

HORIZON
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Invisible Edges of Citizenship: Re-addressing the position of Romani Minorities in Europe

Results in Brief

Study shows how policies and practices exclude Roma

The way that our society is structured perpetuates discrimination against Roma people. Recognising this is the first step towards ensuring equal rights for all.



SOCIETY



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[Roma](#)  living in Europe make up the region's most socio-economically vulnerable group of citizens. Their plight rose to international prominence in the 1990s, as Central and Eastern Europe countries transitioned to market economies.

“Marginalised Roma trapped in urban slums or isolated ghettos in rural areas found themselves in a perpetual situation of exclusion and poverty,” explains InviCitRom project coordinator Peter Vermeersch,

professor of politics at the [University of Leuven \(KU Leuven\)](#) , Belgium.

“Previous structures of solidarity and inclusion nurtured under state socialism had been destroyed, while certain prejudices, such as Roma being ‘unadaptable citizens’, continued to be prevalent.”

Democratic social policies have since failed to remedy the situation. “Over the last

few years, the Roma appear to have become ever more the explicit target of populism and extremism,” adds Vermeersch.

Identifying discriminatory practices

The InviCitRom project, supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme, sought to achieve a deeper understanding of the policies and legal arrangements that perpetuate the marginalisation of Romani citizens.

“We investigated how the perception – and popular image – of Roma as a ‘deviant culture’ has contributed to the forceful restriction of their rights,” says Vermeersch. “It is not that the Roma who are unfit for society, but rather it is the way citizenship is constructed that positions the Roma as unfitting.”

Vermeersch and his team investigated restricted mobility rights of Roma as citizens of EU candidate countries. Concern over increasing numbers of asylum claimants has led some EU Member States to adopt restrictive immigration policies, to discourage the entry of Roma.

Another case study focused on education. “Several states have justified routine practices of school segregation,” notes Vermeersch. “This is portrayed as being beneficial to Romani children, enabling them to ‘catch up’ with the majority language. The end result is in fact the opposite.”

Vermeersch and his team also looked at the situation of stateless citizens. Some stateless minorities, such as Russian speakers in the Baltic states, are politically marginalised, but not what Vermeersch calls ‘at the fringes of citizenship’ because they still have socio-economic rights.

“However, in the case of some Romani individuals, we found a situation of total infringement,” he says. “They are in a space in between, a place where they cannot be citizens but also do not match the legal definition of a stateless person.”

Awareness of rights

One of the strengths of the InviCitRom project was that it situated these European case studies within a broader, global perspective. “These examples are in no sense exceptional,” adds Vermeersch.

“They occur around the globe. We found a lot of similarities with the cases of indigenous populations in Australia, Canada and the US.”

The project’s results will contribute to a more fine-grained discussion on the situation

of Roma within academic circles, among others through a forthcoming book by project collaborator [Julija Sardelić](#). Vermeersch also hopes that the findings will influence policymakers, international institutions and NGOs.

“There is an ongoing need to critically study what governments are doing about the plight of the Roma,” he notes. “Reflection is needed on how matters are implemented on the ground, and how the politics around new policy initiatives evolve.”

This, adds Vermeersch, requires a wider discussion about how the Roma are politically framed and reframed. “Activists and scholars need to cooperate in order to raise awareness about the Roma’s rightful position as co-citizens,” he concludes.

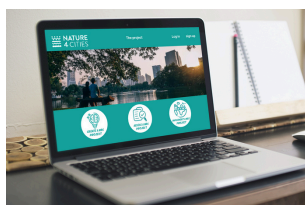
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