

ISSUE BRIEF

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Roma Inclusion: A Call for Central European Leadership

The acrimonious debate surrounding the expulsion of Roma immigrants from Western Europe has highlighted the urgent need for a European Union-wide approach to the integration of Europe's largest minority. Current tactics—whether expulsions, the demolition of Roma settlements, or the systematic placement of Roma children into schools for the disabled—will perpetuate the existence of an isolated underclass in the midst of some of the most prosperous nations in the world. And while myriad constructive initiatives to advance Roma rights exist, a more consistent, coherent, and coordinated effort is required if Europe is to defuse what is, in effect, a ticking time bomb. In the last few years, a perfect storm of economic crisis and growing anti-Roma sentiment has highlighted the urgency of the challenge.

Incidents of violence aimed at Roma throughout Europe have increased in recent years. In Hungary alone, six Roma have been murdered in racially motivated attacks since 2008. Those who have survived attacks, such as the Czech child who suffered third-degree burns over eighty percent of her body, form a much larger group. As states in the region struggle to recover from the global economic crisis, studies show that the impact of Roma exclusion on national economies is highly significant: A 2009 study estimated that Slovakia's GDP in 2008 would have been seven percent higher if the employment rate among Roma was similar to that of non-Roma.

While the challenge of Roma integration is pan-European, it is fundamentally the responsibility of each state to ensure that the rights of its citizens are protected. Today the countries of Central Europe have a unique opportunity to demonstrate leadership in this struggle. The confluence of a reinvigorated Visegrad Group

Under the auspices of the Atlantic Council's Transatlantic Relations Program, the Council has organized a series of events aimed at raising awareness of one of Europe's most compelling challenges: the integration of Europe's Roma population. The most recent of these took place on February 14, when the Council hosted Hungary's State Secretary for Social Inclusion, Zoltan Balog, for a discussion with Washington policymakers, NGO representatives, diplomats and scholars on how Hungary is using its EU presidency to advance national and Europe-wide progress on Roma inclusion. Given the history of the U.S. civil rights movement and ongoing efforts to promote equality of opportunity for all citizens, U.S. experience could be a resource upon which Europe might draw. The implications for continued Roma exclusion, some of which are laid out in this brief, make clear why the United States has a stake in Europe's success, and why this issue should be firmly anchored in the transatlantic dialogue.

(Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) led by Slovakia, with the upcoming, successive European Union (EU) presidencies of Hungary and Poland, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Chairmanship-in-Office of Lithuania, could set the stage for a better-integrated and intensified approach to Roma inclusion. Who better to lead this effort than the states whose perseverance and courage helped turn the promise of Helsinki into a reality, ushering in an

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unprecedented era of democratic transformation? Central European commitment can reinvigorate efforts to build a “Europe whole, free and at peace,” in which all enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

This is a struggle with which the United States is familiar and in which it is still engaged. Through the work of multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and the OSCE, and cooperation among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), lessons learned on both sides of the Atlantic can be harnessed to advance equal rights and opportunities for all of our citizens. As Martin Luther King observed: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men . . . and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy.”

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Roma Exclusion: Dangerous and Unsustainable

Although reliable data on Roma in Europe is notoriously lacking, organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, and Amnesty International have attempted to quantify the extent and urgency of the problem:

- In Slovakia, sixty percent of students at schools for the mentally disabled are Roma (this practice is common in the region).
- Ninety percent of Roma in Bulgaria survive on state benefits.
- The life expectancy of Roma is ten to fifteen years less than the European average.
- By 2040, Roma will comprise approximately forty percent of the Hungarian labor force.

- Approximately half of the Roma population in Central and Eastern Europe is under the age of twenty.
- Economic losses attributable to a lack of education among Roma in Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic are estimated at 5.7 billion euros annually.
- In nine of the twelve Central and Eastern European countries participating in the “Decade of Roma Inclusion,” no data exists regarding the percentage of Roma children who complete primary school.

Although actions by Western European states focused international attention on the plight of Roma in 2010, the most significant concentrations of Europe’s ten to twelve million Roma live in Central and Southeastern Europe. In some countries, e.g., Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, Roma minorities comprise between seven and ten percent of the population. As some of the statistics above indicate, these percentages will grow in the coming years. Thus, the fate of Roma integration efforts will have the greatest impact on the newer EU members.

