

The Roma have a long history of migrations that repeatedly brought repression to their people over the centuries. European countries began introducing laws against migrating peoples (i.e. nomads, travelers) in the mid-Fifteenth century (1). Migrants were perceived as an unsettling factor, even as a threatening and invading group, one that jeopardized the safety of the majority population. Without a registered identity, many Roma remain completely isolated as citizens in the societies on whose territories they live. Being constantly relocated and repopulated, many have been migrants over the centuries; even within the boundaries of the countries whose citizenship they hold. Apart from accusations, disappointments and misunderstandings in their relations with the majority population, we are still facing deep discrimination of Roma, which doesn't have its roots only in ethnic and cultural racism or anti-Roma sentiment. Poverty and nomadism are threatening factors for all of those who live in social systems based on the system of ownership, accumulation of goods and territorialism. Western policies have tried for centuries to include the poor in the system of social protection, or to get rid of them: to banish or eliminate them. Roma are, for the most part, an ethnic class characterized by extreme poverty that can present an obstacle to national or European integrations. It appears that the relation between Roma and non-Roma is, first and foremost, defined by the borderline between wealth and extreme poverty.

The situation of Roma in EU member countries is precarious and in countries populated to a greater extent by Roma, such as Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and in the former Yugoslav republics (especially in Macedonia and Serbia) – the situation is alarming. The situation in which most European Roma find themselves is similar to that of a holocaust. One of the basic problems facing a Roma man or a woman is the issue of belonging to a marginalized social class that is exposed to drastic pauperization, in addition to the problem of the national identity itself – the fact of being Roma.

Various forms of ethnic and class racism against Roma are appearing throughout Europe. In May 2008 in Naples, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Government implemented a state of emergency regarding nomad settlements and communities on the territory of several regions in order to legitimize fingerprinting of the Roma population. This law is very reminiscent of anti-Roma laws dating from the Middle Ages, and of the darkest periods of European history in the 20th century.

The general situation of migrants in Italy is difficult and the violent activities undertaken by the fascist right targeting Roma have reached a peak in the burning of entire settlements, the destruction of property, and the forceful evictions of Roma communities to locations outside certain metropolitan areas in Italy. The most drastic examples of this kind happened in Livorno, Roma, Napoli and Milano between 2006 and today (2).

Similarly in Finland, a settlement built by Roma emigrating from Romania to Helsinki in search of a better future was also destroyed. During our visit to Helsinki in March 2009, we took part in conversations (3) that were part of the exhibition about the history and culture of Roma: *Watch out Gypsies: The History of a Misunderstanding* (4), in the Helsinki City Museum. This visit further convinced us that impoverished Roma are being actively prevented in their attempts to

migrate. Strict EU laws prevent Roma from living or working in alternative ways and thus are not seen as “fitting in” with the EU reality.

The most harrowing images, however, come from Hungary, where an actual hunt on Roma communities has been on-going since the end of 2008. The killing of Roma families by neo-Nazi groups is an example of the worst racist hunt on people in the middle of Europe (5).

Whether living in EU or non-EU countries, a deep and an unexamined hatred for Roma peoples is widespread across Europe. It is symptomatic that direct violence against Roma is most intense in places where a great gap exists between those profiting from neoliberal reforms and local population on the verge of poverty.

New Belgrade's Belville

Belville is the name of a new residential complex in New Belgrade, built by Blok 67 Associates Ltd. This company was founded by Delta Real Estate (part of the Delta Holding Company owned by Miroslav Miskovic, Serbia's richest tycoon) and Hypo-Alpe Adria Bank (11). Their aim is to build business offices and apartments for athletes taking part in the Summer Universiade in June 2009 in Belgrade. After the Universiade, the apartments will be handed to new and predefined owners.

On April 3, 2009, in a sudden action with mechanical-diggers, forty houses were demolished in a Roma settlement that had begun taking shape during the last five years in a location near Belville. The decision to demolish the Roma houses was made by Belgrade's Secretariat for Inspections. City Mayor, Dragan Djilas, said on this issue that: “Whoever is illegally occupying a part of city land in places planned for infrastructure facilities cannot stay there. It has nothing to do with the fact that the people in question are Roma or some other ethnicity. A few hundred people cannot stop the development of Belgrade, and two million people living in Belgrade certainly won't be hostages to anyone. This practice shall continue to be implemented by the City Authority in the future. Simply - there are no other solutions” (12).

