

THE INCLUSION OF HIGHLY VULNERABLE GROUPS:

THE EXPERIENCE OF ROMA MIGRANTS IN FRANCE

Summary of an encounter between researchers, social workers,
migrants and associations at

Sciences Po-Paris on 5th November 2011

Foreword

In recent years, official rhetoric in France and other European countries has often associated Roma migrants from Central Europe and the Balkans with delinquency and marginality. This attitude is what prompted researchers, social workers, associations and Romanian and Bulgarian Roma to come together in Paris, on 5th of November 2011, to study the concrete inclusion actions engaged in by Roma migrants in France. The following paper is a synthesis of the exchanges and discussions that took place at this meeting. It highlights the diversity of the individual and familial trajectories of Roma migrants and the need to take a critical look at the policies directed at these migrants. It also raises general issues concerning means of survival for the poor and their place in our towns today, and the effectiveness of measures for fighting vulnerability in a system which, as we know, is itself increasingly responsible for manufacturing exclusion. Strictly speaking, this is not a scientific paper, but rather a series of reflections based on factual observations. It endeavors to deconstruct pre-conceived ideas and open the way for fresh thinking about the policies to be directed at vulnerable Roma and the fight against vulnerability and exclusion in European societies of the future.

Roma migrants from central Europe (mainly Romania and Bulgaria) and the Balkans (ex-Yugoslavia) began settling in Western Europe in the 1990s and 2000s. Most of them have very little money, yet their administrative status¹ bars their way to formal employment. To survive, these migrants often resort to informal practices, such as constructing makeshift shelters or squatting abandoned buildings, street activity such as begging, collecting and re-selling scrap metal and used clothes, and working in the informal economy.

Because of these practices, Roma migrants, or more specifically, those Roma migrants in situations of vulnerability, have attracted the attention of the authorities and influenced public opinion, with reactions that fall into two broad categories. The first reaction, well-illustrated by the statements made by President Sarkozy during the summer of 2010, is to compare Roma migrants to delinquents who should be hounded out of the country or, at the very least, prevented from causing further harm. The second, more frequently but not exclusively seen in association circles, is to present these same people as victims of the system who should be taken in hand by the authorities and helped to find their place in society.

In a context marked by the growing stigmatisation of the Roma community², researchers, field actors (association staff and social workers), institutional actors and Roma migrants came together for a day in November 2011 to examine actual experiences of inclusion. The ensuing discussions confirmed that Roma people are not necessarily the delinquents or irresponsible characters they are so often portrayed to be. On the contrary, many of them, including the most vulnerable, are engaged in constructive actions, sometimes with the help of associations or social workers, in an attempt to improve their living conditions and social status, and are thus involved in the life of our urban societies.

What follows is a summary of the day's workings, which were based on actual experience and focused on the conditions and means of inclusion for Roma migrants in France.

We have chosen to use the term "inclusion" here, but we could equally have chosen "empowerment". "Empowerment" is a term that came up often in the course of the day's discussions: it reflects the notion of being immersed in a society while retaining some margin for manoeuvre, one's individual identity, or, in other words, a form of autonomy or independence vis-à-vis the social and institutional environment.

THE DIVERSITY OF PERSONAL AND FAMILY TRAJECTORIES

The findings of the study day confirmed beyond any doubt that not all Roma migrants, or more specifically not the entire Roma community, are living in a situation of vulnerability, nor are they all involved in criminal activities or delinquency. Indeed, Roma can be found in the majority of socio-economic categories, working as manual or office workers, licen-

1 - To obtain salaried employment in France, Bulgarian and Romanian nationals have to have a work permit. This permit is issued by the prefecture to migrants with an employment contract of at least several months' duration after a long and costly procedure which discourages a good number of employers. This procedure is one of a series of transitory measures that France and other European countries have decided to apply pending Bulgarian and Romanian membership of the European Union in 2014

2 - See Commissioner For Human Rights, 2012, *Human Rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe*, Council of Europe Publications.

sed professionals or management staff. "Invisible" is how researchers usually describe these people that nothing distinguishes from any other city-dweller. And "diversity" is the key word when talking about Roma migrants and their life projects: some are seeking to settle permanently in France, while others plan to return home; many of them still have strong ties with their home region and have often kept a house there. Associations and social workers tend to stress the importance of inclusion, but it is not the only key to a "successful" migration experience. For Roma, and for migrants in general, pendulum migration can also be a very good way of improving one's living conditions and consolidating one's social status.