The conditions in which many Roma live are shocking, all the more so given the relative prosperity which surrounds them. Settlements without sewers, running water, or electricity are not uncommon, especially in rural areas. Access to health care and education for many Roma is limited by circumstance (lack of transportation, geographic isolation), by prejudice (a 2006 report by the European Roma Rights Centre documented “a consistent pattern of discriminatory treatment of Roma by medical professionals”), and by policies that segregate Roma children into schools for the disabled. In a globalized economy in which an educated and adaptable workforce is sine qua non for sustained success and prosperity, current regional trends are alarming. If in Slovakia, for instance, sixty percent of the children in these special schools are Roma—and this is not a phenomenon unique to Slovakia—what are the long-term prospects for Slovakia’s economic and social health, or for its aspirations to build a knowledge economy?

Roma: Left Behind in 1989

Although Roma have been well settled in Europe since the fourteenth century, they have long been the target of discrimination. During the Second World War Roma were, along with Europe’s Jewish population, deemed “racially

inferior” by the Nazis and singled out for expulsion or extermination. According to conservative estimates, 220,000—or twenty-five percent of Europe’s Roma—perished between 1939 and 1945. The end of the war did not bring an end to discrimination and prejudice toward Roma, most of whom had the ill fortune to live behind the Iron Curtain. Throughout the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, solutions to the “Gypsy problem” included forced sterilization, the removal of Roma children from their homes to be raised by non-Roma, and segregated housing and education.

In the turbulent years following the fall of communism, the always-precarious status of Roma worsened as guaranteed (if menial) jobs disappeared and agricultural cooperatives evaporated. Roma were the first to be let go by failing state enterprises, and most lacked the skills and connections to prosper under free-market conditions. Another consequence of these momentous economic and social changes, now discernible twenty years hence, is a growing alienation between Roma and non-Roma. As Livia Jaroka, the first Roma member of the European Parliament, observed:

Before the transition, there were public places where Roma and non-Roma people could be seen together, like at workplaces . . . There were more opportunities to learn together in schools. Today a huge proportion of Roma children study in segregated schools. The gap is becoming so wide between the two groups that we won’t be able to bridge it, unless we develop the prospect of a peaceful and respectful atmosphere of living together. For that, the Roma need jobs. Not only for being able to support their own families, but also to give them the chance to open up to others in society.

According to Slovak parliamentarian Anton Marcincin, “the Slovak Roma and non-Roma live in two parallel worlds, which does not benefit either of these groups.”

Other post-communist phenomena also hit the Roma hard. As a result of the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, thousands of Roma were forcibly displaced or removed from their homes. Lacking proper documentation, and because of restrictive and complex requirements to attain citizenship, an estimated 30,000 Roma in Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Slovenia are stateless today. Among these, some are still living in refugee camps as a result of a lack of

willingness on the part of their countries of origin to repatriate them without documentation. In some cases, however, repatriations are part of the problem. For example, thousands of Roma refugees—many of whom are children born abroad who speak neither Albanian nor Serbian—are being repatriated from Western Europe to Kosovo. The Council of Europe has called for a halt in repatriations, as have human rights organizations. According to a statement by Amnesty International, Kosovo does “not have the funding, capacity, resources or political will to ensure a sustainable return for them. Until the Kosovo authorities are capable of ensuring the fundamental human rights of Roma and other minority communities, they will return to face a climate of violence and discrimination.”

Finally, the global economic crisis has fostered a climate in which anti-Roma attitudes are ever more acceptable. This prejudice featured prominently in recent elections in Central Europe: In Hungary, the far-right Jobbik party, which won seventeen percent of the vote in the April 2010 parliamentary elections, mobilized its base with crude calls to address “Gypsy criminality.” Across the border in Slovakia, a member of the then-governing coalition, the Slovak National Party, produced campaign billboards depicting a Photoshopped image of a shirtless, heavily tattooed Roma man with the caption SO THAT WE DON’T FEED THOSE WHO DON’T WORK. Such rhetoric has stoked simmering tensions between Roma and non-Roma. In response to concerns about crime, particularly thefts committed by Roma youth, non-Roma communities are literally building walls to separate themselves from Roma. Incidents of violence targeting Roma are even more worrisome than barriers and evictions.

In April 2009, four young Czech men firebombed a home, knowing it was occupied at the time by a Roma family. As a result, a Roma toddler was left with third-degree burns over eighty percent of her body. In March 2009, Slovak police abused Roma children in police custody (the incident was recorded by one of the perpetrators, and the images provoked an international outcry). In Hungary, dozens of racially motivated attacks against Roma took place between January 2008 and June 2009, several resulting in fatalities.

