

Konik – Montenegro’s Forgotten Ghetto of Roma Refugees

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The Roma¹ are a community for whom the past does not have great importance. What matters is what is happening here and now– that is the prevalent belief among many scholars and researchers of Roma history. It is also used in a certain sense to justify the fact that the Roma have been and continue to be perceived in different categories than other groups. That is what happened in the case of their centuries-long experience of slavery and the extermination campaign during the Second World War. In Sławomir Kaprański’s view, that represents a manifestation of the Roma’s marginalization in historiography.²

¹ This article will use the term “Roma” to refer to the community in question. The word “Rom” (of which “Roma” is the plural form) is an endoethonym and in the Roma language means “human being.” Nevertheless it must be added that there are some groups in the larger Roma community who do not identify themselves by that term (such as the Sinti and the Manush).

² S. Kaprański, *Naród z popiołów. Pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 211–213.

And that in turn, as Anna Reading has asserted, is a reason for continued discrimination against the Roma and their exclusion from many areas of life in the societies in which they function.³ And, unfortunately, there already exist precedents for that. The more so since long-unresolved social problems with which politicians, experts and activists acting on behalf of the Roma have been unable to grapple successfully, are deepening. What is more, the failures and ineffectiveness of the initiatives taken are often explained in terms of assessments of the specific nature of Roma society and culture as being exceptionally difficult to understand. At the same time, Roma are treated as objects and are not partners in the creation of strategies or aid programs aimed at addressing their needs. Yet another problem is the launching of solutions that not only do not serve the needs of those whose interests are at stake, but violate international rules or human rights.⁴ In such cases the goal is not aid but rather getting rid of the “problem” and nothing more. There are also cases where the Roma become invisible to the authorities, the decision-makers, activists sensitive to human wrongs, etc. Worse, this happens in situations of crisis as well, where people's life and security are in danger. They find themselves outside the brackets of official priorities

³ A. Reading, *Globalisation and Digital Memory: Global Memory's Six Dynamics*, [in:] M. Neiger, O. Meyers, E. Zandberg (eds.), *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 241–251.

⁴ For example, the deportations of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma from France, Belgium and Germany; the taking of fingerprints from Roma in Italy; the establishment of camps for Roma immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania in Italy; for more, see: J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Wpływ aktywności finansowej Unii Europejskiej na położenie społeczne Romów w Polsce*, Kraków 2013; and, by the same author, *Europa nie dla wszystkich? Romscy imigranci w krajach Europy Zachodniej*, [in:] K. Dąbrowska, M. Grabowska, A. Kościańska (eds.), *Antropologia wobec dyskryminacji*, Warszawa 2015.

and thereby become second-class citizens. We have seen such examples in history: one is the situation of the Roma population in Kosovo, who during the war there were victims on both sides of the conflict, while after the war their fate did not represent a priority for either governments or humanitarian organizations.

In both the specialist literature and popular works on the subject, and above all in media reports, the Kosovo conflict was discussed and presented from an essentially dichotomous perspective, as Serbian vs. Albanian. The ethnic Albanian majority and the Serbian minority together constituted the main players in the conflict and the greater part of the regional population. Nonetheless, it must be said that this dualistic framing distorts not only the multi-ethnic reality of Kosovo, but fundamentally overlooks groups for whom the war in Kosovo was equally tragic in its consequences. One such group were the Roma, who constituted the second largest community living in Kosovo.⁵ At this point I must stress that my purpose here is not to discuss the specifics and historical basis of

⁵ Roma have been living in Kosovo since 1300. It is difficult to precisely calculate their numbers, but estimates reckon that before the war they constituted 5–10 % of the population, which would mean 100–150 thousand people of Roma origin. The Kosovar Roma are essentially divided into three basic groups: Ashkali (an Albanian-speaking group identifying with Albanians and not considering themselves to be a separate ethnic group; they are Muslims), Egyptians (who keep their distance from both the Ashkali and Roma groups), Roma (residents of Kosovo who use Roma language and declare their Roma identity; a decided majority are Muslims, while a smaller number are Eastern Orthodox). For generations, the Roma have led a settled life in Kosovo. The most numerous settlements were in the north of Kosovo, in Mitrovica (about 8, 000 Roma residents); see R. Schulze, *Silenced Voices: Roma, Kosovo, Memories of Home and the Need for a New Discourse*, [in:] J. Selling, M. End, H. Kyuchukov, P. Laskar, B. Templer, *Antiziganizm. What's in a Word?*, Upsala 2013.

the Kosovo conflict.⁶ Nevertheless, however, a shortened summary of the context of the war will certainly allow a more complete understanding of the situation in which the Roma population of Kosovo found themselves at the end of the war.

