

Roma/Gypsy and Traveller education in Europe: an overview of the issues

Introduction

The people to whom the term “Roma/Gypsy and Traveller” has been attached represent a unique phenomenon in European history and culture. From their first appearance in the historical record over 600 years ago, the relationship between Roma/Gypsies and mainstream societies has been marked by many tensions and changes. Roma/Gypsies are now widely considered to be Europe’s largest ethnic minority. The continental population is estimated to be between 7 to 8.5 million and rising. There are Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities in practically every European country.²

This report examines educational policy and provision in relation to Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people from a child rights perspective. Access to formal education is more important than ever in enabling individuals to maintain and develop living standards in Europe’s increasingly knowledge-based economy. Formal education also plays an important role in promoting awareness of the diversity within society, as well as the recognition of our common humanity, providing the basis for our concepts of democracy and human rights. This report reflects growing concern in recent years about the failures of educational provision to Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people. In 1984 the European Commission instigated research into Roma/Gypsy and Traveller education, on the basis of which in 1989 the Council and Ministers of Education passed Resolution 89/C 153/02 “On School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children”.

As its title suggests, the 1989 Resolution was drafted with reference to the circumstances and needs of the more mobile Roma/Gypsy and Traveller populations of the member states of the European Union (EU) at that time. The emphasis was on developing innovative practice to meet the needs of children and young people whose lifestyles presented practical and cultural challenges to service providers. The Resolution sought improvement rather than the achievement of any final aim and did not refer directly to rights. Over the following decade dramatic changes occurred both in terms of how Roma/Gypsies were perceived (to include the whole European diaspora), and in terms of how practice was developed, including the increasing importance of a human rights framework. This report aims to provide a basis for ongoing research into the relationship between rights and Roma/Gypsy and Traveller education. By gathering data on educational services and initiatives specifically targeted at Roma/Gypsies, and by compiling a summary of relevant national and international legal instruments, the report will provide a resource for all those involved in the field of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller education, including authorities with statutory duties to make appropriate provision. The need for such work is underlined by the recognition that the report comes at a time of rapid social, economic, cultural and political change, not only for Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people, but also for European society as a whole.

East and West

Since 1989, policy approaches towards the overwhelming majority of Roma/Gypsies and their access to public services, including education, have undergone dramatic changes as a result of the collapse of communism and the process of European reintegration. Over three-quarters of the continent's Roma/Gypsies live in the former communist countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. There are considerable differences between Roma/Gypsies in Central and Eastern Europe, Roma/Gypsies in South-Eastern Europe and Roma/Gypsies and Travellers in

Western Europe in terms of their demographic distribution, and their historical, social, economic and cultural circumstances. Yet such divisions in themselves are arbitrary; there are just as many differences within countries as there are between countries.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

The inclusion of Roma/Gypsies from Central and South-Eastern Europe into European-wide policy initiatives emphasises all the more the need for policy-makers to consider the full range of



cultural and linguistic diversities that exist. Central and South-Eastern Europe contain the overwhelming majority of Romani speakers in the whole of Europe, yet Romani speakers account for only around 40 per cent of Roma/Gypsies in the region. Furthermore, native Romani speakers use a wide variety of dialects. Most Roma/Gypsies speak the language of the surrounding society as their main language, and different communities represent different stages of the transition from Romani to mainstream languages as mother tongue. Although the majority of Roma/Gypsies in Central and South-Eastern Europe live in the countryside, the region also has more and larger urban Roma/Gypsy populations than Western Europe. Finally, historically the relatively greater integration of Roma/Gypsies in the former communist states means that Roma/Gypsies in Central and South-Eastern Europe have been more exposed to majority cultural norms than their West European counterparts.

A growing population

Roma/Gypsy populations in both parts of Europe differ in terms of their absolute and relative size. The often subjective nature of ethno-cultural identities, combined with the diversity and spread of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities, means that population figures should be treated as estimates. It is broadly accepted that approximately 4.2 million Roma/Gypsies live in eight Central and Eastern European states (which have a total population of 56 million). Only 1.5 million Roma/Gypsies live in the five

largest Western European states (which have populations of between 30 and 80 million each) – over half of these live in Spain.

The context of transition

As well as considerable differences in wealth between the two halves of the continent, differences in economic development also have a major effect on the opportunities of Roma/Gypsy people and populations. Whereas Western European states generally allowed Roma/Gypsies and Travellers to develop traditional practices (for example, as private traders or seasonal farm labourers), in the communist states Roma/Gypsies were usually targeted for relatively low-skilled employment within the centrally planned economy, in both agriculture and industry.

