

Migration and Poverty: The Case of the Slovak Roma

Mitá Castle-Kaněrová

*Independent researcher, Visiting Lecturer, Charles University Prague
mitakanerova@hotmail.com*

This article locates the issue of recent migration among Slovak Roma into the Czech Republic within the context of EU enlargement and the recent concerns over immigration control. The small-scale fieldwork undertaken among the Slovak Roma migrants in Czech detention centres revealed – not surprisingly – that the choice to seek asylum is closely associated with the loss of their economic status and employment in Slovakia. To become an asylum seeker in a neighbouring country is a way of looking for work whilst the family members are safe, free from harassment and unwanted hostilities back at home. The link between migration and poverty, however, should not be seen as a causal link for this category of asylum seekers, since increasing poverty among the Roma cannot be dissociated from political issues, such as institutional discrimination that has not been effectively addressed by the government itself.

This is a case study of a small but significant number of Roma migrants from the Slovak Republic seeking asylum in the neighbouring Czech Republic, which nine years ago formed part of the same administrative social and economic unit. The two countries are now two separate state formations, and the centre of attention as far as migration is concerned is that the Czech Republic is very likely to join the early entrants into the EU, whilst Slovakia will probably have to wait. Thus the Schengen borders along the Czech/Slovak divide need to be well protected and secure. To control the Roma migration from Slovakia is a test case that fits well with the European Union's attempts to put an end to a movement of 'undesirable' migrants.

This article builds on direct interviews by the author with Slovak Roma asylum seekers inside the Czech Republic. The interviews were carried out in selected detention centres throughout the Czech Republic, where the asylum applicants await the Ministry of Interior's decision. The research involved 20 families, which totalled 96 individuals. As the survey was sponsored by the Czech Ministry of Interior, access to detention centres and to the asylum seekers was unproblematic. What was of ethical concern was that the primary aim of the interviews was to determine the motivation and socio-economic profile of the applicants, with the expressed wish by the Ministry to formulate a more coherent policy of asylum refusal, which the Czech Republic lacked up till then.

What will be explored in this article is the interface between poverty and migration. It is not a new theme, and most migration specialists pay increased attention to the growing mixture between economic and political motives for asylum seeking, for which the original 1951 Geneva Convention is ill prepared. Whilst it is acceptable to say that

migration is never motivated by a single reason and therefore the motivation is multi-faceted (Brockner and Havinga, 1997), it is not so widely recognised that, as Harris states, 'it is not the poor who migrate, particularly internationally, where the costs and risks are high' (Harris, 1995: 191).

The results of this particular research confirmed that the Roma from Slovakia travelled to the Czech Republic primarily because they conceptualised the two countries to be still one socio-economic and linguistic unit. Therefore, crossing the borders from one state to the other was, to them, not an infringement of any rules or regulations, merely a form of local travel. In addition, many have had and still have relatives and family members living in both countries and they keep in touch with each other. (This is to do with the past history of the Roma in Czechoslovakia, whereby most of the Czech Roma were exterminated in Nazi camps during the war, and those who came to the Czech Republic from Slovakia during the 1950s did so under the previous communist government's policy of forced re-settlement of Slovak Roma in the Czech heavy industrial areas.)

Many of today's Czech local authorities often complain of 'their Czech' Roma travelling ostensibly to a funeral of a mother or a mother-in-law in Slovakia as a way of avoiding social security check ups and other forms of administrative monitoring. Thus, what one can say at this stage is that the poor Roma of Slovakia are taking minimum personal risks by seeking protection in the Czech Republic, the nearest 'safe' country, and that they do so because they see the Czech government as perhaps 'owing' them this protection. The interviews revealed that these migrants clearly did not possess enough capital or resources to travel further afield, and many spoke with visible nostalgia of the 'good old days' of Czechoslovakia.

What this study may lead us to consider, and what is increasingly becoming more and more topical is, that those in the poorest category of social structures in any one country are the least likely to succeed in bettering themselves, either at home or through their brave act of seeking to migrate out of their desperate and hopeless situation. The fact that neither the Czech Republic nor the EU have a better answer to the modern phenomenon of migration than a thoroughly restrictive and negative immigration policy, breeds the kind of disillusionment and outright alienation of a whole population that we see growing elsewhere in our globalised world. Alienation through exclusion has a long incubation period which most governments in power do not want to concern themselves with, or cannot even see.