The intervention of NATO forces in March 1999 was a turning point for the inhabitants of Kosovo. As a result of two months of bombings, thousands of people lost the roof over their head and everything they owned. Searching for shelter, they managed to get to neighboring Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro or to countries in Western Europe.⁷ At the same time, ethnic cleansing was being carried out, with tragic effects. The victims of these purges were those belonging to non-Albanian ethnic groups, including the Roma, who became victims of persecutions on the part of both armies, Serbian and Albanian.⁸ The exterminations were accompanied by many other forms of human rights violations. Beatings, torture, rapes, kidnappings became a part of the brutal reality of life in Kosovo. Regardless of the absence of proof, Roma were accused of collaboration with the Serbian and the Albanian sides. In connection with such accusations, they became

⁶ For example. M. Waldenberg, *Rozbicie Jugosławii. Od separacji Słowenii do wojny kosowskiej*, Warszawa 2003; a collective work by the Center for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw entitled *Konflikty etniczne w Europie Środkowej i Południowo-Wschodniej*, Warszawa 2002; M. Kuczyński, *Krwawiąca Europa*, Warszawa 2001.

⁷ N. Sigona, "How Can a 'Nomad' be a 'Refugee'. Kosovo Roma and Labelling Policy in Italy," *Sociology* 1/2003, p. 70–74.

⁸ From the 1999 report of Human Rights Watch: "At least one hundred ethnic Serbs, and a number of ethnic Albanians and Roma, were missing in circumstances in which KLA involvement was suspected. [...] Roma in Kosovo were harassed and occasionally attacked by both ethnic Albanians and the police." <http://pantheon.hrw.org/legacy/worldreport99/europe/yugoslavia.html>.

victims of both parties in the conflict. Notwithstanding that fact, anti-Roma actions were not opposed by either KFOR (Kosovo Force, NATO's international peacekeeping arm) or the international police divisions stationed there. It was not uncommon for theft, beatings, intimidation, abductions and so on to occur before the eyes of the soldiers who were supposed to be maintaining order. Furthermore, humanitarian aid was being delivered only sporadically or did not reach all of those in need. A similar stance (though no doubt for different reasons) was taken in Kosovo by the local Albanian authorities. The Roma in effect were deprived of the means of survival and lived below the poverty line, without hope of improving their situation.⁹ Since 1999, and thus since the beginning of the purges directed against minorities in Kosovo, no one has been sentenced for the crimes committed against the Roma group; the perpetrators, even if the victims know who they are, remain unpunished.

This tragic situation and the indifference of local and international authorities caused a massive exodus of Roma from Kosovo. According to available data, 65–80% of the Roma left Kosovo at that time.¹⁰ Those who were able to do so went off to Western Europe, mainly to Germany. Others took refuge in refugee camps created in such places as Kosovo, Macedonia and the neighboring country of Montenegro. The conditions in all such camps were disas-

⁹ N. Sigona, *How Can a 'Nomad'...*, pp. 72–74.

¹⁰ It is difficult to make an exact estimate of the number of people who fled Kosovo. See www.scn.roma.org/survey_overview.

trous. The people forced to abide there lost their hope for a better life. with every day that passed.

A camp called Konik, the largest refugee camp in the Balkans, became a symbol of the tragedy and the social exclusion of the Kosovar Roma. Situated in the suburbs of Podgorica, it became a new home for thousands of Roma. Estimates refer to between two and four thousand residents.¹¹ The discrepancies among estimates are large and result from, among other things, a lack of knowledge about the number of children born in the camp since the beginning of its existence. Determining the exact number of residents in the Konik camp always constituted a problem, because the Roma had no documents with them when they arrived in the camp. Without documents, access to basic services such as health care, education, social support and so on, was impossible. Furthermore, as people who officially and theoretically do not exist, the Roma did not register their newborn children. Retrieving previously issued documents was not possible for safety reasons, while bureaucratic obstacles in turn meant that obtaining new ones would require nothing short of a miracle. This stalemate in which Roma refugees found themselves is confirmed by Jovi Zaric of the UNHCR office in Montenegro, who states that “Many ask for ‘foreigner resident’ or ‘permanent resident’ status, but they are also given the possibility to ask for Montenegrin citizenship. In any case, the Roma need to get documents that show

¹¹ *Move on: Roma refugees from Kosovo in Montenegro*: <http://www.errc.org/article/move-on-roma-refugees-from-kosovo-in-montenegro/978>; <http://www.regionalhousingprogramme.org/actualites-99/hope-for-residents-of-konik-camp/> (7.11.2016).

their origins because without they have no rights, they aren't legally recognised, they can't work, and this process requires long waiting times.”¹²

