

Concept Paper

WHAT IS ROMANI POLITICS?

PART ONE

By Orhan Tahir

Antwerp

November, 2017

The purpose of this paper is to propose guidelines for development of European Romani Politics and to initiate a further discussion on this issue among Roma. It aims at helping the Romani movement to overcome the current crisis of values through evolution into political movement with coherent ideology and vision for the future amidst the changing realities of the world order. This paper should be considered as a starting point of the debate and therefore it does not provide definitive solutions and answers but only outlines the theoretical framework of the concept of Romani Politics.

Why Romani Politics?

The survival of Roma as an ethnic community without statehood, written language and uniform religion, for centuries, is a phenomenon that has no parallel in European history. However, in 2017, the future of 12 millions of Roma in Europe could no longer be left to mere chance but it requires setting of common political agenda – Romani Politics. Simply speaking, the Romani politics should answer the primary question: What could the Roma collectively do today, so that their children and grandchildren enjoy a better life tomorrow without losing their identity? The Romani family is good model. In every Romani family the father and the mother define their “family politics”. So the family is a political institution. In fact, it has been the most important political institution for Roma. Most Roma parents make sacrifices and save money because of the belief that in this way they can provide the next generation with brighter future. They may not live to see that future, but they imagine it, dream about it, work for it. What if thousands and millions of Roma across Europe begin imagining their future together like one big Romani family? A time is coming for a common vision of the Romani families. It is necessary because the integrationist policies which have been dominating the public discourse for so long are failing, and the gap can be easily filled by the far right policies. Obviously, the Roma cannot leave tomorrow in the hands of politicians who advocate birth control on Roma women, removal of children from their parents or creation of labor camps and reservations. Roma know from their past experience what follows when they behave as victims without responsibilities in the face of coming calamity. Now, it is the task of the Romani intellectual elites to forge a third way ahead. The Romani politics should offer clear alternative to both neoliberal and neofascist approaches to the Romani question.

The Romani Question

Today, Roma or Romanies, known also as Gypsies, are the largest stateless ethnic community on European continent with fast increasing youth population without adequate access to political and economic resources for development. Roma do not constitute majority in any European state. They are geographically scattered all over Europe with more significant presence in the Central and Eastern European countries. Due to the declining fertility rates and the impoverishment of the ethnic majorities in these countries after the era of Communism, Roma were perceived as a demographic threat and economic burden on local societies. Though many Roma migrate to richer countries in search of better perspectives, their situation in Western Europe is under question as well. The European migrant crisis, the rise of the Far Right, and the risk of disintegration of the European Union make the future of Roma in Europe unsecure and uncertain. As the WWII and the most recent conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Ukraine have shown Roma are especially vulnerable to violence since they have no home country to protect them at times of crisis. At the other hand, all attempts in the history for complete assimilation or for complete extermination of Roma had failed. The geographical dispersion of Roma, the various adaptation strategies employed by them, and the persistence of Romani culture made the annihilation of Roma impossible. When the Non-

Romani policies fail, Roma should mobilize the strengths and the resources of their own community. Therefore, the Romani Politics requires shift in the way of thinking on the Romani question - from disadvantages to advantages, from weakness to power, from self-contempt to self-respect.

Brief Historical Overview of the Romani Movement

The Roma have survived without a state for many centuries, but their way of life and philosophy came particularly into conflict with the nation-state building projects of the European elites during XVIII-XX c. The bourgeois nation-states differentiated significantly from the old feudal multiethnic states. In the nation-state the elite of a single ethnic group declared to be “a nation” acquires the monopole ownership over the state territory and its resources. The elite of the ethnic majority expels, exterminates or subordinates the other ethnic groups and invents national myths about the past to legitimize its right to rule. Thus, at the eve of the XX century, the non-Roma elites wanted to remove from the territories of the emerging nation-states the Roma and anyone else that did not fit their views on who belongs to the nation. These policies reached their culmination in Nazi Germany where the doctrine of racial superiority of German nation over the Non-Germans resulted into mass extermination of Jewish, Romani and Slav populations.

