

Identity and Conflict: the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe

Renee Lurker

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Approved by:

Donald Searing

Milada Vachudova

John Stephens

## Abstract

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(Under the direction of Donald Searing)

The focus of this study is on relations between majority and Roma populations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the role of the European Union (EU) in minority rights, and the application of the theories of Realistic Group Conflict (RGCT) and Social Identity (SIT) to the Roma issue. A case study of countries in the CEE region is illustrative of Roma majority-minority relations. The majority of the countries in the CEE region passed the Copenhagen Criteria (CC) in minority rights, even though most of these countries did not change the way they treated the Roma. Therefore, violation of Roma rights in the CEE region continues despite the EU conventions and legislation, which in reality, does nothing to curb the prejudice and intolerance. RGCT and SIT explain why the people and the governments in this region are able to ignore Roma and minority issues.

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### *Introduction*

The village of Tatarszentgyorgy near Budapest in early 2009 experienced an assault on a gypsy family by Hungarian nationalists who planned to murder two parents and five children. First, the attackers burned down their house and then began to shoot the family as they fled the scene. The wife and two of the children were shot and seriously hurt, but survived the assault. Tragically, both the father and the 4-year-old son were shot dead.

This account is an example of current tensions between Hungarians and Roma, which have increased recently because of the recession and a rise in unemployment. Even though this family was considered to be decent and hard working by their neighbors, they were targeted for a hate crime based on their ethnicity alone.<sup>1</sup> This circumstance is just one of many that have been occurring since the Roma have been labeled as an undesired ethnic group. Stories such as this one are a tragic example of the current relationship between majority and minority populations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

The Roma are a distinct ethnic minority in CEE who are distinguished by Romani blood and the Romani language—whose origins began on the Indian subcontinent over one thousand years ago. The Roma in CEE are a subcategory of the Romani who are in almost every European country. In 1993 the Council of Europe officially declared them

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<sup>1</sup> “Boy, 4, murdered in hate war against Hungarian gypsies.” 1 March 2009.  
<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5821924.ece>>

to be “a true European minority.”<sup>2</sup> There are approximately twelve million Romani located in various countries all over the world, but an exact count does not exist because they are not recorded on most official census reports. In addition, many Romani and Roma do not admit to their true ethnic origins for fear of economic and social discrimination.

Inter-group conflict and hostility between majority populations and the Roma has existed in CEE since the Roma first arrived between the fifth and twelfth centuries. In examining the situation of the Roma in CEE, this study will address the following questions: Can relations between Roma populations and majority populations improve? What is the role of the European Union (EU) in minority relations in the region? How do the theories of Realistic Group Conflict (RGCT) and Social Identity (SIT) explain the relationship of the Roma with the majority populations? The Roma have experienced discrimination ranging from violence, lack of education, lack of housing, rejection of citizenship’s fundamental and civil rights, as well as prejudice in the workplace. In daily life, Roma suffer from extreme prejudice that affects their ability to survive in the modern world.

The majority of the countries in the CEE region passed the Copenhagen Criteria (CC) in minority rights, though this does not always change the way they treat minority citizens such as Roma. Even if these countries do treat their minorities well, it has been for a limited period of time as they pursue entry into the EU. After this, the countries return to their previous discriminating practices. Currently, the EU influences Roma minority rights because of the CC and EU enlargement. The continued violation of

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<sup>2</sup> “Roma politics in Central Europe.” 25 October 2005.  
<<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/roma-politics-central-europe/article-146377>>

Roma rights in the CEE region, which the EU pursued bureaucratically through documentation and conventions, but ignored in reality, does nothing to curb prejudice and intolerance towards this community. RGCT and SIT explain why the governments in this region are disposed to ignore Roma minority issues and mislead the EU, and why their majority populations support such practices. The hypothesis of RGCT is that the privileged group believes that they are competing with inferior groups for “scarce resources,” regardless if these resources are scarce or not. SIT explains the conditions under which any group will give preferential treatment to its own members and single out non-group members for discrimination.

### *Roma and Majority Relations in Central and Eastern Europe*

The Roma have been in the CEE region so long that they are now an integral part of the ethnic landscape. The CEE region has found it extremely difficult to integrate the Roma into mainstream society; indeed, integration has proven difficult for both Roma and European majorities. Discrimination mostly on the part of the majority ethnic population in all of CEE results in violence. Nonetheless, many Roma remain surprisingly positive about their present situation and simply wish to continue their way of life without direct interference from the majority. They only leave their country of origin in order to find better opportunities and to avoid severe discrimination. Sadly, when the Roma move to new countries, they find themselves in much the same circumstances. It is important to analyze country-specific cases of Roma discrimination in the CEE region for a holistic view of the relationship between majority populations and the Roma today.

#### *The Czech and Slovak Cases*

Discrimination increased after the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia. After 1989, 100,000 Roma were denationalized in what is today the Czech Republic.<sup>3</sup> The Czech skinheads are unsurpassed in civilian racist violence in Europe, closely followed by Slovaks. Currently, in the Czech Republic, 50 to 80 percent of Roma children between ages six and 14 are in special schools for the mentally retarded. In the Czech

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<sup>3</sup> Public Interest Law Initiative. Legal Defense of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Columbia Law School: New York, 1998.

lands, 70 to 90 percent of the Roma are unemployed, while for the general Czech population unemployment is a mere 4.5 percent. Most Roma live in slums with no regular water or electricity, and they have the highest infant and adult mortality rate as well as the lowest life expectancy in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Surpassing Slovakia at 40 percent, 50 percent of prisoners are Roma in the Czech Republic.