So what are the factors behind a successful migration experience and, more specifically, behind successful inclusion, as this is the focus of our attention here?

Of course, conceptions of a "successful" inclusion pathway vary according to individual objectives and representations, but it is useful to compare opinions. During the day's workings, the researchers were able to make a critical analysis of phenomena they have observed, whereas the field actors and migrants, among other things, took a reflective look at their practices and shared knowledge born of their experience.

In the course of the discussions, personal aptitudes were revealed to be the major determining factor in inclusion. For example, qualifications make it easier to find a job and obtain papers, as do practical skills in areas such as agriculture, construction, the collection and recycling of materials, mechanics and trade.

Social capital also plays an important role. For Roma migrants, and for so many other migrants, the family, parents are an essential factor in the migration experience. It is often within the immediate family that economic initiatives are developed, whereas the extended family (relatives) frequently forms the basis of migration strategies.

Finally, people need to be capable of seizing opportunities. But what kind of opportunities?

Economic opportunities, first of all, by which we mean in the informal economy for vulnerable migrants, as they have no access to the formal job market. Collecting and selling recyclable metals, *la biffe*³ and street activities, such as selling news-sheets, playing music and dancing for money, begging, etc., are frequent means of generating income.

Developing new social or relational resources opens up another area of opportunity. Through external contacts (private individuals, association activists, etc.), migrants can find a job or recruitment opportunities (usually child-minding for women, but a whole range of different jobs for men), establish or consolidate links with the local authorities and social services, which at the same time enables migrants to get to know the codes and practices of the society they are trying to integrate. From this point of view, putting their children into school is a key means of enhancing inclusion. Work and school are ideal places for facilitating the socialisation of migrants, after the family and entourage.

As well as personal skills and the family network, the experience gained by the migrants in

3 - *La biffe* consists in collecting and then selling used objects (mainly clothes) found in dustbins.

the host towns also plays a crucial role in the inclusion process. In other words, enrolling in local society is a means for migrants to practice their skills and engage in the inclusion process⁴. It is therefore crucial for the migrants concerned to be given some kind of official residency rights, as this is the only means of ensuring them the residential stability they need to participate in local society.

THE CO-PRODUCTION OF INCLUSION BY MIGRANTS AND THEIR SUPPORT PROVIDERS

As we have seen, inclusion depends mainly on personal and family initiatives - as well as on each person's life project and aptitudes, of course. Where some Roma migrants manage to cope on their own or with the help of their family network, others find it hard to do so because of their personal situation and history, not to mention the discrimination they encounter. In these cases, outside support may be needed from social workers or associations, for example, if the inclusion process begun by the migrants is to have a chance of success.

So what role do social workers and associations actually play? There was general agreement at the study day on the fact that their main role is to act as the intermediary between people in vulnerable situations and society at large, and especially the world of institutions. They build virtual bridges between the shanty town and the rest of the town, and find or attempt to find remedies for the headaches caused by these institutions by seeking ways of sneaking people through the cracks in the administrative system. In concrete terms, social workers and associations work to enable people in vulnerable situations to send their children to school, obtain health care, find a job and get their papers. In doing so, they play an essential role of interface and translator between, on the one side, the world of migrants and, on the other, that of institutions and society at large.

For this co-production of inclusion by Roma migrants and their support providers to work, a relationship of trust is required. This means that support providers need to see the people they are supporting as possessors of rights, as autonomous and competent people who are capable of taking initiatives and with whom they can and must define shared objectives. Of course, this means ignoring the pre-established categories (ethnic in this case) on which today's social policies tend to rely and adopting an individualised approach - although all the people they support must benefit from equal treatment, of course. Similarly, it is important to avoid paternalism or condescension, which is more conducive to social control than to the empowerment of individuals. Nor will taking an overly idealistic or defeatist view be constructive: Roma migrants, just like anyone else, are capable of developing strategies and resorting to tactics or "ruses" to defend their interests.