After the end of WWII the European Roma were not recognized as victims of the German racial laws. Unlike the Jews, they were not entitled to reparations and their suffering during the Holocaust was largely ignored. Roma were subjected mainly to assimilation measures, varying from country to country. In the 1950s some Roma intellectuals opposed these policies by reclaiming the right of Roma to self-determination and nationhood – an idea that goes back to the pre-war Soviet Union where Roma were allowed to develop their language and culture on equal bases with the other nationalities. The notion that Roma constitute a national group has been shortly tolerated in some communist countries, such as Bulgaria under Georgi Dimitrov for example. However, this idea found wider acceptance in Yugoslavia due to the active participation of Roma in the anti-Fascist resistance movement and the new multinational federative design of the state after the war. It was Yugoslavia to introduce for the first time the ethnic name Roma instead of word “Tsigani” in the public sphere.

The initiative for pan-European “Romani movement”, actually, came from Western Europe where numerous Romani associations have been formed by the 60s. As result of the “Romani awakening” the France-based organization Comité International Tzigane (CIT) launched the I World Romani Congress in Orpington near London in 1971. At this Congress, delegates from 14 countries rejected assimilation, adopted the symbols of Romani nation (the flag and the anthem) and demanded reparations for the Holocaust. They renamed CIT into *Comité International Rom* (in Romanes *Komitia Lumiaki Romani*) and elected the Yugoslavian Rom Slobodan Berberski for its first President.

However, the organization was officially established under the name *International Romani Union* (IRU) in Switzerland in 1978 where the II World Romani Congress was held. IRU was

registered in Geneva with the aim to represent Roma to the United Nations. Indeed, IRU was accepted to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) at the next year. In this way the Romani question was brought to the international stage and attracted the attention of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. She subsequently proclaimed Roma to be “children of India”. In 1982 the IRU achieved one of its greatest successes - the West German government finally recognized the genocide against Roma during the WWII.

With the death of Yugoslavian leader Marshal Josip Tito in 1980 and the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, IRU lost its powerful allies at international level. Over the next years IRU sought international recognition of the Romani Day, recognition of Roma as national minorities, standardization of Romani language and compensations for the genocide. Although in 1993 the status of IRU within the UN was promoted to special consultative status category II with ECOSOC the organization was further weakened by lack of financial resources and internal disagreements. The V Congress of IRU in Prague in 2000 marks the last major attempt for resurgence of the Romani movement. In 2001 a “Declaration of Roma Nation” as a non-territorial nation was presented by the IRU President Emil Ščuka to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in New York. At this point, after achieving many of its objectives, the IRU had reached the limits of its possibilities.

The Emergence of the “European Roma Policy”

The fall of Communism in 1989 led to an ideological vacuum in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The state no longer provided job and security for its citizens. The establishment of numerous non-governmental, political and cultural organizations of Roma came as a response to the challenges of market liberalization and democratization. On the other hand many Roma discovered that they have their own flag and anthem, and enjoyed the freedom to openly speak their language and celebrate their culture.

In 1993 the European Council met in Copenhagen to decide on the criteria for EU accession of new members. The Copenhagen Criteria mainstreamed the protection of human rights and the respect for minorities as conditions for the post-communist countries to join the European Union. The same year the Council of Europe (CoE) adopted a Recommendation 1203 describing Roma as a “truly European minority” which needs “special protection”. These new developments led to the emergence of what will be later called “European Roma Policy”. This term applies to set of policies which have their beginnings in the struggle for human rights of the international Romani movement. However, these policies were designed in the 1990s and 2000s mainly by Non-Roma experts in the context of political relations between the European Commission and the countries from Central and Eastern Europe. The Roma have never been a negotiating party in these relations and therefore the term European Roma Policy may be misleading: Roma are not subject but object of this policy. How the **European Roma Policy** can be used for development of **European Romani Politics**: the answer of this question requires an analysis of what is European Roma Policy and what is its impact on Roma.

