

**European Commission Meeting on Roma  
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Keynote Address**

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At the first EC meeting on the Romani people in September 2008, the Chairman José Manuel Barroso said “the dramatic situation of the Roma in Europe cannot be solved in Brussels”, and he urged that it “not become just another discussion meeting”. Its only conclusion was the decision to hold another meeting. So now we find ourselves in Brussels once more, and solving the dramatic situation is precisely what we are here to discuss. We won’t leave here either with anything solved, but we will keep on trying and perhaps we can explore some new directions that will lead to the solutions we all seek.

By way of initiating this very important meeting I have been asked to share some thoughts with you on the current situation of Roma from both a contemporary and a historical perspective, and to provide some thoughts on the main elements that should be considered when planning future policies and programmes for Roma inclusion.

The past two decades have seen enormous changes confronting both the Romani people, and those who study us and work with us. For so many Romanies, these changes have meant adapting once again to new and typically hostile surroundings, seeking security in employment, education, housing and in health and legal care. For the non-Romani world it has meant making room for newcomers who arrive with a complex baggage of stereotypes and a legacy of persecution.

Since the collapse of communism twenty years ago hundreds of thousands of Roma from eastern Europe have left to come West in search of a better life. For westerners, a colourful and largely inoffensive population that was very much restricted in the public mind to storybooks and film suddenly became a real, and evidently menacing, presence. This has not just affected Western Europe; in countries overseas too this has been the case; we need only to look at the hostile reception of Roma from the Czech Republic and from Hungary in Canada as an example.

There were some 180,000 Romanies in Italy four years ago, but today there is less than a quarter of that number. Amongst them, those from Romania are fewer than 6,000, 4,500 of whom are incarcerated, mainly for begging, theft, resisting arrest and for trespassing. These are, incidentally,

exactly the same crimes as those listed in Dillmann's 1905 *Zigeunerbuch* which paved the way for the Nazi genocide. There are no reliable figures for how many Roma are now stateless throughout Europe, although estimates place the numbers at 10,000 in Bosnia, 1,500 in Montenegro, 17,000 in Serbia, and 4,090 in Slovenia.

Reports issued by the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights make it crystal clear: racism against Roma is everywhere on the increase throughout Europe. Today, the Roma are just as poor and marginalized, as unemployed, and as badly housed as they ever were. They are just as far from living the normal lives of citizens in their own countries as they were before the EU's expansion, and comparisons have been made with the atmosphere in Germany during the 1930s. During the past two years, at least ten Roma have been murdered—and those are only the reported cases. An estimated 80% of incidents of anti-Gypsyism go unreported. Evicted families left stranded in the road after their settlements have been demolished are especially vulnerable to acts of violence from hostile gangs. Beatings and rapes are commonplace.

In September 2001 a BBC news release stated that the Council of Europe "issued a blistering condemnation of Europe's treatment of the Roma Gypsy community, saying they are subject to racism, discrimination and violence . . . the United Nations says they pose Europe's most serious human rights problem." An editorial in *The Economist* in 2005 described Romanies in Europe as being "at the bottom of every socio-economic indicator: the poorest, the most unemployed, the least educated, the shortest-lived, the most welfare dependent, the most imprisoned and the most segregated." An EU report called it "one of the most important political, social and humanitarian questions in today's Europe". We are half way through the Decade of Roma Inclusion, but clearly the results of efforts to bring change have still to be judged, and we're not doing too well so far.

Those who went before us were equally unsuccessful; I was reading a report recently published forty years ago in the journal *Soviet Studies* that described the situation of Roma in one particular eastern bloc country. It claimed that while the socialist system had created all of the prerequisites necessary to deal with the "Gypsy problem," those "prerequisites" were not working. That "Gypsy problem" was described as the Roma's "lack of responsiveness to Marxist deterministic formulae," blamed upon their having inherited pre-communist notions of capitalism, and with one or two exceptions, Gypsies were still "beggars, thieves, violent and a scourge in the countryside," to quote from one government report. We were to blame because we were deliberately being antisocial by clinging to our distinctive

identity, since as a people, they said, we came from the same racial stock as the non-Romani population. This contradicts, incidentally, a Romanian foreign minister, who stated publicly not very long ago that criminality was a racial characteristic that set us apart from the rest of the population. We did not satisfy Stalin's definition of nationhood, those reports maintained, because we "neither possessed common territory nor maintained a common culture and economic way of life." Marxist ideology gave Roma a social identity, not an ethnic one.

