

European governments stir up anti-Roma prejudice

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Government representatives in Germany, Britain and France have been agitating against immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria for months. Above all, members of the Roma population have been labelled as “welfare tourists” and poverty migrants who allegedly intend to scrounge welfare benefits.

In Germany, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) has placed itself at the head of this campaign, while in Britain Prime Minister David Cameron has threatened to withhold welfare benefits to immigrants. They have been supported by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany and the Labour Party in Britain. In the recent German coalition agreement with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and CSU, the SPD agreed to challenge claims to welfare benefits by European Union (EU) citizens.

The target of the campaign against the Roma is the social rights of all European workers. EU justice commissioner Viviane Reding stated in an interview with the AFP news agency that the problem was the generous welfare systems on offer in some EU countries. It was an issue for EU members to change this and tackle abuses to the system, she said.

EU labour commissioner Laszlo Andor presented a 52-page booklet, which sought to demonstrate how welfare benefits could be withheld from immigrants. As well as financial support, it concentrated on support with the necessities of life such as health care, attending school and housing.

The alleged welfare abuse is largely an invention of the political establishment and the media. The economist Herbert Brücker, from the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), came to the conclusion that “Romanians and Bulgarians claim significantly less welfare benefits than other groups of foreign nationals. The percentage of benefit claimants within the population (from these two countries) is also lower than that of the eight Eastern European countries before the introduction of freedom of movement in 2011. That is a fact.”

According to the IAB study, there is no evidence that large numbers of Romanians and Bulgarians in Germany are supplementing their incomes from self-employed work with Hartz IV welfare benefits. There are only 1,500 such cases in the statistics. Immigrants from EU member states in southeast Europe also receive child benefits less often than German citizens, and the percentage of Hartz IV claimants is much lower than among other groups of immigrants.

Refusal of social welfare

The real scandal is not the claiming of welfare benefits by immigrants from EU states, but the widespread refusal of social welfare.

Last April, the German municipalities conference accused immigrants of having neglected their accommodation, even though they had absolutely no other option but to live in vacant, completely dilapidated junk properties, whose owners made large profits from the desperate conditions

of the Roma.

Municipalities have even refused to allow homeless Roma to use emergency accommodation and showers. The city administration in Frankfurt insisted that it was not possible to help Roma immigrants, since they had no prospect of work and no right to claim social welfare, even if that was limited to a bed in emergency accommodation. All that the municipality offered was an empty floor at the central police station and the price of a ticket back to Romania or Bulgaria.

As a consequence, an impoverished district has developed on abandoned industrial land in the shadows of the glittering towers of the banks in the financial centre, where people vegetate in cellar-like concrete shacks without heating or running water.

In order to get by, the Roma offer their services as day labourers at the street corners where labour is bought in many city centres in Germany. There they wait in the bitter cold often for several hours to work for starvation wages of a few euros per day on a building site or in a slaughterhouse.

In France, Interior Minister Manuel Valls is continuing the policies of former conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, which are in breach of human rights. Some Roma settlements that are decades old are to be flattened and the residents driven out. The French gendarmerie also maintains an illegal Roma database. Similar practices by police in Sweden have been made public. In Italy, there were even plans to establish a database of fingerprints for all Roma children. In Germany, the Gypsy database, created by the Nazis, was maintained until 2001.

The grand coalition in Berlin has agreed to declare Serbia and Macedonia secure countries of origin, in order that they can refuse asylum applications from immigrants from these countries, who are mostly Roma, and deport them back to the Balkans. Under pressure from the EU and the German interior ministry, emigrating Roma intercepted by the Macedonian border police will face draconian punishment. According to some reports, Roma passports will be stamped with the initial G for gypsy.

Exclusion and persecution

In the countries of southeast Europe, Roma are socially excluded, degraded, denied rights and persecuted. In recent years, 30 people in the Czech Republic and Hungary alone have fallen victim to pogroms and witch-hunts. Numerous others were injured and traumatised.

The misery of the Roma is a direct result of the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe after 1989. After the overthrow of the Stalinist regime of Nicolai Ceausescu, more than half of the 8.4 million jobs in Romania were eliminated. Roma were especially affected by this. They were the first to be laid off, since they boasted lower professional qualifications.

During the Second World War, Sinti and Roma were persecuted by the Nazi regime across Europe and brutally murdered. Around half a million were victims of the genocide. They never received compensation for the atrocities they had lived through. In the 1950s, the German constitutional court still opposed applications for compensation with the justification that this had not been an issue of the racist persecution of a minority. Rather, due to their tendency for “criminality and deception,” they were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis, because “like primitive ancestors they possess an unrestrained impulse to own.”

The conditions for Roma in Eastern Europe improved after the war. The industrialisation at the direction of the state made it possible for them to work in factories and to be integrated into modern work practices. For the first time in their history they gained access to state education institutions, the health care system and social security.

