across Europe, the Jews and the Roma have historically been the two minorities that have suffered most from discrimination on grounds of their supposed "inferiority" and the subsequent negative stereotyping attached to this alleged status of inferiority.

Both minorities originated from outside Europe, the Jews from the area of what is now Israel and Palestine and from the southern shores of the Black Sea, and the Roma from India. Both migrated due to persecution, both have suffered down the ages at the hands of the majorities in Europe and both were considered inferior and many of both groups were exterminated by the nazis during the second world war. Both suffered under the communist regimes in Europe but Roma still experience discrimination, hatred and prejudice while anti-Semitism is today, fortunately, condemned at all levels (society, politicians). Anti-Gypsyism is even not recognised as an existent phenomenon and therefore not condemned.

Aspects of anti-Gypsyism

Dehumanization and reducing the Roma to their 'Gypsyess' are core elements of anti-Gypsyism. Roma are seen as less than human and thus not morally entitled to human rights. This dehumanization is not based on misconceptions or ignorance but **appears to be a legitimising myth that justifies the majority's abusive behaviour of Roma who are not perceived as individuals but simply as 'Gypsies'**. Very often, instead of talking about the problems that the Roma face, there is talk about 'the Gypsy problem' due to their 'Gypsyess'. 'Gypsyess' itself is defined by negative means only.

¹ Source: Valeriu Nicolae, ergonetwork; For the full version of this definition by Valeriu Nicolae go to <http://www.ergonetwork.org/antigypsyism.htm>

The Documentation Centre of German Sinti and Roma and the Land Associations of Sinti and Roma launched initiatives in various Länder and developed materials for schools and educational institutions. These materials deal with discussing and analyzing racism and with the existing patterns of clichés and prejudices regarding the Sinti and Roma. They also serve for analyzing and assessing the history of the Sinti and Roma genocide perpetrated by National Socialism. The Baden-Wurtemberg Land Association of German Sinti and Roma, both on its own initiative and in co-operation with schools and other institutions, carried out projects for analyzing and assessing "anti-tsiganism" (anti-Gypsy hostility). The European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF: www.ertf.org) is working on its own definition of this phenomenon.



Stereotypes and prejudices about Roma are very often at odds with rational thought. Many times they reveal more about the cultural background of the person talking about Roma than about 'Gypsies'. When making a list about the ideas that people have about Roma, many things seem absurd but nonetheless people stick to them as though they were unquestionable truths. There are many examples in history of absurd assumptions being at the foundations of a society's world view (eg. the earth is flat), but many people, especially forward thinking people, are often unwilling to accept that this might still be the case today.

Stereotypes and prejudices against Roma, and thus anti-Gypsyism, are so deeply rooted in European culture that they are most often not conceived as such. Those who suffer from them have to engage in the tiring task of convincing others that they are being discriminated for no reason. **One obvious sign of anti-Gypsyism is the fact that many people who have never had close, personal contact with Roma are nonetheless able to provide a detailed picture of them. How they look, live, and behave. Very often the behaviour of one individual is automatically applied to all 'Gypsies'. The (negative) behaviour is attributed to Romani culture, not to the individual in question.**

Overcoming anti-Gypsyism

Anti-Gypsyism can only be overcome if people admit to its existence. Nothing can change as long as people are not aware that it is a reality: The problem is not the Roma but anti-Gypsyism!

The role of the media



The media, sometimes unconsciously, too often consciously, spread anti-Roma feelings. In case of reporting a crime committed by a person mentioning the ethnicity does not have any positive impact. By the same token, patronizing attitude is also harmful. In addition, media generally do not pay attention to stories in which the Roma are the victims, as it is the case for racist attacks or hate speeches

pronounced by politicians towards Roma, all of these acts that media could help to condemn.

Media can be a valuable tool of awareness raising and promotion of diversity and multiculturalism, if committed to change. Instead of focusing on negative headlines about Roma emphasis should be put on finding positive stories and on



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giving the Roma a voice. **There are lawyers, teachers, politicians and doctors of Roma ethnicity**, so why not reporting about them? Ask those whose stories usually remain unheard!²

Is this a stereotype?