What is important to acknowledge at the outset is that the so-called economic migration is no longer a clear-cut category in itself and on its own. The case of the Roma signals that within the heart of Europe the nearly total exclusion of this specific ethnic minority from the economic activities in the domestic, East European, but also in the global/EU labour markets, goes hand in hand with racial discrimination in other spheres of their lives. Discrimination against the Roma in Slovakia as well as in the Czech Republic amounts to systematic exclusion from jobs and housing, segregation in education, lack of protection against racially motivated crimes, and lack of concerted political intervention in all these spheres by the governments (carefully documented by the European Roma Rights Centre in Budapest since the mid 1990s). The poor are on their own, the poor among the Roma are unwanted wherever they go. To deal with their asylum claims by returning them back to their country of origin, and to the community from which they tried to escape, forcing them back inside the perimeters of their

segregated settlements, will inevitably produce further deprivation, further racial tension, further hatred, further conflict.

Economic background

One of the findings of this case study, which provides the background to the situation of the Roma generally, was that the Slovak Roma migrants came from one specific region of Slovakia, where virtually 100 per cent unemployment led the Roma community to seek 'solutions' in migration. This is not the case for other parts of Slovakia, equally economically deprived, as was noted by an IOM study during 2000 (IOM Bratislava, 2000). Other strategies adopted elsewhere in Slovakia range from train robberies (usually international trains passing through), local crop theft, or other forms of petty crime, to passive resignation. (IOM Bratislava, 2000). Before one can assess the moral significance of associating Roma with crime, it is essential to point out three important aspects to their economic deprivation:

- 1 The systematic de-industrialisation of heavy inefficient industries throughout Slovakia as well as the Czech Republic means that unemployment is a relatively recent experience for the Roma. (Previously they had to work under the 'socialist' legislation of compulsory employment.)
- 2 The recent change in the social security legislation in Slovakia halved social assistance to all those who remained unemployed for longer than two years. As long-term unemployment falls disproportionately on the Roma, their economic degradation became progressively worse, sometimes catastrophically, since the social reform came into effect in June 2000 (IOM Prague, 2001).
- 3 There is a growing number of cases of money lending to Roma affected by the recent flood disasters by unscrupulous, mafia-linked groups and the pressure for repayment has reached such proportions that many of the asylum seekers cite their emigration as a way of escaping threats (threats on their life, or threats of taking Roma children into prostitution in lieu of payment), with reported cases of mafia and police co-operation to drive the Roma out.

Aims and motives of asylum seeking

The methodology used in this study were direct semi-structured interviews with a self-selected group of Slovak Roma asylum seekers. The interviews themselves were only partially recorded by taking notes during the interviews themselves. The details of the interviews were filled into a semi-structured questionnaire, prepared prior to the interviews, and completed the same day. The reason for this was that the interviewees were happy to share their experiences of asylum seeking in the Czech Republic, and indeed volunteered many details of their cases, but had 'had enough' of being a part of another 'official' investigation. The purpose of the interviews was disclosed at the outset, and this was accepted, with many comments being actually directed at the 'authorities'.

The research was seeking to answer the following questions:

- What was the socio-economic profile of the asylum seekers?
- What was the desired aim of asylum seeking in the Czech Republic?
- What was the motivation behind coming to the Czech Republic?
- What were the family connections, if any, inside the Czech Republic?
- Were the asylum applications made repeatedly?
- What was the motivation to return back to Slovakia?

Socio-economic profile

The most significant finding of the study related to this point was that from the total of 20 families interviewed, 14 heads of the household (men) had recently held a job. Further three heads of the household did not mention long-term unemployment as a determining feature of their lives, thus only three heads of the household confirmed that unemployment was their very long-term experience. In one case out of these three, the unemployment was because the head of the household was in receipt of invalidity pension. Those who were faced with unemployment had done so since 1998, relatively recently, and because of the closure of heavy industry in their region. The closure of the industries was accompanied by loss of housing, thus homelessness ensued. However, the key factor was that 'sacking' without any adequate offers of an alternative, and without any compensation (either in money terms or in terms of accommodation) was a practice that fell predominantly on the local Roma.

The majority of the interviewees were young nuclear families, with parents in the age range between 20 and 35 years, with the average number of children per family of three.

