

CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE “BEGGING PROBLEM”
IN THE LIGHT OF EXPERIENCES FROM OUTREACH WORK AMONG THE TRAVELLERS IN HELSINKI.

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Europe is a home for at least 10 million people with Romany background. Originally nomadic travelers from Indian subcontinent, the past centuries have seen the settlement of different Roma groups to all European countries. As Europe’s history is also a history of nationalism and strong border disputes, many Roma groups have lived isolated from one another leading to development of sometimes strong local identities, bearing more resemblance to the ways of life of the local majority than to their own Roma heritage. Still most of the Roma preserve features of their Roma culture, each group within their own habits. It can be said that there exists a common and acknowledged Romany culture consisting of strong local cultures, the whole resembling a mosaic in its plurality and diversity. Due to the original route of travel and power policies related to the Ottoman Empire of the past, by far the largest Romany communities were formed in the current regions of Romania, Bulgaria and Balkan states.

Until the late 20th century, most of the borders in the Europe were closed and people’s movement was greatly regulated. The creation and enlargement of the European Union has opened the borders in an unforeseen way creating completely new possibilities for people to travel and to find places to seek their fortune. One of the driving forces behind the principle of free movement is to allow the free movement of labor force, businesses and other services. National legislations seem to have been set to support mainly business-related section of the movement. The national legislations and service systems were however left without common guidelines when it comes to the movement of the poor or otherwise marginalized people.

The Romany people, because of the centuries of oppression and bad treatment were among the ones most eager to leave behind their old home nations. The first landmark was the revolution in Romania in 1989, the second the fall of the Iron Curtain around 1990, the third the extension of the Schengen Agreement within EU (1985-2007-) and the fourth the expansion of the EU where Romania and Bulgaria were accepted as part of the EU in 2007. The “flow” of the poor Roma people from Eastern European countries started in the beginning of 1990 as groups of asylum seekers started to appear elsewhere in Europe. In 2007 many EU countries saw the amount of people begging increasing rapidly. This happened in a time when the attitudes towards the “outsiders” had strengthened in many countries, and the decline in the international economy didn’t help to ease the attitudes. The situation isn’t helped by the old home countries, as many ex-communist countries have adopted liberal economy politics leading to minimal social support from the government.

The current, so-called “begging problem” is thus a representation of several negative developments with far-reaching historical background, EU’s rapid, economy-driven enlargement and ignoring the existing social problems, and both member states’ and EU’s failures to implement some crucial coherent social policies providing same services equally in all its member states.

The presentation of the “Rom po drom – the Roma on the road –project” will share some of the most interesting findings from a year of work among the Romanian Romany people traveling to Helsinki. The focus will be in examining the situation in the light of social work: its current possibilities and the situation where the means fall short. The situation of the Romany people in EU demands more than the traditional, national, domicile-based approaches can provide for the “first true citizens of the EU”.