The transition in Central and South-Eastern Europe to a market economy has dramatically undermined the formerly state-owned extractive, manufacturing and agricultural concerns that provided the main employment opportunities for most Roma/Gypsies in this region. The result has been widespread long-term structural unemployment and a deepening dependence on dwindling state benefits and services. Economic difficulties for Roma/Gypsies are exacerbated by slow economic recovery in some countries, coupled with the emergence of widening gaps between the more- and less-developed areas both within countries and between Northern Europe and South, East and Central Europe.

Estimated size of Roma/Gypsy populations and GDP per head in selected EU and post-communist countries

Country	Total population	GDP per head (\$US)	Roma/Gypsy population (est.)	Roma/Gypsy % of total population
EU members				
France	59.3m	\$23,000	340,000	0.6%
Germany	82.8m	\$22,700	130,000	0.2%
Italy	57.6m	\$21,400	100,000	0.2%
Spain	40.0m	\$17,300	800,000	2.0%
UK	59.5m	\$21,800	120,000	0.2%
Post-communist states				
Bulgaria	7.8m	\$4,300	800,000	10.3%
Czech Republic	10.3m	\$11,700	300,000	2.9%
Hungary	10.1m	\$7,800	600,000	5.9%
Romania	22.4m	\$3,900	2,000,000	8.9%
Slovakia	5.4m	\$8,500	520,000	9.6%

Sources: Jean-Pierre Liégeois and Nicolae Gheorghe, *Roma/Gypsies: A European Minority*, Minority Rights Group International, London, 1995; *CIA Fact Book*, 2000

The importance of children

Within this wider context, the situation of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children and young people is particularly important. Throughout Europe national populations are in greater or lesser decline and there is growing concern about the implications of an increasingly ageing population. However, the age profile of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities diverges considerably from the national average in many states. A combination of higher fertility and lower life expectancy means that young people constitute a majority in most Roma/Gypsy

communities and the percentage of Roma/Gypsies of school age is greater than that of the Roma/Gypsies as a whole within national populations. Addressing the educational disadvantages of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children is therefore a matter of particular urgency in order, firstly, to ensure that a growing number of individuals can enjoy their human rights and equality of opportunity, secondly, to contribute to the development of Roma/Gypsy communities and cultures, and finally, to ensure the economic development and social cohesion of Europe and its individual countries.

In Western Europe the main challenge has been to connect mobile or socially isolated Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children to the education system. By contrast, in Central and Eastern Europe the vast majority of Roma/Gypsies are settled, with most children enrolled in primary school (although this is not necessarily the case in South Eastern Europe). The question for many countries in Central and Eastern Europe is more one of the quality of education received rather than one of access. Currently about half of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children in the EU never attend school, although the situation varies from country to country and between communities. In Central and Eastern Europe attendance rates (especially in primary school) are at least 50 per cent higher, although again with wide variations within the region.

A European issue

In spite of such huge diversities among Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities across Europe, one feature is more or less ubiquitous: the persistence of prejudice and discrimination. This in turn reinforces their relative lack of success within mainstream institutions and processes and, in particular, in formal education. This focuses attention on the importance of tackling anti-Roma/Gypsy and Traveller prejudice. However, there are a variety of other factors that also affect the access of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people to education. This demands that policy-makers be aware of the diversity that exists within the pan-European Roma/Gypsy and Traveller diaspora. This has proved particularly difficult to achieve given the inherent tendency in

all policy-making to over-simplify issues in order to make the policy-making task both manageable and cost-effective.

During the Cold War division of Europe, policy towards Roma/Gypsies was, almost exclusively, framed within national boundaries. Since 1990 there has been a dramatic increase in the levels of attention and in the number of initiatives focusing on Roma/Gypsies drawn up by supra-national European institutions. Their number is so great (and rapidly increasing) that the timeline (see pages 14 and 15) indicates only the main developments explicitly relating to or directly affecting Roma/Gypsies.

European institutions with a pan-European membership (Council of Europe, OSCE) have shown particular interest in Roma/Gypsies. To date, their activities have largely centred on information gathering, including the establishment of offices to provide continual monitoring and information exchange on Roma/Gypsy-related developments within individual countries. EU activity has been divided between the provision of ongoing support for initiatives aimed at improving the educational opportunities of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children and voicing concerns about the human rights situation of Roma/Gypsies in candidate countries within negotiations on EU enlargement.