On the basis of the information gained, the study concluded that the socio-economic profile of these families is such that they depart from their traditional extended family life style in a desperate attempt to provide for their children. This contradicts the common assumption that these asylum seekers tend to seek advantages under a more generous social security system. Even though the benefit cuts in Slovakia may have been a factor, their primary motivation (as will be evident in the next section) was to look for work.

However, the serious repercussions of this emerging trend of nuclear families travelling for work abroad will be that those who are left behind, the members of the extended family (parents, grandparents and others), face a further drop in their living standards, a deepening social deprivation and increased social isolation, unprotected by the younger and more active family members. What the future holds for them will certainly be a growing dependency on the state and state provision, in illness and old age, which in view of the traditional Roma way of life is new. The ramifications therefore will be the growing social cost, disruption of the family structure, and the resultant social vulnerability.

Migration aims

The answers to this question were mixed and indicative of the uncertainty of the respondents' status as well as the uncertainty about their entitlements. Only four out of the total 20 heads of the households answered that their aim was a long-term, legalised residence in the Czech Republic. Further five heads of the household answered that they would wish for a legalised long-term stay but did not know how to go about it.

Migration motives

What links socio-economic profiles with motives is that altogether 16 heads of the households interviewed stated categorically that their primary motivation for coming to the Czech Republic was to look for work. For this group of the Roma, seeking asylum in the Czech Republic was also a way of providing for and protecting the family during

their search for work in the country. Most of those interviewed were aware that asylum seeking is not the best route to take, and that their asylum applications will most probably be refused (which they share together with other Roma asylum seekers going further afield into the countries of the EU). Asylum in the Czech Republic became a way to provide a relatively secure environment for the rest of the family whilst the head of the household searched for work. Because of the racial harassment and discrimination back in Slovakia, and also because of the familiarity with the Czech labour market, repeated asylum applications were the most efficient way of job seeking whilst the family would be taken care of inside the detention centres (and not feel isolated because of the language barrier). In several cases, the interviews were carried out with the wife, because the husband was in fact absent during the day, openly seeking employment in the nearby locations. It became evident, again confirming research elsewhere, that the refusal to grant asylum, or even a removal, will not be a deterrent in future applications (IOM Prague, 2001). It is not the asylum, or even the social security, that was the aim of this group. Asylum, so it seems to this group of the interviewees, is a stepping stone to other, hopefully better, options.

However, it is important to emphasise once more, that this relatively rational strategy for self-betterment is not a straightforward matter of economic migration. As shown above, migration and poverty are rarely in causal relationship with each other. What was indicative of the complexity of the issue were some of the comments given by the interviewees. For example, one answer to the comment that asylum procedures are reserved for cases of persecution or victims of war, was: 'Not to be able to feed our children or not having a roof over our heads is war.' Further to that, many of those interviewed echoed one statement, saying: 'We want a normal life.'

The worrying aspect of the situation in Slovakia was the apparent collusion between the mafia, the money lenders and the police, even in some cited cases, the local mayors. The desire to get rid of the impoverished, excluded, 'anti-social' Roma (perceived as such by the majority population), reaches such a level that the police not only do not intervene in cases of racially motivated crimes, but apparently organise their own raids on Roma settlements, burning their dwellings and intimidating those who dare to complain. One comment from the interviews was, 'When the mafia embezzles money or property, when they steal, they come to us (the Roma) under police protection and accuse us of the crimes. They put the blame on us.'

Almost half of those interviewed, nine heads of household, stated that the motivation for them leaving Slovakia was the fear of mafia, and/or an escape from being pursued by the mafia. This was coupled by statements about the fear that they will not be protected by the state or the police if anything happens to them. These statements echoed, once more, the findings in the Czech Republic, that one of the main reasons for seeking asylum in the EU is the fear for one's safety and the safety of one's children (IOM Prague, 2000).

The findings certainly brought forward the critical economic and political situation in the region of Slovakia from where the Roma asylum seekers originated. The simplistic assumption, though, that because these Roma are unemployed and in abject poverty, they seek provisions under a better social security regime is misleading, once we acknowledge that their poverty was brought upon them by the change of the economic system back home. Most of those interviewed had jobs prior to 1998, and their family structures provided the necessary backing in times of need. This is now gone, and the

slide into hopelessness and destitution on the scale that generates mass emigration is new.