'Roma are freedom loving, easy going, and carefree nomads, wearing colourful clothes and lots of golden jewellery. They are passionate dancers, gifted artisans, and great musicians. Their women are beautiful and seductive like Georges Bizet's Carmen or Esmeralda from the 'Hunchback of Notre Dame'. They tell fortune and can curse you if you do not give them any money. They are poor and beg. They do nothing to

improve their own situation and steal geese and chickens. They prefer to live on welfare than to work. They have more children than they can feed and clothe.

One day they will probably "out-baby" the majority population. Girls get married at a very early age, the men beat their wives and exploit their children. At night they dance around camp fires and sometimes they steal babies in order to sell them. They do not have a religion, are dirty, and a burden to society. They do not want to integrate and marginalize themselves. They are most happy when they are away from non-Roma. They do not want to be citizens of the country they live in and whenever they migrate, they ruin the reputation of the country that they have come from. They like to live close to trash dumps and their houses are very dirty. They are afraid of water, allergic to soap, and do not know how to use a water toilet. They are a source of disease. They do not know how to read and write, and somehow are not interested in learning it or in going to school. They must be mentally deficient. Maybe they are not even human beings. They live in huge family groups and do not mind to share one room with ten people. They are greedy and never satisfied. They are lazy and not trust worthy. They are genetically predestined to become thieves and drug dealers. And anyway, the term 'Roma' is just an invention and they are actually called Gypsies or Tsigani.'

There are very many stereotypes about Roma. You have probably heard many of them yourself. **Read here to learn more about the most common misconceptions about Roma.**

² On this topic read the article : The representation of Roma in Media, by Karin Waringo, Chief Executive Officer of the European Roma and Travellers Forum, appended. Kindly authorized for publication for Dosta ! campaign.



Stereotype n°1: 'Gypsies' are 'just Gypsies'



Roma are often perceived as a homogenous group and many times they are reduced to their 'Gypsiness'. They are not perceived as individuals but simply as 'Gypsies'. Some people can produce the most outrageous stereotypes about Roma but then claim that they know one 'who is not like that!'. Talking badly about Roma damages all Roma including the one who is supposed to be 'different'.

Roma who do not fit the image that others have about 'Gypsies' are often not perceived as Roma. In reality **there is not a single Roma who could meet all the stereotypes that exist about them.**

There is a huge heterogeneity among the Roma themselves. What is true for one group might be different for another. Differentiating only between 'traditional' and 'integrated' Roma would be too easy: what is true for all the populations is true for Roma as well: **generalisations are never true and the differences between the individuals are greater than the differences between ethnic groups.** Roma live in many different environments, speak different languages and different dialects of Romani, they can be found on all five continents, and have adopted many of the habits of the majority population of the countries they live in. They are engaged in numerous occupations, are members of different religions, and their financial and educational situation also depends from person to person, from group to group, and from the general situation of the country they live in, **just as for any other citizen!**

Stereotype n°2: Nomadism



Roma are often perceived as carefree nomads with no significant worries: free to do whatever they want to, freedom loving, and easy going, living in tents or in caravans and dancing around fires every night. When they are hungry they just steal a chicken from a local peasant.

This almost romantic picture of Roma life is very far from reality.

Only 20% of European Roma today is still nomadic, almost exclusively in Western Europe. In previous centuries nomadism was almost never a matter of free choice but of



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persecution. Continuous expulsion is a main feature in Roma history. Throughout the middle ages, Roma were often mistaken for Muslims and encountered the hatred of the Christian Europeans. They were not allowed to settle down or to work in many countries and thus had to find other ways of making a living. Finding a place to stay, a home is a common theme in Roma tales. During the Holocaust Roma were one of the primary targets of the Nazi regime and were sent to concentration camps all over Europe. After the end of communism many Roma fled from ethnic persecution. Again this was conceived as nomadism rather than an attempt to save their lives. Since the fall of the iron curtain countless Roma in eastern and south Eastern Europe have fallen victim to violent attacks, evictions, destruction of property, and even murder.

