Where next for migrant Roma communities post-Brexit?

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Migrant Roma communities are among the most vulnerable groups in UK society.

Migrant Roma people face an uncertain future in the UK. Especially Roma women and children are at a high risk of social and economic disadvantage. Photo: Pixabay, open source.

Although the number of migrant Roma living in the UK is not known, estimates by the Council of Europe suggest that 225,000 Roma live in the United Kingdom, which amounts to 0.36% of the entire population. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, however, claims that the real figure is between 500,000 and 1,000,000, excluding indigenous Gypsies and Irish Travellers. In the wake of Brexit this group faces an uncertain future. A recent report of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) on ‘Roma communities and Brexit’ has highlighted what it called ‘a triple whammy of risks: uncertainty over their future legal status, rising concerns about hate crime, and a potential loss of EU funding for integration and support services’.

The report’s findings do not come as a surprise. They reveal long-standing concerns of human rights activists, NGOs and public policy think tanks over the UK response to the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, on one hand, and the consequences of the Brexit vote, on the other hand.

Whilst concerns about hate crime have been linked to an upsurge of ‘Brexit racism’, uncertainty over future legal status is perhaps the most ambiguous aspect, and the most unsettling. It is well documented that Roma migrants are already facing substantial discrimination in employment, education, housing and health. Uncertainty over residency and legal status in the UK adds to a burden of social and economic disadvantage. This situation is even worse for Roma women who, due to patriarchal traditions, often
experience discrimination and a lack of respect for their freedom of choice within their own communities.

A recent assessment of the European Commission on the implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, has highlighted that, in the UK, ‘mainstream approaches have not demonstrated sufficient impact on improving the situation of the Roma’, and that more needs to be done to involve Roma in ‘the design, implementation and monitoring of relevant measures.’

Deep ambivalence and prejudice

The UK’s failure to muster adequate impact on improving the situation of the Roma is due to a number of factors. One problem is that the EU Framework is a non-binding, or a “soft” policy tool. Another problem is that the target group of Roma people remains imprecisely defined in the UK policy and legal documents. For example, policy documents rarely take into consideration the heterogeneous and intersectional experiences of Roma lives, especially those concerning Roma women, young people and children. A third problem is the ambivalence towards Roma people. This has less to do with hostility, and includes a failure of the legislative system to imagine and propose creative solutions to what is the new European face of marginality and destitution. Sarah Carmona, prominent Roma historian, cited by The New Yorker, describes the European vision of Roma as ‘paranoid and schizophrenic’, stating that, “They love our Gypsyness, our folklore, but hate our Romaniness. They claim to value our distinctiveness, and, at the same time, they cannot bear our abnormality.”

A Romanian Roma migrant. In many European cities, Roma people endure segregation, disenfranchisement and state evictions. Most continue to live in poverty. Photo: Pixabay, open source
To the great majority of Europeans, the presence of Roma, for some, the shameful face of European freedom of movement, continues to create marked ambivalence and moral uneasiness. The current European project of accommodating diversity has shown how fragile human dignity is, and how difficult it can be to find an appropriate place for Roma’s (European) aspirations.

In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Tileagă outlines some of the most important structural, societal, and discursive aspects of prejudice against the Roma. The book shows how solidarity and sympathy with Roma’s plight are not guaranteed by being enshrined in national law — they are, increasingly, elusive values, sometimes insufficient for the protection of human dignity. It highlights the uniqueness and particularity, the diversity and intensity, of anti-Roma prejudices as an example of one of the most troubling contemporary social problems for European societies. Tileagă proposes a much-needed shift from understanding prejudice as an attitudinal product of antipathy to prejudice as harm inflicted by indignity. Deliberate hatred rarely is the sole source prejudice. The idea of prejudice as indignity is not just about the forms and consequences of extreme forms of social hostility. It is also about understanding the less noticeable, ambivalent, paternalistic, social and ideological ramifications of refusal/denial of dignity as a product of modern democratic society. Both deliberate, as well as subtler attempts, at altering, transforming, or diminishing the worth of migrant Roma (through evictions, denial of access to services, discrimination in employment, etc.) stifle social esteem and the moral status that other people — such as majorities, but also other minorities - take for granted.

Anti-Roma prejudices have migrated to the mainstream. As it is shown in one study, unambiguous denunciations of (extreme) right-wing politics and policies are not necessarily followed by similarly unambiguous declarations of tolerance towards Roma people. The majority of people interviewed by the study, report acceptance of the values of equality and anti-discrimination, yet, in practice, resist or show significant reluctance to their concrete implementation. The vast majority of self-righteous, right-thinking, and well intentioned European citizens that perceive the rise of the extreme right as one of the core challenges to a cosmopolitan, more open and more inclusive Europe reproduce nonetheless extremist tropes, degrading, and dehumanizing repertoires, that transform or diminish Romanies’ moral standing in society.