Four decades of communism were not able to solve their "Gypsy problem," and the two decades that have passed since then have not accomplished a great deal either. We have seen a number of positive changes it is true, for example the Czech government recently banned the Workers' Party in that country as xenophobic and a threat to democracy, mentioning specifically its attacks on Roma. But for each move forward, there are others that operate against us. The French government has just come under fire for failing to provide adequate accommodation and voting rights for Travellers; Switzerland's most recent report to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities said that it was not considering ratifying the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 because it was concerned that the treaty might apply to Roma; Canada is planning to draft a new immigration law that will give the Minister of Immigration the power to declare which country is safe in Europe, and then rule that because of the new category refugees cannot come to Canada from that country. We can predict that they will put all of the EU countries on this list, which means that Roma will not be able to go to Canada as refugees under the new law.

It is almost predictable that any formal report on Roma will use the word problem; a quick Internet search for the words "Gypsy problem" that I made when I was writing this presentation last month brought over twenty-two thousand returns. Let me repeat that: an Internet search for the words "Gypsy problem" brought over twenty-two thousand returns.

It should perhaps be more openly acknowledged that we also have a gadjo problem; after all, those 22,000 references on the Internet did not originate with us. But the reality is that we Romanies and you gadjé have a whole lot of problems with each other. And if they are to be dealt with successfully, just as in a successful marriage the key words are communication and compromise.

I live, like an increasing number of Romani people, with a foot in two worlds, and I can identify a number of these issues from both perspectives. The non-Romani world sees us as the eternal outsiders, not wanting to fit in

yet wanting what it has, living by deception and theft, taking everything while contributing nothing except perhaps entertainment—loud, dirty and leaving a mess behind besides. These are some of the “Gypsy problems” the gadje have with us.

From our position, our overwhelming problem with gadje is racism. This directly underlies and supports the problems that it holds up—those of poverty, those in employment, schooling, health care and housing, and in human and civil rights. Poverty amongst some Romani populations is absolutely overwhelming. In 2006 a World Bank report said “Roma are the most prominent poverty risk group in many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. They are poorer than other groups, more likely to fall into poverty, and more likely to remain poor. In some cases poverty rates for Roma are more than ten times that of non-Roma. A recent survey found that nearly 80 per cent of Roma in Romania and Bulgaria were living on less than \$4.30 per day . . . even in Hungary, one of the most prosperous accession countries, 40 per cent of Roma live below the poverty line.” George Orwell wrote that “the first effect of poverty is that it kills thought.” Seeing ourselves as victims, though, is a loser’s game; we must use our own skills to change our situation, and if we don’t have those skills then we must get them. Ultimately we must rely on ourselves. The outside world is not going to solve our problems for us and if we expect it to do so, it will be a very long wait.

So what to do?

A large sign in Romani on my office wall reads Education is the Passport to Freedom. I firmly believe this, and I urge that we make education our highest priority in the discussions that follow here in Brussels. I will not elaborate upon the weightier issues that stem from racism, their solution will follow in due course once proper educational programmes have been designed and implemented. Just as issues of employment and housing exist because of racism, their solution will come about because of education. And I am not speaking simply of education for Romani people, but also for the non-Romani populations.

I made the point in a recently published essay that it is the vagueness regarding Romani identity that has allowed it to be so casually manipulated by outsiders, and this brings me to the main thrust of my talk this morning. If we knew who we were, and had more status allowing us to be heard, we would have a say in how we are portrayed. If a journalist wants to say we originated in Egypt, as one recently did, who are we to say she was wrong, and what would we say to correct her, and where would that protest even be heard or acknowledged? Because our history was lost to us many years ago and we

thus cannot provide it, the non-Romani world has not shirked in creating various identities for us. I don't believe that we can make history unless we know our history; Alain Besançon has said that "a man without memory is of absolute plasticity. He is recreated at all moments. He cannot look behind himself, nor can he feel a continuity with himself, nor can he preserve his own identity." As long as the storybook Gypsy influences the journalist's and the novelist's portrayal of us, as long as the instant experts in the media feel confident that what they write will go unchallenged, as long as their imagination has free rein, we will continue to be "recreated at all moments," as Besançon says, never in control of our own identity.