The conditions prevalent in the Konik camp were catastrophic from the beginning of its existence. Initially, in 1999, it consisted of 200 tents brought by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The camp had no electricity, running water, or sanitation. The lack of water became the cause of many diseases. The danger of an epidemic arising was serious. Medical care was only sporadically available; occasionally doctors from a hospital in Podgorica visited the camp.¹³ International and local organizations, including some Roma organizations (which were particularly helpful in the process of registering refugees from Kosovo) also managed to provide intermittent help. In dealing with serious problems and war-induced trauma, however this help was a droplet in an ocean of needs. There was no psychological support, regardless of the fact that the people who arrived in the camp had undergone nightmarish experiences. An 18 year-old resident in the Konik camp remembers his last day in his native Kosovo as follows: “On the 12th of July around 11 AM three men appeared in uniform in our home. They had uniforms and armbands with the logo of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). They said they were searching for weapons, which we did not possess. They twisted our

¹² G. D'Amico, *Montenegro: Roma camp in Konik, the 'forgotten refugees'*, ANSAmed, 6.04.2016, http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2016/04/06/montenegro-roma-camp-in-konik-the-forgotten-refugees_cf577c48-cbe1-4a71-bfb5-bbdd020523bf.html (3.11.2016).

¹³ Ibid.

arms, demanding that we tell them where the weapons were. They took 500 Deutschmarks from my pocket, stating that I must have stolen them and therefore must now give them two thousand Deutschmarks if I wanted to stay alive. We had no more money, so the Albanians took me to the police station in Kličina, where the KLA headquarters were then. The station was full of people wearing the same uniforms. They took me to a room where about 15 of them beat me with sticks and metal rods. My nose was bleeding and I was vomiting blood. They let me go 5 hours later. We left in the evening that same day.”¹⁴

A 46 year-old Roma man also tells about the road he traveled in search of safety and shelter for himself and his family:

I saw with my own eyes how the Albanians beat and tortured Roma and burned our homes. Whole villages burned down. We had to flee. We took a bus to Niš in Serbia. After two nights spent there we were sent to the nearby village of Merošina, where something like a center for Roma refugees from Kosovo was located. On the third night, the police from Niš came there and, threatening us, ordered that we return to Kosovo, to the city of Kosovo Polje. They loaded us onto 10 buses and put us in a school building with several thousand other Roma. KFOR took responsibility for safety in the camp, but in spite of everything we did not feel safe. We decided that we would leave Serbia.

¹⁴ Ibid.

We got to Kruševac in Serbia, where we were warmly received by the local Roma community. We had no humanitarian aid and we lived at our hosts' expense. After five or six days we decided to leave, after we heard that in the city of Bar there were ships taking Roma to Italy. We stayed in the park two days while waiting for the ship. We didn't make it, because the police arrived there. We went back to Podgorica and we have no idea what we are going to do now.¹⁵

The lack of basic medical and psychological help was not a problem of the camp's initial phase of existence only. It remained absent the whole time. There was also no sense of safety, such a vital need in the aftermath of the camp residents' traumatic war experiences. In addition, after what they had lived through, they were perfectly well aware that their fate was a matter of indifference even to those supposed to take responsibility for the safety of the civilian population. They were left to themselves, and what would happen to them next depended on sheer chance.

In time, beside the tents made from rags in the Konik camp there appeared wooden barracks and industrial containers. People arrived in increasing numbers and the camp grew. Unfortunately, 2012 brought new troubles and a fire in the camp, as a result of which 18 wooden barracks burned down. 124 people were left without a roof over

¹⁵ Ibid.

their heads. Those injured in the fire were provided with elementary first aid from UNHCR and the Red Cross.¹⁶

The economic situation of the residents of Konik is drastically bad. As mentioned above, without documents confirming their origin they cannot legalize their status. They vegetate from day to day, without work or means of sustenance. Some try to improve their material situation by getting involved in criminal activity. Others make their living by begging on the streets, like the mother and wife of Elvis, whose family has been living for 10 years in rag huts provided by UNHCR after the war. Elvis confides: “I don’t know how long we are going to live here. Though the conditions here are inhuman, we have been living here 10 years. Why does nobody want to help us?”¹⁷ Despite occasional help that comes from humanitarian organizations, the refugees’ needs are constantly growing. Children are born in the camp– further generations will exist without any opportunities if nothing changes. The danger to residents’ life and health is also growing. The camp is located in the vicinity of the largest refuse dump in Montenegro. In summer, due to high temperatures, it is physically challenging to come near the camp because of the unimaginable stench. People have lost their motivation to fight for a better tomorrow. After years of vegetating in the camps, they know that in reality their fate is of interest to anyone else. Nonetheless it is true that every

¹⁶ P. Greenwood, *Montenegro’s Roma camp shame*, AlJazeera, 20.06.2009, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2009/06/2009617174646135402.html> (3.11.2016).

