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Living Conditions, Social Perception and State Policy in the Macro-Region of “Eastern Europe” before and after 1989

Introduction

In this short talk I will attempt to make comparisons between the situation of Roma populations before and after the watershed of 1989, when Communist rule came to an end in the countries of what was referred to during the cold war period as ‘Eastern Europe’. This is a complex task and in the brief time available it would be inappropriate to present a barrage of confusing statistics. Instead, however, I think it will be more instructive to reflect on key similarities and differences in living conditions, popular perceptions and state policy, which might then suggest lessons for future approaches.

This exercise draws on my own experience as an active researcher during the Communist period on state policy for Roma and my subsequent work on behalf of the European Commission, from 2000 onwards, in evaluating EU-supported Roma programmes in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Croatia, and as joint author of a comparative 2004 report reviewing all such programmes in five candidate countries.

The great diversity of Roma populations is often concealed by broad generalisations. For example, not all Roma communities are poor. Nevertheless, bearing these differences in mind, the Roma – taken as a whole – represent the largest and most marginalised ‘ethnic’ group in the continent of Europe. Their numbers are variously estimated at between eight and twelve

million and, of these, perhaps three quarters live in the former Communist countries of 'Eastern Europe', eight of which are now EU member states.

Consequently the overwhelming majority of these people pose a continuing humanitarian problem for the European Union, as was frankly acknowledged in the July 2008 report by the European Commission. A bleak assessment of the situation in this document came after two decades of democratic, post-Communist governments in the region and a decade of EU-funded programmes to promote Roma integration. In spite of these efforts many Roma, when asked, affirm that – for them – life was much better under Communist rule. The 2008 report, the heated debate surrounding it and the first ever Roma summit meeting, convened by the Commission, form the political context for this talk.

The period of Communist rule (1945-1989)

Until the Second World War most Roma in 'Eastern Europe' were sedentary and living in largely segregated communities. These took a variety of forms, ranging from the 'Gypsy quarter' (*mahala*) of Balkan towns to the often isolated settlement (*osada*) of Slovakia, while a minority of Roma still followed a nomadic lifestyle. A Magyar term for this kind of settlement, *kolónia* (colony), reflects the general situation of Roma as a marginal and pariah segment of the labour force, while in parts of modern-day Romania they were actually slaves until the mid-nineteenth century. They invariably gained their livelihood by providing basic craft goods and services to non-Roma in the underdeveloped, agricultural economies of the region. Nowhere did Roma live as independent, self-sufficient communities.

The arrival of the Red Army at the end of the Second World War was a genuine liberation for many Roma, sparing them from the Holocaust in which up to half a million of them had perished. The subsequent domination of the countries which passed into the post-war Soviet sphere of influence had a momentous effect in transforming the lives of Roma living there. Although the ideology of equality of all citizens was a factor, more significant was the adoption of a Soviet-style command economy, replacing dependence on agriculture by the widespread introduction of heavy industry. This profound shift demanded new industrial workers and although these were recruited primarily from the former peasantry, Roma too were seen as important in boosting productive capacity.

Particularly during the earlier part of the four decades of Communist rule, this economic revolution resulted in continuing urbanisation of Roma populations as they migrated to industrial areas to enter the mainstream workforce in large numbers for the first time in their long history in Europe. Men worked mainly as unskilled labourers, especially in basic

infrastructure and construction, but also in mines, while both men and women found jobs in factories, the service sector and agriculture. By the 1960s and 1970s in some countries, male employment rates for Roma reached those of the non-Roma population, while rates for Roma women also increased in spite of relatively higher numbers of children.

Research carried out for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), among others, testifies how Roma took pride in their labour and worked extremely hard to better their situation, often at the cost of their health. In important respects their profile is characteristic of classic migrant workers, which indeed they often were in moving from rural to industrial areas for employment, although in this case in their own countries.

In order to encourage Roma to become productive workers, Communist governments adopted policies to maximise this potential. In particular, measures were taken to promote integration of Roma citizens into the mainstream labour force. Throughout the region the prevailing policy was aimed at their assimilation, since fostering a distinct Roma identity was viewed as retrograde as this was likely to maintain their separation from the general population and not be in their own interest. Furthermore, the Communists were opposed to any kind of alternative identity to that of 'socialist man', particularly ethnic identity, and in any case argued that Roma did not constitute a valid ethnic group in Marxist Leninist theory. Consequently forms of Roma self-organisation were suppressed or discouraged and following a 1956 Soviet law to ban Roma nomadism, several countries in the region followed suit.

