Roma and Sinti - The 'Other' within Europe

Sabrina Kopf
University of Vienna

1. Introduction

Since the enlargement of the European Union in the years 2004 and 2007, Roma[1] and Sinti[2] represent the largest ethnic minority within the EU, with an estimated population of 10-12 million people. However, their situation is characterized by persistent discrimination, structural inequality and social exclusion. Although Roma, Sinti and Travellers[3] have been recognized being a 'true European minority' by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (1993), which takes a special place among other minorities due to its dispersal all over Europe, Roma-related issues have gained salience on the European agenda only since the accession of Central and Eastern European countries. Meanwhile, the European Union has been taking action to promote the ethnic group's social inclusion by establishing a section for Roma issues within the European Commission that is responsible for the coordination of various programs and actions targeted at the minority. Furthermore, the inclusion of Roma and Sinti is also supported through national, transnational or locally-based activities financed by various European Union funding mechanisms, such as the European Social Fund (ESF).

Although the provision of considerable financial resources can be regarded as evidence of the EU's efforts to integrate Roma and Sinti into the respective mainstream societies, the quite modest results of various projects and activities already implemented in different member countries reveal shortcomings and deep structural problems in EU policies. Therefore, the paper[4] will highlight some of the reasons for the still lacking improvement of the ethnic group's situation by presenting two Roma projects, which were funded by the ESF and implemented in

[1] The term Roma (Rom: man, husband) has gained increasing currency as cover term for various Romani groups whose names refer to different attributes: traditional occupation (Lovari, Kalderash), physical appearance (Cále), culture (Romungre), language (Beash), way of life (Travellers) (Kovats 2001: 113). The term 'Gypsy' was created by outsiders and stands for the discrimination and marginalisation of Roma and Sinti. Therefore, it is only used in quotations or with quotation marks.

[2] Sinti and other Romani groups criticize the linguistic unification that goes along with the term 'Roma' and emphasize their cultural autonomy, instead. Therefore, the use of the term 'Roma and Sinti' considers the linguistic, cultural, political and social diversity characterizing the ethnic group.

[3] The term 'Traveller' is used for nomadic Roma and Sinti but also for members of autochthonous minorities in Europe, such as Yeniche people, Bohemiens and Quinquis, whose culture is marked by nomadism and self-employment (Liégeois/Gheorghe 1995: 6). It is particularly common in Ireland and the UK.

[4] The paper is based on my diploma thesis titled 'Maßnahmen der EU zur Integration der Roma in der Slowakei. Eine sozialanthropologische Untersuchung EU finanzierter Projekte' that was submitted at the University of Vienna in 2009.

communities in Eastern Slovakia.[5] Besides structural problems inherent in European Union funding mechanisms, I will identify the persistent reproduction of culturalising and discriminating ascriptions to Roma and Sinti as the main problem in the examined projects. These ascriptions are based on a historic image of 'the Gypsy'; one that evolved over centuries, builds on and stereotypes and is embedded in the European political public discourse on Roma and Sinti. In order to comprehend the consistency of this pejorative image, I will explicate its roots and in doing so, I will also refer to the contribution of sciences and pseudo scientific approaches.

2. Roma projects in Slovakia

2.1 Roma in Slovakia

Roma form the second largest minority group[6] in Slovakia and since 1991 they are recognized as national minority. Although they are a very heterogeneous group marked by the existence of various groups and subgroups as well as cultural, linguistic, historic and regional differences,[7] there are some similarities of which their collective exclusion from the majority is regarded most significant. Roma in Slovakia live at the margins of society, while their social advancement is impeded by a complex interplay of a number of factors. Due to high unemployment[8], poor education and institutionalised discrimination, Roma belong to the poorest section of the population. The segregation of Roma and the disregard of the ethnic group's social situation in the educational system have led to a disproportionally high number of illiterates and school dropouts.[9] Housing in substandard accommodation, isolation in often illegally built settlements characterized by inadequate infrastructure have contributed to the ethnic group's increased segregation. Furthermore, Roma are confronted with different forms of discrimination and race-motivated attacks, which have increased since the 1990ies.
Although Slovakia was one of the first post-socialist countries to accede the European Union in 2004, only little progress has been made in improving the situation of the Roma population so far. Despite an increased willingness of Slovak political authorities to promote the ethnic group's social inclusion and various aid programmes and subsidies that have been provided by the EU, Slovak Roma still form the weakest section of the population in terms of socio-economic status and political power.

