Poverty, segregation and discrimination for the Roma in Germany

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At a press conference directly after the EU (European Union) summit in Brussels two weeks ago, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy caused a diplomatic storm, when he stated that German Chancellor Angela Merkel had signalled to him "her intention to have (Roma) camps cleared away in the coming weeks". His statement was immediately denied by the German government, which justified its claim principally by asserting there were no Roma camps to be found anywhere in Germany.

Politicians from German opposition parties also sprang to the chancellor's aid, levelling sharp criticism at Sarkozy. Olaf Scholz (SPD—Social Democratic Party) accused the French president of wanting to distract the people from his domestic political problems. Gregor Gysi (Left Party) even presumed that, "she (Merkel) couldn't have uttered such nonsense, because we don't have those kinds of camps in Germany".

There are indeed no camps in Germany comparable to those in France. Authorities immediately dispersed make-shift settlements in Berlin and Frankfurt when desperate Roma from Bulgaria and Romania had set up camps there out in the open. Nevertheless, the German government is planning the deportation of Roma on a massive scale—but to Kosovo rather than Romania. The inhumanity of such an undertaking on the part of the German authorities is hardly less alarming than that of the French government. This is especially so because the Roma, together with the Jews, were the principal targets of the Nazi genocide.

On April 14, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU—Christian Democratic Union) signed an agreement with his Kosovan counterparts, obliging Kosovo to take 14,000 refugees. About 10,000 of these will be Roma (See: "Germany prepares to deport 14,000 refugees to Kosovo"), who had fled during the German-backed war in former Yugoslavia. At the time, NATO's Kosovo militia allies expelled more than two-thirds of the 150,000 Roma from Kosovo.

They will now be forced to return, although they have no chance of making a viable life in Kosovo. Investigations, carried out in the country by political scientist Peter Widmann, show that unemployment among Roma in Kosovo is almost 100 percent, and Roma families are commonly segregated. Particularly hard-hit are the 2,000 Roma children the German government wants to deport. Some of them were born in Germany and cannot speak a word of Albanian. According to Widmann, three-quarters of the children of deported refugees in Kosovo do not attend school.

Nevertheless, the German government insists that conditions for Roma in Kosovo have improved in recent years. In the view of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, there exists no "imminent danger, arising solely from membership to a particular ethnic group", and it is also alleged that "economic and social conditions in the state, targeted to take in deportees" are irrelevant for the deportation process. According to UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), however, the deportation procedures violate in practice the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child because of their failure to ensure maintenance of a humane existence.

Responding to an enquiry from the Left Party, the German Interior Ministry recently confirmed that it would be adhering to its deportation plans that were first reported a year ago by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper (See: "Roma face deportation," published October 14, 2009). It can thus be assumed that Sarkozy did not simply invent Merkel's comment about the clearance of camps, but had been informed of the forthcoming deportation of Roma.

Harassment of refugees

The harassment of Roma in Germany is not restricted to those soon to be deported. Roma, who are allowed to stay in the country on sufferance, who possess German citizenship and whose families have lived in Germany for generations, are also facing social discrimination.

A total of about 50,000 Roma sought refuge in Germany from the war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. More than two-thirds of them have not been recognised as refugees—that is, they have been denied a secure right of stay and are only there on sufferance, pending further developments. This temporary right of residence is issued and reissued for only short periods of time, normally no longer than 6 months, so that refugees face the possibility of being deported at any time.

In line with this kind of temporary resident status, access to almost all the state's social benefits is excluded. They have no right to participate in integration programs and language courses, and they are not allowed to travel outside the municipality or administrative district assigned to them. Offences against these restrictions on freedom of movement incur harsh punishments.

Because they are refugees, moreover, the law covering social provision for asylum seekers allows them only a reduced amount of social support. Single parents thus receive only about €230 a month and other household members only €200. However, municipal authorities often only pay out the legally specified minimum amount of €40 in cash, and provide the rest in the form of essential, tangible goods. These refugees also have no claim to child or parental allowances, and are not medically insured, receiving only emergency medical care.