The Czech citizenship law was created in 1994 after the split of Czechoslovakia when the Roma were forced to be Slovak citizens, and they were required to apply for Czech citizenship even though they had never been to Slovakia (they were “Slovak” in origin).<sup>5</sup> The process of applying for citizenship was very difficult or nearly impossible to obtain because there was no assistance from authorities, which made it challenging for Roma to obtain documents because many were illiterate. The law required proof of residency for the last two years; however, they always lived with families and did not own documents to prove residency. Additionally, the law required no criminal record for the last five years and official renunciation of Slovak citizenship. These expectations were all particularly challenging for the Roma to meet.

Sadly, 30 percent of Czech Roma are illiterate, and they have little access to education as merely 15 percent of them complete primary school. Unfortunately, they are unaware of legislative changes, and they are politically isolated with few representatives in high politics. According to a survey from the newspaper *The European*, 91 percent of Czechs claimed that they dislike Roma; furthermore 43 percent

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<sup>4</sup> Guy, Will; Uherek, Zdenek; Weinerová, Renata, editors. Roma migration in Europe: case studies. 1st ed. Münster : 2004, 13-15.

<sup>5</sup> O'Nions, Helen. “Citizenship in the Czech Republic.” Minority rights protection in international law: the Roma of Europe. Ashgate, 2007.



of Czechs see normal “coexistence” as impossible. In many places, Roma are forbidden to enter pubs, clubs, and other public places.<sup>6</sup>

In 1995, there were between 480,000 and 520,000 Roma in Slovakia, comprising 9 to 10 percent of the population. The demographic distribution of Roma populations in the rest of CEE places Slovakia in a unique position. Slovak society has the highest percentage of Roma per capita in Europe, with 10 percent of the population being Roma. Slovakia is a migration bridge between Romania and the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria and Poland.

Between January 2000 and December 2000, 723 Slovak asylum seekers were living in the Czech Republic, and 43 percent of Roma from Slovakia to the Czech Republic were under 15 years old.<sup>7</sup> The Czech Republic launched the Prague Project, which was budgeted at €10 million to return Roma Asylum seekers to their home countries. It was a one-year pilot project sponsored by the European Commission, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Finland. The project succeeded, returning 1,235 Roma altogether – 1,000 to Slovakia, 156 to the Czech Republic, and 59 to Romania.<sup>8</sup>

The Roma leave the Czech Republic and Slovakia because of organized crime, extortion, debt recovery, and settling scores among rival gangs. Other reasons include long-term unemployment, bad housing, apprehension about the future of their children, and fears for their own safety. In essence, these concerns follow from neglect by the majority populations. The Roma’s best instrument of survival is the use of asylum—leaving their country of origin to find better opportunities with less discrimination

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Guy et al, 110-115

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 157

elsewhere. Unfortunately, discrimination continues to follow them most of the time. One such attempt at large scale immigration involved Czech Roma immigrating to Canada, which prompted strict Canadian restrictions on Czech visas. There was the general sentiment among Czechs that they wanted the Roma to leave for Canada. In 1996, 150 Roma left for Canada from the Czech Republic, and in 1997, 1500 Czech Roma immigrated to Canada. Some of the Roma were expelled back in 1998; afterwards, they left for the UK, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Nonetheless, the last substantial wave heading to the UK ended in 2001 because of the discrimination that Roma encountered there. Most indicative of the Czech Roma situation is that 90 percent of Czech Roma have considered leaving and 10 percent have already attempted it.<sup>9</sup>

Today, the Canadian and Czech Roma citizenship issue continues. In mid-July 2009 there was a recent development with Roma immigrating to Canada. Canada reimposed its stringent visa requirements on Czech citizens because of this influx in Roma migration. Those who come to Canada have high debts and no jobs or job potentials, so they soon leave. The Czech Republic has the second most asylum seekers in Canada, after Mexico, with 1720 Czech Roma versus 5500 Mexicans. Czech Roma perceive Canada as being more welcoming than Western European countries, even with the stricter visa requirements there. Canada is the destination of choice rather than Western European countries that have programs to return Roma to their home countries.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Authoritative Discrimination in CEE*

Conflict with the Roma has been fuelled not only by general public opinion, but by the authorities in the CEE region as well. For instance, even violence against the

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 84-90

<sup>10</sup> "Experts split over reasons behind Czech Roma exodus." 17 July 2009.  
<<http://praguemonitor.com/2009/07/17/experts-split-over-reasons-behind-czech-roma-exodus>>

Roma is common among law enforcement authorities in Romania.<sup>11</sup> Romanian police suggested adverse attitudes among Romanians are a reaction to the “self-marginalization” of the Roma. Their refusal to go to school and their subculture are seen as an “aggressive” lack of knowledge and respect for the law. There have been skinhead attacks in Romania on children, and school authorities have failed to respond to threats against the children. There is a general trend of anti-Roma brutality among law enforcement agencies in the area. Polish police are also guilty of discrimination against the Roma. There was a forced expulsion of Romanian Roma in Poland. They were confronted at night, not allowed to gather their belongings, and forced to flee to Romania. Fortunately, there was a strong reaction in the press, and the Polish Parliament issued a critical statement deploring the stealth expulsion.<sup>12</sup> The continued violation of civil rights performed by authorities in CEE prevents conflict resolution between Roma and majority populations because the authoritative forces are participating in extreme discriminatory behavior.

