

ROMANIAN ROMA COMMUNITY IN WROCLAW



REPORT

Wrocław, Poland, November 2013

22 November 2013 dates the first trial of eviction lawsuit between the City of Wrocław and fifteen Romanian Roma, inhabitants of makeshift settlement in Wrocław

Romanian Roma community In Wrocław consists of approximately 100 members divided into 2 groups. They inhabit self-made settlements located on the grounds of former garden allotments at Kamińskiego st. and wasteland area at Paprotna st. Both locations being the property of City of Wrocław.

The majority of inhabitants of these settlements come from Fargas area of Braşov district in Transylvania (Romania). Being citizens of EU member state, since Jan 01 2007 they reside in Poland legally, they have the right to seek legal employment and are entitled to free education. As non-Schengen Area citizens, they are obliged to register after 3 months of their residency in Poland. Yet since the removal of border passport control, there is no way of determining the extent of time these people have spent in Poland. The lack of residency registration makes it impossible for the community members to take advantage of social help programs or to register with local Job Center. In order to get registered as resident, one has to have legal employment, social security insurance, and accommodation. Most of the Roma of Wrocław settlements does not meet any of these conditions.



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WHO ARE THEY?

In the early 1990's Roma appeared on the streets of Polish cities. They would change the place of residency constantly to avoid contact with the public services which would result in deportation to Romania as illegal immigrants. In 1997, the Roma community from Tarnogaj district in Wrocław was led to believe they were going to take part in a social help program. Misled by these declarations, the Roma got on the busses provided by the public services and got deported. Their settlement got demolished and their belongings destroyed. As a result, Roma community exhibit distrust to the public services and strong aversion towards the idea of cooperation with them.

Since the Middle Ages, Roma had been slaves in Romania. Their slavery was abolished in the second half of XIX c. making them equals to Romanian

peasants and granting them freedom of movement. It was then that the first large group of Roma arrived in Poland. The posterity of that migration constitutes one of contemporary Polish Roma groups.

During the Ceausescu Dictatorship, Roma were being resettled from rural to urban areas. Prior to resettlements, they would work as traditional craftsmen (smiths, saddlers etc.); after that, the adults would work at State Agricultural Farms, as unqualified seasonal workers. The children would go to school, where usually they would complete just a few basic classes. Some of them would end up in overcrowded orphanages. After the fall of Dictatorship, Roma started to lose employment and slip into poverty. The ghettos of poverty started to emerge. Many of their inhabitants decided to emigrate in search of employment. A frac-

tion of them went to Poland, some arrived in Wrocław. Roma have been free people in Romania for over a century, yet still they are treated as an under-class of citizens.

Roma settlements were founded in Wrocław locations approximately 3 years ago. Prior to this, the community divided into smaller groups lived scattered around the city. Founding members of these groups arrived in Wrocław in the early 90's. The political changes of that time allowed them to move freely between the member states of the EU. In Romania they were settled in rural areas inhabiting small villages. The families living in Wrocław are the descendants of:

- Romungri – the Roma of Hungarian origin, the lower caste in Romanian Roma social hierarchy;
- Kalderari – former Roma elites, now degraded, possibly due to adaptation of the new lifestyle;

- Cortorari – the so called “tent Roma” – one of the last nomadic groups that would travel in the summer living in tents during that time.

This constitutes a multi-layer, mixed community in which the question of origin is still an important one. This may lead to hierarchical differences and even internal conflicts. Identification of the dependencies and relations within the community based on the origin of every family, would greatly facilitate communication with the whole group.

Roma community in Wrocław makes up 80-100 people. The smaller settlement at Paprotna st. is inhabited by fixed group of 20 people. The whole community is fluid, the quantity of its members change as well as their configuration. It consists of multigenerational families with numerous children. In fact children and the youth are 60% of the group.



HOW DO THEY LIVE?



The Romanian Roma in Wrocław inhabit the settlements of several self-made huts. The huts are built from recycled materials: wooden logs, doors, sheets of metal plate, boards) acquired at the refuse heaps. The huts are furnished with beds and stoves made from metal barrels used for both heating and cooking. Electricity is acquired from power generators. Living conditions in these settlements are extremely harsh, below norms. The settlements are slums, favelas.