---

[5] In my diploma thesis I have analysed the projects Maxim and Ružena utilizing documents and project reports as well as conducting interviews and participant observation. A field research in Eastern Slovakia was conducted between May and July 2007 and constituted the core of my methodological approach.
[6] An estimated number of 90.000 to 480.000 Roma live in Slovakia.
[7] Three groups of Roma are to be discerned in Slovakia today: Slovak Roma (80%) and Hungarian Roma (10-15%) have settled between the 16th and 18th century and represent the biggest groups, while Vlach Roma (5-10%) have reached the territory in the second half of the 19th century (Barany 2002: 13; Hübschmannova 1996: 233).
[8] Although there are no official statistics rating unemployment according to ethnicity, unemployment among Roma is estimated to reach nearly 100% especially in Eastern Slovakia (Cöster/Pfister 2005: 121).
[9] In areas with dense Roma population, such as the Eastern Slovak regions Košice and Prešov, the illiteracy rate adds up to 90%, while census data from 1991 proves that graduation from primary school forms the highest degree for 76,68% of Roma (Vašečka 2007: 23).

2.2 Roma projects – between paternalism and marginalization

Since Slovakia's accession to the European Union several projects have been implemented for Roma, which were financed by subsidies from the European Social Fund. The projects, which I have analysed, were titled Maxim and Ružena[10] and were further implemented by a local agency in a Roma community in Eastern Slovakia (Vel'ká Ida[11]) from 2005 to 2008. Maxim and Ružena aimed at increasing the employability of Roma by providing basic education, various short-time trainings and vocational counselling.

However, both projects were marked by serious difficulties and barriers that impeded a successful implementation. Problems in mobilising participants for the various activities as well as high numbers of drop-outs were the most evident results. Instead of achieving improvements for Roma, the projects have rather reproduced negative stereotypes and existing mechanisms of marginalization. Especially, the structure and composition of the European Social Fund and other funding programmes exerted a decisive influence on the projects' performance since the various funding mechanisms dictate the guidelines for the development and implementation of activities. For example, the exclusive focus on short term activities and the solely integration of Roma into the labour market, which was viewed as the most important precondition for social inclusion within the ESF, prohibited the implementation of an integrative and sustainable approach in the work with Roma communities. Furthermore, the neglect to conduct an analysis of needs as well as the marginalisation of Roma and experienced NGOs during the design, implementation and evaluation of the projects have caused distrust among Roma and hindered the development of ownership in the community toward the implemented activities.

3. The social construction of the 'Gypsy'

'[…] Roma are the most rejected of all minority groups.' (Csepeli/Simon 2004: 133)
Besides the above mentioned problems on the structural level, stereotypes and discriminating ascriptions toward Roma and Sinti were the main reason for the exclusion of the ethnic group from participating actively in the projects and, thus, the projects' weak performance. Following various negative ascriptions, Roma and Sinti were primarily described as a social problem group, which was characterized by an unchangeable culture. Decisively, such negative ascriptions are based on a historic image of 'the Gypsy'. The following chapter will therefore highlight the development of this pejorative image of 'the Gypsy' by illustrating its distinguishing marks as well as science's contribution to the codification of the negative attitude toward Roma and Sinti.