During the centuries settling down often meant having to abandon Roma traditions and culture. Many Roma did this, thus choosing the path of assimilation. Most of those who would have preferred to maintain a nomadic way of life fell victim to forced assimilation policies as early as in the 18th century. During communism the majority of the remaining nomads were settled down by force.

Stereotype n° 3: Music and dancing



Especially in literature dancing is considered a genuine feature of Roma traditional culture and used to represent them as being 'exotic'. Roma, however, do not habitually dance, unless dancing is a common tradition of the country they live in (for example in Spain and in South Eastern European countries).

Music is much more a skill or trade which served as a survival strategy than a main feature of Romani culture. **Not all Roma are musicians** but certain groups have specialized in it. Some have become famous after carrying out studies for making of music a profession. In many countries Roma musicians are often hired for weddings or other special occasions by the majority population. At these events they play whatever the 'Gadje' want to hear rather than traditional Roma music. In addition specialists draw a clear distinction between the non-Roma folk music played in the Romani manner and real Romani traditional music – *Romane purane gilia*.

Stereotype n°4: Fortune telling

A common folk believe has it that Roma can curse you, for example, when you do not give them money. Others believe that they can put you into a trance and will then steal your valuables.



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Roma do have in their traditions a belief system that includes omen and curses but its nature is completely different. Those few Roma who practice fortune telling do so only for the benefit of "gadje" but never among themselves.

Stereotype n°5: Traditional crafts



One of the most well known crafts practiced by Roma is that of a blacksmith. They probably acquired this skill in Armenia as many of the Romani terms which refer to this craft derive from the Armenian language. One of the main reasons why Roma were enslaved in the Romanian principalities was because they were skilled workers.

During the 500 years of slavery other crafts were also developed. Until today Romanian Roma categorize themselves according to which profession they practice. Many Roma family names such as Gabor (smith) and Ciurar (sieve maker) refer to professions. Other professions which are typically linked to Roma are training bears (ursurari), searching for gold in the rivers (aurari), or spoon making (linguran).

As many Roma were doing metalwork 'Gadje' often said that Roma know the secrets of iron and of copper. Since they also practice different forms of wood work it can be added that Roma also know the secret of wood!

The reality is very different: Roma are European citizens and therefore, as any other citizen, they look for job opportunities that can enable them to fulfil their aspirations. When they have the chance of overcoming society or institutional discrimination they are employed in any sector of the job market. If those who are employed are often considered as "exceptions" is just because discrimination is the common rule.



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Stereotype n°6: Customs



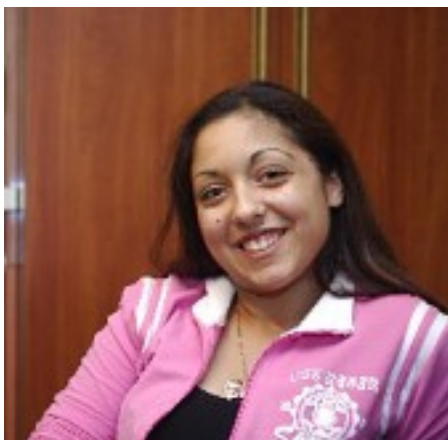
When talking about Roma customs one has to keep in mind the Roma's diversity. There are a few customs which are similar among all Roma who still follow a traditional way of life but there are also very many customs that differ from group to group or even sometimes from family to family.

Customs among Roma just vary as the customs of the population of any European country vary from region to region.

In addition, one has to keep in mind that the majority of European Roma no longer lead a traditional way of life and do not follow or even know about the 'old' customs.

In popular culture Roma are often depicted in a romantic way as beautiful, colourfully dressed people, proud and independent, life-loving and passionate, carefree and enjoying the simple pleasures in life. Their music is passionate and their women seductive. This picture is especially prevalent in literature and in paintings and is perpetuated today by groups such as 'medieval' societies or 'Renaissance' organizations, but cannot in any case be considered as the reality of today's European Roma³.

