

## Explainer: who are the Roma?



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Once again Roma people are in the news and, as ever, they are the focus of prejudice and vilification. The most recent story surrounds alleged child abduction in Greece, following a raid on a Roma encampment. The narrative plays to some familiar stereotypes: allegations of criminal activities, welfare scrounging - and even that age-old fairytale so popular in Victorian times of children being stolen by Gypsies.

As one of Europe's largest minority groups - and its most disadvantaged, it would stand to reason that the Roma would be ideal targets for vitriol. Although this has certainly been the case in the recent past (in the UK The Sun ran a "Stamp on the Camps" campaign a number of years ago) things have been reasonably more uneventful of late - well almost.

The news coverage about how Roma are “criminals”, “undeserving” and a “drain on resources” are far more common in mainland Europe. France’s expulsion of Roma drew international condemnation - but right-wing parties regularly target Roma for their campaigns and hate groups focus violence on members of Roma communities.

## **Who are the Roma?**

Roma people have a long history of living in Europe with a presence recorded from the 13th Century. They are now widely recognised as one of the EU’s largest minority groups with an estimate of more than 10m Roma living in Europe. The term “Roma”, first chosen at the inaugural World Romani Congress held in London in 1971, is now widely accepted across the European Union (EU) as a generic and pragmatic term to describe a diverse range of communities, tribes and clans.

Members of these communities can differ in many significant linguistic and cultural ways. The European Commission identifies four different types of Roma communities namely:

1. Roma communities living in disadvantaged, highly concentrated (sub)urban districts, possibly close to other ethnic minorities and disadvantaged members of the majority;
2. Roma communities living in disadvantaged parts of small cities/villages in rural regions and in segregated rural settlements isolated from majority cities/villages;
3. Mobile Roma communities with citizenship of the country or of another EU country; and
4. Mobile and sedentary Roma communities who are third-country nationals, refugees, stateless persons or asylum seekers.

## **Where do Roma live?**

Data collection about how many Roma there are across the EU is incredibly challenging. Many states prohibit the official collection of data by ethnicity and even informal estimates are difficult given the low level of engagement by services with Roma populations.

However, the information we do have (which is contested by many but at least serves as a yard stick) points to two tentative conclusions.

First, there are varied numbers of Roma populations present in nations across Europe. The most significant populations are to be found in the central and eastern European states of Bulgaria, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Hungary. In these countries, Roma make up between 7-10% of the total population. In most other states Roma make up around 1% or much less of the population.

Second, there are significant differences between “official” population estimates and estimates provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in this field.

The issues faced by Roma are complex, multilayered and often entrenched. The issues read like a description of a community living in a developing nation. Poor health, low levels of literacy, joblessness, poor accommodation standards, low levels of engagement with education and discrimination are endemic within all states within which Roma feature.

## **Roma in the UK**

The communities of those people classified as “Roma” in the UK are complex. Under the definition from the Council of Europe Gypsies and Travellers are included. In fact, most UK Romany Gypsies arguably have a shared heritage with more recently arriving Roma.

However, within the UK the term “Roma” is more synonymous with migrants typically arriving from central and eastern Europe. Roma have migrated to the UK for decades. Increases in this migration occurred post-1945, during the late 1990s and early 2000s and more recently since the accession of new European Union member states in 2004 and 2007.

Previous estimates put the number at between 100,000 and 300,000 but data soon to be released by researchers at the University of Salford attempts an up-to-date enumeration of migrant Roma in the UK.

While in the UK, Gypsies and Travellers are split between those who live in caravans and those who live in housing, it is thought migrant Roma live in housing almost without exception - which reflects the situation across Europe, where Roma have moved from caravans and nomadic way of life to often

precarious and poor housing.

## **Where do we go from here?**

There are efforts being exerted at a European level to resist moving back to an archaic position of blaming Roma for a country's ills. Unfortunately, however, EU member states tend to mobilise in response to the (mostly negative) perception of Roma, without regard to the reasons why Roma occupy the position of a vulnerable minority.

The EC is attempting to consolidate the efforts of its member states into making tangible improvements to the lives of Roma by encouraging the development of National Roma Integration Strategies. But there is clear confusion about how best to tackle this complex and politically charged issue.

A more humanised approach would be a start where we are able to separate the criminality of a few from tainting the futures of an entire ethnic group. The media may be able to help with this. Certainly more than they have in the past.

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