3.1 The historic dimension of the 'Gypsy image'

The negative image of 'the Gypsy' emerged after the first groups of Roma and Sinti had arrived in Europe during the 15th century. Marked by its enduring timeliness, the creation of this image 'was stimulated by a combination of the responses to industrialization, colonialism and emerging

[10] The titles of both projects stand for commonly used first names in Slovakia.
[11] The municipality of Vel'ká Ida is part of the Košice district, which is situated in Eastern Slovakia.

nineteenth century ideas of racial hierarchy' (Hancock 2002: 65). The first encounters between Roma and Sinti and the domestic population were dominated by religious beliefs because the first groups of Roma and Sinti presented themselves as Christians on pilgrimage. Although Roma and Sinti were received well at first (Reemtsma 1996: 34), the majority's attitude changed and the arrivals were soon viewed as heathens and spies for the Muslims. Due to their black skins and unfamiliar appearance, Roma and Sinti were then said to be in league with the devil (Wippermann 1997: 71). Kenrick and Puxon point out that '[…] the conviction that blackness denotes inferiority and evil was already well-rooted in the western mind. The nearly black skins of many Gypsies marked them out to be victims of this prejudice' (1972: 19).

The 'Gypsy image' was also influenced by political transformations, which had far-reaching consequences on the conceptualisation of 'strangers'. During the emergence of nation states in Europe Roma and Sinti were instrumentalised as the image of 'the stranger' par excellence in order to effectuate homogenisation of the population and its identification with the national territory (Hund 1996: 25; Maciejwski 1996: 17). Due to their strange appearance and mode of living, which was linked to burglary, begging and fraud, Roma and Sinti functioned as an excellent object for projection. Thus, they were defined as the categorical 'other' and counterpart of the community of citizens. Furthermore, the exclusion and persecution of Roma and Sinti as outlaws was based on the denunciation of the Gypsy-like lifestyle and used as a necessary disciplinary action by political elites. Most of all, the instrumentalisation of Roma and Sinti is reflected by several anti-'Gypsy' laws, which were enacted between the 15th and 19th century and provided the legal basis for the ethnic group's expulsion and persecution (Reemtsma 1996: 40; Vuolasranta 2006: 20). These laws emphasized the supposed 'criminality' as the essential character trait of 'the Gypsy'. As a result, Roma and Sinti were treated increasingly as a security problem and a subject for action by the police during the 19th century (Maciejwski 1996: 18).

Last but not least, the social construction of 'the Gypsy' also contains a psychological core since repressed fantasies and longings for disorder were projected onto Roma and Sinti by the population in Europe (Okely 1983: 232). In the same vein, Willems and Lucassen remark that 'each image of another […] is always a reflection of a facet of the image of self' (2001: 31).

3.2 The contribution of sciences to the construction of 'the Gypsy'

The construction of 'the Gypsy' is closely linked to the beginning of 'Gypsy studies' – 'Zigeunerkunde' during the 18th and 19th century, which were guided by a popular image of Roma and Sinti being bandits, sorcerers and messengers from an exotic world (Willems 1996: 97). Early 'Gypsy studies' were marked by the conviction of 'the Gypsy's' immutability as well as 'oriental' ancestry and foreignness. Furthermore, the research of anthropologists and 'Gypsy folklorists' focused on the supposed ethnic inferiority, criminal addiction and laziness of Roma and Sinti and, thus, had a momentous impact on the nation states' approach toward the ethnic group. Finally, the enactment of a specific 'Gypsy' policy during the 19th century served to legitimise particular policies of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Willems 1996: 101; Reemtsma 1996: 85).

The negative 'Gypsy image' was continuously reproduced and extended by a racist component during the early 20th century. From the 1930s on, the research of anthropologists, biologists,

medical and racial scientists served the racial policy of Nazi Germany. Like Jews, Roma and Sinti were viewed being 'racially inferior' and were, thus, classified 'unworthy of life'. Robert Ritter, head of the Racial Hygiene and Population Biology Research Unit in Berlin, was one of the most popular proponents of the Nazi racial doctrine. Together with his assistants he collected data on Roma and Sinti to find a connection between Roma heredity and the supposed criminal nature and further to make recommendations for racial policy. Ritter's work was based on the presumption that 'Gypsies' were a 'primitive' people, incapable of adapting to normal civilized life (Willems 2001: 26; Wippermann 1997: 80). In this vein, the racial and biological evaluation of Roma and Sinti by Ritter and other racial scientists set the ground to legitimize the extermination of Roma and Sinti during the Second World War[12] (Gingrich 2005: 121f).

