

## **RROMA IN SOUTH SERBIA**

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### **I. SOUTH SERBIA**

Since the end of the war in Kosovo, the situation in South Serbia has been tense. A large number of refugees from Kosovo, a dismal economic and social situation and a clear uncertainty about the future of the region have contributed to tensions and a wealth of problems.

As usual in former Yugoslavia, the first victims are Rroma. On the one hand, from an ethnic Albanian perspective, they collaborated with the Milosevic regime and the Serbian repression in Kosovo, or more generally against the ethnic Albanian population. On the other hand, this from an ethnic Serbian perspective, Rroma in South Serbia are mostly Moslems and speak Albanian, ergo, are more aligned with the wished and aspirations of the Albanian population. This is a fact, as many Rroma from Kosovo were actually pro-UCK, at least until the war.

As such, in Southern Serbia, Rroma are both loathed by the Serbian and the Albanian population. In addition, the usual mistrust adds to this already tense situation. Events such as threats, actual violence, eviction<sup>1</sup> and of course the ubiquitous outright discrimination have rendered the situation of Rroma precarious.

The recent official demise of Yugoslavia, now replaced by a looser federation of Serbia and Montenegro as well as the current fights within Serbia about the future of Kosovo proper have not improved the situation.

### **II. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION**

According to our sources – something documented explicitly in other reports on the situation of Rroma in the region<sup>2</sup> - returning refugees as well as IDPs (Internally displaced People) are at the mercy of the authorities and have at best a very precarious existence.

The major issues that returning refugees and IDPs face, especially in the case of Rroma, are:

- **Obtaining official Documents:** These are bound to an official residence, which, in the case of Rroma almost always is an illegal encampment or refugee camp.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rroma Foundation Reports under <http://www.rroma.org>

<sup>2</sup> See the report of the Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe on Serbia and Montenegro – December 2002.

- **Housing:** The conditions in such illegal settlements are dreadful. They can at best be compared to the worst of Brasil's "favellas": Cardboard houses, no hygiene, no heat or electricity etc.
- **Lack of official "existence":** In many cases, especially again in the case of Rroma, even proving one's existence can be difficult if not impossible. That is, obtaining the documents such as a birth certificate as well as others, all the pre-requisite for the obtention of an official residency or ID card are beyond the means of most.
- **Work:** In view of the number of Serbian refugees from other regions currently re-located in South Serbia, and in view of the current economic situation of the region, Rroma will be the absolute last ones to obtain a job. This is documented by several cases of IDPs and returning refugees.
- **Property:** We have documented cases where Rroma had a property, be it a flat or a house, this property being currently occupied by other IDPs (Serbian), Rroma have no chance of actually using it or even to being acknowledged as being the owner thereof.
- **Social Services:** As documented in numerous reports, without an official home, the official papers such as an ID card etc., social services, health etc. are denied. This puts Rroma particularly at risk in view of their chances of obtaining the required official documents.
- **Health Care:** According to our sources, the health care situation in Southern Serbia is dramatic for returning refugees. They are faced with the usual hurdles described above of obtaining official documentation that is a pre-requisite to any visit to a hospital, but in addition, the current situation in the region means that in most cases, money is required. One needs money to get an appointment, to pay the doctor, to pay for medication etc. This is a general trend in all Eastern European countries that renders it difficult for people in precarious situation to obtain basic care. In some domains, such as psychiatric medicine, the country is way behind. This is partly due to the neglect and misuse that this branch of medicine suffered under the communist regime but also to the fact that this is still not considered as essential and as such, is even more deprived than other branches. In the current situation, and this especially for Rroma, chances of being properly treated can only be rated as more than unsatisfactory.