However, such pressures were not constant but varied at different times, even within the same country. Assimilation was pursued most vigorously in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia and least in the former Yugoslavia, which was not part of the Soviet bloc. For several years Czechoslovakia conducted a nationwide campaign to disperse Roma population concentrations, particularly from Slovakia to the Czech lands, and many Roma were rehoused from their shacks in settlements to standard state apartments. Meanwhile Roma children were required to attend school and kindergartens, which were seen as especially important for socialisation. Also health initiatives such as inoculation drives were carried out, partly for the reason that the insanitary conditions of Roma settlements were feared to be a source of infection.

Independent public opinion polls were not carried out during the Communist period but social perceptions of Roma held by the wider population at this time appear to be mixed. Roma and non-Roma worked and lived alongside each other to a much greater extent than previously but probably any complaints about Roma workmates or neighbours were of lesser concern to others than the constant worry of coping with repressive pressures in state socialist society.

Nevertheless there are documentary indications of popular resentment at housing initiatives for Roma, at a time when accommodation was in short supply among the general population. Linked to this is evidence of local authority resistance to Roma dispersal and rehousing plans as well as of discriminatory and illegal refusal by council officials to register locally employed Roma as residents.

While the general policy thrust was towards assimilation, in the 1970s and 1980s local authorities in some places sought solutions to their 'gypsy problem' by taking the contrary path of resettling Roma into segregated housing estates, concentrating them into what soon became new urban ghettos. Segregation also increased in the field of education where Roma children were increasingly assigned to so-called 'special schools' for those with learning disabilities, even though they were of normal intelligence. More extreme violation of rights occurred in some countries where attempts were made to restrict Roma population growth by sterilising women, either without their consent or following financial inducements.

In spite of such serious transgressions, it is generally accepted that Roma living standards improved markedly during the Communist period, as the combined result of regular wages from full employment, a better diet, improved accommodation and increased access to health services. Although considerable progress was achieved, the scale of the task of eliminating Roma concentrations, swelled by continuing high Roma birth rates, meant that Roma settlements and other concentrations continued to exist, along with their associated problems.

This was due not just to the size of the problems and limited resources available for their solution but also, and significantly, due to lack of political will by central governments to pursue their policies more determinedly in the face of resolute opposition by local authorities. These governments were well aware of structural discrimination at local level but failed to take action to prevent or at least to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators. This situation is not unfamiliar in post-Communist times but also has parallels in the Roma assimilation campaigns of two centuries earlier by the Habsburg monarchs Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Here, too, the rationalising plans of central authority were blocked and frustrated at local level.

Ultimately it can be said that the situation of Roma improved during the Communist period for two linked reasons. On the one hand, in the new type of economic model that was introduced - the industrialised command economy - vast numbers of unskilled workers were required. On the other, Roma were able to supply this type of labour. Another way of putting this is that the economic shift provided opportunities but that Roma were active in seizing these, so making a determined effort to escape from the poverty that had been their almost

permanent condition in the past. Undoubtedly the positive contribution of Roma to improve their situation during this period has been severely neglected and undervalued.

Taking this viewpoint one might even say that life for Roma improved not because of the Communists but in spite of them. But this would be to overstate the case for hugely improved access to education and other public services under Communist rule also played an important part. In making inspections, as part of the process of evaluating EU-funded Roma programmes, I have often be told, e.g. by social workers, how service provision was better and more comprehensive during the Communist era. But this is not a welcome message to present-day governments.

The post-Communist period – liberal democracy (1989-)

In a 1979 samizdat report on the situation of Roma in 1979 Czechoslovakia, the dissident civil rights organisation, Charta 77, made two predictions. The first was that should the Communist-type economy change significantly and modernise, the Roma – as unskilled manual labourers – would suffer pandemic unemployment. I shall come to the second prediction later in my talk.

This anticipated change came about just over a decade later when the political and economic bankruptcy of the Communist regimes of ‘Eastern Europe’, together with the withdrawal of the support of their Soviet mentor, led to their swift demise in 1989. The remaining regimes in the region toppled soon after.

The process of restructuring the moribund command economies to create functioning and competitive market economies soon led to factory closures and unemployment, especially in the areas of heavy industry and mining. Unskilled workers in general and Roma in particular were hardest hit. In the transformed labour market Roma were rarely successful in finding new jobs, because of their lack of educational qualifications but also due to prejudice where labour offices often acquiesced to employers’ requests for ‘no Roma applicants’. A further problem in Czechoslovakia was an influx of impoverished Ukrainian workers who were cheaper to employ in the unskilled labouring occupations that remained.

The first Charta 77 prediction was fulfilled as Roma unemployment soared, leading to benefit dependency, mounting debt and reliance on the growing number of usurers. As a 2003 World Bank report frankly acknowledged, Roma impoverishment and a rapid decline in their living standards was primarily due to the loss of their former jobs.

