

SITUATION OF THE RROMA IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

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I. HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-ETHNOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Historically, Rroma, in whichever name they appear are a homogenous ethno-cultural entity. This statement in itself may seem rather far from the realm of reality, especially in view of the so-called "differences" or distinctions that Rroma themselves - alas - do further but is nevertheless based in historical reality.

Rroma, and I do stress here that I am using this term in a wide sense, that is to encompass almost all the groups that pass under Gypsies among the general population, have always come under several appellations and names. First, and this should not be neglected in the discussion of the peculiar current situation, Rroma call themselves by various names. For Rroma come in various groups. Each group represents a historical and originally rather localised entity. Its identity stems from a common historical background as well as from common traits, usually, and originally trades.

So one finds Sinti, Xaladitka, Cale, Servi, Arlii, Gurbeti etc., each with a distinct identity, but nevertheless with a common culture. This statement, especially when one thinks of Sinti - who distinguish themselves from Rroma - may seem "heretical". Nevertheless, should one ask a Sinto what language he or she speaks, the answer is invariably "Rromanes", that is the Rroma language. And this is more than just a name, for their "next" relatives, namely Rroma from Poland who fled the German persecutions in the XVIIth century, still speak a very similar - and totally understandable - dialect but they pass for Rroma.

So language is one of the basis of the identity. It is but one, as traditions, trades do form another facet of the identity. While most of these traditions are common to all, it is in minor details that a group identity formed itself. It is more the "horse-dealers" versus the "blacksmiths" versus the "coppersmiths" than fundamental differences among the Rroma themselves. All in all, and this needs to be stressed more than once, Rroma, in spite of several hundreds of years of a distinct history - think of the Sinti versus the Balkan Rroma - still are a culturally homogenous population.

One may think that the Rroma identity and culture is uniquely defined by the ability and the perpetuation of the language - Rromanes. While this is true to some extent, this is nevertheless, far from true. It is the traditions and their respect which, to a large extent define the Rroma identity. And these are not language bound as the example of the Spanish Cale easily shows. Their dialect disappeared in the XIXth century, but to this day, they are amongst the most traditional Rroma. So, especially in cases where a group does not speak Rromanes, there are enough other common elements to define one's identity.

II. RROMA POLITICS

So why this wealth of different names, this seemingly existing competition? There are two factors at play. The first one is a purely Rroma one, and I will shortly describe both its origins and source. The second, and by far the more important is politics. And not Rroma politics, but rather the use of non-Rroma of these small differences to achieve another aim.

One the Rroma side, well, Rroma show their first allegiance for their family, then to their lineage and finally to Rroma at large. This, taken together with the group names and appurtenance can lead to

misleading statements that confuse the layman. Let me give but two examples: A Kalderash - very traditional coppersmiths found the world over - told us once that his father settled in Kosovo after World War Two because there were no Rroma there. He by far did not mean that there were no Gypsies - Rroma - there, just simply that there were none from his group, the Kalderasha. To give a second example, a Sinto told me that in Poland, there were Rroma and Sinti. Well, by Rroma he meant the Kalderasha that I just cited earlier and by Sinti, he meant the Polish Rroma - who call themselves Polska Rroma. Hence, and I do stress here that these are just two typical examples of a general phenomenon, one should show some caution while judging some statements.

While these examples show how the Rroma themselves can confuse the layman, by far the most important factor is the use that non-Rroma have made of these minor "differences". Kosovo, and in fact all of former Yugoslavia provides perhaps one of the best examples of the use that politicians and political parties made of these facts. In Kosovo, one finds, according to the "common knowledge", Rroma, Ashkali and Egyptians. Well, this is true should one listen to their political mouths. Reality, as usual is more differentiated. In fact, there are Gurbeti, Arlii, Bugurdzhi and various other groups and further subdivisions in that region. How can I claim this? Well, it is rather easy. Some of the "Rroma" are in fact - right across the border, claiming they are Gurbeti; others are Arlii while yet others are Bugurdzhi. Family ties, language, all underlines these facts. So what of the Egyptians and the Ashkali?

Especially in the Balkans, many Rroma integrated themselves in society to the extent where part of their identity - in this case the language - was lost. It may seem odd to the Western reader that Rroma are sedentary, are doctors, lawyers, even policemen, but this is attested by Ottoman tax register as early as the XVth century. This is not to say that all of these sedentary Rroma - by and large the bulk of the Rroma population (around 95%) - just assimilated. No, for most kept their language, traditions and identity. Just some lost one of those "legs", namely their language. In the case of some Ashkali in Kosovo¹, it does neither prevent them from marrying Rroma - and vice versa - nor from keeping their identity and traditions.