More broadly, the OSCE and the Council of Europe have been active in developing the concept of minority rights and proactive engagement to encourage the preservation and promotion of distinctive minority languages, cultures and identities. The EU has concentrated

Timeline of main European initiatives aimed at Roma/Gypsies and Travellers

1969	Council of Europe Recommendation 563 (1969) "On the Situation of Gypsies and other Travellers in Europe".
1975	Council of Europe Resolution (75)13 "Containing Recommendations on the Social Situation of Nomads in Europe".
1983	Council of Europe Recommendation R(83)1 "On Stateless Nomads and Nomads of Undetermined Nationality".
1984	Resolution C172/153 "On the Situation of Gypsies in the Community" was passed in the European Parliament. It recommended that national governments of member states co-ordinate their approach to the reception of Gypsies.
1987	EU Report "School provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children". The report was extended until 1989 to take account of new members states (Spain, Portugal, Greece). The full report was published as "School Provision for Ethnic Minorities: The Gypsy Paradigm" in 1998 (Interface Collection).
1989	EU Council Resolution No. 89/C 153/02 (No. C 153/3) "On School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children".
1991	Paris Charter for a New Europe (CSCE) – which made specific reference to the need to address the "particular problems" of Roma/Gypsies and also developed a framework of explicit minority rights.
1992	Office of High Commissioner on National Minorities established in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) (since renamed the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE) with responsibility for monitoring and resolving potential ethnic conflicts. The High Commissioner has taken particular interest in the situation of Roma/Gypsies.
1992	Council of Europe European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – provisions of which may be applied in respect of "non-territorial languages" such as Romani.
1993	High Commissioner on National Minorities (CSCE) first report on "Roma (Gypsies) in the CSCE region".
1993	Council of Europe Recommendation 1203 (1993) "On the Situation of Roma in Europe".
1993	Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe, Resolution 249 (1993) "On Gypsies in Europe: the Role and Responsibilities of Local and Regional Authorities".

more on anti-discrimination and equal opportunities measures. Overall, in the 1990s, there has been a significant increase of interest in issues of racism and inequality and a number of fora have emerged through which interested parties, including Roma/Gypsies and their organisations, can contribute to debate and policy-making at the European level.

Information and policy-making

The way that Roma/Gypsies are viewed by policy-makers shapes how policy towards them is formed and implemented. The current lack of success of Roma/Gypsies and Travellers within mainstream educational systems reflects a long history of governments failing to adopt appropriate and effective policies towards Roma/Gypsies in

Timeline *continued*

1994	Appointment of a Co-ordinator of Activities on Roma/Gypsies, Directorate of Social and Economic Affairs – Council of Europe.
1995	Council of Europe – Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities – requiring states to develop a proactive approach to enabling minority communities to develop and promote their culture and identity.
1995	Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies established in the European Committee on Migration (CDMG) – Council of Europe.
1996	Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues established in the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – OSCE. The Contact Point's role is to co-ordinate Roma/Gypsy-related initiatives within European institutions, to monitor relevant legislative and political developments in individual countries and to promote Roma/Gypsy self-organisation/representation.
1997	EU – Amsterdam Treaty, Article 13 of which provides the basis for the EU (and member states) to develop initiatives aimed at combating racial discrimination and promoting equal opportunities.
1997	Accession negotiation for membership of the EU opened with Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia. The situation of Roma/Gypsies is dealt with under Political Criteria, and the EU's annual "Opinions on Progress towards Accession" includes specific reference to the situation of Roma/Gypsy minorities in individual countries.
1998	EU – European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia established to monitor development in race relations throughout Europe, publishing annual reports on each of the member states of the Council of Europe. Since its inception, it has taken a special interest in the situation of Roma/Gypsies.
1999	EU adopts "Guiding principles for improving the situation of Roma" in Candidate Countries that includes a large number of recommendations in the field of education.
2000	EU Race Directive 2000/43/EC, making provisions for equal treatment, regardless of ethnic origin, binding on member states.
2000	Second report by the High Commissioner on National Minorities (OSCE) "On the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area".

general. This failure is rooted in the inability and, in most cases, the reluctance of policy-makers and decision-takers to fully appreciate the history, circumstances, aspirations and capabilities of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people. There are few, if any, other population groups in Europe against which regular racist pronouncements and actions still pass largely unremarked. The tendency has been for Roma/Gypsies to be

seen as "the problem" rather than the key to the solution, and it is still unusual to come across acknowledgements that "the problem" could be the outcome of personal or institutional racism or well-meaning but ill-advised policies. The consequences of failed governmental initiatives have been deepening misunderstanding, fear and suspicion, contributing to the generation and reproduction of prejudice on both sides.