### *Hidden Identity*

In CEE countries such as Slovakia and Hungary, Roma prefer to conceal their ethnic identities under a cloak of Slovak or Hungarian ethnic identity. Although the Roma have been in Slovakia for at least the last 500 years, only 20 to 25 percent classify themselves as Roma and instead call themselves Sinti, Kale, and Slovak. Even educated

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<sup>11</sup> Goldston, James. “Roma Rights, Roma Wrongs.” Foreign Affairs. Vol. 81, No. 2, 146-162.

<sup>12</sup> Project on Ethnic Relations. Prevention of Violence and Discrimination against the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe: March 21-22, 1997, 8.

Roma are defensive in public or the workplace because they think Slovaks will criticize them as insubordinate based on their ethnicity alone.<sup>13</sup>

Slovak perceptions of domestic Roma are mixed. Institute for Public Affairs statistics show that 14 percent of Slovaks who are not living near Roma had a positive opinion of Roma, while 43 percent had negative views, and 26 percent were mixed.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, people living in close contact have fewer negative feelings: 27 percent reported positive experiences, 39 percent negative and 32 percent mixed. While the perceptions of the Roma on behalf of the Slovaks are low, the Roma's perception of themselves is paradoxical because 63 percent of Roma claim Slovaks to be "our own."<sup>15</sup> The Roma are more willing to be considered to be Slovak than Roma even though the Slovaks do not accept them as their own. A staggering 12.5 percent of Roma do not have a relationship with the majority; yet when they are surveyed, Roma view Slovaks more positively than the Slovaks perceive the Roma.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Hungarian Case*

Unfortunately, no exact data are available on Roma emigrating from Hungary because the information is classified or not available to the public.<sup>17</sup> Canada seems to be the primary country where Hungarian citizens have sought asylum in recent years, second to the Czech Republic; alternatively, some have gone to France as well.<sup>18</sup> There is the perception among Hungarians that the Roma have no cause for complaint about their

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<sup>13</sup> Vašečka, Michal; Jurásková, Martina; Nicholson, Tom, editors. A Global Report on Roma in Slovakia : Čačipen pal o Roma. 1st ed. Bratislava : Institute for Public Affairs, 2003, 80.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 229

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 238

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 416

<sup>17</sup> Guy et al, 121

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 123

treatment in Hungary. Prime Minister Orbán in 1999 stated, “No ethnic group in Hungary has any reason to leave Hungary as political refugees.” In reality there was a multitude of reasons to leave, both economic and political.<sup>19</sup> Despite the rhetoric of Hungarian politicians, the shocking news story from March 1, 2009 reveals much about the actual plight of Roma in Hungary.

After considering the various cases of Roma discrimination all over CEE, the question remains, will Roma relations ever improve? To answer this question, another one is necessary: Do the Roma really want to integrate into majority societies? Many do not; but it is impossible to know how many because the Roma do not share a uniform voice nor do they share a unity in decision-making because they are not a nation. The Roma in one country do not share the same views as the Roma in others. The treatment of Roma may not improve significantly until the majority of the Roma themselves wish to engage with the mainstream societies in which they live.

Regrettably, because there has been so much damage with the relations between majority populations and the Roma, it will be extremely difficult for majority populations to change their extremely negative feelings towards the Roma. The current situation is constrained by centuries of oppression and mistreatment. This persecution resulted in lower status of the Roma, which presented them unequal rights at the workplace and in daily life. Even if the Roma aspire to change their behavior, they will face many challenges in receiving a positive response from majority populations. In effect, the Roma cannot and do not intend to change their group identity to integrate into majority societies, and there will not be a resolution to their debasement until then. A mention of

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 125

the EU is necessary to explain just how cumbersome it is for contemporary institutions to resolve the hapless relations between the Roma and CEE majorities.

### ***Roma Minority Rights and the EU***

Although the Roma are so widespread throughout Europe, the EU has accomplished little in regard to the protection and rights of this minority. Scholars argue that the EU should have been able to use leverage with the candidate countries in order to force their legislative bodies to change their national policies regarding minorities. Nonetheless, many advances were made in this regard until candidate countries joined the EU and then minority protection ceased as the countries returned to their previous states. Curiously, Bulgaria, one of the newest member states, has one of the worst records in regard to minorities, yet it was still able to join the EU and pass the Copenhagen Criteria or CC, which allows new member states into the Union based on the following criteria: democracy, minority and human rights, free market economy, no external conflicts, standards, competitiveness, and absorption capacity.

There are many academics and politicians who argue the EU should be able to make a difference in these countries for the Roma; however, old member states such as France and Greece do not recognize their minorities. How can the Union expect new countries to meet requirements that they themselves do not fulfill? The use of double standards has been a common excuse with the Union when deciding which countries will be new members, ignoring breaches in human rights of candidates they would like to accept based on favoritism.