EXCLUSION DYNAMICS

In reality, the inclusion process often grinds to a halt. This is partly due to the difficult working conditions of the social workers and association staff who often have insecure contracts of employment and limited resources with which to operate. It is not rare, for

4 - This point is also discussed in a recent study into migrants in the Paris region : Sandrine Halfen, 2012, *Situation sanitaire et sociale des « Roms migrants » en Île-de-France*, Rapport de l'Observatoire régional de santé d'Île-de-France :

http://www.ors-idf.org/dmdocuments/ORS_Rapport_Roms.pdf

example, for social workers assigned to projects with vulnerable Roma migrants to have a caseload of over a hundred people. How can they provide the kind of support these people need in such conditions? The same can be said of employment agencies (vocational inclusion services, job centres, etc.) where, in the current economic climate, the number of job seekers has skyrocketed.

Official rhetoric about the supposed delinquency and irresponsibility of Roma clearly has a negative impact as it confirms people's pre-conceived ideas about the Roma community and attracts negative publicity. Roma were little mentioned until recently, but they are now often described as source of problems in the official rhetoric relayed by the media, and so are seen as such by the general public. In other words, Roma are those people who live in shacks or squats and make a living from begging or petty crime. This rhetoric has been particularly wide-spread since the 2000s and is creating a barrier to the inclusion of vulnerable people and stigmatising the whole Roma community.

Finally, the government's position is clearly to reject Roma migrants. It has strengthened legislation and introduced administrative procedures designed to restrict residency rights and free movement (introduction of the concept of the abuse of free movement rights in the latest law on immigration, for example). It has also scaled up the dismantling of settlements and engages in harassment to get people to leave (police harassment is an apparently frequent occurrence). The discrimination against them can be even more insidious. It can be seen in the attitude of public bodies such as the Caisse d'allocations familiales, for example, which applies internal directives or circulars intended to restrict access to entitlements for Bulgarian or Romanian nationals⁵.

As a result, the living conditions of many vulnerable Roma migrants have deteriorated over recent years. Repeated expulsions have deprived many people of residential stability, and the social workers and associations reported that incessant forced displacement is creating barriers to health care, education and inclusion. Practices of rejection, whether in the legal, economic or social field, are therefore condemning Roma migrants to a life of exclusion.

What choice then do these individuals and families have but to resort to squatting, begging, informal employment or even petty crime – practices that the authorities denounce via the media in the name of public order, hygiene and tranquillity, and sometimes even human rights?

GETTING THE INCLUSION PROCESS BACK ON TRACK

There is probably no miracle cure or "best practice" for getting the inclusion process back on track. The important thing is to take proper account of the diversity of situations and local contexts, as well as the diversity of people and personal and family pathways.

The discussions between field workers, migrants and researchers produced some ideas for future action.

⁵ - For more information on these aspects, see Romeurope's annual reports on the situation of Roma migrants in France : <http://www.romeurope.org/-Rapports-Romeurope-.html>.

First of all, the lifting of transitional measures – a demand that associations have been making for several years now - is seen as a prerequisite as this is the only way of allowing people access to employment. If they had the right to work, this would assure many individuals of working age of an income, which would in turn solve such problems as access to accommodation, health care and schools. Furthermore, it would attenuate the negative representations of Roma, as work, along with school, facilitates socialisation and mutual recognition – a fact that was frequently pointed out during the study day.

A tolerant attitude on the part of the authorities towards activities in the "grey" economy, known as such as it verges on the illegal, is another important factor given the role these activities play in the day-to-day survival and economic inclusion of migrants and their often temporary nature. Many people abandon begging as soon as they get the chance of a more sustainable activity (salaried employment, micro- enterprise, etc.). In the absence of, or pending solutions for (re-)housing, the authorities should also adopt a more tolerant attitude towards informal settlements, as we have seen that only when people benefit from a certain amount of residential stability can the inclusion process begin. Only then will migrants whose life project is to settle in France be able to leave the shanty towns and squats.

Local action was also seen by all the participants of the study day as playing an important role in getting the inclusion process back on track. Ordinary citizens often take an interest in the situation of vulnerable people. They are seen to establish links with the inhabitants of shanty-towns or squats and urge the authorities to take action in their favour. Local action of this nature helps Roma migrants to gain access to employment and schools, so in one way, it helps to establish or re-establish links between migrants, society and institutions. However, it is important to remember that it is not the role of voluntary workers or ordinary citizens to replace the social services.

NEW BARRIERS, NEW ISSUES

Of course, things are not that simple and there are still many issues to be addressed. The presence of shanty-towns and squats poses problems of cohabitation, for example, especially when the vulnerable population is a large one: how can problems of waste removal and running water be dealt with? What about the organisation of recycling activities, crucial to the survival of these people, but a nuisance for those living in the vicinity (noise, smoke from burning the rubber casing off copper wire)? And how can a dialogue be established between migrants and their neighbours and changes brought about in their respective behaviour and representations? Lastly, what support can be provided to people whose life project is, in an increasing number of cases, both "over here" and "over there", between host region and home town?

