

INTRODUCTION

Romani Migrations: Strangers in Anybody's Land? Further Reviewed¹

This issue is a follow-up of the Special Section “Romani Migrations: Strangers in Anybody’s Land” featured in Volume 13, Number 2 of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2000). The main aim of this section was to start an academic debate on the issue of East–West Romani migrations, a topic that has been on the agenda of many intergovernmental organisations in recent years, including the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE). Despite this political attention, it is a topic that has remained largely ignored by academics. The original section was a response to the repeated requests from these organisations for academic studies that could serve as background papers for migration policies. The original section featured articles discussing different viewpoints on Romani origins and migrations from a historical perspective (by Sir Angus Fraser); a discussion of the changing pattern of Romani migrations (by Yaron Matras); the experience of Romani asylum seekers in Canada (by Ronald Lee) and Belgium (by Claude Cahn and Peter Vermeersch); the effects of the Kosovo conflict on Roma and their displacement (by Tatjana Perić and Martin Demirovski); and an insight into the impact of Romani migrations on EU enlargement (by Mark and Matthew Braham).

Almost immediately, a number of international organisations—such as the Project on Ethnic Relations, Minority Rights Group International and various Romani non-governmental organisations (NGOs)—expressed interest in the published section. Some have used the work in further studies and conferences on Romani migration.² The OSCE relied on our section as background material for the first meeting of the International Working Group of Romani experts on Refugee and Asylum Seeker Issues, and for the International Consultation on Romani Refugees and Asylum Seekers, a side event to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in October 2000. During this event, the *Review* was publicly credited for starting the debate on Romani migrations by the OSCE Advisor on Romani Issues, Nicolae Gheorghe.

As the Section Editors, we have remained involved in the debate, Ilona Klímová in particular taking an active role in subsequent Romani migration consultations and conferences. As a result, we are now able to bring you this selection of follow-up

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articles, as a Special Issue of *Nationalities Papers*, which granted us the honour of publishing with them. This “Further Reviewed” Special Issue not only develops the discussion originally raised but also reflects interim developments in the Romani migration debate in European political and academic circles.

The most significant shift in the discourse within the last couple of years relates to the identification of reasons for the recent migrations. At the beginning of the debate, activists and scholars almost unanimously challenged the portrayal by government officials and media of Roma as economic migrants. However, opinions have begun to polarise in the last couple of years. While some activists and scholars still maintain that Romani asylum seekers leave their countries of origin only because of racism and discrimination, others believe that Romani requests for asylum are also economically motivated. They argue that migration can be seen as a strategy employed by Romani individuals who turn to Western societies for tolerance in the hope of obtaining a more equal opportunity for personal economic, educational and social development.

Supporters of the first opinion agree that economic marginalisation is, along with racial violence, at the core of Romani requests for asylum. However, they argue that referring to such cases as “economic migration” is inappropriate because the economic marginalisation of Roma is the result of very deep-rooted systemic discrimination—both in the past and in the present—and, as such, provides legitimate grounds for asylum seeking. Advocates of the alternative view, however, believe that the sharp increase in Romani asylum applications is partly a result of the combination of two factors: the rise of unemployment and lack of economic opportunities in transition countries, and the elimination of other legal migration opportunities. This is part of a wider debate in Europe regarding economic migration and the place in the refugee paradigm of persecution through denial of economic, social and cultural rights.

These two differing interpretations of the primary causes of Romani emigration lead to differing opinions about the appropriate strategies for addressing the problem. Those who believe that the current requests for asylum by Roma are a direct result of anti-Gypsyism and the deterioration of the human rights of Roma argue for granting a firm legal status to Roma in Europe that would assure their civil, political, social and cultural rights. They also stress the need for reform of the Geneva Convention on Refugees to reflect the specific situation of Romani asylum seekers. On the other hand, those who believe that the role of economic factors is significant suggest more economically oriented solutions, along with strategies aimed at reopening legal opportunities for Romani migration. They envision programmes aimed at fostering economic independence for the Roma by improving economic opportunities in their home countries through financial aid for Romani entrepreneurs and a more effective unemployment policy. They argue that such programmes should be accompanied by the normalisation of the transfer of Romani labour through the signing of bilateral treaties between refugee-producing and refugee-receiving countries. They believe

that such an agreement would sanction the importing of a labour force. Such an approach requires Western countries to acknowledge that Roma have something to offer in both economic and cultural terms to their societies.