So what of the Egyptians? Egyptians are an old myth among non-Rroma. After all, the first Rroma who arrived in the early XVth century in Western Europe all claimed to be dukes, counts of even kings from "Little Egypt" - and hence their names of Gypsies, Gitanos of the Greek Guftoi, all derived from the Egyptian name. This myth can be traced back to Modon, where a hill near this Western Greek town was called Gyppe, from Egypt, and was settled by Rroma. Maybe, these Rroma Egyptians differ from the actual Egyptians found in Kosovo and Macedonia. However, the region was always known for its Rroma settlements but never ever for "true" Egyptians who could have settled there under Ottoman domination. In fact, even the armies that the Ottomans used in the European part of their empire were mostly local or at least Western when not of Turkish stock. Add to this that Arabic was never spoken in the Balkan and that the appearance of these Egyptians occurs shortly after the visit of Nasser to Yugoslavia in the late 1950's. To give but a parallel, the visit of Indira Gandhi to that very same country sparked a move of Rroma "leader" to denote themselves as an Indian minority.

III. STATE POLICIES - "DIVIDE AND CONQUER"

So, if the "differences" are rather in the form more than in the flesh, what are the causes of these strong positions - namely the "they are not", "we are not to be mistaken with them" etc. Think for a second about the Kosovo situation. Reading the press, and this since eons, one reads that there is a majority of Albanians and a minority of Serbs. This Serbian minority is - or rather now was - by far the largest one in the country.

¹ Many Ashkali from Kosovo do speak Rromanes and claim an appurtenance to either the Bugurdži or the Kovači group.

In fact, without a dividing tactic, namely by splitting Rroma into different "unrelated" groups, Serbs would have been a smaller minority in Kosovo. The same behaviour can be seen today among Albanians in Macedonia. Rroma, at least part of them are being coerced into declaring themselves as being part of the Albanian minority. This minority, in turn gains a greater influence, although most probably, its numbers are by far lower than the ones of the Rroma.

So, if the politics and policies have led to a tethering split within the Rroma community, what of life? As usual, reality is more differentiated than the "facts" and "assertions" one can hear from various leaders and so-called self-proclaimed experts. Inter-marriages abound, as we have said, Rromanes has been lost or retained on either side of the divide - as can be seen for example in the case of an "Ashkali - President" issuing certificates to gullible Rroma trying to avoid being repatriated to Kosovo and who speaks a fluent Rromanes. Perhaps only truly among some Egyptians did a separate identity emerge in the last few decades. As among Ashkali, this identity is still rather shallow and in spite of various theories of a different origin of these groups, a leitmotif, doubts are cast by such statement - seen on one of these "certificates" stating for example that some of the ancestors of such or such a group had been Moslems since the third century.

This is not to belittle the phenomenon as it is just a reflection of what has happened all over the world and resulted in the various Rroma groups. Only, the situation in Kosovo, Macedonia and Southern Serbia is special inasmuch as external play has been involved in the "creation" of those new identities. A fact that is underlined by the alignment of various "leaders" either on Serbian, Albanian or simply for their people.

IV. RROMA TODAY

When speaking about former Yugoslavia, one has to distinguish between very different regions and patterns. Vojvodina is by far the most quiescent place for Rroma. While Rroma there only arrived in the XVII-XVIIIth century, they form a large minority in the region, mostly Mačvaja with some other Vlach group. While their integration within the society leaves to desire, after all, they are living in hard situations, they are not exposed to a state organised persecusion. There are many documented excesses of nationalists or individuals in the region, going up to murders, but the ethnic cleansing mentality that has engulfed most of the other regions of former Yugoslavia has not yet taken root in this region.

So the largest problems are due to lack of work, lack of education, blatant discrimination and outright violence, with the state tolerating these excesses, sometimes / especially the police / participating in them.

Serbia, at least in its Northern part follows the same pattern as the Vojvodina. Beatings, discrimination, skinheads attacks, lacks of prospects etc. are the norm rather than the exception, this in spite of the new democratic government that nevertheless remains nationalistic.

Southern Serbia, on the other hand, is another problem altogether. A large part of the Rroma minority is more closely related to the groups that live in Kosovo, the Arlii, Bugurdži and Kovači. Their second mother tongue is more often than not Albanian and these Rroma are faced with the fact that in that region, they are Moslems, Albanians and in addition also Rroma. This has proved to be deadly. There have been concerted attacks against these Rroma who, in addition to being Rroma, are also considered by the many Serb refugees from Kosovo to be UCK sympathisants. Their prospects are terrible. Work is out of question, living quarters are not available due to the influx of Serbs from Kosovo. Discrimination is even more brutal and violence is rather than norm.

Montenegro represents yet another situation altogether. There are many refugees from Kosovo, Serbs, Gorani, Rroma - in a large part Gurbeti. This refugee situation and the ensuing competition for scarce

resources is problematic for Rroma. Many live in refugees camps, and their only means of living are handouts from international organisations, begging and, something that is becoming increasingly difficult, simple trades – buying and selling goods on the markets. Due to a greater ethnic mix, the starting situation was less difficult than in other regions of Former Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, one sees the same effects as in other regions. A difficult economic situation as well as a problematic political one lead to an increased polarisation and ethnic division of the country. The losers, in case of nationalism are always the Rroma.