To deter future refugees' claims, they are assigned to hostels and provisional housing, lying on the outer limits of towns or industrial estates. So-called "container detention stations" are set up for Roma in some municipalities—a ship for the accommodation of 200 refugees was used in Hamburg's harbour. Otherwise, old school buildings, shabby hotels and administrative sites serve as refugee hostels, all characterised by poor structural conditions, deficiencies in basic equipment and absence of social care.

Although some municipalities have begun to provide Roma with rented flats, the accommodation predicament of the vast majority of refugees has scarcely changed.

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As refugees, Roma are also subject to a restriction on gaining employment or taking part in training programs and further education. Consequently, bleak prospects are assured, especially for young Roma. Particularly affected in this respect are the children, who are refused the right to attend school in federal states such as Hesse and Saarland.

Yet it is often the case that even those children who can attend school fail to receive a decent education. The authorities then put this down to "cultural specifics" relating to Roma, who are disparaged for "not being interested in school" and being "non-conformist". The reasons for this are to be found in the children's living conditions, which are determined by the state authorities themselves.

The reallocation and closure of refugee hostels continually forces the Roma in and out of various places of accommodation. For children, this often involves a change in school and a renewed effort to integrate. De-registrations and failure to re-register then lead to irregular school attendance and missed lessons.

However, parents—for whom there are no language courses, and who are often poorly educated or have never attended school themselves—are sweepingly reproached for not looking after their children. As a result, the children of Roma refugees are considered unwilling to learn and referred, without any diagnostic testing, to special schools, where they are in effect denied any chance of job training.

Discrimination in the education system and on the labour and housing markets drives many Roma into social isolation. Negative experiences with official authorities also lead to distrust and alienation. This in turn is cited by rightwing demagogues as proof that Sinti and Roma are "incapable of integration".

Persecution of Sinti and Roma

In addition to refugees from Eastern Europe, there are also Sinti and Roma people in Germany, who have lived there for generations, most possessing German citizenship. According to the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Commission's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Sinti and Roma are recognised as a minority people and entitled to special rights and protection.

It is therefore surprising how little is known about their social situation. This is firstly evident in relation to the size of this population group. As only the citizenship and not the ethnicity of members of the population is recorded, the number of Sinti and Roma with German passports can only be roughly estimated. This number is usually assumed to be some 70,000 people. Added to this, must be the approximately 50,000 refugees from former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, among whom are about 20,000 children. However, there are also estimations claiming 200,000 Roma in Germany.

Sinti and Roma certainly do not belong to one ethnically homogeneous group. They have very different histories of settlement and speak different languages. The Sinti arrived in Germany about 600 years ago, and the Roma in the Nineteenth Century. What they have in common, however, is a history plagued with discrimination.

After the foundation of the German national state in 1871 and the consequent expansion of the administrative system, persecution of minorities increased. A special squad, the so-called "Gypsy Central [Office]", was set up in Munich in 1899. Officially named "Central Office for Fight Against the Gypsy Nuisance", its jurisdiction was extended to cover the whole of the German Empire in 1929. The main task of this branch of the police force was to compile a systematic register of the Sinti and Roma—an operation the Nazi regime was able to extend in order to build its racial segregation and extermination programs.

Directly after Hitler came to power, the Nazis set up "gypsy camps" in towns and cities, and released the "Circular Decree for the Combat of the Gypsy Plague". From 1942, they began programmed mass deportations to the extermination camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, where 500,000 Sinti and Roma from throughout Europe were murdered. From the approximately 25,000 Sinti and Roma still living in Germany at the start of the Second World War, more than 15,000 were killed by the Nazi terror regime.

