



European Roma Information Office

HOLDING US BACK!

Deconstructing stereotypes in Roma/non-Roma relations



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EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE

2013

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The 'Holding Us Back!' brochure

This brochure exposes the stereotypes held by both Roma and Gadge (non-Roma) about one another. It aims to highlight how the stereotypes are often informed by fallacy and a lack of understanding of the other. In showing that both sides hold prejudices which are based on false truths, we can aim for new principles that do not cast the parties as aggressor and victim, but rather encourage everyone to account as dignified human beings with a role to play in transforming European societies.

The stereotypes and analysis presented and discussed in this brochure have been collected over a period of several months. They were deducted from discussions with a variety of people such as local and regional authorities, civil society, non-Roma students and Roma in general. The different opinions were collected during school visits, events, networking trips and meetings. In this publication we focus on the stereotypes which were most frequently mentioned, and we aim to deconstruct mainly the negative ones. We recognize that these stereotypes are often based on falsity and are not shared by everyone. Stereotypes vary according to the geographical location, historical background, culture, and the relationship of Roma and non-Roma. They, thus, do not reflect any kind of general relationship—whilst in several cases relationships between Roma and Gadge might be difficult, there are many places in which they coexist peacefully.

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Stereotypes... What are they?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a stereotype as “a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person or situation.” They have the power to strongly influence the way people perceive and treat one another and can be both positive and negative in connotation, although always generalizing. At their best, they are harmless and celebrate positive cultural images. However, at their worst, they breed and reinforce the negative prejudices that enable the progress of ethnic and racial discrimination.

Roma and Gadjé stereotypes

Roma and non-Roma (Gadjé) have diverse and complex relationships. Their relationships can be open and peaceful, but they can also be rather closed, tense, and marked by mistrust. The different types of relationships are usually influenced by certain stereotypes and prejudice about the ‘Other’. Especially negative stereotypes complicate Roma-Gadjé relationships as they can lead to misunderstandings and discrimination. In the last decades there has been a development in the understanding of the ways in which Roma are often negatively stereotyped by Gadjé, and of the harmful effects and discrimination caused by such stereotyping. Gadjé often see Roma as the ‘Other’, attaching negative characteristics to them that they want to distance themselves from. In turn, very little is known about the stereotypes which Roma carry about Gadjé. Relationships have two sides, and in order to positively change the way in which the two groups interact, it is necessary to understand and tackle the prejudices held by both parties. Like the stereotypes of Gadjé about Roma, Roma’s stereotypes about Gadjé are also often wrong or based on faulty argumentation. The stereotypes of Roma about Gadjé do not necessarily define their relationship with Gadjé, as Gadjé are not put into inferior positions by the stereotypes, nor do they jeopardize non-Roma’s security or access to different fields of life. In order to avoid a self-perpetuating discourse of difference and intolerance, we must understand and tackle the stereotypes held by both Roma and non-Roma about each other.

It is necessary to understand and tackle the prejudices held by both Roma and non-Roma about each other.

The Roma in Europe

Throughout their history in Europe, the Roma have generally faced many obstacles to integrate into mainstream society. The reasons for this are complex, but it is clear that ethnic discrimination of Roma by non-Roma has been an important factor. Already since the middle ages, European states were enacting laws that were specifically designed to marginalize Roma and exclude them from mainstream society. In fact, a number of heads of state legalized the killing of Roma and anti-Gypsyism became widespread amongst the general population across the continent. The long-held and socially ingrained prejudice against Roma, culminated in the destructive and violent ideologies of the Nazi's in the Third Reich. Along with numerous other communities, the Roma were classified as *Untermenschen* (subhuman creatures) by the Nazi regime, and between 220,000-1.5 million Roma were systematically exterminated in the Holocaust. Yet, despite this suffering, little was done to improve their situation after the war. No Roma were called to give testimony at the Nuremburg trials, only few received adequate compensation or recognition, and if so very late.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

...the European Union and the Council of Europe use the term 'Roma' to refer to a number of different, often disparate ethnic groups? Included within this terminology are, amongst other communities, Romani, Sinti, Gitanes, Manouche and Irish Travellers, who all hold distinct cultural identities but who are all labeled 'Gypsies' by outsiders. Despite this diversity, many Roma cultures and languages are thought to descend from an original westward migration of people out of northern India around 1000 years ago. Interestingly, these migrants were sometimes confused with Egyptians, a falsity from which the term 'Gypsy' has evolved over the centuries.

Today, the Roma people are the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with an estimated population of 10-12 million people of which 6 million live in the EU. Despite their significant demographic presence and the fact that the socio-economic wellbeing of Roma lags far behind that of the majority population in all EU Member States, many decision makers still neglect the issues faced by these communities. Across the continent, Roma and non-Roma live side-by-side, yet they often inhabit completely different worlds. One of the challenges for European societies is to bring these worlds together in a way that is informed by mutual understanding and acceptance.