Nor should we overlook the fact that shanty-towns and squats are far from idyllic places to live. Insalubrity, violence and racketeering are common-place, all the more so as, under pressure from expulsion, people are being forced to group together in zones where a real economy of poverty is developing. How should we react to this phenomenon of which people and families Roma migrants are the first victims? To a certain extent, doesn't the fact of tolerating the presence of shanty-towns and squats mean we are closing our eyes to the exploitation of poverty and destitution? In any case, there is no doubt that economic inclusion is a means of emancipation for individuals and families. Once assured of a regular income, they can distance themselves from the networks of dependency that have been

holding them captive in a manner of speaking.

Actions directed at migrants also raise cross-cutting issues concerning both the modalities of public action in the social sphere, in particular the involvement of civil society and ordinary citizens, and the place of poor people in our towns. With regard to the first point, do we really have time, especially those of us at work, to support people in difficulty, to enter into relations with them or exercise "active citizenship"? And what skills are required to support people in difficulty? Are good intentions enough? As for the second point, what place can the poor find in our towns, especially if they are foreign, when many town-dwellers are already being forced into the outskirts by the high cost of land and real estate ?

Finally, what are the "economic niches" that vulnerable people can exploit today in order to meet their day-to-day needs? The disappearance of a growing number of unqualified jobs and minor professions and the lack of tolerance shown towards the "grey" economy leave vulnerable people little room for manoeuvre. When it comes down to it, what else can they do to survive but resort to social assistance, insecure employment or so-called "deviant" practices?

THE INCLUSION OF ROMA MIGRANTS: A FALSE ISSUE?

Our reflections have led us to the conclusion that the inclusion of Roma migrants is in fact a false issue.

First of all, Roma migrants do not form a homogenous group. Some of them have never had to worry about inclusion. Others are capable of sorting it out for themselves or with the help of social workers or associations. Others still are, for various reasons, in great difficulty and require specific support or follow-up. In other words, no two situations are alike. For this reason, Roma do not and should not be seen to constitute a predefined public in need of public policy. Otherwise this would imply that the whole Roma population is in difficulty and a source of problems, stigmatising it even further.

Recent scientific projects⁶ and the discussions with people working on the ground and with Roma themselves show to what extent the "Roma issue" which, a priori, doesn't actually exist, is in fact a creation of urban societies and institutions. Although the cause of much debate and controversy, the practices of migrants are in effect largely the result of the policies in place, as these policies relegate the people concerned to the margins of society, which in turn generates negative media fall-out. In periods of crisis, political communications are often at the origin of this negative publicity. For example, in Italy in 2007-2008, then in France during the summer of 2010, Roma migrants were made the scapegoats of a discontented population and of public authorities in search of legitimacy.

Finally, the inclusion of Roma raises issues which, far from concerning just one population group, concern society as a whole: What "right to the city" can vulnerable people claim in towns governed essentially by economic interests rather than by the search for social justice, and which leave fewer and fewer options and opportunities to economically disadvantaged individuals? Has entering the precariat become their only alternative to

6 - See *Géocarrefour*, 2011, vol. 86, n°1, Roms migrants en ville : pratiques et politiques en Italie et en France (the introduction can be accessed freely on the magazine's website: <http://geocarrefour.revues.org/8210>), or *Roms en (bidon)villes*, by Martin Olivera, published by Editions rue d'Ulm in 2011.

social assistance, other than so-called deviant practices and petty crime?

We can but wonder then about the chances of success of the fight against social exclusion. How can we include people in difficulty in a social, economic and political system that is actually manufacturing more and more exclusion? We can try to mobilise the resources of social engineering, and seek innovative approaches to stimulate what we today call "social creativity", but the equation will remain very difficult, not to say impossible to resolve.

This observation may be pessimistic, but it is based on simple common sense – and it has at least one advantage. It is motivation for institutions and associations, ordinary citizens and researchers to broaden the scope of their current thinking and actions and adopt a global approach to dealing with the causes of inequity and precariousness rather than focusing on finding solutions for a hypothetical "Roma issue".