Deregulation and privatisation of former state housing stock led to rent rises and arrears and the frequent eviction of Roma tenants from urban apartments, which had now become

potentially valuable real estate. Displaced Roma sought cheaper housing on the periphery of towns, moved in with relatives increasing overcrowding or even returned to their former rural settlements. All of these moves had the immediate effect of making access to potential employment far more difficult.

Other aspects of the rapidly changing economy also had damaging consequences. Food prices rose, charges for medicine were increased and, significantly, state subsidised kindergartens were often closed or charges were introduced, e.g. for meals, leading Roma to withdraw their children.

After the initial wave of euphoria at regime change the general public soon began to realise that what they saw as Western European levels of prosperity were not imminent in their own countries. Those on fixed incomes, including pensioners, were hardest hit by rising prices and popular resentment grew against unemployed Roma living on benefits, who were seen as parasites making the situation even worse for everyone else. This hostility was fuelled by press reports of a mounting crime wave of thefts and robberies which the media openly attributed to Roma criminality.

This antagonism found more direct expression across the region in a wave of violent attacks on Roma, frequently by skinhead gangs, and even sporadic pogroms. Police forces mostly failed to respond effectively to such incidents, appearing to sympathise with the perpetrators, while courts were equally indifferent. Meanwhile public opinion polls regularly reflected strong antipathy towards Roma, irrespective of the social class, gender, age or educational level of respondents. However, during the 1990s, national and international NGOs were quick to respond to reports of anti-Roma violence and produced critical reports that placed Roma on the political agenda.

Policy of early, post-Communist governments towards the Roma populations of the region can best be characterised as absent. Confronted with profound economic and political problems, they had more pressing worries. In the early elections after 1989, a few Roma leaders were elected to parliaments and in most countries the previous Communist policy was reversed as Roma were recognised as national minorities. Support was sometimes offered to Roma organisations and for cultural activities but the profound social problems resulting from economic changes were almost wholly neglected until candidacy for membership of an expanding European Union became a reality.

Governments in the region were eager to gain security and prosperity by emulating the states of Western Europe and these wishes coincided with expansionist plans within the European Community to push its boundaries eastwards. But it was not until 1993 that conditions for

entry were agreed by the European Council. As well demanding that candidates should have established a functioning market economy, the Copenhagen criteria also required 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities'. However this last term remained vague and undefined and therefore verification was problematic.

The following year the Council of Europe published the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities with far more stringent safeguards. Although applicants with Roma minorities signed and ratified this instrument, its status was that of a recommendation and therefore compliance could not be a necessary condition for EU membership.

In the late 1990s accession negotiations for the first group of EU entrants coincided with the arrival in Western European member states of Roma asylum seekers. Apart from causing political embarrassment these event strained the credibility of the claim that these countries were respecting their Roma minorities. While making critical comments about the situation of Roma in annual regular reports on progress towards accession, the EU also devoted some of its financial and advisory support to candidates through the Phare programme to Roma-specific projects.

The European Commission stated in its 2008 report that more than €100 million had been spent to promote Roma integration since 1998. The areas of education and housing infrastructure had been particularly highly prioritised. However a 2004 comparative review of Phare Roma programmes in five candidate countries showed that less than 10 percent of the funds had been spent on employment-related projects. Yet, in the previous year a UNDP survey, investigating the situation of Roma in the same five countries, had reported that in every country the top priority of Roma was to get a job. It had not helped that in the Phare employment projects that had taken place, many had involved public works programmes where participants carried out only basic tasks and generally received little or no training to improve their chances of finding permanent employment. Nevertheless the comparative review praised the Phare programmes for placing Roma higher on the political agenda.

Research revealed that many registered unemployed Roma men were continuing to work for very low wages in the informal or 'black' economy in their former occupation as unskilled labourers but now without legal protection and subject to exploitation. These were part of what has been termed the Roma 'middle class', desperate to maintain an approximation of their former standard of living and to avoid being driven back to the 'ghetto', particularly for

the sake of their children's future. This was also the motivation underlying some emigration to the West.

Even though it was questionable whether the Copenhagen criteria had been adequately met as regards Roma minorities, none of the applicant countries were denied EU membership. After admission, however, new policies applied. In 2000 the European Council had adopted the Lisbon Strategy which involved a strategic approach to social inclusion, particularly of those who were multiply disadvantaged. This initiative included medium-term action plans and the use of EU structural funds for projects to combat the exclusion of marginalised segments of the population.

In this way policy towards Roma was brought into the mainstream of broader social concern. At the same time, since the Strategy applied not only to new entrants but to all member states, Roma populations throughout the EU – in Western as well as former 'Eastern European' countries – were taken into consideration, as had been urged by activists for many years.