V. AN ATTEMPT AT ELIMINATION

To illustrate the pattern to which we have been recently confronted, let us present the case of a family of Peje and of one family of Prizren, both in Kosovo. These are only two cases among the ones that we have so far investigated in both Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina and Southern Serbia. We also have several additional ones, with similar results and others that are currently either pending or being investigated.

Both families are currently refugees in Switzerland, and in both cases, required documents in order to be able to marry in Switzerland. In one case, the family (Peje) had copies of their Yugoslav Identity papers issued in Kragujevac while in the other, we only had an attestation of the loss of their house in Prizren (signed by Kosovar authorities) as well as all the data concerning the family, their dates of birth, names etc.

We asked both the UN administration as well as the local authorities about those families and whether it would be possible for them to issue a birth certificate (in both cases) and an attestation that the person was not married (in one case). In both cases, no traces of the families were to be found in the official acts. Other similar cases are known to us both in Kosovo and also in Bosnia - Hercegovina. In the latter case, this pattern seems to be most common in the current Republika Srpska (Serbian part of Bosnia), for example in the region of Doboje.

Housing is yet another problematic issue for Rroma. In Kosovo, officially buying houses – that is with all relevant property papers - was forbidden for ethnic Albanians from 1989 onward². This according to the SFH as well as to the OSCE and UNMIK is leading to a complicated solution whereby it is almost impossible to determine whom property belongs to. The same sources are stating that they are expecting ca. 75'000 processes to straighten property litigation in Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro.

This measure from the Serbian authorities did also affect Rroma. Most Rroma in Kosovo owned property, farms and land, a situation that was also found in Bosnia and Hercegovina. During the war itself, many Rroma houses were destroyed by Serbs. Following the NATO intervention, Rroma were forced to flee. We know of numerous instances whereby Rroma families were forced to leave their property under threats of death and give it – sometimes even signing property papers under duress – to Albanians.

Thus, Rroma both in Bosnia. Southern Serbia and in Kosovo have lost their property, land, houses. These houses are by now occupied by the very people that expropriated them or by people to whom these houses were sold in good faith, and more often than not, by former UCK members or their relatives or by Serbs or Moslem refugees. The chances for Rroma to gain back their property in a process are more than doubtful. First, due to the sheer number of processes that are currently being initiated, they will not see their cases judged for a very long period of time. We will thus see a situation by which property seized from Rroma is not returned to them and by which the person

² See OSCE/UNMIK Property rights in Kosovo, January 2002 and see SFH report “Kosova – Situation der Minderheiten”, April 2002.

occupying the land will be given the property rights, a situation already well known in other former Yugoslav republics.

This behaviour is by far not limited to Kosovo and Bosnia. We have cases in Serbia. In one such case, a Rrom owning a flat in South Serbia returned home after his asylum request was denied by Switzerland. He found his flat occupied by Serbian refugees from Kosovo. In spite of his efforts, he could neither prove that he owned the property, and in fact, the authorities granted the property officially to those Serbian refugees. Another one was kicked out of his flat in Beograd to make place for Serbian refugees. This is unfortunately a common occurrence in Serbia proper whereby an Albanian name and the Moslem religion – or worse, Rroma - are sufficient to guarantee that your rights will not be respected.

VI. A PLACE FOR RROMA

This is not the first time in history that such a behaviour has been observed. It happened in Czechoslovakia after the war where some Holocaust survivors could not find any trace of the existence prior to the war. That it happens in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Hercegovina and other places in Former Yugoslavia is not surprising. After all, a lot of property was seized or destroyed, many Rroma fled for their lives. And now, the perpetrators are running the administration. In fact, as in several places in Bosnia³, the administration itself or people with strong connections with the government are housed in former Rroma properties.

A returning Rroma refugee will thus be placed in a difficult situation. While his or her former Yugoslav passport may grant him or her the entry in the country, in many cases, he will not have any chances of returning to his original home. Even worse, the administration will not recognise him as a citizen of that country. After all, without a birth certificate, one may have been born in another part of former Yugoslavia. So, a returning Rrom is de-facto a stateless person within his or her own country.

The example we have given earlier illustrate that these Rroma have no chances of settling in Serbia proper. First, they are mostly Moslems, with Albanian names and as such already have little chances of being recognised as “refugees” or even be allowed to settle there. Secondly, the lack of documents proving their origins is yet another hurdle and finally, housing is even worse an issue for Rroma in Serbia proper⁴.

As a recognised country, Rroma returning there are at best accepted in their former home without any chance of being recognised as full citizen – for they lack the formal proof that they were born there, that they held property, that they worked there. They are thus in the situation of refugees within their own country.

³ See the Rroma Foundation Report on Bosnia and Hercegovina

⁴ We refer to various publications on the subject, for example from the Helsinki Watch in Serbia.