The end result is frequently to apportion blame to Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people themselves for policies and practices that were derived without any consultation with, or involvement of, their end users.

Problems of accountability

Being aware of the reasons for past policy mistakes may help to avoid their repetition. In recent years this process has been greatly facilitated by the unprecedented degree of self-organisation displayed by Roma/Gypsy and

Traveller people, and their desire to engage in decision-making processes that affect them. There are still significant obstacles to the development of reliable mechanisms of accountability between those who represent (especially at national and international levels) and those who are represented. Every activity in which Roma/Gypsies and Travellers come into contact with mainstream institutions (such as education) should have a basis of dialogue and consultation. It is increasingly recognised (at least in Central and Eastern Europe) that government policy cannot be implemented without the consent of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people.

Underpinning this is the need to develop a dialogue that does not reinforce a Roma/Gypsy elite, but that reflects their diversity. The question is not only to what extent decision-takers invite and understand the views of Roma/Gypsies, but also to what extent they take into account these representations when decisions are made. It is important that supra-national institutions, governments, NGOs and other organisations are able to evaluate the growing data on Roma/Gypsies and their circumstances in order to avoid joining the long list of those who have failed to find an answer to the “Gypsy Question”.

A “common European home”

The movement towards the greater internationalisation of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller policy began in 1984 with the passage in the European Parliament of Resolution C172/153 “On the Situation of Gypsies in the Community”, which recommended that governments of member states co-ordinate their approach to the reception of Gypsies. The collapse of communism and the continuing process of EU enlargement have served to increase the diversity of legal instruments which can be deployed in relation to the education of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children and young people. Indeed, the creation of a “common European home” could have particular significance for Roma/Gypsies. By making Roma/Gypsies and Travellers citizens of a multicultural Europe rather than minorities within nation states, they may finally be able to overcome some of the many problems they face. However, at the same time, the debate on EU enlargement has created scope for some national

governments to seek to evade their responsibilities towards their Roma/Gypsy populations by portraying Roma/Gypsies as a stateless “European problem” for whom no national government need take responsibility.

The rights framework

In addition to the current context of changing policy approaches to Roma/Gypsies, this report is being compiled at a time when large-scale political changes in Europe are creating new fora and an enhanced role for the discourse on human rights. For much of the post-war period, international law and the domestic legislation of European states have dealt with the rights of ethno-cultural minorities by guaranteeing their right not to be discriminated against. Policy affecting Roma/Gypsies – including education policy – was developed and implemented within individual states and is therefore subject to domestic political and cultural considerations. Since they had little political influence at this level, Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people and their interests were rarely taken into account.

European enlargement has strengthened the position of international agreements with regard to domestic legislation through the process of legal harmonisation. In addition, new bodies have been established to monitor political developments within states and to check compliance with international agreements. In 1993 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe endorsed Recommendation 1203 “On the situation of Roma in Europe”, which explicitly requested that governments

implement international agreements relating to Roma/Gypsies. Offices have been established within the Council of Europe (Specialist Group) and the OSCE (Contact Point) to monitor and advise on policy towards Roma/Gypsies against a rights background. Furthermore, the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities has conducted two detailed investigations into the circumstances of Roma/Gypsies (1993 and 2000). In respect of post-communist states (many of which have large Roma/Gypsy populations) their aspirations to join the EU are conditioned by the Copenhagen Criteria which demand the "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities".

Minority rights

As a result of these developments there are now accessible institutions, charged with collating data and facilitating good policy and practice across Europe, working to a more rights-oriented agenda. The process of Europeanisation also means that more Roma/Gypsies are able to promote their interests at a wide range of international fora and may seek remedies at the European Court of Human Rights.

A key change in the rights discourse has been the development of special rights for ethno-cultural groups, known collectively as minority rights. The degree to which minority rights will evolve, and the extent of their application with regard to Roma/Gypsies, is a matter of conjecture and will be decided ultimately by how useful they are perceived to be in different local contexts and at

the regional (European) level. In 1991 minority rights achieved detailed expression in the Paris Charter (CSCE/OSCE). This was followed, in 1995, by the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which implicitly recognises minorities as collective entities with legal entitlements. Given the wider debates about Roma/Gypsies, and most recently Travellers, as ethnic minorities, minority rights have an important bearing on Roma/Gypsy and Traveller education.