Stereotype n°7: Dress



In the minds of many, all Roma wear colourful dresses and a lot of golden jewellery. Today only very few Roma still dress in this way. Among traditional groups men quite often adapt the way of dressing to their environment. Since the head is regarded as the body's focal point, they might draw attention to it by wearing large hats and wide moustaches. On special occasions, a good suit and a brightly coloured neck scarf might be worn.

Flowers, colourful skirts, blouses, and head

³ To learn more about actual Roma customs go to <http://www.geocities.com/~patrin/tradition.htm>.

scarves are not specific to Roma women but can be found everywhere in the East from India and Iran up to the Balkans.

Traditional Roma women had the habit of wearing long, colourful skirts, often consisting of several layers. In some traditional communities married women still demonstrate this fact by wearing a *diklo*, a headscarf. Traditional Roma women usually allow their hair to grow long and braid it. Jewellery was used not for its beauty but for its intrinsic value, as in other countries of the East. In times were bank accounts were unknown, carrying your valuables on you own person was seen as safer than carrying it in a bow.

Traditionally, acquired wealth was converted into jewellery or coins called *galbi*. Among some groups coins were worn on clothing or adornments or even braided into the women's hair.

The colours of clothes have different meanings. Red, for example, is the colour prevalent at marriage ceremonies. It does not symbolize only love, as in the West, but individual sacrifice for the collective weal. Instead of individual selfish love, traditional marriage blesses the long-term alliance between families, which become *hanamik* (in-laws).

Stereotype n°8: Purity



Roma are often regarded as dirty. They are accused to be allergic to soap, afraid of water, and a source of disease. **These are definitely stereotypes.** Some Roma have limited access to fresh water because they live in isolated places without water pipes, plumbing, or indoor toilets. Finding a better place to live or improving living conditions is often difficult or impossible. The responsibility of reversing this situation stands on

States and Governments which have the obligation to grant to every citizen the access to the basic social rights.

Cleanliness and purity were among the highest values of Roma traditions, both in the physical as well as in the ritual purity sense. There were very specific rules about personal hygiene, washing dishes and clothes, and about what kind of water to use. Taking a bath in a bath tub for example was forbidden, as this would mean to lie in ones own dirt.

Despite this, it is true that the life expectancy of Roma in many countries is 15 years less than that of the majority population, but again, the responsibility for this is not on the Roma who are simply the victims of lack of access to adequate utilities and to health care.



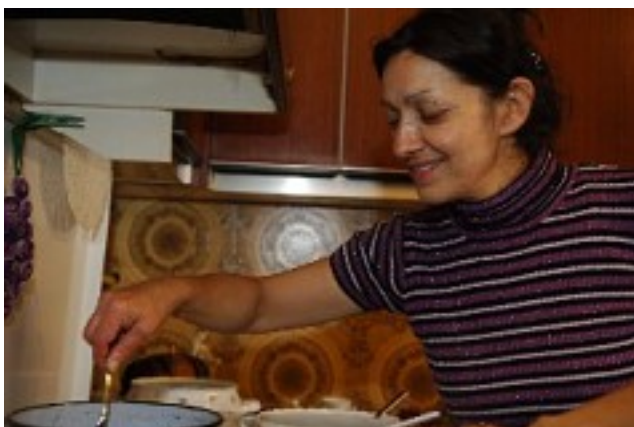
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Stereotype n°9: Religion

Many people think that Roma do not have a religion. This is not true. Roma usually adopt the religion of the majority population that they live among. There are Roma of Muslim faith as well as of all kind of Christian dominations: Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Evangelist etc.

Only among some traditional groups, formal religion is complemented by faith in the supernatural, in omens, and curses. These beliefs vary among different Roma groups and are influenced by the most common superstitions of the countries they live in⁴.

Stereotype n°10: Women



There are two main ways of stereotyping Roma women. The first one portrays Roma women as passionate dancers, ready to seduce any man, fiery and exotic, immoral and lusty; the other as old fortune tellers ready to curse you or to put you into trance if you do not give them any money.

The second view depicts Roma women as dirty, having too many usually naked children, being

beaten by their husbands and exploited by their wider family. They marry at age 11 and have the first child at age 13.

