

Romani Rose¹

Participation with equal rights for Sinti and Roma in Germany and in Europe

Roma are currently increasingly subjected to violent racism in a large number of countries in Europe, which has led to pogrom-like attacks and murder in some states. The climate has also become more threatening for minorities in Germany: at least nine people of foreign origin became the victims of a series of murders motivated by right-wing extremism between 2000 and 2006. In this connection, the Central Council has been warning of the consequences of a growing racist hate campaign on right-wing extremist websites for many years now. This is increasingly targeting Sinti and Roma as the object of potentially violent racism. This racism is based on widespread social rejection of the minority. A representative study carried out by Infratest in 2002 for Germany showed that 58 % of the population were extremely prejudiced against Sinti und Roma.² A survey carried out by the Central Council in 2005 showed that 76 percent of the Sinti and Roma had had direct experience of discrimination. These results currently require systematic investigation, because adequate political strategies for action cannot be developed until precise knowledge of the attitudes of the population towards Sinti and Roma is available.

The initiative of the European Commission for defining national strategies for integrating the Roma is therefore of crucial importance and is fundamentally welcomed by the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. It is first and foremost of great importance for the respective national minorities of the Roma in the new member states of the European Union, providing that a number of conditions are met and, in particular, the political will for practical implementation is demonstrated. The Central Council considers the European Commission's emphasis on the areas of education, work, housing and health to be right and necessary, especially in the new EU member states. However, the resentment of the majority population towards the minority must also be focused on as a cause of their exclusion in all the stated areas, in order to tackle the present problems in an appropriate manner. The underlying causes of poor education cannot only be attributed to poor housing conditions or the low income of many families but also to the centuries-old marginalization and the current racism against Sinti and Roma in Europe. The European strategies must also be directed at the deeply rooted racism in some sections of the majority population if they are to meet with success.

We also need to criticise the fact that a purported "special way of life" or "traditional culture" of the Roma is frequently given as the reason for their degrading living conditions in documents and political discussions. In this way, the minority is made responsible for its exclusion from equal social participation, and social and economic problems which are structural in nature are seen in terms of culture. Another problem is the tendency which can be observed at European and national level to define the partial marginalisation of the Roma population in some Member States as a characteristic feature of the entire minority. The image of "the Roma" as an alleged "European social marginal group" is systematically reproduced in this manner. This has a long tradition, also in Germany. It is imperative that a differentiated image is set against this image of the minority, which is characterised by stereotype perceptions and negative clichés, since the generalizations made are marginalizing as such and promote marginalization. In particular, the media are called upon here to ensure that a balanced picture is presented.

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² The American Jewish Committee: Die Einstellung der Deutschen zu Juden, dem Holocaust und den USA [The attitude of Germans towards Jews, the Holocaust and the USA], Berlin 2002, p. 2. Survey by: Infratest, Berlin.

Sinti and Roma were subject to criminalisation by the police and judicial authorities for decades in the young Federal Republic of Germany. The cause of this can be found in continuities of personnel: large elements of the officers who participated in the persecution and deportation of the Sinti and Roma were able to continue their careers virtually without a break. In this regard, they had to play down their participation in the genocide of the 500,000 European Sinti and Roma: whereas the Holocaust of the Jews was publicly and officially acknowledged, and its denial is liable to prosecution, the Holocaust of the Sinti and Roma was denied for decades, and the persecution by the Federal Government and even by the Federal High Court of Justice were trivialized for decades as merely crime prevention measures. In addition to this the former Nazi officers as so-called "Gypsy specialists" once again gained interpretational sovereignty over their former victims. The Holocaust survivors and their progeny were thereby subjected to a form of stigmatisation by the former perpetrators, which still has negative affects on societal awareness with regard to the minority and led to the marginalization of Sinti and Roma from the German society for decades.

There were also no socially relevant forces in the 1950s and 1960s which would have spoken out against the stigmatisation and marginalization of the minority. The perception of the public in Germany- to some extent at least – did not change until the beginning of the civil rights work of the Sinti and Roma, which expressly opposed traditional racist formulations and compared these marginalizing approaches with the concept of a national minority with its own language, history and culture. Whereas the self-organisations of the Sinti and Roma had to overcome considerable resistance in their foundation phase at the end of the 1970s, the Central Council of the German Sinti and Roma is nowadays in continuous dialogue with the responsible institutions in politics and society.

Roma were also only recognized as an independent national and ethnic minority in the former socialist countries after the change of system and accession to the European Union. Until then they were treated as an alleged "social problem group" in some areas, which had to be integrated in the socialist proletariat. As a consequence, Roma in these countries were employed in manufacturing, but mainly as unskilled workers, so they were the first to lose their jobs after the collapse of socialism. The segregation of Roma children practiced in a number of countries, whereby they were concentrated in special schools (often special schools for children with learning difficulties) or schools in Roma quarters with a reduced curriculum, contributed to their advancement being greatly limited in spite of the proclaimed integration. A large section of the Roma minority in the countries of central and eastern Europe experience great poverty today and are massively disadvantaged with regard to training opportunities, job opportunities, housing conditions and health care compared with the respective majority populations.

The national states have the obligation to implement equal participation of the Roma here. In this respect, the European Commission and the European Parliament found that the responsibility for the respective national minorities of the Sinti and Roma in Europe lies with the Member States and, in particular, that the implementation of the respective programmes has to orientate itself towards the local conditions. With this in mind, the Central Council has prepared a differentiated catalogue of specific demands which must be implemented and reviewed regionally and/or locally. In Germany, this initially concerns the national minority of approx. 70 000 Sinti and Roma with German nationality. In their case, the focus of attention is on the effective implementation of the "Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities" with specific measures for recognition, participation and promotion.

Furthermore, the situation of war refugees from former Yugoslavia and of migrants from the Member States of the European Union and from non-member States must be improved through appropriate regulation of status issues, particularly of residence rights and naturalization laws, support in education and training, job opportunities and protective social measures for health and housing.

In summary, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma sees the necessity of establishing long-term programmes for promoting the equal participation of Sinti and Roma in Germany and in countries of the Council of Europe. However, it is imperative that such programmes are developed as specific projects at local level and undergo regular monitoring and evaluation. This is the only way that the successful implementation of the European general framework can be ensured in the long term.