

Rromani people in France in 2008

*Joint report of the Rromani NGOs based in France:
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When the situation of the Rromani people in France is discussed by NGOs, one is expecting the speaker to mention the non recognition of the minorities in the country, as well as a plethora of complaints: discrimination, exclusion, racism etc. The purpose of this document is to contribute to the solidification and the further development of some positive changes that are occurring since a few weeks (1) so that the worsening situation of the Rroms¹ (2) finds a solution.

1. It is better late than never

A few changes are to be mentioned with regard to the French position on the Rromani population. These changes occurred during the last weeks, under French presidency of European Union:

- The European Summit on Rromani people (Brussels, September 16th 2008) was held under French presidency of the European Union
- The French representatives in this Summit, Mrs. Christine Boutin and Mr. Bernard Kouchner presented in their respective speeches a new outlook on the topic, which represents a considerable progress. To mention only one, maybe the most interesting aspect, Mrs. Boutin said that about 400.000 Rroms live in France. This is the first time that France recognises Rromani population both as such, - with its own identity, - and as a part of the French nation.
- Mr. Kouchner greeted the 7th World Congress of the International Rromani Union in a very encouraging way;
- After the European Summit, we observe with certain satisfaction a closer contact between the national government and the Rromani NGOs based in France, even though we consider that there is still room for improvement.

¹ « Rroms » is used here in its wide sense, including the Sinté (Manouches) and the Kalé (Gitans)

However, these changes are to be confirmed in the long term and, above all, should reach the lower levels of government, mainly the local authorities. Since the Second World War, the treatment of the Rromani population in France has gone through a process that had enough time to prove counterproductive. This treatment has been based on the postulate that the Rroms were but a socially disadvantaged group whose feature was the mobile way of living. Thanks to an insistent informational work on behalf of our organisations, the central French administration has overcome this prejudice. As a matter of fact, (a) only a minority of Rroms belongs to the administrative category called “Gens du voyage”² such as this last is defined by the law³ and (b) the abnormally high rate of Rroms who live in difficult conditions is not what makes out of them Rroms, but rather the consequence of how they are perceived and treated by the majority population, because of their ethnic belonging.

As a consequence, tracking the issue exclusively in terms of social exclusion leads to a stronger stigmatisation, therefore to a stronger exclusion.

The recent contacts with high officials of French government show that the need for change in the perception of the topic is well understood. The remaining questioning is that of comparative speeds between the system such as it has been implemented since decades and the change that is needed. In other words, will the change be implemented before the running machinery makes it ineffective? By the way, what is this machinery?

2. The machine that produces more problems while pretending resolving the existing ones

Since 1969, France has changed its legislation on ambulant activities. One could ask: “what the ambulant activities have to do with the Rroms?”. In fact, nothing. There are Rroms who make a living with ambulant activities, but not more than there can be Senegalese who live out of breeding. Not recognising ethnic identities other than the French one on its soil, France, who felt obliged to put in place a special legislation to be applied to the Rroms, had adopted in 1912 a law on “nomads”, even though in practice many non-Rroms were nomads and many Rroms were not. Creating the “*carnet anthropométrique*” this legislation made it easy to intern and deport the Rroms during the Second World War. True enough, this *carnet* was obligatory also for non-Rroms who had a mobile lifestyle. However, these last were freed quickly, while the Rroms’ internment, decided by French government in 1940, before the nazi occupation, lasted until 1946, one year after the liberation. Twenty five years later, in 1969, due to the burden that then official term word “nomad” hold, France decided to cancel it with a new law. This new law on ambulant activities cancelled also the “*carnet anthropométrique*” and replaced it by different special documents for those “who circulate in France with no residence or domicile for more than six month in a year”. The application decrees that followed used the term “*gens du voyage*”, still in use.

² « gens du voyage » means « people of travel », which is not to be confused with the Travellers in UK and Ireland, who form a distinct minority of Celtic descent.

³ According to law, this category includes all people who has neither a fix residence, nor a fix domicile during more than six month within one year

Since then, the concept of “gens du voyage” constitutes the basis of every policy and action on behalf of the authorities, or better to say, on behalf of the NGOs who receive delegation to implement actions towards this population. One more remark is needed before the presentation of this system: the non fixity of residence or domicile of “gens du voyage” is artificially created. Many live in caravans on the same location for decades, but the caravan is not recognised as a domicile, or as a fix residence. Moreover, the occupants are obliged by law to move at least once per year, what gives birth sometimes to a displacement of a few hundred meters only!

The equation “gypsies = nomads”, crystallised in the administrative terminology “gens du voyage” is the fundament of every action towards Rromani people in France. Among others, French law provides with an obligation for all municipalities of 5000 or more inhabitants to create one “aire d’accueil”, which is a caravans’ site in which people can live for certain period, but not permanently. In practice, as mentioned above, they only leave for short periods (one month per year) as the law obliges them to. These “aires d’accueil” are a great business for those who work on. As a matter of fact, since the obligation made by law in 1990, only one third of the planned sites have been constructed. The municipalities often refuse to conform to this legal obligation. In a recent circular, the government recalled the maximum amount to be invested in creating a “aire d’accueil”, specifying that this amount was too often overstepped. The reason of for this overstepping is that the few existing “aires d’accueil” are constructed in polluted areas, between factories, dumps and highways, what means a series of preliminary operations of sanitation. More than the simple bad management of public money, human lives are at stake, because whatever be the sanitation processes, their effects disappear very quickly in those areas that continue being polluted. This explains the alarming life expectancy amongst Rroms, only a few higher than half of that of the majority population.

