

Turkish government makes tangible steps on the right track or just a jaunt?

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The Roma in Turkey

Turkey's Roma community represents a special color in the palette when we are looking at the picture of the European Roma, and the geographical characteristics broaden our view to a larger scale, taking into consideration that more than 95% of Turkey belongs to the Asian continent. Roma started their historic journey from India about a thousand years ago, and a large group settled in Turkey in the time of the Ottoman Empire.

Today, Roma in Turkey reveal the art of the mixture between geographical multiplicity and historic noteworthiness.

According to official data, about 500,000 Roma live in Turkey. It is estimated that the real number reaches 2.5 million, taking into consideration that large numbers are illiterate and do not possess personal documentation. Through the years, the Roma have been given different names in different regions of Turkey. They are called *Çingene*(Chingene) in Western Anatolia and Thrace, *Mutrip* in Van-Ardahan and surrounding areas, *Elekçi* (Elekchi) in Central Anatolia, *Poşa* (Posha) in the Erzurum area, *Cano* (Djano) in Adana, and *Esmer vatandaş* (esmer vatandaş, or dark citizen), "*Köçer*" (Kocher) and "*Arabacı*" (*arabadj*') in various regions of Anatolia. The Roma in Turkey are mainly divided into three groups: the Rom, Dom and Lom communities.

About 95% of the Roma, also called "settled nomads," live in big cities, earn their living by playing music, selling flowers, basketry, tin-working, or collecting waste and iron. There are communities that still preserve their nomadic traditions. They live in warm areas in winter and move to outer districts of cities in summer.

The Roma gathering in Istanbul

In a festive atmosphere, with music and dancing, more than 15,000 Roma from all over Turkey welcomed Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the afternoon of Sunday, March 14, 2010 in the Abdi Ipekci sports hall in Istanbul.

Ms. Elmas Arus, Chairwoman of the Zero-Discrimination Association highlighted in her impressive opening remarks that the problems of the Roma start as early as their birth. "*We thought that our school uniforms would make us equal to all other school children. Unfortunately our Roma origin was such a strong uniform that it separated us from our friends, and our teachers settled us in the last rows in the classrooms. These uniforms are the ones that we have to wear for a lifetime. We had to hide that we are Roma to have a "normal school uniform" like the other children had. We had to deny our identity! Today, we came here to demonstrate that our Roma identity, our lifetime uniform should not separate us from the others but make us come together. This is who we are!*" Ms. Arus requested concrete actions by the government regarding housing, employment and education. "*This is what the Roma in Turkey need, and this is why we are here today,*" she concluded.

The enormous sports hall seemed small for the Roma who travelled long hours from all regions of Turkey. Many of the Roma called the event a historic milestone because, as they explained, they have never been invited by any government officials until today to talk about their hardships. *“We were always the people on the margins, the forgotten ones,”* an old man answered to a question posed by a journalist from the national media.

About 20 representatives from European institutions and organizations were invited to this remarkable event. In their short speeches, the director of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO), Mr. Ivan Ivanov, and the representative of the Council of Europe – Roma and Travelers Division, Ms. Eleni Tsetsekou, welcomed the initiative of the Turkish government. Considering the event as Turkey’s first step towards a serious approach and profound dedication to Roma issues, they officially offered future closer cooperation.

State Minister Faruk Çelik also spoke at the gathering and noted that the key demands of the Roma community are higher involvement in education, opening employment opportunities and improving housing conditions. *“Until today, nobody cared to ask the Roma community what their problems are,”* Çelik said. *“We have, and we have started to address the issues, each problem one by one.”*

The audience stood up to welcome Prime Minister Erdogan as he entered the hall. Ovation and clapping could be heard in every corner of the hall. The Premier stated that Turkey is a country, a land, a civilization inspired by love and tolerance. He explained that he is familiar with Roma issues because he was born in the famous Roma settlement of Kasimpasa in Istanbul. *“I heard every derogatory term used for you. I saw the way you were outcast and framed as ‘gypsies’, ‘tziganes’, ‘chingene’ and many other names,”* he said. *“Let them say what they please. What is important is that you are human beings and you have to be treated equally to all the others who live on this land”*

Even though the strong dedication was remarkable, the Prime Minister could not free himself from using the standard Turkish stereotypes of the Roma in his speech. He described the Roma as people who like the colors red and pink, as people who cannot live without music. He, also, stressed that the Roma can feel the coming of the spring, and promised that this spring is going to be another spring – a real spring, not like the ones interpreted in the sad Romani songs.