### *Discrimination in EU Countries*

CEE is not the only region in Europe that discriminates against minorities. In early 2000, the EU suspended bilateral relations with Austria because of a xenophobic political party, the Freedom Party. Because of the Austrian incident, amendments to the Treaty of Nice established a mechanism for the suspension of certain EU treaty rights to member states in the event of severe breaches of human rights or rule of law standards. The EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) was established in 1997, and it commenced its activities in 1997 and 1998. Incidentally, 1997 was declared the “European Year Against Racism.” There were anti-discrimination directives, such as Article 13 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community (TEC). Also, the “EU Race Directive” introduced legal standards throughout the Union aimed at equal treatment of ethnicities’ legal remedies for victims of social and racial discrimination that is known as Directive 2000/43/EC.<sup>20</sup>

In the past, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has applied provisions for similar directives where member states have been performing. The “Laeken Social Exclusion Indicators” were named at the European Council, and they were approved in 2000 at Lisbon. In Ostrava, Czech Republic during 1998 and 1999, a Romani child was 27 times more likely to be in a remedial special school than a non-Roma.

In addition to the forced segregation of Roma in schools, there is a concern about the forced sterilization of Roma women. The United Nations (UN) Committee Against Torture currently is urging the Czechs to investigate coercive sterilization of Roma women. Unfortunately, there is insufficient identification of the “individual complaints.”

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<sup>20</sup> Petrova, Dimitrina, ed. *Roma Rights – Quarterly Journal of the European Roma Right Center*. 2004, 30.



The same situation exists for Roma women in Slovakia where they do not give their consent, and Czech and Slovak hospitals sterilize women after labor or during advanced stages of labor. In other parts of the EU, similar discrimination exists. Roma children in Greece do not attend school, and the Greeks expelled Roma from neighborhoods near Olympic games facilities in 2004.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Importance of Transnational Actors*

There are essentially three levels of analysis for the minority and human rights issues for the Roma. They include the following: the state level, the intergovernmental level, and the level of non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups. In regard to the governance level of international organizations, the international bureaucracy has some autonomy, and international organizations are not merely diplomatic arenas where states pursue their power. The Council of Europe (COE) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have influenced Romani policy formation since the early 1990s. These two organizations have been instrumental in bringing change because of their mission of becoming an enlarging community. Unfortunately, the EU enlargement process and the EU itself are too inexperienced with the challenges brought by Roma minority rights. What can improve upon the problem is the influence of the CC that requires stability of minority and human rights so that democracy is guaranteed in accession states. With regards to the Roma, one can divide the international organization influences as (1) OSCE: security, human rights, and minority rights; (2) COE: migration management, human rights, and minority rights; and (3) EU:

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 30-33

diversity management and situation of minorities for external relations.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, the international organizations cannot replace the policy implementations that member states should complete to improve Roma rights. The OSCE and COE select the Roma from other minority groups because they affirm that their ethnicity creates conflict, which is strongly correlated to human rights violations and persecution. Nonetheless, the incorporation of Roma rights within the two organizations lacked consistency. Documents and initiatives were multiplied because no attention was given to language or continuity. The CC helped to focus on Roma policy, yet there are no new approaches or policy recommendations to increase a commitment on behalf of the EU.<sup>23</sup> The disorganized nature of Roma policy and the conflicting goals and strategies of the OSCE, COE, and EU leads to the question: Are these organizations truly committed to equal rights for the Roma?

#### *Limitations in EU Minority Protection*

According to Milada Vachudova—a Political Science Professor from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill who focuses on CEE—the EU’s “active leverage” is based on the requirements of membership that have “shaped almost every area of domestic policymaking,” with an “unprecedented leverage over the domestic politics of aspiring member states.”<sup>24</sup> Other authors are more skeptical about the influence of EU conditionality at the domestic level of candidate states of CEE. To elucidate, Hughes and Sasse, professors from the London School of Economics and

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<sup>22</sup> Sobotka, Eva. “Opportunities and Limitations for International Organizations in Addressing the Situation of Roma and Travellers in Europe.” *Roma Diplomacy*. Central European University Press, 2007, 105.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Rechel, Bernd. “What Has Limited the EU's Impact on Minority Rights in Accession Countries?” *East European Politics & Societies*. Sage, 2008, 172.

Political Science, have argued that there is only a weak “clear-cut causal relationship between conditionality and policy or institutional outcomes.”<sup>25</sup> The impact of EU conditionality was linked mostly to domestic factors. In a number of CEE countries, the change of a political party in power led to important improvements in minority rights. In other countries, in particular where ethnic nationalism gained popularity such as in Romania and Slovakia, domestic politics were a hindrance to the external influence on minority protection. EU accession countries have developed policies and programs to ameliorate the situation of Roma that were often merely declarations and were not followed by actual implementation.<sup>26</sup>

The CC of minority protection is mostly a normative statement which has been elaborated through the European Commission’s (EC) monitoring of candidate states. The EC is the key EU agency responsible for EU enlargement. In the area of minority protection, three main conditions emerged for most accession countries on the part of the Commission: adoption of the Council Directive 2000/43, adoption of the COE Framework Convention, and the adoption of governmental strategies and programs for the inclusion of the Roma minority in countries where the Roma population is large. Although the Roma conflict receives attention from the EC and CC to improve Roma rights in candidate countries through such enactments, once the candidate countries become member states, these measures become inconsequential.

Regarding the respect for and protection of minorities, the Commission pointed out that the integration of minorities was in general satisfactory, “except for the situation of

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

the Roma minority in a number of applicants, which gives cause for concern.<sup>27</sup> Bulgaria noted that the Roma minority, originally referred to as “gypsies,” suffered from discrimination and social hardship, as did the Roma in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The Commission concluded that none of the ten CEE applicants fully satisfied the CC shortly before 2004, but the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia could be in a position to satisfy the criteria in the medium term. Essentially, hardly any positive minority rights were introduced in the years after 1989.

