



Roma and Romanian Migrants in France

Soyuz Postsocialist Studies Network

Elena Popa

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This post is the third in a three-part series on Romanian Mobilities: Vehicles of Migration in New Europe

In the summer of 2016, during my fieldwork with Romanian migrants in France, I received a public Facebook invitation to visit an organization aiding homeless persons in the Paris region. Before I could reply, an acquaintance of mine, Laura, interjected to clarify that the inviting organization was for “Romanian gypsies.” She recommended I instead attend her own soirée for Romanian migrants who “despite hardship, honor their country.” She elaborated:

Elena, you were pointed to an organization that takes care of Romanian children who were abandoned during communism and raised in orphanages. These are gypsies (*țigani*). You are not interested in that. You are interested in writing something beautiful about Romania. That is why I invited you here tonight, so you can see the real Romanians, who did something in their lives, who are worth being part of a book.

Laura’s dismissal of Roma orphans, whom she calls “gypsies,” makes clear her belief that Roma are not part of the Romanian family, and therefore also not worth being part of my study on Romanian migration to France.

Laura’s claims point to an established hierarchy of Romanians in Romania that becomes both more and less salient when Romanians are abroad. Roma, who are considered “Others” at home, typically remain “Others” in the French context. Moreover, as we see in Laura’s case, Roma serve as a foil through which other Romanian migrants define their own achievements abroad. While the literature on migration is filled with examples of camaraderie among diverse people bonded by common

circumstances, the shared experience of migration seems not to reduce some Romanians' distaste for the part of their population that is Roma. Laura's dismissal of Roma orphans, whom she calls "gypsies," makes clear her belief that Roma are not part of the Romanian family, and therefore also not worth being part of my study on Romanian migration to France. To Laura and many other ethnic Romanian migrants I met, Roma shame the country of origin rather than honor it.

While Roma occupy a low social position within Romania, the stakes of this position for ethnic Romanians are transformed in migration. Romania became part of the European Union only in 2007, and while its economy is **growing** rapidly, it remains among the EU's poorest member states. Many of the ethnic Romanian migrants I interviewed were preoccupied with their own "negative image" among the French. While **anti-Romanian sentiment in France** is likely part of a greater **upswell of xenophobia**, some ethnic Romanians criticized Roma for panhandling on the streets, playing music in the metro, engaging in petty crime, or any public activity that seemed to throw into question Romania's "Europeanness." Added to this were concerns about the conflation of the ethnonyms Roma and Romanian, and thereby the identification of the Romanian nationality with delinquency and poverty. For people like Laura, Roma not only do not render, but actively threaten, a "beautiful" image of her country in the French collective imaginary.

Some Romanian migrants were also concerned about being grouped with other foreign-born populations in France, most notably those that came from beyond continental Europe. In the aftermath of the tragic **Paris terrorist attacks** (November 13, 2015), I was surprised by some Romanian migrants' reactions to the event. For them, the attacks came as a confirmation that Romanian migrants were not the source of the socioeconomic and political problems France was facing. Some Romanians hoped they would no longer be the subjects of racializing and criminalizing discourses in French media and politics. A few of my consultants expressed a disquieting enjoyment at the thought that the attacks proved that Romanians were not dangerous citizens and criticized the French for calling Romanians "gypsies" and "thieves." Reactions like this reflect Romanians' frustrations with how they believe French perceive Romanians. Despite these frustrations, most of the time, in an effort to highlight their similarity with the French and as such their European aspirations, Romanian migrants in France align themselves with French practices. In doing so, they support the marginalization and expulsion not only of non-Romanian migrant groups, but of fellow Romanians who happen to be Roma.

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe and they are most numerous in Romania. Just like other Romanian citizens, the Roma began to migrate after 1989. During the communist era, many Roma were employed in state-owned factories and collective farms. As such, the post-1989 "transition" to a market economy had left many of them unemployed. In other words, ethnic

Romanians and ethnic Roma from Romania were often migrating for the same reasons, on the same passports, and, with the advent of low-cost air carriers, even in the same planes.

