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Europe's Roma

Hard travelling

Scapegoated abroad and the victims of prejudice at home, eastern Europe's Roma are the problem no politician wants to solve

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SLOVAKIA is in shock; France in uproar. The cause of both nations' turmoil is the Roma (gypsies), or, rather, what is being done to them. This week a gunman in the Slovak capital, Bratislava, killed seven people and injured 14, before shooting himself dead. Six of the victims were a Roma family, killed inside their apartment; they appear to have been deliberately targeted.

In France the expulsion of hundreds of Roma immigrants, whom Nicolas Sarkozy's government says were in the country illegally, has galvanised opposition from the pope, French churches, a

UN committee and even several ministers in Mr Sarkozy's own government. Yet further tough legislation is promised.

Between them the Slovakian shootings and the expulsions from France highlight the difficulties faced by Europe's largest stateless minority. An ingrained underclass, Roma are the victims of prejudice, often violent, at home in eastern Europe. Thousands have migrated westward to seek a better life, particularly as the expansion of the European Union has allowed them to take advantage of freedom-of-movement rules. Yet although conditions may be better in the west, the reception has rarely been friendly and politicians like President Sarkozy have ruthlessly exploited hostility towards the newcomers.

But the demagogic instincts of western leaders pale in comparison to the negligence of their eastern counterparts. Roma don't vote much. No government in eastern Europe with a substantial Roma minority has done much to deal with the discrimination they face or the hopeless poverty that keeps them excluded from the mainstream, says Rob Kushen of the Budapest-based European Roma Rights Centre.

One of the biggest problems is schooling: Roma children are routinely placed in institutions for the mentally handicapped. A new survey by Amnesty International says that in Slovakia, Roma make up less than 10% of the school-age population but 60% of pupils in special schools. Unsurprisingly, many leave school early, without the skills they need to compete in the job market. Instead they drift into collecting scrap metal, begging or petty crime.

Straightforward prejudice plays its part. This week an MEP from Jobbik, a far-right Hungarian party, called for the mass internment of Roma. Last year Hungarian police sought help from the FBI after a series of attacks on Roma settlements in which six people were killed, including a five-year-old boy, Robika Csorba, and his father, Robert. Gunmen firebombed their house and lay in wait as they fled, before opening fire. A few weeks later, six Roma teenagers arrested in the Slovak town of Kosice for allegedly stealing a purse were forced to strip naked, kiss and hit each other, as police filmed their humiliation. In western Europe Roma migrants have faced firebomb attacks in Italy, pogroms in Belfast and forcible evictions in Greece.

This year marks the halfway point of Europe's "Decade of Roma Inclusion", launched in 2005 at a riverside hotel in Budapest. Five years on, say activists, most Roma are still worse off than under communism, which, for all its faults, at least guaranteed work, housing and welfare, and stamped down on hate crimes. Today conditions in Roma settlements on the edges of town and villages rival Africa or India for their deprivation.



Inside Europe, outside society

Yet the Roma also suffer from problems of their own making. Ambitious youngsters are often held back by their intensely patriarchal and conservative societies. Girls are married off in their teens and boys put to work at an early age rather than study. Weary of the hostility they face from the outside world, Roma communities are prone to cut themselves off from society and its laws. Four years ago in Olaszliszka, northern Hungary, a driver who clipped a Romany girl with his car (she was unhurt) was dragged from the vehicle by a mob, many of them related to the girl, and beaten to death in front of his daughters.

In recent years, under the EU's rules on freedom of movement, a torrent of cheap workers from the east have found work in the west. But most Roma leave their homelands in search not of work but of freedom from destitution and persecution. Little wonder that France, egged on by Italy and others, has been keen to "Europeanise" the issue, urging Brussels to go to greater efforts to get the eastern countries to integrate their Roma. Yet now that those countries are safely inside the EU it is far harder than in the pre-accession years for Eurocrats to tell their governments what to do.

Europeans would be swift to condemn the plight of the Roma were they in any other part of the world. However, eastern European governments are unlikely suddenly to tackle a problem that dates back centuries just because Brussels tells them to. Perhaps self-interest may prove a more powerful motivator. Roma families are far larger than those of the mainstream population: the pool of deprivation is only going to grow. In addition, a recent World Bank study estimates the annual cost of the failure to integrate Roma in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and the Czech Republic at €5.7 billion (\$7.3 billion). As the report notes: "Bridging the education gap is the economically smart choice." If humanitarian arguments fail to carry the day, perhaps economics and demographics might.