¹⁷ Ibid.; *Montenegro: Floods in the refugee Camp Konik DREF Operation (MDRME006) Final report*, reliefweb, 21.02.2013, <http://reliefweb.int/report/montenegro/montenegro-floods-refugee-camp-konik-dref-operation-mdrme006-final-report> (3.11.2016).

now and then representatives of humanitarian or human rights organizations do visit the camp. They gather information, prepare reports, and leave. Meanwhile, nothing changes in the situation of the Roma. The situation is further complicated by the continually worsening relations between them and the majority society, which does not want to have burdensome neighbors.

In recent years the living conditions in the Konik camp have begun to improve slightly, which must be understood as relating to Montenegro's efforts to attain membership in the European Union. EU rules demand that problems connected with the situation of minorities, refugees, etc. be kept under control. Funds are relayed to support those processes in future EU member states.¹⁸

In September 2014 the European Commission financed the construction of living areas for the Roma, who since the end of the war in Kosovo have been living in tents. The plan was to build about 120 apartments. Construction began in late 2015 and early 2016. The support of international organizations also made it possible to improve access to education and create employment opportunities for a small number of camp residents. Transportation to school and educational workshops on health issues were organized for over 200 children.¹⁹

¹⁸ J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Aktywność finansowa...*, pp. 108–111.

¹⁹ See www.unhrc.org; www.errc.org; *Hope for residents of Konik camp*, Regional Housing Programme, 31.03.2015, <http://www.regionalhousingprogramme.org/actualites-99/hope-for-residents-of-konik-camp/> (3.11.2016).

As the Montenegrin authorities and EU decision-makers have emphatically stated, the new homes and integration programs for Roma refugees are intended to help them start a new life. There is no doubt that these actions are necessary, though not sufficient, for there to be not only short-term improvement, but a long-term process that would transform the Roma refugee's socioeconomic situation. One Konik resident from Kosovo, Mensur Haliti, notes that the actions taken by the European Union and local authorities to help the Roma in the Konik camp are ineffective. At the same time, he underscores the paternalistic approach of the authorities and activists. Of course, in his view, the European Union is playing a vital and important role in stabilizing the situation of Roma refugees, but nevertheless, despite the transfer of tens of millions of Euros supposed to help Roma refugees, not a great deal has changed in their situation. Haliti feels that the money has not been invested the right way, because the Roma, instead of becoming independent from social support, are becoming increasingly dependent on it.

It is difficult to disagree with this Roma activist. The effects of the war should have been proactively redressed and basic assistance implemented much sooner. It is unimaginable that people who became victims of the various results of the war, from ethnic cleansing to persecution, violence and resettlement, have been living since 1999 in tents or containers. It demonstrates the irrelevance in political affairs of people who have no political power because they lack a nation of their own. No country wants to

take in Roma refugees. Associated with social problems, they would become a burden to local authorities. For that reason, they have vegetated for years, and have had to wait so long for minor but important advances to be made. The scale of the problem remains enormous, and in view of the current migration crisis related to unstable situations in Africa and the Middle East and the massive influx of refugees to Europe, their needs will probably not be acknowledged by EU decision-makers. Those policy makers are even less likely to do so given that for the Roma refugees from Kosovo, change for the better means more than new domiciles– it also means fighting chronic unemployment and apathy. Nonetheless, the Montenegrin government has set itself an ambitious plan, one essential for the country’s future EU membership: by the end of 2017 the Konik camp will be liquidated, and the living situation of the Roma will undergo significant improvement. This perspective provides some hope. In practical terms, any betterment will be an extremely long process demanding engagement from politicians, activists, experts, but also the Roma themselves. In this context it is worth citing the words of the Kosovar activist Gazmen Salijević: “[I]f you consider us as human beings, then you must put us in the game.”²⁰

Unfortunately, despite many similar statements, and even injunctions of EU institutions against treating the Roma as objects and in favor of involving them in projects direct-

²⁰ N. Sigona, *Being Roma Activists in Post-Independence Kosovo*, [in:] N. Sigona, N. Trehan (ed.), *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic. Mobilization and the Neoliberal Order*, Basingstoke 2009, p. 212.

ed toward them as early as the stage of developing ideas or a plan of action, the notion remains wishful thinking. The stereotypical belief that the Roma are not capable of or interested in working together still holds great power. If the effort to overcome it is not successful, the process of positive change will not become a reality. The saddest part, however, is that the consequences of that will, in the end, be borne by the Roma.

translated by Timothy Williams