From the 1970s until today folklorists continued to study culture, history and way of life of Roma and Sinti glorifying and searching for the 'true Gypsy'. Again, the historic 'Gypsy image' is reproduced within the so called 'tsiganology' by emphasizing the cultural foreignness and alleged unwillingness of 'Gypsies' to integrate themselves into majority. However, the stereotypical 'Gypsy image' is also the dominating element in today's public and political discourse on Roma and Sinti in which they are represented as the counterpart to a rational, modern and enlightened world (Pantucek 2002: 25f).
In fact, Heuß argues that the continuing instrumentalisation of Roma and Sinti by nation states is characterized by the ethnic group's definition as a 'social problem group' denying them ethnic or historic autonomy (Heuß 1996: 120) while legitimizing a policy of assimilation. Liégeois and Gheorghe agree that 'according to the definition imposed upon them and the image by which they are characterized, Roma/Gypsies are thought to have no linguistic, cultural or ethnic roots. They are instead a 'social problem' requiring 'rehabilitation' and 'reintegration'' (Liégeois/Gheorghe 1995: 12f). As a result, policies toward Roma and Sinti are limited to combat unemployment, lack of education, inadequate housing and health problems instead of targeting ethnic discrimination and segregation.

4. The reproduction of the 'Gypsy image' in Roma projects

The reproduction of the historic 'Gypsy image' and the classification of Roma as 'social problem group' characterize the public discourse in Slovakia. Furthermore, the pronounced negative attitude toward the ethnic group also found its way into the projects Maxim and Ružena and represented a crucial barrier for a successful implementation of activities.
On the one hand Roma were perceived as a 'social problem group' by the project staff whose members were said to ignore prevalent social norms and values, while on the other hand specific cultural traits were ascribed to them and held responsible for the lack of integration into mainstream society. Especially, the alleged unreliability as well as the 'backward' and carefree lifestyle were seen as the main problems during the implementation of the projects.

[12] Approximately up to 1.5 million Roma and Sinti were murdered in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe between 1939 and 1945 (Latham 1995:2).

> 'They don't take responsibility over their life and fate and their future. […] They don't appreciate the education and the investment to their self development. […] Living for today - you know - and not for the future.' (Legen, G 2007, interview, 10 September)

Being defined as a 'social problem group', Roma were said to live exclusively at the expenses of the state and tax payers without wanting to contribute to mainstream society. Furthermore, the high rates of illiterates and school drop outs among Roma were explained by their indifference and inability to realize the necessity or importance of education. These alleged 'characteristics' were also stated as reason by several members of the project staff, for not giving Roma any possibility to participate in projects targeted at them. The following statements were made by members of the project staff and outline the various and often contradictory stereotypes Roma are confronted with in daily life.

> '[…] they have no motivation to work. They stopped to take it seriously. They get social money, money for the children, housing money and medical care. […] So, they have no need to work but we are working and don't get any money.' (ibid.)
>
> '[…] they are not willing to contribute. They are not willing to learn, to invest in their development.' (Legen, G 2007, interview, 10 July)

The belief that Roma are caught in traditions that keep them from 'developing' themselves and adapting to a modern wolrd was added to the stereotypical image of Roma as being lazy, carefree and indifferent.

> 'Sometimes they are stuck in old traditions, which push them back, and we cannot force them to change when they don't want to.' (Hricková, S & Železnik, T 2007, interview, 24 July)

Roma's nomadic lifestyle and the lack of written culture were mentioned as further reasons for their poor education. The threat of a specific 'Roma culture', which is characterized by poverty, violence, alcoholism, drug abuse and lethargy, dominated the attitude of the project staff and, thus, the design of the analysed projects.