Summary produced by Olivier Legros with the help of David Dumeau, Marilisa Fantacci, Sandrine Y. Halfen, Marion Lièvre, Yannick Lucas, Michèle Mézard, Martin Olivera, Anna Pitoun and Tommaso Vitale, and based on the discussions that took place in the following thematic workshops:

Workshop 1: "The co-production of inclusion by social workers and beneficiaries"

Laurence Alimi (Habitats solidaires, Romeurope 94), Aurilène Da Costa « Rues et cités -Montreuil), Marilisa Fantacci (Romeurope), Thérèse Leprêtre (Ecodrom), Geoffray Lloveras (ALJ 93), Nadine Morel, Tommaso Vitale (Sciences Po Paris), Léonard Veliciu (salaried worker, Bordeaux) Véronique Gilet (ALPIL – Action lyonnaise pour l’insertion par le logement)

Workshop 2: "Self-inclusion or inclusion practices outside the institutional system"

Norah Bennarosh, PhD students, Roms de Montreuil (and in Romania), Iosif Boti (entrepreneur, Saint-Denis), Grégoire Cousin (University of Tours, European Romani Rights Centre), David Dumeau (social mediator, Bordeaux Town Hall), Robert et Laura Gracia (Montpellier), Marion Lièvre (Univ. Montpellier III), Yannick Lucas, (Univ. Angers – Louvain-La-Neuve), Sandrine Laborde (ADIE - Association pour le droit à l’initiative économique), Ludovic Rafi (European Commission), Nicu Stoican (entrepreneur, Bobigny), Ramona Strachinaru (Coup de Main, Choisy-le-Roy)

Workshop 3: " A few years later: what becomes of people who get their papers ?"

Francis Couvidat (Town Council, Evry), Yves Douchin (Romeurope 77), Aude Leveillé (Romeurope 94), Saimir Mile (La Voix des Roms), Codin Novacovici (Romeurope 77), Anna Pitoun (producer, Paris), Aline Poupel (Romeurope 94), Martin Olivera (Rues et cités), Méline Revellin (ALPIL - Action lyonnaise pour l’insertion par le logement), Sasha Zanko (UFAT-Union française des associations tsiganes)

The following people also took part in the discussions: Thomas Aguilera, Emmanuelle Ajon, Claudio Altenhain, Myriam Argoud, Aline Arrouze, Angela Bagnato, Héléne Baland, Marie-Pierre Baumhauer, Marion Blank, Céline Berger, Colette Billet, Carine Bonnaud, Anna Brauener, Delphine Bruggeman, Andrea Caizzi, Cornelia Carpaci, Livius Carpaci, Nadia Cirpaci, Christian Castagna, Bérangère de Contenson, Alina Cornea, Monika

Dak, Aurilène Da Costa, Nicolas De Groot, Cécile Debarge, Anna-Maria Draggio, Marie-Dominique Dreysse, Fanny Dubray, Jacques Dumortier, Anne Dunoyer, Anne-Sophie Dupeyras, Lou Einhorn, Chloé Fabre, Clarissa Filguera, Martin Favreau, Lucile Gacon, Yasmina Gharet, Pierre Girard, Adriana Giurea, Oanna Gogoiu, Maria Grecu, Costel Grigoras, Lucas Gualdi, Sandrine Y. Halfen, Iulia Hasdeu, Eleonore Havas, Tom Hérard, Jean-Claude Houdoin, Elodie Kerrien, Samy Khaldi, Boris Kozierow, Gwen Lamandé, Christophe Laplace-Claverie, Marie-Thérèse Leblanc, Claire Lefebvre, Colette Lepage, Karine Lesueur, Sylvie Litvine, Léan Longeot, Joanna Lorilleux, Dorinella Lucas, Katia Lurbe Puerto, Christelle Maïcon, Morgane Mallet, Chiara Manzoni, Laure Marbot, Evangéline Masson-Diez, Michèle Mézard, Camelia Morazu, Marie-Louise Mouket, Marc Nectar, Dae-Miyung No, Laurence Noël, Jeanne Palombieri, Greta Persico, Evelyne Pomerat, Arthur Prouvost, Olivia Rajabaly, Claude Reznik, Claire Sabat, Silvana Salandra, Alice-Sophie Sarcinelli, Bruno Six, Estera Stefan, Rahela Stefan, Auxane Tertrais, Marie-Sophie Trotta, Karin Waringo.

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