Europeanization and politicization of the Romani issue

For the first time the Romani question acquired clearly political dimensions during the EU Pre-accession process because the protection of the rights of the minorities was part of the political criteria for EU membership. For this reason many European countries recognized Roma as national or ethnic minorities, and for the first time Romani political parties were registered and allowed to participate in elections in the former Communist countries.

All these were initially demands of the international Romani movement from the 1980s but it was only after the collapse of the Communist bloc in 1989 that the Western governments began to pay more attention to the Romani question in the light of their new foreign policy priorities. Hence, when it comes to the promotion of the minority rights, for a short period of time, the interests of the Romani movement overlapped with the interests of the Western powers. This development opened an opportunity for the Romani civil rights activists to play some consultative role within the framework of the OSCE, UN and CoE through participation in the formulation of recommendations and resolutions concerning Roma¹. Furthermore, this newly formed “Roma elite” was engaged in monitoring and reporting the human rights situation of Roma in the candidate countries during the Eastern Enlargement of EU.

Over the next years, the American and the Western European institutions and organizations identified and endorsed their “Roma partners” across the region giving preference to the Romani NGOs over the Romani political parties. The majority of the Romani NGO activists remained reluctant to the ideas of the Romani ethno-political mobilization since such ideas could jeopardize their relations with the authorities and the donors. The political field was largely left to Romani communal leaders and businessmen interested mainly in the local politics.

Among the initiatives that illustrate the Europeanization of the Romani question probably most interesting is the so called “Finnish initiative”. In 2001 the Finish President Tarja Halonen proposed the creation of a consultative assembly representing Roma at pan-European level. This proposal came into being with the support of French government in 2004. Actually, the Finnish and the French governments negotiated the issue between them, leaving little space for public deliberations. The European Roma and Travelers Forum (ERTF) was established with the idea to be a representative body of Roma in Europe, but this idea has never fully materialized. The ERTF became financially dependent on the Council of Europe and its secretariat was accommodated in the premises of CoE in Strassbourg. However, the CoE has recently decided to stop the funding for the ERTF in line with the general shift in the European Roma Policy.

The main outcome from the Europeanization of the Romani question was the emergence of public perception that the responsibility for “Europe’s largest minority” rests much more on the European Union, than on the national authorities (though the Commission is insisting now on the “joint responsibility” of all member states but joint responsibility means no

¹ Mirga, A. and N. Gheorghe, ‘The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Paper’, Project on Ethnic Relations. Princeton, New Jersey: PER, 1997.

responsibility). Therefore, the solution of “the Roma problem” should come from outside and not from inside the countries with large Roma populations. The deduction of this principle of primacy of the supranational level over the national level is of utmost importance for the development of European Romani Politics.

The Romani issue becomes money issue

On the next place, as a result from the EU accession process the Roma issue became a financial issue. Pre-accession negotiations allowed the Central and Eastern European governments to bargain on the Roma problems with the European Commission. They were offered financial assistance to improve the situation of Roma, but the Commission has never held them truly accountable. On several occasions high level state officials publicly admitted that they do not know what part of these funds actually reach the Roma. Paradoxically, the Commission has been constantly increasing the funding for these countries over the last decades, despite of the unsatisfactory progress, indicated by its own experts. Thus, as a consequence, most East-Europeans started thinking of the Roma issue as an issue of money. The Roma were perceived as a privileged minority that receives money as an inducement to integrate with the major society, but it does not want to; that is why the implemented projects do not lead to visible progress. This populist explanation was embraced by the far-right parties, particularly after the end of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2015, which has been widely interpreted as a symbolical end of the integration efforts towards Roma.