Roma's voluntary segregation from the mainstream society was mentioned as a further cultural trait and barrier for the ethnic group's successful inclusion.

> '[…] Roma people always separated themselves even though we tried to put them together with us. But they would rather live on their own and care about their stuff and that's perhaps the specific about them.' (M & P 2007, interview, 23 July)

Instead of blaming a fictional 'Roma culture', Vašečka argues that the exclusively negative elements, which coined the ethnic group's image in Slovak mainstream society, have to be seen rather as the results of assimilation, marginalization and brutal interventions into the social life of Roma communities.

> 'Is there something like a Roma culture which is causing problems? No, I don't think so. I strongly believe that this ['Roma culture'] is caused by two hundred years of assimilation, losing of tradition, agony, alienation, etc.' (Vašečka, M 2007, interview, 30 October)

5. Conclusion

The precarious living conditions of Roma and Sinti in Europe have forced the European Union and its member states to set measures in order to promote the ethnic group's social inclusion. Although the European institutions and the member states have recognized their joint responsibility claiming to use 'all the instruments and policies for which they have the respective competence' (European Commission n.d.) to combat the ethnic group's poverty and segregation in their official rhetoric, little improvements have been achieved within the activities and projects financed by the EU.

To highlight the reasons for the ethnic group's perpetuated exclusion from mainstream society, two projects targeted at Roma communities in Slovakia have been presented. Both projects were funded by the ESF – European Union's primary funding programme – and aimed at integrating Roma into the labour market. Despite generous financial and personal resources, the projects' results failed to live up to the high expectations. Besides structural problems inherent to the composition of European Union's funding programmes, the continuing reproduction of culturalising and discriminating ascriptions toward Roma proved to be the main barriers within the projects. The negative attitude toward Roma and Sinti is based on a fictional image of a specific 'Roma culture' and a classification of Roma as a 'social problem group'. Roma are, thus, conceived as work-shy, criminal and nomadic strangers who are hindering all attempts of integration by holding on to their 'backward' way of living. These ascriptions to Roma and Sinti are closely tied to a historic 'Gypsy image', which developed in Europe between the 15th and 19th century and has been reproduced continuously over centuries to enforce political and economic interests. Unfortunately, the 'Gypsy image' still permeates current political and public debates in Europe and has even found its way into European Union's activities directed at Roma and Sinti. Especially, the ethnic group's reduction to passive beneficiaries of help in the EU's activities denies them the right and possibility to determine their future themselves and to be viewed as being active and equal partners. Instead, the stereotype of the poor, apathetic 'Gypsy' is being reproduced.

6. References

Barany, Zoltan 2002, *The East European Gypsies. Regime Change, Marginality and Ethnopolitics*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge.

Cöster, Anna Caroline & Monika Pfister 2005, 'Die Situation der Roma nach der EU-Osterweiterung am Beispiel der Slowakischen Republik', in Matter, Max (ed.), *Die Situation der Roma und Sinti nach der EU-Osterweiterung* / Otto Benecke Stiftung e.V. Beiträge der Akademie für Migration und Integration vol. 9, V & R Unipress, Göttingen, pp. 113-126.

Csepeli, György & Dávid Simon 2004, 'Construction of Roma Identity in Eastern and Central Europe: Perception and Self-Identification', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 130-150.

Gingrich, Andre 2005, 'German Anthropology during the Nazi Period: Complex Scenarios of Collaboration, Persecution, and Competition', in Barth, Fredrik et al. (eds), *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, The Halle lectures, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 111-136.

Hancock, Ian 2002, *We are the Romani People. Ame sam e Rromane džene*, Interface collection, Centre de recherches tsiganes, Hatfield.

Heuß, Herbert 1996, 'Die Migration von Roma aus Osteuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: Historische Anlässe und staatliche Reaktion - Überlegungen zum Funktionswandel des Zigeuner-Ressentiments', in Giere, Jacqueline (ed.), *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion des Zigeuners. Zur Genese eines Vorurteils*, Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Fritz-Bauer-Instituts vol. 2, Campus-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 109-131.