With regard to minority rights, the EU has so far not developed comprehensive standards; the CC for minority protection remains ambiguous. EU legislation relevant to minority rights was recently adopted in 2000 but remained confined to nondiscrimination. At the internal level, the Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997 strengthened the requirement for EU member states to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and it suspended membership in case of a violation of democratic principles, but it did not include any lucid reference to minority rights. However, Article 13 urges the EU to combat discrimination based on racial and ethnic origin. The EC has drawn up three elements to implement this article: Council Directive 2000/43 of June 29, 2000, which implemented the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin; Council Directive 2000/78 of November 27, 2000, which established a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation; and the Council Decision of November 27, 2000, which established a community action program to combat discrimination from 2001 to 2006. The Constitutional Treaty of 2004 was the first

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

constitutive document of the EU that made reference to “the rights of persons belonging to minorities.” Nonetheless, all member states have not yet approved it.

Along with little implementation of laws concerning minority rights, there is also a double standard issue with EU member states that joined before the majority of the CEE countries. Originally, old member states did not need to meet the CC for minority rights, but the EU expects new member states to meet them. France and Greece have not even recognized the existence of ethnic minorities in their territories; consequently, the EU often cannot provide a solution nor can it always be a competent role model. It is not entirely clear, for example, how the treatment of the Turkish minority in Germany principally differs from the treatment of the Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia. Also, many Roma in Western Europe face severe discrimination and harassment, and Roma asylum seekers from CEE have often been turned away or deported to their countries of origin.

All of the post-communist candidate countries were able to meet the criterion of “respect for and protection of minorities” because of low acceptance standards. Candidate countries were declared to satisfy the accession criteria, despite continuing violations of minority rights and discrimination. The problems that persist in this area have apparently not been considered an obstacle to accession. In the monitoring of CEE candidates, the EC has focused on two minorities: the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia, and the Roma in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

The EU has demonstrated repeatedly that failing minority protection does not prevent accession. As one of the 2007 accession countries, Bulgaria has been considered

to fulfill the political CC, despite the largely unchanged Roma discrimination. There is less incentive to continue to enforce supporting minorities once membership is achieved because the EU has lost its leverage. Minority issues will again disappear from the policy agenda, or, worse, the absence of conditionality will give rise to a political backlash.<sup>28</sup>

### *EU Influence on Roma Citizenship*

Approximately 25,000 Czech Roma lost their citizenship in 1993 and became Slovak or stateless. This signifies a significant failure in the EU's pre-accession policies for new member states. The law was created the same year as the CC, which was designed to change the way the new enlargements were legally regulated. The Commission gave little attention to the Roma issue, which it considered a civic and political rights issue rather than an ethnic minority protection issue like the case of the Russian minority in the Baltic States. This move conflicted with the Council claims that candidate countries were "destined to join the Union on the basis of the same criteria and [...] on an equal footing."<sup>29</sup> Fortunately, the Roma did obtain their citizenship in the end, not because of efforts of the EU but instead due to the actions of the UK, Canada, and the OSCE. For instance, Canada introduced visas for Czech citizens in order to manage the large influx of Roma. Because the UK and Canada were receiving so many Roma asylum seekers, these two governments pressured the Czech government to change its policies regarding Roma citizenship.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> Kochenov, Dimitry. "EU Influence on the Citizenship Policies of the Candidate Countries: The Case of the Roma Exclusion in the Czech Republic." *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. Vol. 3, No. 2, 2007.

### *Roma Integration in the EU*

Asmet Elezovski, a board member of the Roma National Congress in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), claims that the Roma should be aware that they must “start the process of integration within society through self-reliance and organizing action so that they may improve their current situation.”<sup>31</sup> He continues to explain how Roma organizations and activists need to influence public opinion by holding authorities accountable through support for Roma organizations like the European Roma and Traveller Forum, the Roma National Congress, the Gypsy and Traveller International Evangelical Fellowship, and the European Roma Information Office. Elezovski believes that the Roma are willing to accept this dialogue, but need to know that the international and national communities will guarantee their support. Non-Roma often complain that not enough spending has been made available to mitigate problems with Roma communities. Some steps have already been initiated; such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion from 2005 to 2015, an initiative adopted by eight countries in CEE, which is supported by the international community. Changes need to be made before the Roma community becomes weary. Long-term integration will mean that the Roma will need to learn how to become citizens who possess equal rights and obligations under law.<sup>32</sup>

The EU aims to be the most influential international organization advocating Roma and minority rights in CEE. Nonetheless, the EU is inconsistent because newer member states are expected to meet more stringent criteria than are older member states. The difficulty of this position is that the EU lacks credibility and hence real leverage to

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<sup>31</sup> Elezovski, Asmet. “Roma Integration in the EU.” *Roma Diplomacy*. Central European University Press, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

ensure that the Roma receive better treatment. The EU remains inexperienced with minority rights. International Organizations such as the EU, the COE, and the OSCE cannot replace national governmental bodies in regard to changing national policies that ensure minority protection. Even though the CC singled out the Roma, no new approaches or policy recommendations increased the commitment on behalf of the EU. Sadly, the CC for minorities remains vague, which allows candidate countries to join the EU with failing minority protection policies. Although there are Roma in government such as Asmet Elezovski, who do have a voice in Roma rights, his stance on the protection of Roma is not perceived as representative of all European Romani. Many Romani politicians claim that the Romani are willing to have a dialogue with the international and national communities about their minority rights. Still the question remains: what is their common voice? The difficulty with the Roma issue is that there is no clear solution for either side. If large international organizations such as the EU cannot reach the Roma community, then it will take a considerable amount of effort to understand what the Roma truly want, which they need to sort out for themselves.

