

Comments of the Municipal Programme for the Eradication of Shanty-Towns in Aviles (Principality of Asturias)

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Term explanation: I will use both the words Rom and Gypsy. The former because obviously it is a major component part of our heritage and the latter, even though it has a negative connotation, due to the historical weight that it carries. On the other hand, I strongly believe that we should not be afraid to use such words since our aim as members of the younger generation of Rom is, among other things, to give new meaning and content to our culture, to pour new wine into the old vessels as the proverb has it, to enrich, improve, to make better our identity, to try to reach perfection, this is our goal.

Introduction:

Regardless of the fact of the universality of the Roma presence, and whether one accepts or not the idea of the origin of Rom people from India, it is, to my mind, important to have today more social histories about the life and social conditions of the Roma communities, to have additional knowledge about the context where Gypsies reside and flourished both in the past and nowadays, because the above mentioned key events give to the layman the impression that Gypsies all over the world are the same and share common things. We do, by all means; by it is also the different routes that each one of us followed that are integral part of our common heritage. I see the case of the Principality of Asturias as a stopover of a long journey in history, which can enhance our view about our lives. I am saying this because up until now we were given by gypsologists general descriptions about the course of the Rom in history, a view that hides the multiplicity of routes, (drama) that were taken by Gypsies and their consequences. This is a view, which is a-historical at last.

Before giving a brief but concise sketch of the situation of the Roma in Greece, I would like to begin with a general comment about the programme in Aviles, something that I believe stands behind the whole project. I can see a philosophy, a reasoning, which in my opinion is summarized, in the idea, phrase of the reports: "... housing policy now focuses on the needs of individual families and seeks to integrate Roma into varied neighborhoods, mixed schools and mainstream services...."

Again another: *in the wake of changes described in the foregoing, a far-reaching cultural transformation process is also under way within the Roma community. This is not to say that Roma culture is in risk of disappearing but simply that it is evolving in a context in which there are a myriad of ways of interpreting what it means to be Roma in the 21st century....*

Further down the author stresses: *The culture of resistance, the basis on which Roma identity was forged in a context of persecution and repression, no longer makes sense in an open society in which people possess multiple identities.*

I interpret this as a challenge to see Romani culture and identity not in the context of the classical concept of single cultures which envisages cultures as closed spheres or autonomous islands each corresponding to a folk's territorial area and linguistic extent. This model was developed in the late 18th century by the German philosopher Herder and is today both untenable and dangerous. We are called to view our identity in a wider context, beyond the contraposition of ownness and foreignness, the polarity

of *Gadjo* and *Rom*. We should understand our lives as 'a migration through different social worlds and as the successive realization of a number of possible crosscutting identities'.

I would also like to point out some basic historical information about the Roma in Greece, since the report is referring mostly to Eastern Europe and Spain. In Greece the first group of Roma is located in the island of Crete in 1323 while there references for the existence of Roma in the region of Peloponnisos in 1350 and there is the mentioning in the Byzantine history of the feudal state of Roma in Corfu. Greece has been a stop over for the dispersion of Roma in Europe and a place to settle where there have not been any expulsions or legislative prohibitions with regards to their language or culture.

A very large number of Roma moved to Greece with the exchange of population in 1922 between Greece and Turkey. The position of Greece at this particular point in history where it was attempting to unify the Greek society (after its failed attempt to liberate the Greek population of Asia Minor) its position towards the Roma was negative or uninterested. This has led to social exclusion, which gradually until today it seems to go deeper and deeper magnified by the acute socio – economic transformations in the Greek society in the last 4 decades.

Finishing this part I would like to mention that the Greek state gives Roma the Greek citizenship in 1955. The population of Roma is debatable, perhaps between 200.000 – 300.000.

1. A brief assessment of the possible relevance of the policy to the peer country

Before assessing the relevance of the policy examined here it is best to describe briefly the main issues facing the Roma community in Greece.

Housing:

- 1) A considerable percentage of the Roma population in Greece today lives in shanty towns ((shacks, tents and huts) and in extremely poor and unhygienic conditions. leading to degradation.
- 2) There is also a large number that lives in more permanent constructions and settlements which nevertheless have a great need of interventions with regards to town planning, refurbishment of housing and provision of basic infrastructure (electricity, hot water etc.)
- 3) In addition there are also the Roma travellers, at a seasonal base, with very acute problems in securing appropriate places to live as they move and as a result they end up in areas, which do not have even the most basic prerequisites for organizing temporary settlements.
- 4) A well of financially community who nevertheless is socially excluded.

