
Hirundo drop-in centre for vulnerable migrants in Helsinki

Anca Enache

Introduction

During recent years, the diverse political and socio-economic transformations encountered by the Eastern European countries, have contributed to various forms of migration and mobility in Europe. In 2004 and 2007, most of the countries in the mentioned region have joined the European Union or were part of the agreements on EU visa liberalization. Therefore, the Roma from these countries, most affected by poverty, exclusions and discrimination have continued to practice various forms of migration to other European countries.

Generally, the media and politicians in the “receiving countries” have discussed the Roma migration within EU, as a threat to public security, social security and the economy, and even questioned at times the legitimacy of the European Union Free Mobility Directive (Parker & Toke, 2013; Sigona, 2005.) National, and especially local policies and regulations were put in place, especially targeting the Roma (Nacu, 2010; Sigona, 2011.) For example, the harsh actions towards Roma in Italy, such as the forced relocations of Roma living in camps, forced expulsions, and the increased surveillance, culminated in the fingerprint collection in 2008, which targeted the entire group defined as belonging to the Roma minority (Sigona, 2005.)

During the last seven years various Roma mainly from Romania and Bulgaria, but at times also from Czechia, have been migrating for short periods to Finland and to other Nordic countries and have generated income through varying and changing activities such as: working in formal employment, selling a street magazine or different products, collecting recyclable materials, begging and so on (Enache, 2012; Markkanen, 2012). Transnational practices and experiences vary among different migrants, and are shaped by particular socio-economic contexts, age, gender, religion, family status and so on as a few researchers such as Markkanen and Enache have shown in the publication *ATTENTION! Roma on the Road* (Markkanen, Puurunen ja Saarinen, 2012.)

This paper briefly introduces the mobilities of the Romanian Roma migrants particularly to Finland and the main service that is provided for the migrants in Helsinki, Hirundo drop in center at Helsinki Deaconess Institute.

The mobilities of Romanian Roma to Finland

Romania has been one of the main countries of emigration in Europe during the last decades. Massive social, political and economic transformations in the country and widely in Eastern Europe, as well as changes in border regimes in Europe have shaped these mobilities. The collapse of the socialist regime in Romania in 1989 contained a

process of abrupt deindustrialization (Koritz, 1991), which meant that many people became outsiders of the traditional industries and subsequently of the new transition, market-orientated economy. This had profound implications on the distribution of jobs and welfare and therefore on the socio-economic structure, which also pushed for mobilities outside the country, especially as the border crossings became more accessible at the same time (Popescu, 2014). Minorities, such as the Roma have been disproportionately affected by the changes. Secondly, in 2002 Romanian citizens were granted freedom of movement within EU, while in 2008 Romania became a EU member state, both changes influencing the mobility paths as well (Anghel, 2013).

The present migrations from Romania in Europe are very complex, with migrants practicing different forms of mobilities, relying on various social networks and occupying different social positions in the home countries and countries of destination and social spaces. However, the political discourses in most of the Western European countries have focused on the marginality of the migrants and negative stereotypes, constructing them as low paid laborers in agriculture, care or construction, beggars, criminals or as trafficked and oppressed victims. This has been even more often the case when mobilities of Romanian Roma have been discussed in Europe (Benedik, Göderle, Tiefenbacher, 2011; Guy, 2003.)

In Finland the mobilities of the Romanian Roma became visible in 2008. At the same time, the small number of migrants, between 300- 400 people, their marginal position in regard to social, economic, political and civil rights in Finland as well in the home country raised heated and often biased public and political discussions (Warius, 2011, Enache, 2012). Most of the public discourses have been centred on what was constructed as the “Roma beggars problem”, discourse that framed the Roma migrants as a homogeneous distinctive ethnic and problematic group (Tervonen, Enache, 2012.) Almost every year, reforms of laws and local initiatives proposals were discussed which publicly targeted the Roma migrants every day, among which included: the ban on begging, the ban on non-authorized camping, the reform of the pimping regulations, and the bill on the register of the people who are begging (Saarinen, 2013; Tervonen, Enache, 2014).

Structural inequalities, poverty and insecurities

The Romanian Roma migrants who practice mobilities to Finland have diverse backgrounds, living circumstances, histories of belonging or exclusion and transnational experiences and networks. They come from at least six different counties in Romania, and they occupy different social-economic and symbolic positions in the home communities. On the other hand, most of them are identified as “Gypsies” in Romania by the “majority” populations, which means that they have faced significant marginalization and discriminations, while present exclusions should be understood in light of a long history of slavery, persecution and discrimination (Steward 1997.)

With little exception, many of them have been left out of the formal labour market after the collapse of the communist regime in Romania, and never re-entered the formal labour market again. They generated income by working abroad in formal or informal economy sector and working in short term casual agriculture or other works in Romania. The level of education and formal qualifications is usually also low, an important reason being the structural inequalities of the schools and institutions in relation to Roma (Duminica and Ivasiuc, 2011). There are varieties also in regard to the educational levels, belonging to a family with a particular social position in the community, gender, religious belongings or the socio geographical region of region, all have an impact on the situations of different individuals and families.

Because of the limited sources of income and the precarious support provided by the welfare system in Romania, their housing and living conditions are often poor as well, families having to share overcrowded premises that lack water running systems or electricity or lack the legal registrations from the officials. Furthermore, most of the people that we worked with in Finland were outside of the Romanian national health insurance scheme, which meant that they cannot access the European Health Insurance Card and they are entitled only to acute health services in Romania and in the EU.