The Shift in the EU Roma Policy:

From Ethnic Minority to “Social Problem”

Since 2000s the European policies towards Roma underwent a major shift from the earlier ethno-political discourse to social policy and security discourse. While in the 1990s Roma were cherished for being specific ethnic group enriching European culture, now they were seen in a new light – as a “social problem”. The key factors for this shift were the economic crisis, the coming to power of right-wing political parties across Western Europe, the Eastern Enlargement of EU, and off course the Romani migrations to the West.

When Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007 the Romani issue became an internal issue for the European Union. Nominally, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary have met the political criteria for EU membership. Hence, the EU Commission lost its tools to exert pressure on the countries where the majority of European Roma lives. These states were now members of the “European family” with their own representatives in the European Parliament and the other EU bodies. They gained confidence to revise their relations with the West and to set up new goals in their foreign policy. One of their goals was to reduce the external and internal criticism for the failing “Roma integration” and to shift the responsibility to Romani communities. For this reason some of the new Member States

undertook diplomatic and other steps to convince their Western partners that Roma are “social menace” which East European authorities can contain on condition that they are provided with the necessary financial and political aid. In reality, it did not take them so long to achieve this goal, given the 2007 World financial crisis and the undergoing mass migrations of people in East-West direction at that time.

The arrival of thousands of Albanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Romani migrants and refugees from the Balkans after the Yugoslav wars and the EU Eastern Enlargement led to escalation of the problems with illegal migration and petty criminality in the Western European societies. Interestingly, the main focus of the authorities fell on one single group among the arrivals – the Roma, and mainly those coming from Romania. Thus, the mass migration of Roma to the Western part of the continent caused revival of the century old prejudices towards this ethnic community.

In 2008 Italy became the first EU Member State in Western Europe to propose ethnically targeted measures against Roma: to fingerprint and photograph all illegal immigrants in the “camps for nomads” that “endanger public order and security”. At the next year Belgium became the first EU member state to sign a “readmission agreement” with Kosovo for repatriation of asylum seekers, mostly Roma. In 2009 the German government announced its intention to send back to Kosovo 10,000 Roma, who actually escaped from an ethnic cleansing there (the agreement with Kosovo was signed in 2010). However, in all these cases the affected people were mostly non-EU citizens, and their faith did not attract wider public attention.

The real European scandal arose in 2010 when the French president Sarkozy initiated evictions and deportations of European citizens of Romani origin back to Bulgaria and Romania. This time the European Commission had to admit that there is a problem with the treatment of the Romani migrants in the Western countries but the Commission refused to launch infringement proceedings against the member states, which violate the European law (more specifically the EU Race Equality Directive, the EU Freedom of Movement Directive and the EU Data Protection Directive).

In the East European capitals the behavior of the Commission was interpreted as a retreat from its commitments to Roma. In this way the EU Commission gave a “green light” to the Central and Eastern European governments to use a firmer hand towards their Romani minorities. The Gyöngyöspata accident in Hungary (March-April, 2011) and the country-wide pogroms after the Katounitsa accident in Bulgaria (September-October, 2011) were indicative for this trend. In both cases the national authorities allowed militant extreme-right groups to terrorize the local Roma for weeks, while the EU Commission was passively observing these developments without intervening.

After 2010 the issues of social vulnerability, marginality and criminality became central to the debates about Roma. The Roma were seen as a problem for the European Union, a problem that may challenge its functioning and may cause further internal tensions among its members. The 2011 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 was the response of the European Commission to this challenge. The document put strong

emphasis on non-discrimination, marginalization, school attendance, vocational training and social services, but it also promised more money to the Member States (EUR 26,5 billion in the field of “social inclusion”). Thus, practically the EU Framework reinforced the public perceptions that now the whole Roma community is European problem and this problem costs lot of money to the European tax-payers.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that the words “identity”, “language” and “culture” are totally absent from the entire document of 19 pages. Roma are referred to as “community” only twice and as “minority” only once. At the expense of this, the word “integration” is mentioned 62 times, the word “education” - 32 times, the word “poverty” - 10 times, the word “marginalised” – 4 times. The employed terminology clearly displays the philosophy behind the EU Framework for National Roma Strategies. The Commission asked the Member States to develop their own National Strategies on the ground of this document.