Without education we cannot be articulate; we lack a loud enough voice. We complain, but are not heard. Five members of the Roma Civic Alliance attending a conference on Roma in Bucharest recently were made to leave when they criticized the government's inaction. Their voice was stifled. Without education we cannot tell people who we are, and where we come from, and how we have had the strength and determination to survive centuries of persecution, slavery and genocide and still be here. When we have our own educators, lawyers and doctors, we will no longer need to rely on the outside world, and go to the gadje with our hands out. As long as we continue to do that, we will never be respected. We don't want the non-Romani world to love us, particularly, but we do want its respect.

Educational curricula for Roma must be carefully planned. Will they promote integration or assimilation? The older generations must be comfortable in the knowledge that it is not turning their children into gadje, which is a great fear among American Romanies. In turn, education about the Romani people for state schools must present our history and culture in a uniform way.

I have already mentioned the media. While they could be a powerful ally, they are overwhelmingly just the opposite. A quarter century ago Kenedi Janós wrote "the mass media, in a veiled, and often less-veiled form, goad opinion in an anti-Gypsy direction." Newspapers disseminate opinion on a regular basis as well as news. Newspapers make people's minds up for them. Newspapers create attitudes. When the biggest daily paper in Romania, *Evenimentul Zilei* wrote that "Gypsies are believed to be genetically inclined to become criminals" it was repeating Hitler's rationale for the extermination of Romanies in the Third Reich. When another Romanian daily, the *Cronica Romana*, advised customers not to do business with any salesman because "the colour of his skin" is an indication of his being "untrustworthy," the message is clear. And this is not an attitude restricted only to central and

eastern Europe. From England headlines such as “Gypsies! You Can’t Come In!” in the *Sunday Express* or the *Sun’s* “How long before we kick the whole lot out?” for example, fueled public hostility, and a marked jump in anti-Gypsy public opinion. I was stunned to learn that the Foreign Press Association has just presented the BBC production *Gypsy Child Thieves* with its Media Award for the best Television Story of the Year. The irresponsible move on the part of the BBC aside, in showing this for the second time despite outrage from Romani organizations following its first broadcast six months ago, the Foreign Press Association’s claim that its purpose is to “continually strive to enhance communication and understanding between the rich diversity of cultures of this world and the global community” is a travesty. No understanding of the situation of those children came from the documentary, and in no way did it present our “rich culture.” Instead it helped hammer down even more firmly the growing Romaphobia in Britain, the country where I was born, ensuring further hateful newspaper headlines. The documentary has just been shown in Italy and this country too, and complaints have been filed with the Belgian Centre for Equality and with the Media Supervisory Authority for Audiovisual Media in Belgium.

Fictional print media can also perpetuate stereotypes, though usually those of romance, magic, and mystery. Two recently published titles are Sasha White’s *Gypsy Heart*; the book’s cover reads “Can a man bent on settling down convince a free-spirited woman . . . to risk her Gypsy Heart? Warning: this book contains explicit sex explained in graphic detail with contemporary language,” and Isabella Jordan’s *Gypsies, Tramps and Heat: An Anthology of Erotic Romance*, tells the reader “Lose yourself in the dark eyes and crystal ball of a gypsy lover!”

Film also presents Romanies in a negative way specifically for entertainment. Now showing is the movie *Werewolf*; a year ago we were watching *Drag Me to Hell*, and before that *Thinner*. My students’ first exposure to Gypsies was through the Disney version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. There is an Internet link specifically for “Gypsy curse movies,” and typing that in on Google brings up 64,000 hits.

