Roma in Germany forced into abject poverty

Sybille Fuchs
14 February 2013

A recent report aired by the German public broadcaster ARD provided a shocking exposure of the contempt shown by local authorities and church institutions in the city of Dortmund for impoverished workers from southeastern Europe.

The extreme poverty in the countries from which these workers have emigrated—above all, Bulgaria and Romania—has been deliberately exacerbated by the policies of the European Union (EU). This, in turn, has acted as a mechanism to drive living standards down sharply in countries such as France and Germany.

In the ARD report, television journalists Isabel Schayani and Esat Mogul accompanied Ercan, a Roma worker from Plovdiv in Bulgaria, who had spent a week fruitlessly looking for a low-paying job in the north of Dortmund, the city's poorest area.

Immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania can legally live in Germany, since both countries joined the EU in 2007, but they are refused the right to work legally. Nonetheless, in 2011 200,000 such workers came to Germany to attempt to earn money mostly as day labourers.

Thousands have come to Dortmund. They stand on the street every morning and hope that a passing driver will offer them work.

Many have no permanent place to live and are forced into so-called "Ekelhäuser" (horror houses). These houses are either already occupied, meaning that the workers can be evicted at any time, or the latter must pay the owner for a single mattress on which to sleep each night. Washing facilities and kitchen appliances are often broken or completely inadequate for the number of people staying in the houses.

The overcrowding leads quickly to a build-up of rubbish and unhygienic conditions, as well as social tensions. The owners do not provide enough rubbish bins for the large number of occupants. In one house, where 19 people were living, there was no water and only one toilet.

Ercan worked for a firm for 22 years in Bulgaria as a packer, but like many Roma workers he lost his job.

Since coming to Dortmund a week earlier, Ercan had had no money to phone his wife. When he arrived in the German city, he found a place to sleep and was told by a Romanian, who said he was the head of the house, that he could stay there for four or five days. But when Ercan returned that evening he found the windows and doors boarded up. Having left his belongings inside, he found himself with only the clothes on his back.

Because of the freezing temperatures, Ercan needed to find somewhere to shower and warm up as soon as possible. The television reporters accompanied him to a charity run by the local evangelical church. He was turned away from there by a man with a note that read, "Bulgarians are not allowed to shower here".

"They know this full well", said the man. "but they always come back. And I have to show them this note again. Can they not read it? It is in their language. So, no showering!"

Reporter: No showering. So Bulgarians and Romanians cannot shower here, but anyone else can?
Man: Yes.

The reporters were told by someone from the social welfare charity for Dortmund and Lünen that they offered emergency help for those who required it. But in the provision of showers they were "very poorly equipped".

People were simply sent on from there to the immigration centre, where they had a public clinic at 1pm. After a reporter asked if that meant Ercan could not shower, the following dialogue took place.

Man: He certainly can't shower.
Reporter: Why not? Who is allowed to shower in there?
Man: Only Germans; no immigrants.

Ercan finds a place where he can shower, but only three times a week. He has similar problems with where

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to sleep. He tries to gain emergency accommodation from the welfare services for men, but he is also unwelcome there.

Man: Bulgarian or Romanian?

Ercan: I'm Bulgarian.

Man: Oh, no sleeping here. Only people from Dortmund. Only Germans.

Reporter: Why?

Man: This is only for Germans. Not for Bulgarians or Romanians. That is unfortunately how it works. We're not allowed to do that.

Reporter: Is there a reason for that?

Man: That is unfortunately how it works. Social services and the city authorities have said so.

The only thing the man from welfare services can offer Ercan is that if he returns at 11:30 pm, "My colleague and I will decide if we will let you sleep here. But this time will only be an exception, because it is so cold. Ok? I can't do anything more".

Ercan spends the night in an Internet café, before travelling back to Bulgaria in the morning. The reporters give him the money for the trip.

This is not the first programme showing the predicament of Roma in Dortmund. Two years ago, a young Roma woman who sought to earn money for her family through prostitution was thrown out of a window by a brutal client and severely disabled. The television report used her fate as an opportunity to expose the grim conditions facing Roma in the city.

The report also noted the desperate conditions in the would-be immigrants' countries of origin. Many of the Roma who arrive in Germany come from Stolipinovo, a district in Plovdiv. This part of the town is one of the largest Roma ghettos in the Balkans. Some 45,000 mainly Turkish-speaking Roma live there, often with no electricity or running water. Their living conditions have worsened catastrophically since the break-up of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Bulgarians and Romanians are only allowed to stay in Germany for more than three months if they obtain a registration certificate, a rental agreement and health insurance. Most of those who arrive have no idea how to obtain such documents. Full freedom of movement and the legal right to work will only apply after 2014. In the meantime some try to sell old scrap vehicles to dealers. Others have to beg or are forced in to criminal activity.

Many women manage to exist precariously on the streets. More than 700 in Dortmund reported prostitution as their occupation.

Prostitution was banned on the city's streets in 2011 and the whole of Dortmund declared an exclusion zone. The measure was aimed at deterring further immigration. Dortmund city official Ingo Moldenhauer stated, "This should send a signal to Bulgaria, that one can no longer earn money here by working on the streets".

Prostitution now takes place in illegal brothels. Social workers who were previously able to look after the women by providing contraceptives and organising courses in the German language now have no opportunity to do so.

The horrible living conditions in the "Ekelhäuser" also provide a welcome pretext for a witch-hunt in the media, reminiscent of Nazi propaganda.

For example, the *Ruhr-Nachrichten*, a local newspaper wrote in April 2011, "They [Roma people] steal, break in, and run wild in their surroundings. They confirm every well-known stereotype. Whoever cannot fend them off will perish, believes Hubert Scheuer, an old trade unionist".

Instead of blaming the miserable economic conditions, government officials and gouging landlords, the media makes the Roma the convenient scapegoats for social problems.

Several "problem houses" were subsequently forcibly cleared by the security services. The Dortmund Municipal Housing Association (DOGEWO) bought seven buildings and has renovated 65 apartments. More is to come. Of course Roma immigrants will not be able to afford the rent in these houses.

Dortmund is not unique. In several large German cities the conditions are similar. In Duisburg, at the other end of the Ruhr region, around 6,000 Roma from Bulgaria and Romania live under the same inhuman conditions.

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