Having reviewed CEE country-specific cases and the EU's policies towards Roma and minority rights, I will now turn to the theories of RGCT and SIT in order to explain why there is so much hostility toward the Roma and why CEE countries are able to maintain EU membership without treating their Roma populations according to accepted international standards. These two theories also offer insight as to why France, Greece, and other EU member states are able to continue violating Romani minority rights. RGCT and SIT are rooted in the disciplines of sociology and social psychology. They provide insight into the important role individual and group psychology play in political



life. For an in-depth understanding of efforts to improve the situation of all Romani in Europe, it is vital to understand and explain the mindset of members of society driving the conflict. Both theories suggest why it has proven so difficult to improve Roma and minority rights in CEE.

### *Approaching the Theories of RGCT and SIT*

The theories of Realistic Group Conflict (RGCT) and Social Identity (SIT) explain basic principles of relations between groups. They focus on in-group favoritism, ethnocentrism and relate these phenomena to social structure. RGCT and SIT give much insight into the methodology of minority-majority relations in particular. For this reason, these two theories are essential in the analysis of the Roma population's relationship to majority populations in the CEE region. They also help us to understand why the EU does not hold these countries accountable for their treatment of minorities once they are member states: EU old member states practice the same processes of group categorization and favoritism. RGCT and SIT single out the importance of improving the way people appraise minorities and groups in general because often people are unaware of the ill effects of oppressing minorities on society as a whole.

RGCT focuses on self-interest. The theory claims that economic resources are scarce, which results in competition for them. What one group gains, the other loses. This competitive self-interest can also be thought of in a social status context, such as privileges in society. Meanwhile, SIT argues that individuals need positive self-evaluation; hence, they need to think highly about the groups with which they identify. In order to do this, they distinguish themselves from other groups by placing these other groups in a disadvantageous light and themselves in an advantageous one. Groups respond supportively toward those who belong to their group and unsupportively toward

those who do not. Currently, there are two versions of the theory. The first states that the simple act of group categorization creates bias in favor of the in-group; the second suggests that it is not categorization, but the cooperative/competitive nature of the context in which people are categorized that is vital.<sup>33</sup>

### *Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT)*

RGCT is one of the most established theories about inter-group hostility. In-group identification is the process of basing self-identity and self-interests on group membership. The fundamental proposition of RGCT is that conflict is produced when multiple parties contest common goods, ideas, or perceived resources. Conflict can only be reduced through inter-group cooperation and sharing control over the desired item. RGCT hypothesizes that majority population will restrict the Roma's rights, out of fear that the privilege the dominant group holds will be lost; majority populations fear loss of state and sponsored benefits, advantages in employment, and preferential treatment in housing.

Inter-group discrimination and prejudice are the result of real groups being locked in zero-sum competition over either real material or symbolic resources. The perception that the majority's gain is the Roma's loss and vice versa translates into perceptions of the Roma threat, which in turn spurs prejudice against the Roma, negative stereotyping of the Roma, in-group solidarity, awareness of in-group identity, and internal cohesion—including intolerance of Roma deviants, ethnocentrism, use of group boundary markers, and discriminatory behavior. This form takes place in various ways such as in remedial

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<sup>33</sup> Sniderman, Paul M. and Hagendoorn Louk. When Ways of Life Collide. Princeton University Press, 2007, 74-78.

school segregation,<sup>34</sup> expulsion from housing,<sup>35</sup> forced sterilization of women,<sup>36</sup> and perceptions of Roma in Slovakia.<sup>37</sup>

RGCT explains when and why prejudice will arise. The theory is based on two primary assumptions. The first is that real groups actually exist and have a history of shared identity and shared fate. Second, it is assumed that groups believe themselves to be in zero-sum competition over valued resources.<sup>38</sup> As stated earlier, the theory of RGCT explains multiple factors associated with discrimination of Roma by majority groups because inter-group hostility is created by conflicting goals between the two groups. For example, these conflicting factors may include, real or imagined threat to the safety of the majority, economic interests, political advantage, military consideration, or social status. All of these factors demonstrate conflicting goals over resources that may be scarce or viewed as scarce. Very often, one particular issue comes to be the dominant influence in the inter-group relationship. Muzafer Sherif, the founder of social identity theory, labeled this phenomenon the “Limiting Factor,” because it tends to skew the evaluations of all other inter-group issues that arise. One “Limiting factor” for the Roma is the stereotype that Roma steal and are, automatically, labeled as criminals.

Theoretically, inter-group conflict leads to negative stereotyping and prejudices, which give rise to greater intra-group solidarity. This is typically the case with the Roma who are shunned from society. Even if there are ample resources, an inequitable distribution between groups often continues, despite the fact that the resulting conflict

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<sup>34</sup> Guy et al, 13-15

<sup>35</sup> Roboch, Zbyř, 26

<sup>36</sup> Petrova, Dimitrina, ed, 30

<sup>37</sup> Vařečka et al, 80

<sup>38</sup> Sidanius, Jim, and Felicia Pratto. Social Dominance. Cambridge, 1999, 17.

prevents greater harmony.<sup>39</sup> This explains why the Roma issue has not been resolved once the economies of the countries in CEE have improved enough to join the EU. Majority populations in the CEE region, as well as majority populations in other regions of the world, are interested in keeping their social status high and in guarding resources that they perceive as solely for their own group.

