

# The plight of the Roma in Romania

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The brutal austerity measures introduced by the right-wing government led by Emil Boc in Romania have led to a severe worsening of living standards for the population in this member state of the European Union. Large-scale redundancies and wage cuts for public sector workers, cuts to social state provisions and rapidly rising prices for basic goods have made life for the average Romanian increasingly precarious.

Especially hard hit in Romania is the Roma minority, which already faces discrimination and suffers from extreme poverty. The risk of poverty in the Roma community is three times higher than the national average, according to 2003 figures. A World Bank report revealed that approximately 70 percent of the Roma population live on less than US\$4.30 a day.

A significant proportion of the Roma community suffers from a broad spectrum of social disadvantages. These include a low level of education and training, leading to a lack of qualifications, high numbers of children to support, poor living conditions, and virtually no chance for employment on the regular labour market. In addition, the Roma population is subjected to social exclusion and marginalisation as a result of racial discrimination.

The low level of participation in the labour market is the main problem in the Roma community. According to official data contained in the 2002 census, only 23 percent of the Roma population were part of the country's actively employed population.

There are major deficiencies recorded in the professional field. More than 70 percent of the Roma minority have no qualifications or undertake activities that do not require any formal training. The proportion of temporary day workers (42 percent of the Roma population) makes clear they are in a difficult situation in terms of employment and have a minimum income for their needs. Many Roma lack any experience in legally recognised economic activity or have suffered

long periods of unemployment (more than 50 percent of the Roma population were unemployed for more than 27 months).

The living conditions of the Roma are highly precarious. Often, their homes are not connected to electricity, heat or sewerage. Inadequate income leads to a low participation in the education system. As a result, dropping out of school and non-participation in education are more frequent in the Roma population than the national average. More than a third of the Roma population (39 percent) are affected by illiteracy. Some discriminatory practices in relation to the population of Roma—including teaching Roma in separate classes—have only worsened their situation.

The Ministry of Education has developed various projects to reduce school dropout rates and stimulate educational participation among the Roma population. Reports showed that during the school year 2004/2005, about 10 percent of Roma children enrolled in schools offering courses in their language.

But problems persist. In general, the Roma population lives in the suburbs, in notoriously ill-equipped neighborhoods with schools offering poor learning conditions. Many teachers refuse to take a job in such schools. In schools where most students are Roma, repetition rates are about 11.3 percent, above the national average.

There are a number of organisations and governmental programmes whose nominal function is to seek the integration of the Roma community into society and improve their living conditions. But so far, the government's "Roma strategy" has shown modest results and is virtually limited to the creation of an institutional framework.

At the same time, some elements of this "strategy" give cause for concern. Earlier this year in Strasbourg, President Traian Basescu announced the launch of new strategies for Roma integration to be introduced in

2011-2015. While the general objectives sound noble, they show considerable lack of practical detail and will probably remain on paper.

Organisations fighting for human rights have accused the EU of closing its eyes to Roma discrimination. Large numbers of Roma have been repeatedly expelled from many European countries. While under European Union law, Roma are EU citizens who can travel freely and acquire citizenship where they choose, they have been expelled from France; in Ireland their camps have been set on fire. In Spain, posters have been erected outside pubs and restaurants reading, “No Roma allowed”, while Belgium authorities forced a caravan of 700 Roma to leave Flanders for a camp in the south. In other words, most of the countries in western Europe have washed their hands of any social responsibility for the plight of the Roma.

Even though Romania has been accepted into the EU and Romanian Roma have a right to immigrate, they face discrimination all over Europe. In Romania—with an average official jobless rate of 8.5 percent last year, few governmental programmes, low wages and increased taxation—it is practically impossible for the Roma to find a job and a decent home.

Despite the European funds it receives, Bucharest has done virtually nothing to integrate Roma. Roma representatives blame the government for this situation and for failing to implement a policy for their integration into society: “Now I am back home, but I will do my best to go abroad. What can I do here? I have no job and I receive no help from the Romanian state. The social benefits have also been cut. I have four children”, declared one Roma who had been expelled from France.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, 412 Roma had been sent back from France by the end of September 2010. The minister of the interior in Paris said that 51 illegal camps were dismantled last summer and the objective was to repatriate 700 Roma to Bulgaria and Romania by the end of 2010.

After the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, there was an outburst of racial hatred and a wave of collective violence and abuse against Roma. In 1990-1993, fascist groups attacked Roma communities in Romania, burning their homes and destroying their possessions. Entire families were terrorised and forced

to flee. Violence and discrimination remain an everyday reality for the Roma even today.

The Roma population faces attacks from the New Right Movement (Noua Dreapta), an extreme right-wing nationalist organisation considered to be one of the main protagonists of racist and anti-Semitic views in Romania. In 2007, the organisation openly incited racial hatred by displaying posters in various cities, demanding that the term “gypsy” be revived to differentiate Roma from the Romanian population.

The Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare, PRM) is a nationalist party that also promulgates racism and xenophobia. On November 26, 2000, the extreme nationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the PRM leader, received 28 percent of the votes for the post of president. Tudor is known for his anti-Roma, anti-Semitic and anti-Hungarian tirades. In 1998, Tudor, then a senator in Romania’s parliament, declared that his programme includes “the isolation of criminal gypsies in special colonies” to “prevent the transformation of Romania into a gypsy camp”.

The most serious abuses directed against Roma are often associated with the police. Complaints of abuse by police against Roma include violent police raids on Roma communities, torture of Roma and the mistreatment of detainees, racist intimidation and the harassment of Roma involving the illegal use of weapons causing injury and sometimes death. According to reports compiled by Romanian non-governmental organisations, Romanian authorities often engage in actions to evacuate the Roma from their living areas.

The latest developments mean more social exclusion and discrimination for the Roma. In December 2010, Liberal Democrat Party deputy Silviu Prigoana initiated a legislative proposal to replace the term “Roma” with “gypsy”. In February 2011, the government agreed to make this change, based on the recommendations of the Romanian Academy.



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