It is more than clear that with the advance of the far-right political parties the European Roma Policy will be undergoing further transformation into European Anti-Roma Policy. This process is already under way and it once again brings up the need of elaboration of Romani political strategy with regards to the deteriorating public climate of growing hostility towards Roma in Europe.

The End of Neoliberal Multiculturalism as a Prerequisite for Development of Romani Politics

Ironically, the “Roma elites” which actually helped the Post-Communist governments to meet the criteria for EU membership, were no more needed after the accession of these countries to the European Union. Unlike the International Romani Union, the post-1990 Romani organizations have never been able to produce a common Romani agenda at European level. The competition for donor funding did not imply solidarity among Roma NGOs and their role was restricted largely to implementing small-scale projects at local level. Most of the NGOs active in the 1990s disappeared from the scene and new organizations emerged in the period after 2002 in order to fill the gap. Many of them became service providers to which the governments and the municipalities assigned part of their own tasks. Thus, after the EU accession the very existence of non-governmental organizations in Eastern Europe was challenged. With the withdrawal of the private donors from the region and the monopolization of the EU funds by the national governments the critical voices were silenced and the civil liberties were suppressed.

Consequently, the objectives of the Romani movement were replaced by the objectives of the Non-Roma stakeholders (“stakeholder” is a term directly borrowed from the corporate business world). This replacement is visible even in the project terminology in which new concepts like “prevention”, “control” and “intervention” were introduced (for example “early marriages prevention”, “school dropout prevention”, “control of tuberculosis”, and etc.). These concepts are typical for the law enforcement and penitentiary institutions and their imposition on the Roma NGOs illustrates two tendencies: the break with the traditional civil

rights movement and the instrumentalization of the NGOs by the state apparatuses to “discipline” Roma in a Foucauldian sense². With the time, this NGO community became even more fragmented, as some Roma activists were still defending the old human rights paradigm, while others were following the Neoliberal doctrine of social integration which was now promoted by the European Commission.

According to this Neoliberal doctrine, known as “Neoliberal Multiculturalism”³, the Roma are an unexplored “asset” to the society or “citizens with unused potential” and these citizens face certain hardships that impede them from becoming truly competitive at the labor market. The lack of education, the poor housing and the poor health have been often identified as the major problems of Roma. Once these problems are solved the integration of Roma in the post-communist societies should be accomplished since after the transition to market economy these societies are deemed open, democratic and liberal. In other words it was believed that after getting proper education and jobs Roma will turn into “social capital” for non-Roma populations and their fellow citizens will welcome and respect them as equals.

Actually, the authors of this neoliberal integrationist vision for the future reduce everything to economic equations in which the human being is seen as a commodity or raw material. This approach is dehumanizing and dangerous: on the one hand it allows for discussions whether certain ethnic group is “useful” or “useless” from economic point of view, and on the other hand it completely downplays the historical and the cultural backgrounds of the East European nations.

On the first place, all European countries with significant Roma populations in the region are nation-states formed after the disintegration of the big multiethnic empires in Central and Eastern Europe – the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman and the Russian empire. The new nation-states were built on extreme ethnic nationalism promoted through their state apparatuses, their educational systems, their cultural institutions and even the church. To a great degree the anti-Roma sentiments have shaped the identity of the ethnic majorities in these countries. Therefore, it is impossible to overcome the negative stereotypes towards Roma without reshaping the existing national identities. To reshape the identity of those who are expected to integrate Roma proved to be unrealistic because the dominant groups were not prepared for such fundamental cultural change. Instead, the main assumption has always been that it is only the Roma who should change if they want “to catch up” with the major populations, and this assumption reflects the relations of power and subordination between Roma and non-Roma.