Employment:

There are not any complete data concerning the employment of Roma. The majority of those in employment are in self-employment mostly in trade and a larger percentage is occupied with mobile trade. Without wanting to repeat myself I will say that the types / sectors of employment are the same as mentioned in the Spanish case. The difference is that contrary to the Eastern European countries and Spain there were not efforts made to incorporate in its central planning policies the employment of Roma. While Greece was mainly an agricultural society Roma had the skills to operate within this structure but as the society became urbanized and the sectors of economy shifted Roma faced greater

problems that in the last decades have exacerbated their situation leading to very large numbers of unemployment and illegal practises mostly such as drug trafficking.

Education:

Specific numbers do not exist but it is safe to assume that 80% of the population is illiterate.

Health:

The living and health conditions are quite poor. Nevertheless, there is full access to the system of national health where it seems that Roma often approach.

Interventions:

Similar actions as in Spain have been undertaken in Greece as well because the problems faced are similar and they have addressed the 4 pillars mentioned above.

My opinion is that this specific approach adopted at Aviles can and should be transferred to Greece since it responds to the root of the problem and it is the only way that leads to true integration. It is nevertheless quite important to stress that certain prerequisites should be taken into account that respond to the Greek framework (collaboration and coo-peration between levels of government and social actors operate differently in Greece).

Overall this is considered a very good example and very relevant as a policy to the challenges and conditions we face in Greece. It is questionable as to whether it can be applied within the same methodology as in Spain.

1.2 A brief assessment of the similarities/differences of the policy with the experience of the peer country

Policy

As in Spain, Greece acknowledges that the problem is multifaceted and it needs to be tackled in an integrated manner. The four pillars adopted in the Aviles program have been adopted in Greece as well.

The Greek plan with regards the philosophy of inclusion resembles the 2nd phase of the programme where the aim was to build some temporary townships for Roma and then gradually and through the provision of support assimilate the Roma into non-Roma areas.

Another marked and crucial difference is that a plan has been developed for combating the social exclusion of Roma but funds were not matched with the actions proposed.

Overall many efforts have been made in Greece but they were done in a fragmentary manner thus failing to respond in an integrated way.

Administrative structure

There is an Interministerial committee that monitors and coordinates the national plan. Working groups have not been developed.

Local government is to participate and implement the policies but social policy departments are not quite strong nor do they have financial powers. While local government should be the instigators of such actions, in many cases they had to be convinced to respond to the problems facing the Roma community.

Partnerships

Experience from participating in EU projects has created a know-how but it is not quite as active or continuous. In the Spanish case the partnerships cover a wide spectrum of active actors whereas in Greece many times they are only in paper.

Political consensus:

There is an overall consensus concerning the need to resolve the acute problems faced by ROMA at the central level but in many instances municipal leadership is lacking and the commitment of central government is not backed with finance.

Institutional framework:

There is an Interministerial Committee that includes Roma organizations but is lacking the mobility to revise policies and to has not developed mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the implementation of projects. At local level the two major actors are local governments with Roma communities and Roma organizations. Sometimes there is a successful cooperation between the two, which produce fruitful results, and at other times there is mistrust from both sides and lack of understanding the Roma situation.

1.3 A brief assessment of the potential transferability of the policy (as a whole or in part) to the peer country and of the likely conditions for its application

Most likely the exact process cannot be repeated in Greece but certain key elements of this case study seem to stand out and to give the right impetus to be considered in the Greek planning. Specifically:

The individual case to case approach with regards to dispersion of Roma in the non Roma areas and the adoption of policies to support their inclusion process seems quite plausible within the part of the Roma population that is more ready to move away from Roma areas. It might be possible for groups of ROMA to apply a more step-by-step approach, which is to provide basic services at settlements but put great emphasis on education and to integrate them through a gradual process.

I would like to address here the issues of perceptions and behaviours regarding both the Roma community and the Greek political system. The political system is still such that it mainly exploits the

Roma for attracting votes and this is a drawback since it leads to political patronage and does not help to create a perception of civic duty. In addition due to this system and the experienced exclusion and high unemployment, Roma tend to rely and pursue social benefits and this leads to a vicious cycle of dependence.

1.4 A note of any important questions about the policy that are being raised and debated in the peer country

A major issue is the education of Roma people since it is believed that this is the safe road to social inclusion and occupational integration.

There is a conflict between those that feel that the ROMA “ cultural characteristics” should be maintained and therefore not to fully assimilate and those who believe that the Roma community should fully integrate and assimilate since it is an existing part of the Greek culture.

Another issue is the type of policy to be applied due to the difficulties and since the applied ones have failed mainly due to the lack of support mechanisms, monitoring and auditing systems.

1.5 NAP inclusion

Some of this project’s policies and parts of its methods of implementing the actions provide an interesting theoretical framework for policies in the future to be included and in the NAP especially on the collaboration of the working groups, the client centred services.

1.6 Key issues and main questions

- Feasibility of this project and how successful it is in the long run.
- How were the Roma received within the non-Roma communities and what actions were taken to sensitise the community
- How did the program prepare the Roma to assimilate and not to experience very stressful situations due to the change of life style?