While there was a cursory reference in the BBC documentary to the shameful conditions experienced by Roma in today’s Europe, no attempt at analysis was made to explain why such a situation has come to exist, no explanation of the profound psychological legacy Romanian Roma have inherited from 550 years of slavery, indeed no mention of that slavery at all, when it was the former slave-owners who received compensation from the government for their loss, while no programmes were created to help

integrate the uneducated and penniless Romani ex-slaves into free society. There was no reference in that documentary either to the fact that after the Holocaust the Romani survivors of that genocide were turned away from the camps with no help, no war crimes reparations, to rebuild their shattered lives in a hostile world where laws against them were still in effect.

The Chinese say that the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right name. If we treat "Gypsies" as one people, one "community," we are simplifying a complex situation and ignoring the great differences that distinguish the different Romani populations. In July, 2007, *Newsweek International* ran a story entitled "All over the world, people are embracing the culture of the Roma people," but of course we have no single culture, and the cultures we do have are certainly not embraced by peoples all over the world. But it makes good copy. Finnish Kaale and Spanish Calé have more differences than similarities; Romanichals differ very considerably from the Kalderasha, and so on. Those differences have been used to deny Romani populations any shared ethnic identity, and instead to use social and behavioral criteria to define us. The quote from *Soviet Studies* I read earlier is an example of that kind of thinking, and I've repeated the words of the Czech sociologist, Jaroslav Sus, several times before, who claimed that it was an "utterly mistaken opinion that Gypsies form a nationality or a nation, that they have their own national culture, their own national language."

Instead of thinking negatively in terms of identity, about the things that make one group different from another, we must think instead of what all of us share, in terms of language, culture and ancestry. After all, those are things we came with into Europe. The characteristics that divide us now have all been acquired from the non-Romani world.

Let me then turn to what I think are the main issues that bear examination.

Firstly, do we proceed regarding Roma through-out Europe as ethnically-defined populations or as socially-defined populations? Clearly the latter has been the case so far, since both Romanies and non-Romanies have usually been grouped together, for example in the various Roma and Gypsy Traveller organizations and festivals. Certainly common cause is every reason for different groups to work together, and that should continue to be the case. But I maintain that not enough acknowledgment is made of the cultural distinctiveness of Romani peoples, distinctions that must be taken into account for example in the areas of teaching, or housing. The fact is that different Romani subgroups are not anxious to work with each other, given a

choice, let alone with non-Romani groups who, from the Romani point of view, are gadjé after all.

If Roma are to be regarded ethnically, then a number of questions immediately arise. Can we in fact speak about one Romani people? Well, the answer is both yes and no. Let me elaborate on that.

A military origin for Romanies is not a new idea; over the past one and a quarter centuries researchers, including de Goeje, Clarke, Leland, Burton, Kocha-nowski, Bhalla, Courthiade, Mróz, Haliti, Lee and Knudsen have all argued for this—the consensus being that it was the Ghaznavid invasions during the first quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century that led to the move out of India. The work of Soulis, Fraser, Marush-iakova & Popov and more recently Marsh has further-more demonstrated that it was also the spread of Islam that was the principal factor in the migration of our ancestors into Europe from Asia during the mediæval period. I won't go into the historical and linguistic details here, they are presented in a book of my essays edited by Dileep Karanth and shortly to be published by the University of Hertfordshire Press. What is significant about this is that we now understand that our ancestors were never one people speaking one language when they left India, but included many ethnolinguistic components.

I have argued elsewhere that like our language, our identity as Roma came into being during the sedentary Anatolian period, the professional status of the Indians and the contact variety of their language crystallizing into the Romani language and people, particularly under the influence of Byzantine Greek. There were no "Roma" before Anatolia.

I should like to advance here a different perspective which, I believe, provides an alternative way of understanding the question of identity, and why the question of identity confuses journalists and sociologists, and why it causes us ourselves so much of a problem.