Family links

Among those interviewed, only four heads of household stated that they had direct family connections inside the Czech Republic. This was somewhat surprising, given the general knowledge that the majority of the Roma families in the Czech Republic originated in Slovakia, and also that many intermarry. The conclusion from these answers can be twofold. Either the respondents did not want to acknowledge the family links because they thought this might go against them as far as their applications are concerned (or generally, because the majority population does not positively accept the extended family networks, which are nowadays almost alien to the mainstream culture, and which are often seen as the source of trouble when family members come to 'gate crash' at relative's flats or dwellings); or because these connections are simply unhelpful because they cannot provide either shelter or job opportunities to additional family members.

The results of the interviews in this respect confirmed that, although the family is an important source of information and motivation to migrate, it is not a fall back institution in times of refusals and removals from the country. This is a further indication that the Roma family networks have become so impoverished that they cannot absorb any further family extension. It seems that poverty does drive the extended family apart and favours the more mobile nuclear family. The consequence of a more costly family social policy is then to be expected.

Repeat applications

When asked if asylum applications were made before the present ones, seven out of the total of 20 heads of households responded by saying yes. Out of these seven, four families previously sought asylum in the EU. A further three heads of household stated that they had sought an asylum in the Czech Republic in the past, usually in connection with their fear from the mafia. In addition, another four heads of household indicated that they would seek asylum in the Czech Republic again if their current application was refused.

Return to Slovakia

In view of their reasons for leaving and their determination to keep applying for asylum, it was not surprising to find that the interviewees lacked motivation to return to Slovakia. Out of the total sample of 20 families, 16 answered unambiguously that they would not go back to Slovakia, and that they do not wish to settle there again.

Conclusions

This case study points to some obvious conclusions about the conditions faced by the Roma in the Slovak Republic, with wider implications for the European Union, and especially for the enlargement process. First, it is clear that the Slovak government is

unwilling to take the plight of the marginalised, discriminated-against Roma ethnic minority seriously, and instead echoes the deeply ingrained prejudice that the poverty and marginalisation has been brought on to this group by themselves – be it by their criminality, their lack of work effort and discipline, or by their anti-social behaviour generally. No proper social analysis of the conditions which contributed to the social degradation of the Roma minority after the transition to market economies in East Central Europe (which added to the already poor social status of the Roma) has yet appeared in any of these countries. There is some talk of segregation and ghettoisation, even racial discrimination, which appears in the academic press, but no such analysis has been taken on board by the governments of these countries. Instead, the political agenda seems to be informed by the support for the right-wing views. To be openly supportive of the Roma cause is perceived as ‘political suicide’ by many politicians in East Central Europe. Such a negative political climate is not enhanced by the efforts coming from the EU itself, where the restrictive and increasingly racist immigration policies have replaced the initial concern with human rights abuses in the countries of East Central Europe. It seems that the effort to enable some East Central European countries to enter into the EU has produced silent collusion with the governments of these countries as far as the Roma ethnic minority is concerned (Castle-Kaněrová, 2001). The admission that racial discrimination is taking place inside the ‘new democracies’ would have to be matched by the seriousness with which the Roma asylum seekers’ cases are being treated in the countries of the EU. It is easier to agree with the governments of the Czech and the Slovak republics, who claim that because they have embarked on to the pathway of democracy, there is no ground for discrimination and therefore no ground for asylum. Both are then satisfied, yet this does not stem the flow of applications, and many returned to the Czech and Slovak Republics simply to apply again elsewhere.

Thus, migration will not cease, and unless proper solutions are found (preferably inside the countries of origin, that is unless social, economic and political conditions there change) then migration will remain one of the preferred ways of escape from an unbearable situation. Temporary restrictions, even deportations, will not heed the migration flow, quite the opposite. The official, administrative and political rejection of the plight of the Roma migrants will lead to further isolation and alienation that may produce next generation of even more complex migration issues. Force applied in deportations and the closing of the available options may, as can be perceived at present lead to hostility and aggression that needs to find its own channel.

Short-term solutions are therefore not to be encouraged. It may be more painful and costly to admit to the depth of the socio-economic crisis that the Roma ethnic minority faces in the Slovak Republic, but, if the EU and the whole of Europe wishes to create conditions suitable for the enlargement of the Union, then it is time to put resources into a co-ordinated gesture of help. This means member states and the Commission, jointly with the governments of East Central European countries getting together to improve the conditions for those who cannot find a place of hope for themselves and their families at present.

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