The “aire d’accueil”, which literal translation into English would be “hosting area” are also, in fact, a place of social control. While the façade justification is the “respect of the way of life” of those who live in, the reality is totally different. These locations are managed by outsiders, contracted by the municipalities. The Rroms who live there has no word to say on the internal organisation of these locations.

Last, but not least, in every department (local entity of several municipalities) there exists a departmental association of the “gens du voyage”, still run by non-Rroms, which is responsible for every single step on behalf of the so-called “gens du voyage”: schooling, social assistance, housing etc. Meant to help and mediate, this kind of structures is a real brake to any integration as in practice it is a kind of sunblock. The Rroms almost never have a direct contact with decision makers. This is even more alarming when it comes to schooling, with the departmental associations for the schooling of the “children of travel”, whose main activity is giving lectures with a very reduced curriculum and even with non-qualified teachers in car-schools.

Against any logic, quite a similar process has started with Rromani immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria, who have always been sedentary. Upon their arrival in the nineties, they were placed in caravans by their exploiters, as this kind of housing was more accessible. Since the suppression of visas with these countries in 2002, the smuggling disappeared with its *raison d’être* and the Rromani immigrants constructed barracks in the peripheries of big cities, from which they are repetitively expelled. Since a few years, a new kind of initiative is observed near Paris: the

expulsion is accompanied with an “insertion project” within the framework of a “Maîtrise d’Oeuvre Urbaine et Sociale” – Urban and social project. This is a common tool for helping families to get minimal living conditions, especially housing. However, the way it is implemented for Rromani immigrants is specific and very different from the mainstream. State and local authorities as well as NGOs put in place projects aiming at the insertion of “certain Rromani families”. In a recent interview, the sub prefect of Saint-Denis (department 93) declared to media that its department “could not and wants not to host all the Rroms”⁴. Therefore, a selection is made every time such projects are implemented. Every time, some criteria of selection are announced, by this same sub-prefect, but they are not respected for selection.

The “lucky selected”, as media uses to qualify the Rroms who are selected to benefit from these projects, are put in caravans in some closed areas. An NGO is mandated to manage the site and the families. The access to the site is forbidden to any external person, including to family members of those who live in, to NGOs and even to media (see picture below). The guards sincerely regret to refuse access, especially to family members, but they have to respect the orders of their hierarchy, e.g. the NGO manager of the site.

(Saint-Denis, a journalist of Radio France Internationale waiting outside for some inhabitant to get out so he can make an interview.

Credit: La voix des Rroms)



It is difficult to remain diplomatic when qualifying this kind of practice. The aim of the project is the integration of the selected families into French society. Logically, none can integrate as far as he or she cannot work. Romanian and Bulgarian citizens have not the right to work in France without a work permit. The deliverance of this work permit is within the jurisdiction of the prefecture, which is one of the partners of these projects. The “insertion village” on the photo

⁴ Le Parisien, Sept. 9th, 2008, <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/la-fin-du-plus-grand-camp-rom-de-france-04-09-2008-195869.php>

above has been created in September 2007. More than one year later, none of its inhabitants has obtained such permit. It is worth to mention that the name “village d’insertion” was for the first time utilised in Saint-Denis, while the first project of this type was implemented one year before in a neighbour municipality, Aubervilliers.

By the way, what kind of insertion is this? What kind of integration? Is the isolation and even the disintegration of a Rromani family a first step towards its integration into the French society? How many villages in the world, and in which country, are forbidden to visitors? How many of them are hidden behind such metallic walls? In how many of them there are guards and check points? Last, but not least, in how many Rromani settlements a mother has to offer the coffee to her daughter on the pavement, between the iron wall and the highway?

As far as the economic dimension of such projects is concerned, there is not enough transparency allowing an analysis. However, through informal sources the costs are up to 3 millions of Euros. Families are requested to contribute to the expenses by paying 30 Euros per month. Of course, this is not a huge amount of money, but how can State require money from people to whom it refuses the right to work otherwise than by pushing them to illegal income generating activities?

It looks therefore that a lot remains to be done for the change, - already well understood at the central governmental level, - to be implemented on the spot, by local players and authorities. The transition will be difficult because of the interests at stake, especially among those structures whose raison d’être is the social intervention and who fear any philosophical change that can question their activity. However, their interests should not prevail over the interest of people that they consider only in terms of “target group”, not to mention the common interest of all, which lays on justice and social cohesion. Continuing the stigmatisation and the maintaining of a whole people in the dependency trap in France, while this dependency trap has been condemned by international structures such as the UNDP in Eastern European countries, is unacceptable. Letting this destroying machine function with the only aim to perpetuate itself at the expense of a cultural, linguistic and historical entity is hazardous.

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