Concerning the first view it has to be pointed out that traditional Roma have very strong moral values. Premarital intercourse as well as the betrayal of the husband are traditionally unacceptable. In addition, some scholars argue that those elements of Roma dancing, which are often seen as seductive, are in fact relic of Indian temple dances, which were not intended to be seductive at all. Music, dancing, and fortune telling, which are seen as integral elements of Roma culture by many, were in fact a means of making a living.

Concerning the second view, the difficult living conditions which many Roma face have to be taken into account. Lack of utilities such as running water, having no clothes for children, or eventual cases of domestic violence are indicators of poverty but not of 'Gypsiness'.

⁴ To learn more about them go to <http://www.geocities.com/~patrin/beliefs.htm>.

Stereotype n°11: Children



Since birth rates among Roma are generally higher than among non-Roma, it is feared in many countries that Roma will out-baby the majority population. No one looks at the positive aspect of this, i.e. that Roma, as well as the immigrant population, indirectly help to combat Europe's population ageing.

Roma children are often seen as filthy beggars or pick pockets. Their parents do not seem to look after them well and are assumed to be ready to exploit them. Roma parents love their children just as much as any other parents. Children are adored and cherished and the whole family feels responsible to raise a child. The ways Roma children are raised might differ from that of the majority population and reflects the harsh reality in which Roma live in. Roma children grow up in traditional families and mostly learn by example and not by teaching. This learning method is also used by other people who live in harsh environments and cannot dedicate a lot of time to teaching (for example the Inuit, who are pejoratively called Eskimos). Learning by example includes processes of observation, imitation, and, later on, participation.

If some Roma children are seen begging or caught pick pocketing, this should be regarded as an indicator of the harsh social climate in which their specific community has to live. In this respect, it is interesting to quote the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs, Mr. Giuliano Amato, who said –during a visit to a Roma settlement in Roma, Italy, on 15 August 2006- *“the recognition of Roma rights is a European topic which concerns everybody; Italy is one of the countries where the Roma minority is not recognised; nonetheless Italian Roma are ready to be part of Italian society but they face too many difficulties for integrating the school system and getting a job. One cannot simply believe that Roma children are criminals by nature: one should look at the reasons and conditions that push some Roma children to become criminals”*⁵.

⁵ Source: http://passineldeserto.blogosfere.it/2006/08/amato_occorre_r.html



Stereotype n° 12: Financial situation



Roma are usually conceived as either extremely poor or as incredibly rich. If they are poor then this must be due to their laziness. If they are rich then this is most likely a 'proof' of drug dealing or other forms of illegal businesses. In reality, poverty nowadays is often due to the fact that Roma have been left out of the post-communist political and economic transitions. Still today, they are discriminated and often

excluded from the school system (see stereotype 13); they face discrimination when seeking for a job, and in many countries they are segregated in geographically isolated settlements. In some cases, their situation excludes them from the social protection benefits (institutional discrimination). As a consequence, many Roma today are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion which cannot be considered as their own fault.⁶

Stereotype n° 13: Education



Many non-Roma tend to believe that Roma do not value education. This is, to a certain extent, true when it comes to very traditional families and only with regard to formal education.

What is true is that poor education levels today are a major obstacle for Roma to access the labour market. Educating Roma children is thus seen as essential in

overcoming poverty.

However, Roma children who want to go to school have to face many obstacles. For those Roma who live in isolated settlements, the way to school alone becomes a hurdle. Furthermore, parents might lack the financial means for

⁶ For further details go to:

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTROMA/Resources/roma_in_expanding_europe.pdf,

[Report on "Access of Roma to Employment in SEE", 2005](#)

[Report on "Access of Roma to Employment" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004](#)

[Report on "Access of Roma to Employment" in the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 2004](#)

[Report on "Access of Roma to Employment" in Serbia and Montenegro, 2004](#)



buying proper clothes, shoes, school supplies, and food for their children. Exclusion from the part of the teachers and schools is also an issue. Many Roma children are forced to attend separated classes in order not to mix with children coming from the majority population. In many countries Roma children are overrepresented in special schools or classes for mentally disabled children. In 2006 several anti-Roma demonstrations organised by the parents of non-Roma students took place in different European countries at the entrance of de-segregated schools in which Roma children were enrolled.