AND DID YOU KNOW THAT...

...Roma call non-Roma 'Gadje'? A non-Roma man is called 'Gadjo' and a non-Roma woman is called 'Gadji'. The term has its origins in Sanskrit ('gadjjha') and its ancient meaning is 'non-warrior'; the forefathers of today's Roma who left India approximately thousand years ago belonged to the 'warrior caste'—the Gadje were, thus, those people who did not belong to that caste. Today the term 'Gadje' refers to non-Roma, and sometimes also to Roma who do not follow a Romani lifestyle. It, hence, designates the 'Other', or outsiders. Generally, 'Gadje' does not have a negative or offensive connotation. Just like the word 'Roma', 'Gadje' does not designate an homogenous group of people, but an assemblage of people with diverse lifestyles, religions, cultures and languages. At the same time, many Roma carry generalizing ideas, as well as positive and negative stereotypes about the people they refer to as Gadje—just like non-Roma have stereotypes about Roma.

Stereotypes about Roma by Gadge (non-Roma)

Do you think Roma are...

'They are always playing music. It seems they all know how to play music.' – Marie

... good musicians?

Erroneously, music is considered as a core feature of Roma culture. Historically music has been a tool that helped Roma to survive since any other means to support themselves were barely available. The fact that many famous Roma are musicians reinforces this stereotype and might even make some Roma believe that music is the only way to be successful. Although some groups of Roma are musicians, not all of them are.

Despite some positive connotations in this stereotype, it is overwhelmingly negative. It implies that Roma are lazy and prefer an 'easy option' instead of looking for a job. The reality is that access to employment for Roma is difficult. Unemployment among Roma is double than among non-Roma; in Czech Republic and Slovakia it is 4-5 times higher. This is mainly due to the discrimination Roma face. For example, an EU survey¹ showed that 50% of the surveyed Roma felt discriminated against when applying for a job.

Do you think Roma are...

'They typically have mullets and sort of wear denim jackets and have horrible facial hair.' - Jan

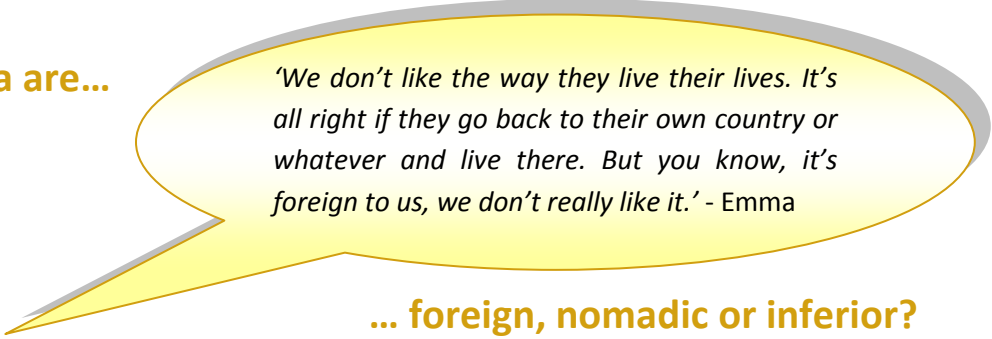
... culturally backward?

This stereotype operates in numerous guises, but mostly entails the idea of Roma as being backward, or behind mainstream cultural norms. Non-Roma consider the nomadic lifestyle of Roma (which is in itself a stereotype as the majority of Roma is sedentary) as being archaic and

¹ http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/2099-FRA-2012-Roma-at-a-glance_EN.pdf

not a 'normal' way to live in the modern world. Whilst the nomadic lifestyle could be seen as subversive or as a way of avoiding taxes, it is also considered to reflect Roma's defiance and an inability to adapt their culture to the modern day. This stereotype is reinforced by the fact that the way Roma dress and present themselves is often condemned as being outdated and unfashionable. Television programmes, such as the UK's 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding' have spread this stereotype in relation to marriage and relationships in Roma communities. In this show, the phenomenon of 'grabbing', where young men attempt to force girls to kiss them at wedding parties, has been represented as a custom practiced by all Roma in the UK, an assumption which is strongly disputed by the majority of the Roma community.

Do you think Roma are...



'We don't like the way they live their lives. It's all right if they go back to their own country or whatever and live there. But you know, it's foreign to us, we don't really like it.' - Emma

... foreign, nomadic or inferior?