The police assisted in the demolition of the settlement by securing the diggers, without giving residents the time to rescue their belongings. Several inhabitants had to be practically drawn out of the ruins at the very moment when one digger was clearing the area. As we were close by, we joined our neighbors from the very beginning of this action in Block 67. As an act of protest to the home demolitions, Jurija Gagarina Street was blocked around noon that day. The settlement's inhabitants then organized another protest in front of Belgrade City Hall. No one addressed the displaced Roma residents from Block 67 who gathered in front of the Belgrade City Hall that evening. The protest continued the following day.

Following protests by the public, several NGOs also started to raise their voices. Pushed by UNHCR, the WHO and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, the Belgrade city authorities tried to settle down the issue. The “solution” was to set up residential containers in the suburban neighborhood Boljevci that very night. The bureaucratic apparatus that was set in motion to ‘solve’ this issue in the field soon proved to be non-functional. We learned that a Roma teenage boy had been killed several years ago in Boljevci. So there is a logical question: why was it decided that the containers should be placed in this very village? Boljevci residents blocked roads demanding that residential containers for Roma be removed: “If you don't remove them,

we will burn down both the containers and those trying to move in them”, one person from Boljevci said. The protests by Boljevci residents had violent moments: attempts were made to burn down residential containers and thus prevent Roma from moving into these temporary facilities. The incident resembled an open racist revolt. Mayor Djilas said: “I can understand the fear of people from Boljevci, because they were to have as neighbors people who, in part, do not even have personal ID cards. It is not known who they are”, adding that “all those who do not have a residence in Belgrade must go back to the places they came from. It is legally right, it is the basis for everything, and there will be no negotiations with the OEBS, UNHCR, or NGOs on this issue.” (13).

So, as far as Djilas was concerned, the Roma issue was ‘solved’ by placing a three Roma mothers with children into containers in Mirijevo, near the old Roma settlement. The majority of the people still have no alternative solution.

Although Serbia is currently presiding over the “Roma Decade” in 2009, city authorities didn’t have a plan for alternative housing at the moment the houses were demolished. It took three protests and pressure from international organizations to stop the media lynch against Roma and to try to find a solution for alternative housing. Our documentary “Belleville” was filmed during the ten days when these events happened in which we took part directly as active participants fighting for the rights of our neighbors. This documentary premiered in the Cultural Centre of Serbia in Paris where it was included at the last moment in our exhibition previously called “Psychogeographic Research”. On 27th of May 2009, the film was shown at the settlement in Blok 67.

European Slums

UN-Habitat’s Global Report (14) distinguishes six different “cities” with specified class actors and economic functions: there is the luxury city, the gentrified city with advanced services, the suburban city of direct production, the city of unskilled workers, and finally the city of permanently unemployed “underclass” or “ghetto poor” with income based on marginal or illegal activity and direct street-level exploitation.

This last city is the informal city or city of illegality, which comprises the slums of large megacities such as Lagos in Nigeria or Sao Paulo in Brazil. The informal sector has its base there; services are reduced and unstable, and residents do not have a legal status and are not part of the legal system. Harassment by authorities is commonplace. The poorest Roma settlements in Serbia and throughout Europe can be qualified as slum cities typically associated with the global South. The UN-Habitat’s Global Report on human settlements from 2003 defines slums as settlements with poor access to drinking water, sanitation and other infrastructure; with poor housing quality, overcrowdedness and by the uncertain residential status of its inhabitants. These characteristics provided by UN-Habitat can be applied to more than a hundred Roma settlements in Belgrade.

The composition of the population and its status in Belgrade’s slums is divergent. There are cases of Roma who have managed to secure registered residences in Belgrade or who are indigenous. There are also the Roma refugees from Kosovo who may represent between 20-40% of the population in a given settlement in Belgrade. A number of inhabitants are economic migrants from southern Serbia, from places where no economic existence is possible. A large

number of inhabitants are Roma asylum seekers from Western European countries and the EU, who were deported back into Serbia by the Readmission Agreement. A number of inhabitants in these settlements are not of Roma descent, just the poorest of the poor, refugees or the socially excluded. A great number of those living in these settlements are children and youth. Some estimates put the number of Roma in Serbia at 600,000, although the 2002 census only registered 102,193 people as Roma. The number and condition of Roma children and youth can be best understood from the following data: "According to the UNICEF report on the condition of Roma children in the Republic of Serbia (2006), almost 70% of Roma children are poor and over 60% of Roma households with children live below poverty line. Children are the most imperiled, living outside of cities in households with several children. Over 4/5 of indigent Roma children live in families in which adult members do not have basic education." (15).

If we consider the existing data on urban poverty and the dynamics of "slumization", we can better analyze the demolitions that occurred in the Belgrade neighborhood of Blok 67. Complex relations between local authorities and local residents become even more complex in the proximity of the Flea Market. The market is a source of income and survival for people who gather and resell recycled goods. Local and flea market authorities have developed a string of rules, networks and complex arrangements with the locals / users of the market from whom they generate a certain amount of profit.