In many countries Roma children are overrepresented in special schools or classes for mentally disabled children. This is often part of public policy: in some areas the special schools are the only ones which have a school bus and offer free school lunches. Also the children whose mother tongue is Romani, might for example not completely control the majority language: in these cases the presence of a Roma school mediator could help in making the children learn more rapidly; unfortunately, the role of the Roma school mediator is not institutionalised. Parents are often recommended to have their children sent to special classes without receiving an explanation of the whole meaning and consequences of this.

In addition, text books often spread a negative image of Roma or completely ignore their role in history. And of course, Roma history is not included in the schools'curricula.

Even those Roma, who go to regular schools, prestigious high schools or university, often face discrimination. Many teachers and professors think that it is shameful to teach Roma students at their renowned institution. For this reason Roma students are often discouraged from going to high school or from applying for a good one. They are often told that they won't 'make it' anyways.

Stereotype n° 14: Employment



Roma are often seen as work shy and as voluntarily living on welfare rather than looking for a job. This picture is far from the reality of most Roma. There would be no point in denying that there are some Roma who prefer to live on welfare just as much as this phenomenon can be found in other ethnic groups, included in the majority population. The crucial question, however, is not if Roma want to work but what

kind of employment they can find, if any: Roma are virtually invisible in the service sector. There are almost no Roma taxi drivers, shop assistants, kitchen workers, waiters, or door men. It goes beyond the imagination of many to employ a Roma house cleaner, let alone a baby sitter.



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If Roma find employment then it is usually in physically demanding, often dangerous, and badly paid jobs. In many cases the transport to and from work already consumes the biggest part of the salary. Roma are hired as garbage collectors, field hands, or as forestry labourers, thus in the least prestigious work places. Legal work is often denied, forcing Roma to work black. While unemployment rates are generally high in Eastern Europe, the rate of Roma unemployment (in some settlements as high as 100%) in no way compares to that of the majority population. Improving educational levels alone will not be enough for ensuring better employment of Roma. A change in attitude also has to take place on the side of the employers and of the National Employment Agencies. Nothing can change as long as common stereotypes about Roma are not being questioned. What speaks against hiring a Roma to do qualitative and responsible work? Many non Roma cannot support the idea of hiring (a qualified) Roma for superior positions. Employers are often unwilling to even hire Roma as contract workers and thus force them to work black.

Stereotype n° 15: Housing



Many people seem to believe that Roma prefer to live in unhygienic housing conditions. While there are surely many Roma who live without running water, indoor toilets, electricity, and heating it would be hard to find a single Roma who would not like to exchange these conditions for a nice house or apartment. Many Roma live close to trash dumps, or in isolated settlements without utilities because these are the only

places where they are allowed to stay.

Unlawful forced and collective evictions of Roma are a weekly phenomenon in Europe (often not reported by Media), clearly infringing the obligations undertaken by European countries through the signature of international treaties.⁷

Improving the infrastructure of Roma settlements is one of the top goals of today's Council of Europe policies. Unfortunately many governments are reluctant or slow to invest into better housing for Roma⁸.

⁷ See for example Council of Europe recommendation on improving the Housing conditions of Roma where it is stated: "Member states should establish a legal framework that conforms with international human rights standards, to ensure effective protection against unlawful forced and collective evictions and to control strictly the circumstances in which legal evictions may be carried out. In the case of lawful evictions, Roma must be provided with appropriate alternative accommodation, if needed, except in cases of force majeure"; more information: http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/documentation/recommendations/rehousing20054_en.asp

⁸ From August 2006 till November evictions occurred in Russia, Albania, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Greece and Slovenia



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Stereotype n° 16: Roma and society

Roma are often depicted as untrustworthy and unwilling to integrate into society. But when too many non-Roma do not trust Roma it is very difficult to continue willing to be part of a whole. 'Integration' usually means the loss of Roma culture without being fully accepted by the majority population. Even educated Roma who have lived inside the majority population all their lives often face exclusion. The fear of being rejected is sometimes so present that some Roma have to hide their ethnic origin in order to continue living in the society instead of on the fringes of it. As long as marrying a Roma or allowing one's children to do so is still a taboo for many, there can be no talk about the Roma's unwillingness to integrate. Self-marginalization, when it is the case, is and has been a survival strategy rather than a free choice.