The settlement at Paprotna st. makes up several fenced huts. Due to its remote location, fenced area and lack of neighbors its inhabitants can enjoy relative peace.

The second settlement at Kamińskiego st. is bigger and more densely populated. It is located in the vicinity of blocks of flats. Their residents consider the Roma a nuisance. They are bothered by the mess surrounding the settlement, inappropriate ways of waste disposal, burning of plastic waste, polluting the area with excrements.

In addition to that, the Roma often ask their neighbors for water, food and money, which is a growing problem.

There has been instances of direct confrontations during which either ones or the others tend to react aggressively. The feeling of mutual distrust and fear is present. The platform for development of healthy social relations is lacking.

For the past few months the settlement at Kamińskiego st. has access to waste disposal containers, lavatories and water provided by MOPS (Municipal Social Help Center). The interaction between the community and MOPS workers has been described as problematic by both parties. This is partially caused by the lack of knowledge of legal procedures and inadequate command of Polish language by the Roma. Another barrier is unfamiliarity with the group's specifics and lack of cross-cultural communication skills among the MOPS officials.

Since November 2011, NOMADA association (Association for Integration of Multicultural Society) is in constant contact with the inhabitants of the settlement. Since May 2012, NOMADA in cooperation with Dom Spotkań im. Angelusa Silesiusa act for the improvement of Roma community situation.



EDUCATION, HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT

Although the majority of people from Wrocław settlements can speak Polish, they can neither read nor write. The children, most of them born in Poland, gradually lose the ability to communicate in Romanian. The major and most common language among the community members is one of the Romanian dialects. Few people of 20-25 age group attended primary school before they left Romania. The Roma do want their children to be educated in Poland. The major obstacle is fear of involvement in legal procedures. Parents are afraid of accepting legal duties and obligations, the fulfillment of which would be checked on and verified in the future. Another problem stems from extremely poor living conditions of the community. The primary focus of all group members is on daily survival. Since February 2013 some children of school and preschool age participate regularly in informal educational classes

tailored for their needs. The NOMADA and DAS educators develop the children's communication skills, teach them to speak, read and write in Polish, provide them with some general knowledge classes.

The majority of Romanian Roma does not have health insurance, their access to Public Health Service is very limited. Bad health condition of Roma families is also the result of poor diet and malnutrition. The children develop slower than they should, the adults suffer from chronic diseases. Many of the diseases are diagnosed at a very late stage. The actions undertaken by NOMADA have helped to secure access to healthcare programs for some members of the community, especially for pregnant women (gynecological examinations, care during pregnancy), and children (hospitalization in the case of contagious diseases, vaccinations). Other instances of medical as-

sistance, in the cases of life threatening events, are negotiated, if possible, by Roma assistants.

The community lives in extreme poverty. Their homes are makeshift huts. At any time they may be removed from the municipal grounds they inhabit illegally. This, in practice, makes them homeless. Inability to acquire legal employment gives no virtual chance of improvement. Unemployment is caused by two major factors: one being the perception of Roma through negatively reinforced stereotypes, the other being their complicated legal status. On top of that, Roma lack basic knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as EU citizens. Their main source of income is mendicancy. Beggars are mainly women and children. Men collect junk, they are responsible for the repairs and improvements around the settlement: the huts and the equipment.

Traditional occupation of the group's members is metalworking, in particular, crafting of metal stoves.

The stoves, hand-made from metal barrels, are the source of heating in the settlement. This craft is slowly disappearing though, mainly due to the lack of crafting tools. Despite of apparent eagerness to get a job, it is very uncommon for a Rom to find even seasonal employment. In most cases, Roma are employed to do simple jobs for couple of hours. Their pay is usually inadequate to the labor.

The majority of legal interventions involving the inhabitants of the settlements concerns parental rights or mendicancy. The cases are monitored by Roma family assistants. This becomes a necessity due Roma's inadequate knowledge of legal procedures and Polish language. Also, there have been instances of the officials exceeding their powers in Roma cases.

Wrocław Family Court has had several cases of parental rights. Over the past 2 years, there have been two instances of children being taken away from their parents permanently, due to extreme poverty.





WHAT TO DO?