In his publication "Planet of Slums" (16), Mike Davis says that national and local political machines acquiesce in informal settlement as long as they can control the political complexion of the slums and extract direct financial benefit from them. These almost feudal relations of dependence on local police or important players in certain political parties and non-governmental organizations are deeply rooted and disloyalty may cause the destruction of the slum itself.

The current stratification of European societies which is particularly evident in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia may cause social unrest in which Roma might play an important role as a trans-national ethnic group. Non-controlled Roma migration to countries of Western Europe is not desirable, even though the borders are open.

It is not surprising that there is a strategy to "solve the Roma issue" in these countries. The 'Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015' gathers together the countries of Central and South Eastern Europe, international and non-governmental organizations (like the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, United Nations Development Program, the Council of Europe, Council of Europe Development Bank (17)) and Roma civic associations. The objective is to improve the status of Roma and "close unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society." In addition to areas of major concern (housing, education, employment, and health), special attention is given to the elimination of discrimination, the reduction of poverty and the improvement of the position of Roma women. Including representatives of Roma communities in all processes is the basic principle.

The policy of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to lend money to countries which meet the requirement to privatize territory, real estate and resources, as a result brought devastation to local economies in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 80's, as well as elimination of the middle class and "slumization" of entire regions. The 'Decade of Roma Inclusion' is intended to lead to the nominal equality of Roma communities in the countries participating in the Decade,

in order to legitimize their deportation from EU countries back into to their “native countries”. At the same time, the elite that carried out the inclusion by controlling financial and other aid is being supported. This is counterproductive to the development of Roma communities as self-organized political subjects.

Raedle&Jeremic have been working together on joint projects since 2002. Their aim is to detect and research conditions in the society and spatial changes in Belgrade municipal area and other locations, and comment on what they find. The field of contemporary art is their means for criticism, enabling them to have active roles in various fields of social activism.

Further information is available at their website: <http://raedle-jeremic.modukit.com>

(1) Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 1994

(2) *Security a la Italiana: Fingerprinting, Extreme Violence and Harassment of Roma in Italy*, 2008, Report, European Roma Rights Centre and others;

Source:

http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles_publications/publications/fingerprinting_20080715/fingerprinting_20080715.pdf

(3) Source: <http://www.hiap.fi/index.php?page=304&abr=0&event=137>

(4) Source:

http://www.hel.fi/wps/portal/Kaupunginmuseo_en/Artikkeli_en?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/Museo/en/museum+news/news+and+events/leave+your+roma+prejudices+behind

(5) Source:

http://www.dur.org.rs/cms/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83:u-maarskoj-rome-ubijaju-po-metodologiji-slinoj-taktici-amerikog-kju-kluks-klana&catid=34:vesti&Itemid=56

(6). David Rych, „Under the Bridge – A derivé to a topos of social relevance or... “a visit to the zoo”?” pages 34-37, *Under the Bridge Beograd*, Bureau for Culture and Communication, Novi Sad, 2005

(7) Tanja Ostojic, *Open Studio of New Belgrade Chronicle*, 2007;

Source: <http://tanjaostojic.blogspot.com/>

(8) Lorenz Aggermann, Eduard Freudmann, *Can Gülcü, Beograd Gazela-Reiseführer in eine Elendssiedlung.*, Drava Verlag, Klagenfurt, 2008

(9) *Vecernje novosti*, July 11, 2005, Source:

<http://www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?Id=14&status=jedna&vest=77610&datum=>

(10) Source:

http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=24&nav_id=320375&nav_category=12

(11) Source: <http://www.belville.rs/kosmomi.jsp>

(12) *Borba*, April 3, 2009; Source: <http://www.borba.rs/content/view/4472/123/>

(13) YUCOM, *Regards from Saban Bajramovic*, *Pescanik*;

Source: <http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/2970/61/>

(14) *The challenge of slums- Global report on human settlements 2003*, UN Habitat;

Source: <http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/GRHS.2003.3.pdf>

(15) Government of Serbia, *Strategy for the Improvement of Roma Status in the Republic of*

Serbia“, „Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, No. 55/05, 71/05- Correction, 101/07 and 65/08), Belgrade, April 9, 2009;

Source: http://www.humanrights.gov.yu/dokumenti/roma/strategija_april_09.pdf

(16) Mike Davis, Planet of Slums, Verso, London 2007;

Shorter version of the essay at: <http://abahlali.org/files/NLR26001.pdf>

(17) Source: <http://www.romadecade.org/index.php?content=1>