**Brexit and the Plan for Britain**

Brexit is perhaps the rawest expression of the idea that the historical moral order of sovereign states has been turned upside down by the European project. A corollary of this view is that a cosmopolitan Europe is a mistake that needs to be rectified as soon as possible.

The UK Government has set out its Brexit plans in its *White Paper* and the *PM’s letter to Donald Tusk* triggering article 50. The Government’s *Plan for Britain* offers accessible access to the Government’s goals as the country leaves the European Union: a global Britain, a stronger economy, a fairer society, a united nation. There is a conspicuous absence in the Government’s plans for Brexit. There are no separate stipulations for minority rights post-Brexit. The White Paper does not address minority rights, nor does the PM’s letter to
Donald Tusk. Although the language of PM’s letter is purposefully inclusive, using expressions such as: “fellow Europeans”, or “our” continent, it does not address the ways in which the rights of EU nationals, specifically those of migrants, will be protected. Perhaps not surprisingly, Her Majesty’s Government is more anxious about the shape of a future trade deal with Europe, and less concerned with the human rights of vulnerable groups in society.

Brexit is foreshadowing an ‘ethical culture’ that is likely to affect the dignity of, and respect for, others. There are not yet guarantees that this new ethical culture will also protect migrant Roma rights. Faced with different ways of being in the world, and more generally, with poverty, and destitution, Roma people will likely be excluded, as they are elsewhere, from full membership in the framework of community that majorities deem best. With Brexit, this new framework of community will ensure that the decency and rights of ‘citizens’ come first.

Britain’s plans for Brexit, for a ‘fairer society’ and ‘global’ nation, do not spell out the potentially harsh economic and moral consequences for those not covered by the plan, those on the margins. The new Brexit rhetoric of global economic pressures and a fairer and inclusive society proposes a new framework which will further worsen the moral and social status of migrant Roma. By positioning itself as a nation driven by clear aspirations of globalism and economic renewal, yet failing to mention the consequences on (migrant) minorities, the UK has already started to redraw the boundaries of what social psychologist Susan Opotow has called the ‘scope of justice’. Transforming the scope of justice has important consequences for people who are not included in it. Those not included in it are particularly vulnerable to moral exclusion. Because of the uniqueness of Roma’s historical persecution, prejudices and exclusionary practices that reproduce Roma’s historical and social marginality are prone to resurfacing.

The future of Roma integration

If, as Amber Rudd argued, Brexit will end freedom of movement ‘as we know it’, then the future is dire for Roma communities in the UK and on the continent. Roma integration will continue to be a priority for the European Union. However, as Britain is preparing to leave the EU, its Roma policies will stop being guided and informed by European policies and laws. Also, Roma integration and inclusion programmes will no longer have access to EU funding. For instance, for the period 2014-2020, the European Social Fund and the European Research Fund had a budget of approximately €11.6 billion for the UK. At least 20% of this sum was targeted towards promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. The UK would have to find alternative ways to fill the ensuing funding gap for social inclusion programs. Moreover, given that the UK has failed to deliver on so many specific aspects of effective integration of Roma, it needs to urgently develop a post-Brexit strategic approach to Roma integration, beginning with awareness raising and human rights information and tailored programmes especially for those most vulnerable in migrant Roma communities: Roma women, young people, and children.

In order to adequately respond to Brexit challenges around Roma integration, we need to understand, as French anthropologist Didier Fassin has argued, that liberal democracies are
mechanisms of domination as well as empowerment. In a Great Britain that, arguably, tries to protect its citizens from what one European politician called the ‘undesirable effects of globalization’, a desire to uphold the values of sympathy coexists with a desire to control the flux of people, erect barriers and enforce national boundaries. Brexit is exacerbating the latter.

We also need to understand the tension between two Britains: a cosmopolitan Britain that actively fights isolationism and defends human rights of the destitute and vulnerable, and a conservative Britain, on one hand, keen for a return to nationalistic values, yet carefully, on the other hand, to promote sympathy. Too often, the abstract liberalism of equal opportunities clashes with the practical aspirations of concrete liberalism.

Brexit Britain exacerbates the clash between progressive social creeds and values and actual discriminatory, and moral exclusionary, practices. We should be prepared to explore uneasy questions and challenges which are currently barely sketched by asking the Government to commit as soon as possible to clear post-Brexit guidelines and frameworks for Roma integration by developing new legal frameworks. Within this process, it is important that Roma people would not become merely the objects of policies, but active citizens and equal stakeholders in the decision making process. For meaningful and informed Roma integration frameworks post-Brexit, the Government needs to ensure that the presence of heterogeneous migrant Roma voices is both recognized and enforced.