A very common stereotype about Roma is that they are foreign, and therefore do not share any ethnic or racial characteristics with non-Roma. In Romania, for example, the national parliament came close to enacting legislation in 2011 that would have legally re-named Roma as 'Gypsies', in order to prevent other nationalities from confusing Roma with Romanians. The stereotype of Roma as 'foreign' (and persistently migratory by nature) allows non-Roma to distance themselves from the Roma, and national governments might use it to deny their obligations towards Roma. Consequently, many Roma have very poor access to public services, which contributes to their poverty and reinforces the stereotype of inferiority.

The notion of Roma as being 'biologically inferior' has a long history, and was most infamously exploited by the Nazis as a justification for the evils of the Holocaust. Even today, some people still hold similar ideas, endangering Roma and peaceful coexistence. For example, a founder of the current ruling political party in Hungary, Fidesz, recently wrote an article in a national newspaper where he stated that 'a significant part of the Roma is unfit for co-existence. They

are not fit to live among people. These Roma are animals and they behave like animals.' The same party also refused to openly condemn a march organized by the far-right Jobbik party, where thousands shouted the same racist slogans.

Do you think Roma are...

'They come and they nick things and they leave a terrible mess.' – Alfred

... inherently criminal?

This stereotype is perhaps the most severe of all, as it portrays Roma as 'morally evil', and thus, it might be used as a justification for any discriminatory treatment of Roma. Roma people are often the first to be (falsely) accused when a crime has occurred and it is often believed that their culture encourages criminality against non-Roma.

It must be noted that in many states national crime statistics can be produced which show that Roma criminals are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime compared to their non-Roma counterparts. However, the crimes committed are, in the vast majority of cases, petty, and are symptomatic of the poverty they live in, rather than cultural conditioning. More serious crimes are overwhelmingly committed by non-Roma. The incredibly anti-social and racist nature of this stereotype encourages employers not to hire Roma. This has the circular effect of increasing Roma unemployment and augmenting the poverty of Roma which could, thus, favour criminal behaviour.

Do you think Roma are...

'They have the tradition of reading cards and fortunetelling.' Tineke

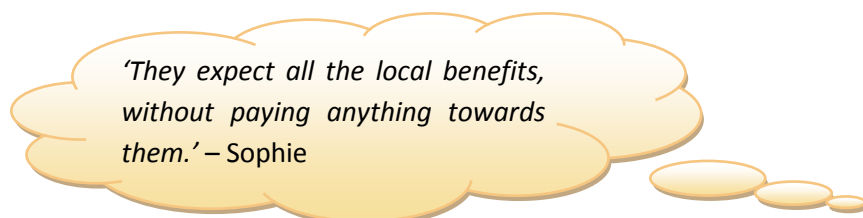
... are fortune tellers?

It is widely believed by non-Roma that The stereotype of Roma women as fortune tellers and readers of tarot cards is longstanding. This activity has been a way for many Roma women to provide an extra living earning for their families since any other work was impossible to find

due to the discrimination these communities face. This stereotype is harmful as it constructs Roma as fraudulent, avoiding decent and productive work.

In the past, the myth of fortune telling and other forms of mystification might have been used by Roma for their own benefit to ensure safety as a way of protecting themselves by making non-Roma believe that they possess special supernatural and curse powers. Only a few Roma women still practice fortune telling as a way of making a living. We should not forget, however, that even nowadays many forms of fortune telling are practiced by non-Roma too. So fortune telling should by no means be identified as an exclusively Roma practice.

Do you think Roma are...



... parasites?

It is widely believed by non-Roma that whilst the Roma are happy to claim welfare benefits and use state services, they do not wish to integrate into mainstream society and do nothing to fulfil their obligations as national citizens. This idea, although pervasive on its own, is often linked to the notion that all Roma are nomadic and have a wandering spirit that prevents them from integrating into local communities. However, this assumption ignores the fact that approximately 80% of European Roma is in fact sedentary.

It is often said of the Roma that they habitually do not pay taxes, and consequently should not be allowed to access the public services paid for by the taxes of non-Roma. Roma's perceived nomadism is seen by many as a tactic to avoid paying council tax, and the stereotype of their criminality does nothing to suggest to non-Roma that they pay income tax either. Consequently, there is often pressure put on local authorities not to provide community-specific services for the Roma, who are seen as undeserving of help from mainstream society.

Stereotypes about Gadge (non-Roma) by Roma

Do you think Gadge are...

'Gadge constantly think about their money, they hoard it.' Sara

... stingy?

The idea that Gadge are stingy might have its origins in the fact that many Gadge pay more attention to economic security than Roma might do, and that it is more common for them to plan financial or material matters thoroughly. Because most Roma have been poor for centuries, some of them even being slaves in the past, they did not get the possibility to earn a lot of money or make financial plans for the future. For poor Roma communities it is common to rely on and live with the present, rather than making plans for the future, which is often insecure due to the poor socioeconomic conditions they live in. Gadge, who often have a financially more secure life, and who keep track of financial matters more than some Roma might do, could therefore seem stingy to Roma, even though not all Gadge are, of course.

