

Economics, Extremism and Roma Rights: A Dangerous Linkage

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THE theme of this issue of Roma Rights is the impact of the economic crisis and the rise of extremism in countries with significant Romani populations. The contributors to this issue demonstrate that extremism is indeed on the rise in some countries in Europe. There has been an apparent increase in violent attacks against Roma in Hungary since 2008. An extremist political party with an explicit anti-Romani agenda, Jobbik, recently gained 14% of the vote in elections to the European Parliament. Neo-Nazi groups have been more active in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and elsewhere, with much of their racist and violent rhetoric and actions directed explicitly against Roma. In Italy, the government has adopted an explicitly anti-immigrant and anti-Romani political agenda. The European Parliament elections delivered 32 seats to extremist political parties with anti-immigrant, anti-Romani and anti-EU views.

Despite these alarming developments, it would be simplistic and factually wrong to attribute the rise of extremism solely or even substantially to the global economic crisis. The seeds of extremism in Eastern Europe can be found in populist politics, which came to the fore during a time of economic prosperity, not economic crisis. In the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Slovakia, for example, populism and extremism became evident in 2006-08, times of economic prosperity for these countries. In her description of anti-Romani violence and threats in the Czech Republic, Gwendolyn Albert demonstrates that the relationship between economic stress and Roma rights violations is anything but linear and direct: There was an uptick in neo-Nazi and anti-Romani activity when the Czech Republic's economy was quite strong. Moreover, economic prosperity

created pressure on Romani settlements in city centers, resulting in increased marginalisation and numerous rights violations.

Andrzej Mirga notes that the economic crisis cut across a broad swath of Europe, yet only in a few countries do we see an uptick in anti-Romani hate speech and acts of violence. At the same time, he notes a systemic failure of States to make progress in addressing fundamental inequality between Roma and non-Roma: "Significant gaps remain between Romani communities and mainstream society in areas such as housing, education, employment and access to public services and justice." It is these gaps that lie at the foundation of Roma exclusion and hence the foundation of anti-Romani tension and violence.

Jenő Kaltenbach and Catherine Twigg's note on the situation in Hungary traces an increase in extremism and anti-Romani sentiment not only to economic hard times but also to the collapse of constraints imposed by Communist rule, the pyrrhic triumph of free expression and a political discourse obsessed with nationalism. The economic crisis is at best an aggravating factor. This view is echoed by the Director of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), who notes a complex of political factors in contributing to a rise in racist rhetoric and violence. Gwendolyn Albert suggests that the increase in extremism in the Czech Republic is due in part to political expediency: Czech politicians value anti-Romani rhetoric as a means of distracting voters from scandal or more important political issues.

In many cases, the trend toward populism and, in its extreme form, a backlash against minorities (including Roma) can be seen as a reaction to a variety of changes wrought by EU membership, including

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the EU's efforts to forge a multi-ethnic Union with an emphasis on minority (if not specifically Roma) rights. Thus Bernard Rorke situates Roma rights violations within a broader context of increasing populism, anti-immigrant sentiment and hostility to liberal democracy evident in much of Europe. Hungary is experiencing an increase in anti-Semitism along with an increase in anti-Romani violence. In Italy, the Prime Minister has publicly rejected the notion that Italy is or should be a multi-ethnic society. By diluting the potency of the nation-state ideal, EU expansion and integration has created a rallying point for extreme nationalism.

It is clear that the relationship between economic crisis and rights violations is anecdotal and tells an incomplete story. As many of our commentators note, the abuse of Roma goes back hundreds of years to the first appearance of Roma in Europe. The deterioration of socio-economic conditions for Roma dates to the collapse of the safety net created by Communism as well as the check on nationalism and overt racism imposed by Communist ideology and repression. Kaltenbach and Twigg write that the collapse of Communism "ushered in a freedom that also relieved inhibitions" to express "historical injuries." Rorke writes that "anti-Romani prejudice remains well-nigh ubiquitous and has long thrived in good and bad times alike." The Director of points to the EU-MIDIS survey as an indication of the deeply rooted perception that Roma have of themselves as marginalised and subjects of discrimination. Yet the survey interviews were completed in July 2008, before the impact of the economic crisis was apparent in many of the countries surveyed.

What we are seeing is, broadly speaking, the politics of reaction, taking different forms depending on what political forces are in power against which one can react. This is a cyclical phenomenon that has many complex causes (economic stress being one such cause) and need not be an irreversible trend. But we must be vigilant to ensure that reaction does not lead to a serious degradation in rights protection or violence.

Open societies are not without their flaws; they can produce vast inequities in wealth and they sometimes fail their most vulnerable citizens. Arguably those who do not participate in economic

growth in an open society are more susceptible to extremist messages of intolerance, and these messages are apt to spread more readily and efficiently through open societies that put a premium on free expression. Moreover, as the current economic crisis demonstrates, laissez-faire capitalism without sufficient government regulation can create distortions that lead to cycles of economic collapse, with open and closed societies suffering in equal measure. But the value of open societies is that they can continuously reinvent themselves, respond flexibly to crises and over the long run maximise economic opportunity and respect for individual freedom.

In the end, the causal relationship between economics and human rights violations is beside the point. Economic prosperity and protection of fundamental rights are important goals in and of themselves; there is value in pursuing both, and one need not, and should not, come at the expense of the other.

Positing a simplistic causal connection between economic crisis and the degradation of Roma rights is dangerous and counterproductive. In times of crisis, it is easy to treat rights as a luxury that we cannot afford. To "explain" a rise in anti-Romani expression and actions by pointing to the economic crisis risks providing a justification for them. To the extent that populists and extremists link laissez-faire capitalism to "liberal" values that also promote human rights, the rights agenda of an open society risks being discredited by the economic crisis. The economic crisis must not become an excuse for curtailing rights, nor should it be used as false evidence that the rights agenda has failed.

The approach of the state to economic development and human rights can in neither case be passive: Just as laissez-faire capitalism has produced some harmful results, a laissez-faire approach to rights protection will not be sufficient to protect the most vulnerable groups. Institutions that protect rights must be developed, human rights values must be inculcated, and, in appropriate measure, positive actions must be taken. In the political marketplace, even in an open society, special measures must sometimes be taken to protect the rights of the minority against the will

of the tyrannous majority. This is particularly true with a minority such as Roma, who are still insufficiently developed as a political force to rely on the political process as the sole means of advancing their interests.

It is also naïve to expect that focusing exclusively on civil and political rights protections for Roma will solve the deeply rooted problem of Roma exclusion. Economic development in Roma communities remains a critical issue. As Mirga notes, economic prosperity in Europe left most Roma behind and accentuated their marginalisation and the sense of difference perceived by the majority population. He attributes this

marginalisation, which occurred despite or in some sense because of economic prosperity, to be a contributing factor to the increased animosity Roma now face. Mirga's solution is to focus in the short term on a vigorous government condemnation of extremist speech and activity, with a long-term commitment to devoting more resources to addressing unspecified "Roma-related policies." In my view these resources should be directed at economic development. The economic crisis should bring a renewed sense of urgency to addressing the persistently high levels of unemployment among Roma throughout Europe, as well as the root causes of poor education, inadequate housing and health care (to name a few).