Such examples of discrimination and violence are at odds with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which, following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, now legally binds Member States. While it remains to be seen how the EU will enforce the Charter—the dispute with France over the

expulsions was viewed by many human rights organizations as a lost opportunity on the part of the European Commission—there does appear to be a growing realization within the EU that Roma integration is an imperative which requires greater resources, attention, and coordination than has heretofore been brought to bear.

In a speech given in Strasbourg last October, entitled “The Imperative of Roma Integration—More than Just a ‘Summer Story,’” EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, Viviane Reding, stated unequivocally: “The integration of Roma in Europe can no longer wait. We cannot continue to look away from centuries of rejection, deeply rooted prejudice, extreme poverty, precariousness, unemployment, poor health and education. We have a major task ahead of us; looking away from the unacceptable living conditions of the Roma is contrary to our very own values and fundamental principles.” The good news is that what needs to be done—and how—is known. What has been lacking has been sustained political will to tackle the challenge.

The U.S. Experience: Is It Relevant?

While not analogous in every way, certain potentially useful parallels can be drawn between the U.S. experience in addressing racial inequality and the challenges Europe faces as it struggles with Roma exclusion. In the 1960s, efforts to enforce civil rights legislation encountered strong, sometimes violent opposition. That is to say, the serious commitment of the U.S. government to finally address centuries of discrimination against black Americans did not result from a widespread public acceptance of the necessity of ensuring equal rights for all U.S. citizens, but rather from a realization that governmental leadership was a practical as well as a moral imperative. Following threats of violence when two black students attempted to enroll in the University of Alabama in 1962, President John F. Kennedy delivered a stirring speech laying out the stakes of continued inequality:

Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety . . . This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone . . . We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether

all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated . . . This Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

Kennedy’s speech marked an important and courageous milestone in a long, arduous process. Without strong leadership from the Oval Office, that progress would have been significantly slowed.

More than sixty years have passed since the Supreme Court declared segregated education to be unconstitutional, and almost fifty years have passed since the Voting Rights Act—which outlawed discriminatory practices that made it difficult for black Americans to exercise their franchise—was adopted. In the decades since those landmark decisions and laws were enacted, statistics regarding health, education, and wealth for black Americans have improved. The election of Barack Obama as president was a historic milestone but, as he acknowledged during a campaign speech about race, much work still needs to be done in order to realize the Founders’ dream of a “more perfect Union.”

In addition to strong political leadership and the strict enforcement of effective laws, four discrete aspects of the U.S. experience may be particularly useful to consider in the effort to support Roma inclusion:

- the effectiveness of early childhood education in leveling the playing field (e.g., federal programs such as Head Start);
- the role of housing policy in supporting (or undermining) the integration of minorities;
- the importance of support from key figures in the majority population for minority political enfranchisement; and
- the civil rights movement and the example of Martin Luther King.

Hard-won experience and lessons learned are already being shared, but transatlantic cooperation toward the goal of Roma inclusion can and should increase. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last year, “Protecting and promoting the human rights of Roma everywhere has long been a personal commitment for me, and under the Obama Administration it is a priority of the United States. Working with governments, international organizations, civil society

groups, and individual citizens, we seek to help Roma chart their own destinies, with opportunity, dignity and prosperity.”

Some young Roma leaders in Europe are already looking to the U.S. civil rights movement and the work of Reverend Martin Luther King as a potential model. As Robert Rustem of the European Roma and Travellers Forum wrote in a December 2010 editorial, “the mountain of reports from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) shows that virulent anti-Gypsyism not only survives but is growing in many countries. That is why Europe’s Roma will share in the celebrations marking the forty-seventh anniversary of the March on Washington and look to the civil rights movement for inspiration. It offers a convincing example of how reconciliation, social justice and the progress of the marginalized into the mainstream can be achieved.”

The Time Is Ripe for Central European Leadership on Roma Integration

Only twenty years ago, the countries comprising the Visegrad Group were emerging from decades of authoritarian and repressive rule. Today, these four countries share notable achievements: full integration into European and transatlantic institutions; vibrant and evolving democracies; and growing activism and leadership on the international stage.