The primary justification of minority rights lies in the acknowledgement that the right to not be discriminated against has not ended discrimination. Their justification also lies in the recognition that minorities possess certain characteristics that are not dealt with by anti-discrimination and which often require additional institutional or legal support to maintain. Whereas anti-discrimination rights seek to make sure that members of minorities can access mainstream resources, services and individual remedies, minority rights focus on enabling the minority community to develop and reproduce itself as a distinct cultural community.

Extensive linguistic and cultural diversity and the wide variation in relationships with extra-communal institutions, societies and cultures that characterise Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities pose fundamental challenges to the development of a distinct cultural community. However, it is precisely because the Roma/Gypsy diaspora exhibits diverse circumstances and needs that minority rights may well prove to be the most useful instrument in addressing a particular issue or situation.



Human rights

Human rights mechanisms have also dealt with rights for Roma/Gypsies and Travellers. The UN Commission on Human Rights, the UN Sub-Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and its Working Group on Minorities are examples of fora where the issue of Roma/Gypsy rights have been made explicit. For example, in 1999 the Sub-Commission entrusted one of its members to prepare a working paper on the human rights problems and protection of Roma/Gypsies. In addition the reports of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance have frequently referred to discrimination encountered by Roma/Gypsies and Travellers.

Child rights

Finally, the existence of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child and its almost universal ratification by governments across the globe has helped to reduce the invisibility of children and establish their value in their own right. The establishment of formal mechanisms to monitor child rights and in particular the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have been instrumental in holding countries to account on a number of issues, some of them specific to Roma/Gypsy and Traveller children.

A voice for Roma/Gypsies and Travellers

The development of appropriate and effective policy and other initiatives targeting Roma/Gypsy and Traveller education has been facilitated by improved channels of communication between Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people and mainstream society resulting from the unprecedented growth in formal Roma/Gypsies self-organisation. Since 1970, five World Gypsy Congresses have been held, with a continually expanding number of affiliated organisations. Since 1979 the International Romany Union has enjoyed Consultative Status at the UN (enhanced in 1993). European institutions have proved less enthusiastic about supporting the establishment of a permanent representative body for Roma/Gypsies; however, the Specialist Group and the Contact Point (see page 15) encourage both national and international Roma/Gypsy and Traveller organisations to play a greater role in decision-making.

At the national level, the steady growth in the number of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller organisations in Western Europe since the 1960s has been enhanced by Roma/Gypsies in Central and South-Eastern Europe exploring new opportunities to adopt a public role with the development of civil society in this region and the end of one-party political systems. Roma/Gypsy and Traveller representation currently plays a mediator role, allowing Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people to transmit information up to Government as well as providing policy-makers with a means of disseminating information and

explaining policy to Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities. The balance in these relations varies according to the political context, ie, the degree of political authority that Roma/Gypsy and Traveller representation can command in any situation, and the extent to which policy-makers are interested in taking on board what Roma/Gypsies might have to say.

Decisions taken at local government level often have direct significance for Roma/Gypsies and Travellers, especially in the field of education. Local authorities usually have the primary role in allocating resources and monitoring the quality of educational provision. As Roma/Gypsies and Travellers perceive the need to develop mechanisms for representing their view to local decision-makers, the response of authorities ranges from conflictual to co-opting. Roma self-organisation can also take cultural or religious forms and manifests itself within the activities of mainstream NGOs and other organisations. The development of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller media throughout Europe also provides means by which Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people and mainstream actors can establish a dialogue and aim for greater mutual understanding.

Finally, there are the Roma/Gypsy and Traveller individuals themselves, including children and young people. The arena of education is naturally favourable to identifying and establishing dialogue with those targeted by educational initiatives. In respect of education, it is particularly important to identify, understand and take account of the views of those most directly affected by education: children themselves.

Therefore, the *Denied a Future?* report includes many direct quotations from school pupils and other young people in which they explain their experiences and aspirations.

The diversity of Roma/Gypsies and Travellers, their long history and the continued pervasiveness of anti-Roma/Gypsy and Traveller prejudice means that governments and NGOs must be aware of the need to establish confidence in

themselves and their activities among Roma/Gypsy and Traveller communities. Such confidence is best achieved through the representatives of mainstream bodies demonstrating their ability to understand the concerns of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people, including those of children, and to establish a consensus on how Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people can enjoy their educational and other rights.