In Hungary, where in 1960, 35 percent of the Roma population still had no regular work and a further 32 percent were hired as casual labourers, there was almost no unemployment among Roma 20 years later. The proportion of casual labourers had dropped to 15 percent, and the remaining 85 percent went to work in regular employment. [1]

However, they were generally integrated into the production process as low-qualified, untrained workers, and only a small layer achieved a university qualification. Their living conditions improved, but full integration failed due to the politics of the Stalinist regime, which continued to discriminate against them.

In Romania and Czechoslovakia, Roma children were forcibly sent to special schools until the 1980s, which prevented their educational progress. Additionally, they were regularly separated into districts of cities established for them.

This failed integration had terrible consequences for the Roma after the restoration of capitalism. Due to their lower school education and professional qualifications they were the first to lose their jobs. Children could no longer go to school because bus routes were stopped that had previously brought them there, or because there was no money for school books. Due to unemployment and the lack of educational opportunities, many Roma settlements became poverty ghettos.

The EU imposed the privatisation of industry and agriculture and the collapse of the economy that accompanied this in the 1990s, before the acceptance of the Eastern European states into the EU.

The Kosovo war in 1999 also had terrible consequences for the Roma. The European Union and NATO deliberately looked the other way as the Albanian nationalists they were supporting drove the Roma out of Kosovo. At the same time, Germany's foreign minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) was justifying the war with the words, “Auschwitz, never again!”

The social decline of the Roma is now producing statistics that are normally only seen in so-called third world countries. In large Roma districts in Bulgaria, like Fakulteta in Sofia or Stolipovono in Plovdiv, nothing has been invested in infrastructure since 1989, although the population residing there has risen sharply. As a result, 40 percent of Roma do not have access to electricity or fresh water, and 60 percent are not connected to the sewage system. They have access to only 10 square metres of living space per person. Most Roma have no chance of emerging from such poverty districts.

They are once again overwhelmingly excluded from state educational institutions and are referred to special schools. The rate of illiteracy has risen within a short period of time to more than 30 percent. More than 60 percent of the Roma in Eastern Europe are unemployed, and in some regions this rate is over 90 percent. Four out of five Roma live on less than €60 (\$81.2) of social support per month. Life expectancy has dropped to 57.

With every wave of market liberalisation and reforms, the impoverishment of the Roma and the working class as a whole has

increased.

When a property bubble burst in Romania in 2009, the state agreed a bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund that was tied to draconian measures. Public sector wages were reduced by 25 percent, pensions cut and VAT increased from 19 to 24 percent. Many welfare benefits were eliminated without any replacement, and one in four hospitals were closed. In the public sector, 100,000 lost their jobs. Average monthly income per head fell from €265 in 2007 to €194 in 2012.

To avert the most serious desperation and to cover over the worst of the poverty, the government has established a “bread and milk” programme. School pupils receive a roll and 200 millilitres of milk daily, since they could otherwise not concentrate on their lessons due to hunger.

Many Roma seek help from family and friends as a consequence of their hunger and poverty. The notorious family clans that crop up in the media in Western Europe are thus not the result of the remnants of a pre-modern lifestyle, but simply the result of a completely broken social security system. The reliance on relatives is often the last straw in the daily struggle to survive.

The EU's Decade Programme

In 2005, the European Union called for a Roma Decade and boasts that it has made available €18 billion for this. In reality, the EU is responsible for the problems of the Roma: unemployment, poverty and the lack of health care. Social scientist Katalin Zamfir has only ridicule for the EU's plan to allegedly tackle discrimination against Roma. For example, the EU has invested a lot of money in a research project into bullying in the workplace, as if this would be the most pressing problem amid unemployment of 60 percent.

The Decade Programme consists to date mainly of declarations of intent full of platitudes from governments and international organisations, but without a single meaningful measure. There were merely a few Roma advisory councils created in which a few minor posts arose, while the social and class questions were suppressed.

Roma expert Mappes-Niediek wrote that the problems facing the Roma could not be solved as Roma problems. “If something is to be improved, the problems must first of all be called by their right name. They are poverty, unemployment, a miserable education and underfunded health care systems” [2]. But the scarce resources from the EU are deliberately not being used to improve the living conditions of the Roma and the impoverished population in southeast Europe.

As a result, the grandiose proclamation of a Roma decade serves merely to cover up the reactionary policies of the EU. In a period of sustained economic crisis and the impoverishment of broad sections of the population in Eastern Europe, the Roma are being degraded as scapegoats. The witch-hunt against the Roma serves to divide the working class in order to impose further attacks on the social rights of the entire working class.

References:

1. Figures from Norbert Mappes-Niediek, The impoverishment of the Roma and the poverty economy, *Journal for German and International Politics*, vol. 12: 2012, pp. 73-83.
2. Ibid, p. 83.



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