On the second place, Roma are not a vulnerable social group, as it is still imagined by some officials in the European institutions. In fact, Roma are an old ethnic community in Europe with its own language and distinct culture, and only part of Roma experience sharp social problems. This is a community with more complex and diverse internal structure than the

2 Foucault, M., ‘Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison’, New York: Random House, 1975.

3 Kymlicka, W., ‘Neoliberal Multiculturalism?’ in Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont (eds.) *Social Resilience in the Neo-Liberal Era*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 99-125.

surrounding non-Roma populations. However, the demographic growth of Roma and the demographic decline of non-Roma certainly did not fit into the integration policies designed within the frames of the traditional majority-minority paradigm.

The outcomes from the desegregation projects implemented in countries like Bulgaria over the last decades, clearly demonstrate the shortcomings of the neo-liberal integration policy. In ethnically mixed, desegregated schools where the share of Romani children increases as result from the demographic processes, Bulgarian parents tend to withdraw their own children. They prefer to send them to more distant but “ethnically pure” schools even though this option is more costly for them. That also explains why the typically neo-liberal mantra about “economic benefits” of Romani integration for the mainstream societies does not work. The cost-benefit analysis employed so often by institutions like the World Bank to interpret social phenomena through market-based logic is inapplicable in this case. The non-Roma parents obviously do not act according to their economic interests but according to their ethnic preferences. Most of the non-Roma employers and public officials across the region of Central and Eastern Europe share the same mindset, and this is so because the deep-rooted cultural patterns of behavior prevail over the material considerations. When *Gadje* and Roma meet at school or at work this is not simply an encounter between rich and poor, white and black or men and women, but this is an encounter between two different cultures. And in societies where the majorities feel insecure about their status of domination the “clash of cultures” more often produces fear and alienation than integration.

The main reason for this discrepancy is that the ideology of Neoliberal Multiculturalism has been designed to accommodate the expectations for economic gains of the big multinational corporations in the Western world, without an account of the cultural differences in the local societies. From capitalist point of view the minorities, the indigenous peoples and the migrants are “useful” as long as they work and pay taxes. If allowing them to practice their traditions or to speak their languages increases their motivation and productivity, then multiculturalism is profitable for the business (for example many British companies provide their Muslim workers with special rooms for praying).

The Western establishments have been promoting the neoliberal form of multiculturalism since the 1980s, mostly because of the benefits of the cheap labor force of the migrant and indigenous populations. The neoliberal elites were confident that if some financial incentives are offered to the politicians from the post-communist block what works in the West may work in the East. However, this turned out to be an “economistic fallacy”⁴ with regards to the Roma inclusion in Europe. The proponents of this ideology, however, are silent on the question: what happens in times of crisis when the minorities or immigrants are no more seen as contributors? When they cannot find job, for instance? Or even worse, when they are perceived as a demographic, cultural or terrorist threat? The more silent are the neoliberal politicians on these questions, the louder are the calls of neofascists for introduction of anti-minority and anti-immigrant legislations in America and Europe.

4 Rorke, B., ‘The End of a Decade: What Happened to Roma Inclusion?’ (2015)

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/bernard-rorke/end-of-decade-what-happened-to-roma-inclusion> accessed 20 November 2017.

The retreat of the neoliberal agenda creates a space for development of alternative approaches towards the Romani question. The paradox is that the end of the Roma integration marks the return of identity politics in Europe. The Roma are facing now the challenge how to adapt to this new situation which requires political maturity and sensibility. The success of Roma depends on whether, after so many years, the existing Romani elite is ready to take the helm of the European Romani politics amidst an increasingly complex international environment, that carries many risks, but also many opportunities.

END OF PART ONE