Hübschmannová, Milena 1998, 'Economic Stratification and Interaction: Roma, an Ethnic Jati in East Slovakia', in Tong, Diane (ed.), *Gypsies. An Inderdisciplinary Reader,* Garland , New York, pp. 233-270.

Hund, Wulf D (ed.) 1996, *Zigeuner. Geschichte und Struktur einer rassistischen Konstruktion*, Duisburger Institut für Sprach- und Sozialforschung, Duisburg.

Kenrick, Donald & Grattan Puxon 1972, *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies*, The Columbus Centre Series, Heinemann, London.

Kovats, Martin 2001, 'The Emergence of European Roma Policy', in Guy, Will (ed.), *Between Past and Future. The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, Univ. of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, pp. 93-116.

Latham, Judith 1995, *First US Conference on Gypsies in the Holocaust*, Current Affairs Bulletin No 3-23928, Voice of America, Washington.

Liégeois, Jean-Pierre & Nicolae Gheorghe 1995, *Roma/Gypsies: A European Minority*, Minority Rights Group [MRG] International Report vol. 95, no. 4, MRG, London.

Maciejwski, Franz 1996, 'Elemente des Antiziganismus', in Giere, Jacqueline (ed.), *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion des Zigeuners. Zur Genese eines Vorurteils*, Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Fritz-Bauer-Instituts vol. 2, Campus-Verlag , Frankfurt am Main, pp. 9-27.

Okely, Judith 1983, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, The University Press, Cambridge.

Pantucek, Gertraud 2002, 'Romni und Roma in Makedonien: Zwischen Tradition und 'transition'', MA dissertation, University of Vienna.

Reemtsma, Katrin 1996, *Sinti und Roma. Geschichte, Kultur, Gegenwart*, Beck'sche Reihe vol. 1155, Beck, München.

Vašečka, Michal 2007, *Study on the Social and Labor Market Integration of Ethnic Minorities. Final Report on Slovaki*a, Centre for Research on Ethnicity and Culture , Bratislava.

Vuolasranta, Miranda 2006, 'Roma und Sinti - Europäische Identitäten, Antiziganismus muss erkannt und bekämpft werden', in Toivanen, Reetta & Michi Knecht (eds), *Europäische Roma - Roma in Europa*, Berliner Blätter, Ethnographische und ethnologische Beiträge 39/2006, LIT-Verlag, Münster, pp. 20-24.

Willems, Wim 1996, 'Außenbilder von Sinti und Roma in der frühen Zigeunerforschung', in Giere, Jacqueline (ed.), *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion des Zigeuners. Zur Genese eines Vorurteils*, Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Fritz-Bauer-Instituts vol. 2, Campus-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 87-108.

Willems, Wim 2001, 'Ethnicity as a Death-Trap: The History of Gypsy Studies', in Lucassen, Leo; Wim Willems & Annemarie Cottaar (eds), *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups. A Socio-Historical Approach*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, pp. 17-34.

Willems, Wim & Leo Lucassen 2001, 'The Church of Knowledge: Representation of Gypsies in Encyclopaedias', in Lucassen, Leo; Wim Willems & Annemarie Cottaar (eds), *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups. A Socio-Historical Approach*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, pp. 35-52.

Wippermann, Wolfgang 1997, ''Wie die Zigeuner' – 'wie die Juden'', in Butterwegge, Christoph (ed.), *NS-Vergangenheit, Antisemitismus und Nationalismus in Deutschland*, Beiträge zur politischen Kultur der Bundesrepublik und zur politischen Bildung / FH Potsdam, Nomos Verl.-Gesellschaft, Baden-Baden, pp. 69-84.

Web documents

Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly 1993, *Recommendation 1203 (1993) on Gypsies in Europe*, viewed 01 January 2009, http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta93/EREC1203.htm

European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities n.d., *The European Union and Roma*, viewed 26 April 2010, http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=518&langId=en