While the majority of articles in our original section supported the first view, our “Further Reviewed” issue presents articles illustrating the second, more recent view. Mít’a Castle-Kaněrová argues in her case study of the vicious circle of asylum seeking by Czech Roma that the current restrictive immigration rules have the undesirable side-effects of irregular or illegal migration and increased trafficking in human beings. She cites recent research that suggests that the EU’s labour power is declining and that the majority of potential Romani migrants would happily accept temporary worker status. She therefore advocates the political reclassification of refugees as migrants with significant potential to contribute to the host society. Slovak analysts Imrich and Michal Vašečka enrich the debate by providing a local perspective from within one of the countries of origin of Romani asylum seekers. They present the results of their qualitative survey of Slovak Roma regarding the circumstances leading to Romani asylum seeking in EU member states since the 1990s. They conclude that the causes of the emigration are a legacy of the Communist regime’s approach toward Roma, particularly its consequences for their subsequent socioeconomic status. Contrary to the common assumption that it is the poorest Roma who leave Slovakia, the authors identify the so-called “Romani socialist-type middle class” as the most common asylum seekers. This, according to the Vašečkas, is due to a systemic threat of losing the higher social positions these Roma gained under Communism. In their opinion, this migration can be seen primarily as an attempt to escape social exclusion.

Although both of the above-mentioned articles emphasise the role of economic motives for Romani migrations, this is by no means an attempt to discredit the legitimacy of Romani claims to asylum. It is simply an endeavour to go beyond the activist rhetoric of human rights and to look at all the factors (including those currently not seen as legitimate for granting asylum) leading to Romani emigration from Central and Eastern Europe. Doing so will contribute to the creation of a holistic and realistic picture of Romani asylum seeking, which should advance the search for appropriate and lasting solutions. This particular discussion has an important contribution to make to the wider debate over the international protection of refugees, because it challenges assumptions that “economic migrants” are clearly distinguishable from “genuine refugees.” It demonstrates that it is often a combination of economic and political factors that forces people to leave their homes.

Besides illustrating this developing trend in the Romani migrations debate, our “Further Reviewed” issue continues, as did the original section, a methodological debate between established and emerging scholars. While our original section featured two shorter pieces by junior academics Martin Kovats and Nidhi Trehan, both challenging the approach of their senior colleagues Mark and Matthew Braham, we now present the Brahams’ reply pointing to the need to apply a more scientific

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methodology to policy analysis of Romani issues. Although the Brahams' analysis is at times challenging for the more advocacy-oriented reader, particularly in the distinction made between "statistical" and "ethnic discrimination," it provides an interesting insight into the value of economic analysis in policy development.

Finally, this section presents two articles that elaborate on the general themes addressed in the original section. Will Guy demonstrates that the condemnation of Romani asylum seekers reflects the deep-rooted and long-standing anxiety in the United Kingdom about immigration and its potential consequences. He argues that, in spite of their relatively insignificant numbers, Roma have acted as convenient motifs in this ongoing discourse, being assigned a prominent symbolic role at a time of heightened political sensitivity. David M. Crowe's historical survey explores the importance of migration in the culture and history of the Roma and looks at how forced migration throughout the centuries has harmed them and helped create some of the negative stereotypes and prejudices that haunt them still.

The debate over Romani migrations is evidently widening and, as this issue reveals, there is a growing polarisation of views. It is the editors' hope that this issue will both introduce a wider audience to recent developments in the debate and also contribute further to the debate itself.

Ilona Klímová and Alison Pickup

NOTES

1. The editors would like to express special thanks to Charlotte Lindberg Warakaulle for her editorial comments, which were instrumental in enhancing the quality of several of the articles in this section and to Jasmine Dellal, whose film *American Gypsy: A Stranger in Anybody's Land* inspired the title of the Special Section.
2. For example, the 1999–2000 study and intergovernmental conference on "Current Romani Migration from the EU Candidate States" financed by the EU Odysseus Programme and organised by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development in Vienna.