The fact that each of these countries was able to navigate the difficult path from authoritarianism to democracy, from centrally planned to market economies, and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, to manage the dissolution of a state peacefully and with notable success, makes them role models not only for their neighbors in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, but also for countries in transition around the world. Those struggling for democracy as far away as Cuba and China have been sustained by the support of Central European governments and NGOs, which have also played a vanguard role in ensuring that human rights concerns inform EU foreign policy decisions.

And yet, the conditions in which the majority of Central European Roma lives do not fit into this narrative of success and transformation. The dire implications of this growing divide are beginning to be better understood by policymakers and others in and outside of the region. As Anton Marcincin and Lubica Marcincinova estimated in an important 2009 study, “The Cost of Non-Inclusion”

(www.romadecade.org), Slovakia’s GDP in 2008 would have been seven percent higher if the employment rate of Roma was similar to that of non-Roma. This figure will rise to eleven percent in 2030.

With the election of three new governments in Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, there appears to be a renewed interest in tackling the problem of Roma exclusion, as well as a new impetus for cooperation among the Visegrad Four. Slovakia, which currently holds the V4 presidency, has agreed with its V4 partners to cooperatively address Roma inclusion—a priority also for the Hungarian EU presidency, which began in January 2011. Acting together, and utilizing the tools and frameworks offered by the EU, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, the countries of Central Europe are well positioned to advance an agenda of inclusion, setting a positive example in Europe and beyond.

The challenges are enormous, but by taking some basic steps, ideally, together, Central Europe can, once again, play a decisive role in shaping Europe:

- **Speak up:** Senior government officials—and not only those who focus specifically on human rights or minority issues—must speak out unequivocally against anti-Gypsy rhetoric, crimes targeting Roma, forced evictions, and school segregation. The corollary is to refrain from anti-Roma rhetoric.
- **Empower government officials who have responsibility for Roma issues:** Whether this individual is a deputy minister, state secretary, or ambassador, he or she needs genuine authority, data, and resources (both human and financial).
- **Implement basic commitments:** Ensure implementation of European and international commitments undertaken with respect to minority rights and antidiscrimination. A first step could be a public pledge by V4 leaders to fulfill the recommendations of the most-recent European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) country reviews within a year. In some cases, the issues cited by ECRI are common among V4 states, and a joint pledge (e.g., to ratify key agreements) could provide needed momentum and solidarity. In other cases, V4 members could share lessons learned to assist other partners in meeting recommendations.

- **Don't reinvent the wheel:** Utilize the existing work of the OSCE, the EU, and the Council of Europe—as well as that of NGOs and experts—in crafting policy. From the macro, e.g., the EU's "The 10 Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion," to the more detailed approaches laid out in the OSCE's 2003 "Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area," Human Rights First's "Combating Violence Against Roma in Hungary, and the Open Society Institute's study of the impact on policymaking caused by a pervasive lack of data on Roma, "No Data—No Progress: Country Findings," there is a wealth of scholarship and information available to guide efforts. Take advantage of lessons learned through the EU Forum on Roma, and, closer to home, among V4 and Decade of Roma Inclusion members. Indeed, as Hungary's efforts to launch a program modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone suggests, relevant experience can also be found on the other side of the Atlantic.
- **Set an example; share knowledge:** Through programs like the Eastern Partnership and via ongoing bilateral contacts, the V4 and other Central European states have taken the initiative in efforts to draw neighboring states outside the European Union (e.g., Moldova, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans) more tightly into the community of shared European values. Given their mutual experiences and challenges, the rapport between Central Europe and its Eastern partners is particularly deep

and open. V4 leaders should ensure that treatment of Roma and other minorities is as much a part of the conversation about integration into Euro-Atlantic structures as are issues like security, energy, and economic development.

- **Leverage leadership positions and V4 solidarity for progress:** During the "Year of Central Europe" in the EU, the Hungarian and Polish presidencies should work together to ensure that the issue of Roma inclusion is woven into efforts toward fulfillment of the Europe 2020 strategy. They should also call for the use of EU structural funds to be made available for early childhood education for Roma, and coordinate EU initiatives, to the extent feasible, with the efforts of the OSCE and the Council of Europe.
- **Invest now:** In the wake of the global economic crisis, Central Europe is also struggling to address fiscal challenges and rising unemployment. It will be tempting to defer comprehensive initiatives aimed at Roma inclusion for a "better day," or for a time when attitudes of "anti-Gypsyism" among majority populations are less prevalent. For today's leaders, the political and economic challenges are daunting, but inaction would be a terrible mistake. Europe—and Central Europe, in particular—literally cannot afford another lost generation of Roma.

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