

Roma and racism in Europe

Why UNA members should take up their cause

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Last week, Italy came under fire at the United Nations Human Rights Council for the persistent racist attacks suffered by migrants and minorities, including the Roma, on its soil. Interest in Italy's record on the protection of minorities piqued following a spate of violence at the beginning of this year, during which two migrant workers were shot. But as Navi Pillay, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, pointed out when presenting her annual report to the Council in March, this issue is not confined to Italy.

Highlighting treatment of the Roma in particular, Pillay said "while the European Union and several European governments have done their best to improve the situation of the Roma, in many other countries, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia, their position is noticeably deteriorating".

The situation of Roma in Europe today represents one of the major social injustices facing not only the UN and the EU, but specifically the UK. It is estimated that there may be over 10 million Roma in the EU, many of them in southern Europe in Romania and Bulgaria, in the central European countries of Slovakia and Hungary, and large historic communities in Spain and Italy.

Monitoring of the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and studies by UN Development Programme have shown that in Europe many Roma suffer direct discrimination in education, health care, housing and employment, with some groups living on incomes of under \$2 a day and a significant number, particularly Roma women, being illiterate.

A survey conducted by the EU in 2009 revealed that 90% of Roma interviewed in Hungary, 83% in the Czech Republic and 81% in Slovakia said that discrimination due to ethnic origin was widespread. Consequently it should come as no surprise that many Roma initially sought asylum in Britain. This number increased after the Czech Republic and Slovakia joined the EU, allowing them to travel freely to the UK more easily. Much larger numbers also migrated to Spain, Italy, and France.

How many Roma have migrated to the UK is not known, though some estimate that it is in excess of a six-figure number. Many of them will likely not leave, as they value the comparative lack of discrimination in the UK. However, they face other considerable challenges here.

EU citizens have the right to move and live anywhere in the EU, provided that they meet certain conditions. They are entitled to seek work and the local authorities are legally obliged to provide education for their children. However the Roma migrants are not entitled to claim benefits, and as many are employed in short-term work, they are forced to move from town to town with their children to seek employment.

A recent report commissioned by the then-Department of Children, Families and Schools, undertaken by European Dialogue, showed that the majority of local authorities were in denial about the numbers of Roma children and were failing to provide outreach work or assistance to these families to integrate children into schools. This denies Roma children the right to education (Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and in the longer term, sows the seeds of an underclass of illiterate Roma, who in general perform worse than the other traveling communities in the UK. (It should be noted that these communities – even groups that are fluent in English – have the lowest educational attainment of all ethnic groups in the UK.)

European Dialogue has called on local authorities to meet their responsibilities starting with a coherent policy on social inclusion, advice units and information, the training staff, measuring the need and providing resources, monitoring private employment practices and promoting cooperation between the Roma communities, civil society, the police, local government and local service providers.

If UNA-UK is to think global and act local, UNA branches should ask critical questions of their local authorities on what action they are taking to support these initiatives. UNA members should also ask their MPs what action the UK government is taking to stop discrimination and fund successful education programmes for Roma children not just in the UK but across the EU, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in particular.

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