In light of the particular details of our origins and of our shared and unshared social history since then, certain conclusions must be drawn: First that the population has been a composite one from its very beginning, and at that time was occupationally rather than ethnically-defined; Second that while the earliest components—linguistic, cultural and genetic—are traceable to India, we essentially constitute a population that acquired our identity and language in the West (accepting the Christian, Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire as being linguistically and culturally 'western'), and Third that the entry into Europe from what is today Turkey was not as a single people, but as a number of smaller migrations over perhaps as much as a two-century span of time. These factors have combined to create a situation that is in some

sense unique, that is to say we are a population of Asian origin that has spent essentially the entire period of our existence in the West. We are the proverbial square peg trying to fit into a round hole.

Because the population was fragmenting and moving into Europe during the very period that an ethnic identity was emerging, there is no sense of our ever having been a single, unified people in one place at one time. We can speak of a “core of direct retention” consisting of genetic, linguistic and cultural factors traceable to Asia and evident to a greater or lesser extent in all populations identifying as Romani, but we must also acknowledge that all of these areas have been augmented too through contact with European peoples and cultures, and it is the latter accretions that account for the sometimes extreme differences from group to group.

For some, “core” Romani culture has been diluted practically out of existence, sometimes by deliberate government policy as in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Hungary or Spain, yet such populations are nevertheless regarded as “Gypsies” by the larger society on the basis of appearance, dress, name, occupation and neighbourhood and are treated accordingly, but have no traditional ethnic community into which to find refuge. At the other extreme are Romani populations in substantial numbers, such as the Vlax or Sinti, who vigorously maintain the language and the culture and who are restrained from functioning in the European mainstream because of them. Because of this, no single educational package will do for every group. We will need group-specific—within the larger framework of country-specific—programmes.

While these will provide knowledge of a common origin and early history, and explain our differences, they are not likely to serve to coalesce all groups into one. What relationship they will ultimately recognise remains to be seen, but ideally some sort of commonalty should be achieved—there is strength in numbers.

My second point that I’d like to have discussed addresses the psychological damage that persecution has brought with it—not just the fear Roma live with daily in too many places, fear that affects both mental and physical health, but the deeper psychological damage that history has wrought. I don’t believe that any attention has been paid to this at all. In 1988 in Austria, on the anniversary of the *Anschlöss*, Romani survivors told a *London Times* reporter that they were still haunted by fears of recurrent Nazi persecutions. Apocryphally, there are stories of isolated Romani families in far eastern Europe who believe that the Nazis are still in power.

Some Romanies bear another, heavier legacy—a perspective on life inherited from the hundreds of years of slavery. For more than five centuries,

Vlax Roma had no decision-making powers. This has created a worldview which sees the situation of Roma as having been created by non-Roma who, having caused the problems arising from it, must therefore be responsible for solving those problems. Having no internal autonomy or problem-solving power, the slaves had to go to the gadje for intervention, or else get by on their wits. If, for centuries, a people have lived in a society where every single thing, including food, clothing and even one's spouse was provided from outside, i.e. at the discretion of one's owner, and if getting anything extra, including favours, depended upon one's influence with that owner, then it must instill an assumption that this is how one survives in the world. And while slavery has been abolished now for a century and a half, remnants of this way of thinking are still in evidence. Not only are assistance and material things sought from outside rather than from within the community, but cultivating useful and influential contacts outside of the non-Romani world is also a priority, and becomes a mark of prestige within it. A man can become the leader of his community on that basis alone. This kind of thinking does not encourage self-determination or personal initiative; but before it can be addressed and changed, it has to be understood.

I want to say something last of all about those who are sometimes called *pasaxèrja* in American Vlax. It is a word that means "passengers," and refers not to those who genuinely want to work with us and help bring about change—such people are very welcome—but instead to those who have hitched a ride on the Gypsy Industry bandwagon, those who get a grant, write one or two things about us while it's a hot topic, and then disappear. These are too often people who don't know any Roma socially, and who have no understanding of Romani mentality or culture. The author of one of the most oft-quoted work on the ethnopolitics of eastern European Roma actually says in the introduction to his book "I don't like Gypsies very much;" a similarly highly profiled book on the treatment of Roma in the Holocaust includes the words that we are, "with exceptions, a lazy, lying, thieving and extraordinarily filthy people . . . exceedingly disagreeable people to be around." Such people are self-serving, taking but giving nothing. Let's talk about what to do about that too.