Despite **deporting** considerable numbers of Roma every year, France remains a target destination for many. Roma often arrive with scant resources and few work prospects. Many come with their extended families and build makeshift camps on the outskirts of big cities. This practice subjects the Roma to constant policing and deportations, which results in increased media attention that further stigmatizes them. French media and **political discourses** reinforce opinions like the ones Laura expressed at the outset of this piece: that Roma, unlike “real Romanians,” are not doing anything of their lives. Accusations that Roma simply do not like to work or prefer to engage in prohibited income-generating activities freeze Roma into a stereotype that has real material consequences on their lives. Moreover, they erase the reasons why Roma (and Romanians) migrated in the first place.

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George, a Roma man from Cluj County, observed that Romanians in France generally have the status of second-class citizens:

If you are Romanian you are considered a thief or you are equal to nothing. It doesn't matter if you are a gypsy or a Romanian, and this is perhaps because of our governors. Because of them we are not appreciated. If our governors and those in power who lead our country were different we would be more appreciated. We have a beautiful enough country, a rich enough country. We have or at least we had factories, agriculture, which means a lot. But now nothing works anymore.

For George, the fates of Roma and non-Roma Romanian migrants are not disconnected, but rather parallel. Like Laura, George finds Romania “beautiful,” but unlike Laura, he locates the threat to that beauty in Romanian politicians. George, like many Roma I interviewed, described Romania as a corrupt or even failed state, and the petty crime Roma are often blamed for as “insignificant” compared to the illicit activities of Romanian politicians. Roma described a lack of basic needs such as food and access to healthcare as pushing them to pursue certain income generating activities. George was nostalgic for the communist past, an attitude expressed even by younger Roma born towards the end of the communist regime and who had never known a country not in “transition.”

The French migratory context reveals how the production of difference is relational and tiered, as well as how migrants who share a common vision of their home country's potential can have strikingly distinct assumptions about who is to blame for its failure to thrive. While the dynamics of blaming and shaming which occur among Romanian migrants in France are particularly extreme, to focus only on them would suggest that there were no previous tensions between Romanians and Roma, between other Europeans and Roma, or between Western Europeans and their neighbors from the former Eastern Bloc. Therefore, attention must be focused on both the national and supranational structures that maintain exclusive definitions of Europeanness and marginalize the EU's most vulnerable ethnic groups.

Read the first article in this series [here](#).

Read the second article in this series [here](#).

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Siv Lie says:

February 13, 2017 at 11:39 am

I have observed a similar situation in my fieldwork among Manouches, a subgroup of Roma in France. As French citizens who have faced discrimination in their own country for generations, many Manouches explicitly dissociate themselves from Romanian Roma out of concern that they will be viewed with the same disdain that other French people express towards these migrant Roma.

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Judith Melita Okely says:

February 14, 2017 at 10:07 pm

The denigration of Roma and Gypsies goes back decades, if not centuries. Communism forbade nomadism and ghettoised once economically active groups who attempted secret trading as 'wicked capitalists' (all now institutionalised and respectable post 1989). How shocking that the very label 'Gypsy' is automatically demonised and not even given a capital G. In 2004, when keynote speaker in Berlin, I was warned the EU had 'banned the use of the word Gypsy in the public domain'. Should I tell the English Gypsies I lived with they must now call themselves Roma? At a 1999 Copenhagen conference, a visiting professor of education from Romania insisted Roma should be banned from using that label because it sounded too like her proud country. My Scottish Traveller student, also present, thus witnessed a new racism, beyond the UK.

No wonder the Gypsies I lived with called themselves 'Traveller' when meeting outsiders. But a linguistics 'expert' claimed I only lived with 'Travellers' because he ignored social context. The naming ambiguity was deliberate in my monograph title 'The Traveller-Gypsies' (Okely 1983). Thankfully, Gypsies in England continue to celebrate their title and identity, while shielding

themselves from stigmatised projections. Tragically, some Roma have internalised that stigma, while ignoring potential allies. When presenting a paper at Sheffield Hallam university for 'People, Place and Policy 2014' about English Gypsies, I was rebuked by two Eastern European Roma for using the 'G' word. They had no idea of it's history. But, as Elena succinctly reveals, anthropologists and activists should know better.

Judith Okely is Research Associate, School of Anthropology, Oxford

Her recent 2014 article is 'Recycled (Mis)representations: Gypsies, Travellers or Roma Treated as Objects, Rarely Subjects' People Place and Policy 8 / 72-6

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