Romanian Roma migrants face a set of shared inequalities, poverty and insecurities also in Finland. As EU citizens, they have the right of entry to Finland, but most of them cannot obtain registration, as they cannot prove that they have a regular formal income or address (Saarinen, 2012) or have family ties residing in the country. As a consequence, they have no access to municipal social and medical services, but only to acute ones and to support provided by the third sector, volunteers or churches (Puurunen, Enache, Markkanen, 2016). The majority of them face difficulties in getting a job on the Finnish formal market economy, being therefore, forced to generate income through various income generating activities such as: selling the street magazine “Iso Numero”, playing street music, working as part time workers, collecting bottles or begging.

Furthermore, most of the Roma migrants that we met in Helsinki and other cities in Southern Finland, face harsh sleeping conditions. The majority of them sleep outdoors- in tents or in abandoned buildings or industrial and recycling containers. A few of them get to sleep at times or more permanently in the places of acquaintances, helpers or relatives. The rough sleeping condition affect their access to everyday basic needs such as cooking, washing, or storing once belongings, also expose the migrants to insecurities and fears of violence during the nights. As sleeping in public unauthorized places is restricted in Helsinki for example, the people risk evictions by police officers (Puurunen, Enache, Saarinen, 2016.)

The mobilities of the Romanian migrants to Finland are quite recent, having started mainly only after 2008. They are often short term, circular mobilities to Finland but also to other Nordic or European destinations where family members or networks might be present. Many migrants migrate together with family members, while the young children are mainly often left at home, to be taken care of by relatives. In 2008, few families migrated with their children, a situation which changed once families started to be concerned that the child welfare authorities might take the children into custody if they lack a proper sleeping place. Right now, mainly it is the families who have a residence permit and sleeping place who have children with them, so they are a very limited number.

Hirundo drop- in centre

Hirundo drop in centre is a social service for Roma migrants and people without papers provided by Helsinki Deaconess Institute together with City of Helsinki and Helsinki Lutheran Parish¹. The service in its present form was launched in June 2010. However, in 2008-2010 it was preceded by an outreach project ‘Rom po Drom’, in which Deaconess Institute and the City of Helsinki mapped out the situation - including the need for acute health and social services - of the migrant Roma who were making their living on the streets of Helsinki. At the same time acute humanitarian aid was provided for the migrants reached (Leinonen & Vesalainen, 2009).

The main objective of the service nowadays is to provide social support, information and acute humanitarian aid for the migrants who face vulnerabilities in Finland. The work is based on close cooperation with the local authorities, especially the City of Helsinki, and local parishes, as well as with other relevant stakeholders. Secondly, the service is advocating and lobbying for the rights of the Roma migrants in Finland and in Europe through different actions, networks and platforms. In October 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee gave an award to the Hirundo drop-in centre in 2014 Civil Society Prize competition².

The drop in centre provides a physical space and facilities where people can take care of their basic hygienic needs, rest and have coffee during the daytime. As most of the migrants sleep outdoors, these facilities have been intensively used. Especially during summertime, there are queues to the shower and the laundry room. Approximately one hundred people use the small premises of the centre daily during that time of the year. The names that the migrants call the centre reflect its functions: it is commonly called “the shower”, or “the social”. The latter name refers to Hirundo’s role as a transnational

¹ <https://www.hdl.fi/fi/konsernin-artikkelit/204-palvelut/kehittamishankkeet/2059-paivakeskus-hirundo>

² <https://www.hdl.fi/fi/konsernin-artikkelit/233-medialle/ajankohtaista/1875-hirundo-sai-merkittavan-ihmisoikeustunnustuksen>

place in people's migratory trajectories, a place where migrants exchange information on transportation and street work, charge phones, call home and store their belongings.

From 2014 the service has also developed a particular component, which focuses on the situation of women and children. Under this framework a transnational project "Empowerment and Participation – Grassroots Democracy by Roma and Non-Roma Women in Valea Seaca, Bacau, Romania" has started in Romania in cooperation with the E-Romnja- the Association for promoting Roma women's rights in Romania³. The goals of the project are: to improve the equality among Roma women and girls in Valea Seaca, Bacau, Romania; to develop a process of local participation through which the Roma women and girls will acquire the skills needed to access all services/opportunities available to citizens and minorities in Romania, as well as to develop capacities to take full ownership over their choices;

The overall work of Hirondo is framed under participatory and rights based practices, the methods and everyday actions being shaped and contested continuously by the "worlds" of the people that are involved with the services. Citizens and volunteers are also involved in various ways in the life of the centre.

Final words

Hirundo drop-in centre seems to have a very important role in easing the everyday conditions encountered by the Eastern European migrants in Helsinki, as they encounter homelessness, unemployment, access to acute social and health services and discrimination. However, both acute services in the migration countries, and longer-term initiatives in Finland and in the countries of origin are needed. The use of democratic and rights-based approaches are crucial in regards to all initiatives developed with the Roma migrants. However, there is need for resources to assure that people can be involved in actions on an equal basis. When having to straggle to gain the daily food and income, people might lack resources to engage in actions.

All in all, such service is crucial for securing the minimum services for the Eastern European migrants. On the other hand, structural political and economic changes should occur in Europe, in Finland and in the Eastern European countries as to assure a genuine implementation of the human rights among the Roma migrants.

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³ https://www.hdl.fi/images/stories/liitteet/HDL_Kummikylaraportti_web.pdf

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Anca Enache,

Helsinki Deaconess Institute/University of Helsinki

Head of Project Hirundo

Hirundo

Puotinharjun ostoskeskus

Turunlinnanpolku 2,

FI-00900 Helsinki

Finland

Tel: +358 50 5781301

Email: anca.enache@hdl.fi

Web Site: www.hdl.fi/en