### *Social Identity Theory (SIT)*

According to SIT, attitudes toward inequality result from specific social identity concerns that arise from the position of the in-group or majority in the social structure. SIT takes into account the differential powers held by privileged and disadvantaged groups and the different psychological issues that arise from these groups interpreting and responding to the social context from the in-group's unique perspective. The theory claims that it is the group that interprets the social standing of groups and identities. This interpretation creates more discrimination towards those groups that are "culturally inferior."<sup>40</sup>

People show inter-group differentiation partly to exalt their group and elevate themselves.<sup>41</sup> Low status groups will find alternative means to achieve positive distinctiveness.<sup>42</sup> The Roma are very keen on this and do not need the majority populations' approval in order to feel entitled or better about themselves. Attitudes toward inequality result from specific social identity concerns that arise from the position

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Schmitt, M.T., Branscombe, N.R. and Kappen, D.M. "Attitudes toward Group-Based Inequality: Social Dominance or Social Identity?" *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 42, 2003, 161-186.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Sidanius, Jim, and Felicia Pratto. *Social Dominance*. Cambridge, 1999, 230.

of the in-group in the social structure.<sup>43</sup> Naturally, the group always prefers its own, majority or not.

The Roma encourage the preferential treatment of their own group over others. For instance, American anthropologist Anne Sutherland described Roma individualism: “they delight in deceiving the *gajo* [non-Roma] mostly for a good reason, but sometimes just for the fun of it or to keep in practice.”<sup>44</sup> The Roma believe that it was the non-Roma who, by forcing them to speak a foreign language, forced them to lie. She continued to explain that, “stealing from other Roma is wrong but it is not necessarily wrong when it is from the *gaje*; although one should not be too greedy.”<sup>45</sup> Stealing from the *Gaje* is not a misdeed as long as it is limited to stealing basic necessities and not in larger quantities than were needed at that moment.<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, SIT does not simply suggest that people always favor their group over others, nor does it assume that group-based inequality is inevitable; rather, this social identity perspective suggests that a number of factors moderate how people define their group membership. For example, disadvantaged groups are more likely collectively to resist their disadvantage when they perceive social reality to be organized along group lines; they perceive alternatives to the status quo as plausible and legitimate, and they have enough collective power to affect social change. The preceding example of this is the shared belief that lying to non-gypsies preserves a moral boundary of in-group members who are privileged over outsiders because only they are worthy of the truth.

Another example of defying social standards includes the Roma resisting their

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<sup>43</sup> Brown, Rupert. “Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges.” *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 30, 2000, 745-78.

<sup>44</sup> Lewy, Guenter. *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*. Oxford, 2000, 11-12.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

disadvantage by rejecting the education system because they are thwarting attempts to indoctrinate children through learning about the superiority of the majority culture. Both examples demonstrate a fundamental rejection of the Roma's subordination.

In addition, SIT suggests that majority society, the privileged group, does not always engage in discrimination against the disadvantaged, but they are more likely to do so, for example, when their privilege becomes insecure. Therefore, the social identity approach assumes that responses to group-based inequality fundamentally emerge in a dynamic context of inter-group relations.<sup>47</sup>

A direct demonstration of the theory's claim is that people show inter-group differentiation partly to idealize their own group. This process has been labeled the 'self-esteem hypothesis.' SIT was primarily devoted to explaining the diverse reactions of members of dominant and subordinate groups. In the early phases of the theory, the dominant belief was that the "need for distinctiveness" resulted in lower status groups showing greater favoritism to in-group members when compared to high status groups. However, as the theory has matured, the opposite is now held to be true. This is explained because high status groups have more perceived privileges to protect.<sup>48</sup> Majority groups in the CEE region are constantly avoiding the Roma in their neighborhoods, at the workplace, and in public spaces by protesting their living arrangements that are close to majority populations, by not hiring them based on ethnicity alone, and by prohibiting them in public.

Tajfel and Turner, who first presented SIT, discussed what hierarchical structures imply for inter-group discrimination and social identity strategies. They noted that the

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

<sup>48</sup> Brown, 747-748

more stable group boundaries are perceived to be, the more members of different groups will discriminate against one another. They also argued that group conflict is likely to be minimized when both the superior and inferior groups accept the legitimacy of the status distinction between them.<sup>49</sup> When relating SIT directly to the case of the Roma in CEE, one can see clearly that group boundaries are very strong, which keep the Roma extremely segregated from majority populations. Both majority populations and the Roma have accepted the legitimacy of the status between them; however, the Roma resent it even though the Roma continue to embrace anti-social patterns of behavior. The Roma issue is a low-level conflict, and there is a general acceptance from both groups that their distinction is acceptable because there is a low level of violence that occurs only when xenophobic extremists assault the Roma.

#### *Bridging the Two Theories*

How are the theories relevant to the Roma? RGCT and SIT address in-group favoritism, ethnocentrism, and social structure within a majority-minority relation's context. According to RGCT, objects of value such as competition in the workplace, politics, housing, and the economy are perceived by majority societies as being threatened by the Roma. Fewer jobs, increased political influence, better housing for Roma, and the mere possibility for the Roma to become economically more ahead than a member of the majority population all create animosity from mainstream society. Thus, the majority population maintains the Roma's out-group status. Inter-group hostility—which is motivated by conflicting goals such as safety of the majority, economic interests, and social status—regulate the level of hostility of majority populations towards

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<sup>49</sup> Sidanius and Pratto, 19



the Roma. Sadly, the ethnic conflict continues even when resources are no longer scarce.