Since their arrival in Poland (for some people it has been 20 years) Roma have been living in exclusion. This exclusion is sustained and reinforced on two levels. First is a negative stereotype of a Rom present in Polish society leading to prejudice and distrust. Second is the lack of knowledge of Roma community, on their rights and obligations as foreign residents in Poland. Absolute lack of attachment with legal system along with economic exclusion make the process of social integration extremely difficult. Lack of public debate, turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the issue of Roma minority in Poland, results in negative attitude of Polish society towards the group. It seems crucial to make administrative decisions and introduce official procedures, allowing regular help.

IMMEDIATELY:

- Help men acquire jobs – employing even a single member of a family will allow women to get off the streets. It will also provide health insurance for the family;
- Help with formal residency registration procedures – it will facilitate the process of acquiring employment and allow the use of Social Services;
- Help in finding permanent accommodation – fulfills basic needs and allows further development
- Formalize the institution of family assistant – this is highly recommended by the members of NOMADA association who report great success with application of this solution at work with Roma community over the past 2 years.

LONG-TERM:

- Carry out vocational courses for men and women;
- Carry out language courses (Polish and Romanian);
- Educate on health and nutrition;
- Prepare children to attend schools and preschools;
- Prepare schools and preschools for adaptation of these children;
- Carry out social campaign in Wrocław (and other cities) – it is important to work with the excluded group as well as with the receiving group.



Success can be achieved if three crucial conditions can be met.

- 1. All of the parties of interest should be involved in the dialogue.** This includes local and national authorities, social associations and organizations and the beneficiaries – Roma community. Cooperation is crucial throughout the designing and implementing of the projects. One can't forget about "the receiving community" throughout the process. It should be informed, educated and talked to.
- 2. It is necessary to integrate the activities and actions involving various aspects of life of the beneficiary group.** The most important issues of employment, education, accommodation and health should be the primary targets. Efforts made within just one of these areas of interest hardly ever result in permanent positive outcome.
- 3. Partnership among the groups should be created on both, vertical and horizontal surface.** All of the parties of interest should be involved in managing processes. Cooperation of local, national and EU authorities, activists, volunteers, experts and Roma themselves, gives a real chance of bringing about genuine, lasting improvement.

We already know that large-scale, long-lasting, top-down programs just don't work. The focus should shift to bottom-up initiatives and organizations being in direct contact with Roma community. This approach allows instant evaluation of effectiveness of a given action and rectification of possible mistakes. While interacting with the group, one should resist the temptation of undertaking any actions leading to assimilation (forbidden by the Polish law). The aim should be to find solutions allowing the Roma to preserve their identity and function efficiently within the society.

It seems most rational for Wrocław and other cities to learn from the experience of other countries (and cities) that have successfully introduced programs of cooperation with Roma immigrants. Both, the authors and the people involved with these assistance projects strongly emphasize the importance of cooperation of public authorities, officials, assistance institutions and non-governmental organizations as well as the beneficiaries themselves.





GOOD PRACTICE

1. Great Britain – cross-cultural education is a compulsory subject at schools.
2. Spain – there is a regulation in place on unconditional right of residence for EU citizens. The only requirements for registration are proof of identity and confirmation of nationality.
3. Spain (Cordoba) – educational classes are organized for children, while their mothers are occupied with mendicancy (begging)
4. Spain (Catalonia) - The Comprehensive Plan for the Gitano Population in Catalonia (PIPG), is in place with the budget of 3.5 million Euros annually.
5. France (Cesson) – the authorities have given land for accommodation for the families who send their children to school on the regular basis.
6. Italy (Piza) – the authorities allowed the Roma to live their traditional way within designated area. The terms of use of the municipal grounds have been established in the form of written contract. The institution of family assistant has been introduced.
7. Slovakia – A construction/housing project has been introduced involving the members of Roma community. During the construction, recycled materials are put to use. Apart from direct improvement in living conditions, the project has an enormous educational value.

SOURCES

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- Informacje na temat pracy Stowarzyszenia **NOMADA** na rzecz i ze społecznością Romów rumuńskich we Wrocławiu znajdziecie Państwo na stronie: www.roma.nomada.info.pl



NOMADA
THE ASSOCIATION FOR INTEGRATION
OF MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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