For the new entrants, where most Roma still live, the difference was that although the Lisbon Strategy might be regarded as a more systematic and rigorous means of achieving the goals of earlier Phare Roma programmes, criteria for compliance could no longer be enforced by the European Commission – even in theory. Responsibility for performance lay with individual member states, while the functions of the Commission were to advise and harmonise policy initiatives, through the Open Method of Coordination, as well as to disseminate examples of good practice, by peer reviews.

The limited role of the Commission was at the crux of the debate surrounding its 2008 report. Six months earlier the European Council, as the EU's highest political body, had directly addressed the issue of the situation of Roma for the first time, 'inviting' the Commission to report on progress. Meanwhile the most influential international NGOs concerned with Roma issues formed a coalition, criticising the Commission for 'failing to establish coherent strategy' and calling for a special unit with a dedicated Commissioner to implement a comprehensive 'European framework strategy'. A key member of this coalition was the Open Society Institute, which together with the World Bank had launched the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. This initiative closely resembled the Lisbon Strategy in certain aspects, although it only applied to Roma in 'Eastern Europe'. Further support for an integrated Roma policy came from the European Parliament and several 'East European' states.

In response the Commission pointed out, in its report and again two months later at the Roma summit in the words of its president, that without a new mandate from the European Council, 'key policies for the inclusion of Roma are the competence of member states, though they are,

or can be, coordinated at the Community level'. Therefore the Commission recommended that current instruments should be improved and applied more effectively, although critics were offered the possibility of a coordinating 'Roma platform'. However what might be the functions and powers of such a body were unclear. Subsequently the European Council took up this suggestion and in December 2008 asked the Commission to 'stimulate cooperation... in the context of an integrated European platform' but once more the enigmatic term was left undefined.

The way forward remains unresolved but widespread frustration at the lack of progress had come to a head. Initial evaluation of Lisbon action plans, as applied to Roma communities, suggested that devolution of former centralised powers meant that national governments were often unable to implement their policies at local level. Indeed to one critical analyst it appeared that what was being enacted in practice amounted to 'a policy of managed segregation'.

Conclusion

Charta 77's first prediction – that there would be mass unemployment among Roma workers - was fulfilled soon after the ending of Communist rule. The second was that the resulting hardship would lead to the emergence of Roma radicalism and consequently to inter-ethnic strife.

Until now impoverished Roma communities have been remarkably quiescent in spite of their deteriorating situation. But there have been recent signs that this might be about to change. In 2004 there were food riots in fourteen Slovak towns after the government had targeted Roma in lowering the benefits ceiling - halving the income of some families. Two thousand police and soldiers were deployed to restore order. In 2007 there were riots involving Bulgarian Roma in Sofia and Samokov. The same year saw the founding of a paramilitary, extremist Hungarian Guard, wearing uniforms resembling those of the wartime fascist Arrow Cross movement. This organisation mounted demonstrations against 'Roma crime' and was associated with attacks on Roma before being banned by a court order in December 2008. Meanwhile the far-right Workers' Party organised similar demonstrations in the northern Czech town of Litvínov in November 2008. All of these incidents provoked active Roma resistance.

Rioting in Paris suburbs by unemployed young people of North African descent prompted fears about the potential for similar action by marginalised Roma in the Czech Republic. Consequently the government reversed its previous resolute opposition to collecting

ethnically disaggregated data about Roma, resulting in the 2006 survey of socially excluded Roma localities and communities by the sociologist Ivan Gabal. Reflecting in 2008 on the Litvínov incidents, as well as those elsewhere, Gabal predicted that ‘the time of ethnic conflict is arriving’.

The heated debate about the lack of progress in advancing Roma inclusion and the limited role of the European Commission had taken place against a backdrop of escalating violence in Italy. The arrival of an estimated half a million Roma migrants, following the accession of Romania to the EU in January 2007, had led to accusations of ‘Roma crime’ followed by violent attacks on the urban shantytowns these Roma shared with other immigrants. In this way the consequences of both EU enlargement and Roma exclusion combined to threaten not only the relationship between two member states but also the fundamental right to freedom of movement within the EU.

However they also served as a sharp reminder that, in spite of over a decade of EU involvement and assistance, the problems of the vast majority of Roma inhabitants in new member states remained unresolved, driving many to migrate westwards in search of a better life. Also bearing in mind the continued high Roma birthrate, the 2008 OSCE status report on the results of its action plan observed that a mistaken course of action or ‘neglecting implementation now [of any strategy] will cost more in the future, both in terms of social harmony and finances’. If such alarming developments escalate, we must ask how much time remains for a solution. The inhabitants of one small Roma settlement in Slovakia have a vision of how it might all end – by their deaths in a bombing raid by the Slovak air force.