

Roma: problem or mirror for our societies?

Elias Hemelsoet

A changing society: the arrival of fellow European citizens.

During the last few years, a lot of new Roma immigrants coming from Bulgaria, Slovakia and to a smaller extent Rumania have arrived in the city of Ghent (Belgium). This changing societal context brought about quite some political discussions in which grinding humanitarian situations alternate with striking statements by politicians. Opinions differ to a large extent, but on one thing there seems to be agreement: the growing presence of Roma in our cities brings along problems for which a solution is required. The arrival of about 3000 newcomers a year on a total population of 250 000 is said to put pressure on the living climate of the city. Something has to be done to tackle rack-rentery, discrimination, moonlighting circuits, abuse of women and various kinds of criminality. Moreover, the capacity of the welfare state seems to reach its boundaries when large groups of East European (Roma) people migrate only for the benefit of an easily accessible social security system.

The Ghent policy towards Roma people: tackling a problem.

In its note 'Intra-European migration and the city of Ghent', local policymakers develop a two-track policy to deal with the situation. The focus is on 'pull factors' that make people come to the city, whilst 'push factors' of migration are recognized but can less be controlled. On the one side support is offered through an integration policy and on the other side all forms of (semi-)illegal practices are repressively and firmly combated. These aims are realised through four lines of action: coordination (formation of a Permanent Consultation Committee to improve communication between different services), housing (amongst which clearing squats), schooling and work (formation of a central information point and installation of Roma mediators) and supra-local action (sensitisation and pointing out problems towards higher policy levels). All of the initiatives that are taken start from an 'explicit but not exclusive targeting' on Roma people.

A green answer: a look in the mirror.

It is questionable to what extent Roma will benefit from this policy being explicitly targeted at them. The starting point are societal problems which are directly related to the target group of Roma and defined in terms of a 'Roma problem'. There is much to argue though that there is no direct link between Roma and both criminal activities or poverty. Moreover, there seems to be a lot more attention to the repressive track of the policy than the supportive track when looking at practice. For example, after having lived some years in the city, many families are kicked out of the squats they have been living in without any further reception or support in order to find a new house.

For some reason or another, Roma are looked at in a different way than other migrants are. It may be the right time to have a look in the mirror and wonder why our attitudes towards Roma migrants are so defensive. In general, depositing money to a charity organisation in combating injustice all over the world does not seem to be a big problem for most people. To support Roma coming to our cities is a different thing though. Fighting poverty is fine, as long as it does not come to our backyard.

And is this not what a genuinely social policy and attitude is all about: to engage with people who are less well off? The arrival of Roma may then serve as a mirror that forces us to face ourselves and the way we seek to improve the world around us; could that not be an opportunity rather than a problem?

Elias Hemelsoet is working as a Ph.D. researcher at Ghent University. His research area is the right to education for Roma people and irregular migrants.

Contact: Elias Hemelsoet, Department of Foundations of Education, UGent, Henri Dunantlaan 1, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium. Email: elias.hemelsoet@ugent.be

Greens in Ghent: www.groengent.be , www.elkedecruynaere.be

Extra question – nutshell box: *When looking at many policy initiatives being taken towards Roma people in Belgium, the thing we should wonder is what it is exactly we are aiming for when talking about ‘Roma inclusion’?*