Passivity



Many people accuse Roma of not doing anything in order to improve their own situation. This accusation concerns their financial situation as well as employment, education, or housing.

One has to keep in mind, however, that half of Europe's Roma were enslaved for 500 years. During this time learning how to read and write or revolting against inhuman treatment was forbidden and harshly punished. Killings of Roma under slavery were so common that many cases were not even registered. Even today violence against Roma often goes unnoticed. Centuries of forced passivity make it hard to encourage human rights movements today. Demanding your rights is still dangerous. Roma activists in many countries face harassment and physical violence by the authorities as well as by the police.

Reputation



In many eastern European countries the majority population claims that the Roma ruin their country's reputation when they migrate to other countries. Apart from the fact that reputation is not a concept used in Western politics, it is the treatment of the Roma and not the way that they behave, which can be held against the states, from which they have come.

In a recent poll 70% said that Roma should be denied the right to foreign travel, even when all legal conditions are met.

The Romanians also view Roma as tarnishing the country's international image and, in particular harming the country's prospects for integration into Europe. This was aggravated last year when high profile articles appeared in the



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French media claiming that Romania's Roma immigrants were responsible for rising crime rates in France. Other European media followed suit. As a result, the French government imposed stiff visa restrictions that affected all Romanians. The French government has since withdrawn these restrictions but damage to the Roma's image remains⁹.

In September 2006 a member of the European parliament, of Roma ethnicity, fell victim to the racist attacks of a Bulgarian parliamentary observer. Since this incident happened on the day when it was decided that Bulgaria and Romania would join the European Union the question arose if human and minority rights are really valued in Bulgaria.

Crime



Many people seem to believe that Roma are genetically inclined to commit crimes. This is nonsense. In many cases Roma are the first to be suspected of having committed a crime but the last to be rehabilitated when proven innocent. Whenever Roma do commit crimes the whole community is stigmatised and therefore judged and condemned for the act of an individual.

Theft

Common stereotypes depict all Roma as thieves. This is again the consequence of judging a whole community for the acts of individuals who just belong to the community. Every society has its thieves and criminals, but not for that the whole group is systematically stigmatised, as it happens to Roma.

Recognition of the crimes of which Roma were victims is, on the contrary, hard to obtain. **Does anyone ever think about the things that have been stolen from the Roma?** Roma were victims of the Holocaust: their valuables, especially gold, were taken from them before they were sent to death. In today's post communist transition period, Roma often fall victim to pogroms or unjust forced evictions, during which their property is often being destroyed¹⁰.

⁹ Source: NDI report 'Roma Political Participation in Romania' February 2003

¹⁰ For more detailed information about forced evictions visit the homepage of the Roma and Travellers Division of the Council of Europe: www.coe.int/romatravellers.



Roma steal babies



The myth that Roma steal babies is centuries old. Even today it is often repeatedly told. In 2006, Romanian press reported about a Roma women who had kidnapped a non Roma child. It later turned out that the women was not Roma but Romanian. Of course this fact did not hit the news. When Roma children are kidnapped by non-Roma, fall victim to violence, or are murdered this is hardly ever becomes a public scandal.

Drugs

There surely are some Roma who deal in drugs just as much as you can find drug dealers in basically any country in the world. Roma are not genetically inclined to deal with drugs nor is drug dealing a part of Roma culture. When it does occur it should be regarded as yet another indicator of the hardships Roma face when trying to enter the 'normal' work market and of the resulting poverty, just as **it happens to all vulnerable groups, including those belonging to the majority population.**

Conclusions

Did we convince you? So now help us in breaking down prejudices towards Roma!

Dosta!



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