Intrinsically, RGCT emphasizes self-interests, while SIT focuses on positive self-evaluations. SIT explains how the Roma potentially threaten cultural identity and safety in the minds of CEE citizens. Along with a fear of a change in culture because of diversity, members of majority societies fear vandalism in their neighborhoods and more violence in their cities.<sup>50</sup> All these factors create resentment towards the Roma for living in CEE. The position of the in-group in the social structure is vital. Groups interpret the social standing of groups and identities and decide which are low-status and which are high-status. The low-status groups find alternatives to create a positive identity and distinction. All groups always prefer their own groups; meanwhile, disadvantaged groups resist their status, while high-status groups engender in-group bias to reduce the volume of negative minority stereotypes.

RGCT and SIT can be used to explain not only majority-minority relations in CEE but in the rest of Europe as well. EU old member states are unwilling to accept the fact that they are just as responsible for similar acts of prejudice as the CEE region is against their own minorities. Curiously, as RGCT and SIT explain, it is easy to ignore the natural functions of inter-group relations because they are so embedded in our consciousnesses. RGCT and SIT explain conflicts between Roma and majority populations in CEE. However, the same social processes exist in Western Europe. In point of fact, I would argue that western societies present even more opportunities for conflict due to their greater concentration of resources.

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<sup>50</sup> Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 80

### *Conclusion*

Roma emigrate from their countries of origin for better opportunities in countries nearby, or they migrate as far as Canada. Intolerance of the Roma grew after the fall of communism in many of the CEE countries because up until that point the Roma could not migrate under Soviet control. Due to severe prejudice, many Roma leave countries in CEE such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia on account of organized crime, extortion, and debt recovery. Authorities and law enforcement in countries such as Romania and Poland performed violence against the Roma as well as civilians. In Slovakia and Hungary, the Roma prefer to conceal their identity because of the negative stereotypes that come along with it, preferring Slovak and Hungarian to Roma. Even though the Prime Minister of Hungary in 1999 claimed that there was no reason for any group in Hungary to request political asylum in other parts of the world, there are incidents of severe hate crimes against the Roma. As indicated by these examples, the Roma will have many challenges in improving relations with majority populations because of past and ongoing intolerance.

Before the CEE countries endeavored to join the EU, such an influential body did not exist in regards to minority rights, nor did they have quite the incentive to reform and encourage minority rights. However, the EU should not expect candidate countries to fulfill requirements regarding minority rights that they themselves do not fulfill. The EU is not the only international organization that oversees Roma rights. The COE and the

OSCE both focus on minority and human rights and accomplish more for Roma rights than the EU because they recognize the issue as a human rights violation and not simply a civil or political rights violation that the states will manage on their own. The OSCE and COE perceive the Roma as different from other minorities because they claim that their identity creates violence and conflict. On account of double standards, the EU cannot provide a solution for the Roma as the old member states shared in the same mistreatment of the Roma. Tragically, the EU did nothing to aid the citizenship crisis in the Czech Republic when 25,000 Czech Roma lost their citizenship in 1993. The OSCE, Canada, and the UK aided the Roma in receiving their citizenship instead. Along with international organizations that support Roma rights, there are of course politicians. Elezovski is one of the actual Roma activists and politicians who is a Roma himself. He argues that the Roma desire to obtain equal rights, and all they need is the support of the international community in order to accomplish this. Although the COE, OSCE, the EU, and politicians like Elezovski aspire to improve Roma rights, these outside organizations and forces have little leverage in achieving equal rights within the national governments themselves. Instead, the pressure must start from within. Disappointingly, once the CEE candidate countries entered the Union, the EU lost its leverage in enforcing Roma rights.

The theories of RGCT and SIT explain not only majority-minority relations in CEE but also the ability of these countries to manipulate the EU into assuming that reforms in minority relations were to endure. RGCT concentrates on explicating inter-group hostility through self-interests that are based on group membership. Discrimination and intolerance are brought on by zero-sum competition over resources imagined or not. Conflicting factors include threats to the safety of the majority,

economic interests, and the social hierarchy. SIT suggests that people favor their own group and disadvantaged groups are more likely to resist their own disadvantage. Roma do this by rejecting education because they do not accept their children learning that the majority population is superior once they are placed in remedial schools or maltreated by their educators. Even if the Roma protect their own and prefer their own group, there is more in-group bias in high-status groups than in low-status groups because high-status groups wish to eliminate the influence in the negative stigma of the low status groups and concentrate on protecting their resources.

The improvement of Roma relations with majority populations does not look likely in the near future in the CEE region. Unfortunately, the Roma do not share a common voice in politics or decision-making because they are a nomadic people who value their families more than a country or ethnic identity. The modern world dictates that citizens should be patriotic and identify themselves, accordingly. Because of the EU, Modern Europe demands a cohesive “European” identity, whether the populations living in Europe consider themselves to be European or not. Essentially, the EU complicates Roma rights, as there is now less motivation for the governments in CEE to continue its amelioration of minority rights. Minorities, immigrants, and asylum seekers have another institution to answer to because of the Union along with the governments of the countries in which they live or are seeking to live.

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