However, the persecution and murder of Sinti and Roma was hushed up and denied for decades after the war. Occasionally, authorities even continued the Nazis' inhumane policies. In Bavaria in 1953, the "Vagrants Central" was established as a direct successor to the "Gypsy Central". It was led by Josef Eichberger, who had formerly been in charge of the Reich Central Exchange for the Deportation of Sinti and Roma. The Vagrants Central customarily drew on old Nazi files. Numerous Sinti and Roma, who had become stateless under the Nazi regime, had to wait until the 1980s before they were again granted German citizenship.

The German authorities also continued the ideology of persecution employed in the Nazi regime. They alleged that all Sinti and Roma were incapable of integration, owing to their race and culture; that they were driven by a roving instinct; and that they had criminal tendencies.

Although the Sinti and Roma were generally pressured to remain in one spot, respective municipal authorities tried to prevent settlements within their own administrative districts.

Alternately victims of ghettoisation and eviction, the survivors of the concentration camps were only granted caravan parking space without any water or electricity facilities by some of the municipalities; elsewhere they were allocated to low-grade residential areas in remote places.

In spite of this, the great majority of Sinti and Roma have long become settled. However, only a small proportion of them have been able to raise their standard of living. The deplorable social situation of the Sinti and Roma has been evidenced by two comprehensive social science studies from 1978 and 1982. No further studies of the kind have been made, but locally restricted investigations reveal that the Sinti and Roma's precarious situation is being perpetuated. The findings show that up to 30 percent of the children are placed in special needs schools, 30 percent of the adults have had no school education, and a further 50 percent had left school, before gaining a leaving certificate. The standard of residential accommodation for a large section of the Sinti and Roma was found to be below the currently accepted minimum level.

In the mid-1980s, a change of policy within the municipalities was initiated, leading to special school and job training measures, as well as local housing programmes, tailored to the Sinti and Roma population. However, the social situation improved only slightly for these people, who had lived in Germany for generations.

A 2007 UNICEF study of the condition of children from Roma families in Germany presented a gloomy picture of prospects for young people, because they "have great difficulty creating a successful life for themselves in conditions where job training provision and the labour market are unfavourable for the young. In many cases, continuing widespread notions about gypsy stereotypes and their background in publicly scorned residential areas also impede the search a job or a training place".

In addition to this, socially and professionally successful Sinti and Roma move away from their old living settlements, which are consequently in danger of becoming "retreat areas for the losers.… What occurs here with respect to a minority of the German Sinti is a development that is also known in the whole society: the tendency towards urban segregation according to economic levels".

Sinti and Roma, who have immigrated since the eastern expansion of the EU, continue to live in extremely miserable conditions, despite there being no openly visible slum dwellings and large-scale camps in Germany

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in contrast to France and Italy.

Roma who had fled Bulgaria and Romania gathered in Berlin last year. They earned themselves a little money by cleaning the windows of cars waiting at the traffic lights on the city's major ring-roads. Lacking regular accommodation, they spent the nights outdoors in a park, before being bundled off to an asylum-seekers hostel by the municipal authority. Roma from south-eastern Europe have also camped in Berlin parks again this year.

According to a report on the Bavarian radio, as many as 500 Roma have taken up jobs as day workers. As the right of "freedom of movement for employees" has only been implemented in Germany—in contrast to France— since this year, these people are denied work-permits, although they are citizens of the European Union. They are therefore forced to work on the "black labour market" on construction sites and in cleaning jobs. Their residence in Germany is thus regarded by the state as illegal, and they face continual harassment from the city authorities.

Considering the Roma in Europe, essayist Karl-Markus Gauss remarked in *Der Zeit* that, "[A]part from the relatively short period of their persecution by the Nazis, their situation has never been so bad in all their history" as it is now. Not only in France have Roma become the target of racist campaigns; they have already been subject to murderous attacks in Slovakia and Hungary. It is significant that the Brussels summit resolved, "to try to develop a long-term strategy at the next meeting so that a solution to the problem can be found". Thus, the EU recalls even in its use of language the dark era of Roma persecution, when the "problem" was seen exclusively in terms of ethnicity.

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