“I don’t want to see my Roma brothers living in the tents anymore. I don’t want to see them living in the destroyed houses anymore,” said Erdogan as he unveiled plans for the Housing Development Administration, or TOKİ, to increase living standards for the Roma by building new houses in 40 provinces. There was loud clapping and happiness in the auditorium when the housing programme was projected on a screen by the Prime Minister. He explained that the Roma families will get new houses in the framework of the project at affordable prices, with installments of 100 Turkish Liras (50 Euro) per month in total of a 20 years` payments. The construction has already started, and the first families are expected to move in early summer 2011.

“From now on, your problems are my problems. Nobody in this country can be treated as ‘half’ a person,” said Erdogan after explaining that Turkey is responsible for each of its citizen and that the Roma issue is treated as a national issue.

At the end of his speech, the Prime Minister announced that all Roma who do not possess personal documentation will be able to request the issuing of documents free of charge. A couple of Roma families received their personal IDs, birth certificates and marriage certificates directly from the Prime Minister on the stage. This symbolic event expressed the government's commitment to provide personal documentation to all Roma.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's speech (Turkish)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw09QiOWynE&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERIQSRuxXsw&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9CEgkaQxYo&feature=related>

The recent initiatives of the Turkish Government

In the last quarter of 2009 Turkish governmental representatives organized several meetings with NGOs announcing the preparatory phase of serious initiatives. A government-sponsored workshop on December 9, 2009 gathered nearly 120 Roma NGO representatives, experts and government representatives to address issues of the Turkish Roma community. It was underlined that prejudices and the discrimination are the significant challenges Turkish Roma are facing. A list of recommendations to the government was drafted during this workshop. The workshop was hosted by State Minister Mr. Faruk Çelik, Mr. Ali Koyuncu and Ms. Nursuna Memecan, MP.

Just one week after the Prime Minister's meeting with 15,000 Roma in Istanbul, the Edirne municipality made a move to support the government's democratic initiative. Mustafa Büyük, the governor of Edirne, has guaranteed jobs for all university graduates from the Roma community. Edirne is the biggest province in the region of Thrace and is also known for its considerably large population of Roma.

A Roma Research Center is going to be established in Southern Turkey at the Aydın Adnan Menderes University. The research center is in a preparatory phase and its opening is expected by early autumn of 2010.

Amendments to the articles in the national laws started in early 2006. The first article that was amended was Article 134 of "Regulations regarding Police Discipline, Role of Police in Ceremonies and Communities, and Organization and Responsibilities of Police". Paragraph 9 clearly designated Roma as potential criminals. This article is requested police chiefs to fight effectively against those who violate security and are involved in crime, similarly to the regulations in many other countries. Subparagraph 5 regarding individuals granted permission to the police to take special measures towards "the gypsies who do not have a good job" even if there are not any suspicious activities or objective need for this.

The government amended Article 21 of the Law on the Movement and Residence of Aliens (Law No: 5683), which authorizes "the Ministry of Internal Affairs to expel stateless and non-Turkish citizen gypsies and aliens that are not bound to the Turkish culture", thus promoting discrimination against Roma. The amendment proposal was submitted by four AK Party MPs including Ali Koyuncu, the Bursa MP in charge of the Roma gathering. This amendment was accepted just one week after the Roma gathering in Istanbul on March 14, 2010.

Is Turkey slowly but surely making a serious attempt to improve its Roma citizens living conditions? Does the Prime Minister's official use of the term *Roman* (Roma) instead of the derogatory term *chingene*

promise new perspectives and serious opportunities? Under the cautious European eye, expectations are higher than ever. The actions are still to come.