Do you think Gadge are...

'The Gadge care so much about things, objects and property. They are cold and don't believe in anything they cannot touch or see!' Marius

... materialistic?

This stereotype is quite complex. On the one hand, one could agree that among Western Gadge, especially in capitalist societies, materialism is a widespread phenomenon. The fact that Roma often define Gadge as materialistic, on the other hand, might also have its origins in the fact that many Roma do not have the possibility to lead a materialistic lifestyle due to their poverty. In many Roma's mentality, spirituality and emotional elements are much more important than

the accumulation of personal property and luxury goods. Roma's wishes often focus more on 'immediate pleasures', something they can enjoy in the present, rather than some far-away enjoyments in the future. The 'mentality of immediate pleasures' seems to be something especially spread among poor Roma communities. An interesting example, which shows this mentality, is the outcome of a survey assessing the needs of Roma in Spain. The needs listed most frequently on top of the list were things like a stereo, a satellite receiver, a car or a musical instrument. While all of these are indeed tangible objects they, in turn, all satisfy immediate pleasures Roma are used to live with (entertainment, mobility, music), and are therefore not necessarily a sign of a materialistic mentality.

Do you think Gadge are...

'Gadge girls and young women are sinful: they drink, wear tight clothing, wear makeup, party and flirt around.' Aleko

'The Gadge youth is usually quite naughty. They never listen to their parents and they have no respect for them.' Mariana

... immoral?

The expectations and norms of mainstream societies for girls and young women differ from those of many Roma communities. The expectations of Roma communities for Roma girls are sometimes very strict, and differ to those of Gadge towards young Gadge women. Some Roma communities are quite conservative, upholding traditional gender roles, and they condemn some of the behaviour of young Gadge women, like wearing makeup, going out on their own and being (sexually) independent, which is, in turn, widely accepted by Western mainstream societies. There are, moreover, certain norms of behaviour which Roma maintain towards their parents which is usually marked by deep respect. The behaviour of some Gadge towards their parents, which often does not follow defined norms, might therefore seem unacceptable for some Roma.

Do you think Gadge are...

'The Gadge are naïve—they often trust anything and anyone but don't know what real life looks like.' Daniel

...naïve?

Roma often consider well educated people living in high or good standards to be naïve. Especially poor Roma often trust only a limited number of people and have very little trust in official institutions, which is often a result of their poor socioeconomic conditions and their survival strategies. In many cases Roma, however, consider Gadge to be naïve by nature and do not relate this back to Gadge's level of education or better living conditions.

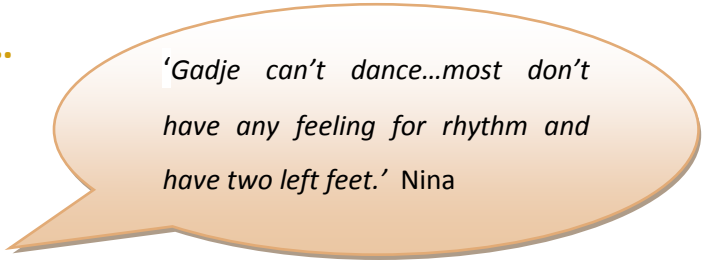
Do you think Gadge are...

'Gadge often forget about the importance of the family, they never see each other and care little for their relatives and parents.' Victor

... careless towards their family and relatives?

This stereotype probably derives from the fact that family has a very high status in Roma culture. In fact, this does not mean that Gadge do not also give a lot of importance to their family, but social interaction differs a lot and the status of the family might be lower for many Gadge than for Roma. Roma families and kin, for instance, tend to live together or at least close to each other. In many Gadge families it is, in turn, less common to find multiple generations living under the same roof as children usually leave parents' homes when going to university, starting to work, when moving together with a partner, or when they are having their own children. The strong family relations of Roma can also be observed in the fact that the whole family and kin visit a relative in the hospital. While many elderly Gadge live in retirement homes, it would be unacceptable for Roma to place their elderly relatives into a retirement home.

Do you think Gadge are...



'Gadge can't dance...most don't have any feeling for rhythm and have two left feet.' Nina

...bad dancers and musicians?

While there are, of course, also great Gadge musicians and dancers, this stereotype arises from the fact that music is very important in Roma's cultures. There are many great Roma musicians, singers and dancers. It is well known that they are very good at musical improvisation and that they have a well-developed sense of rhythm and melody. Due to the fact that they are very good in this, for them it might seem that everyone else seems to perform less professionally than them.

