
Post-Yugoslav Romani minorities in Europe

MIREES' open lecture

Julija Sardelić, the Max Weber Post doctoral Fellow at the European University Institute, Florence, held a MIREES Open lecture on the position of Romani minorities as marginalized citizens in the context of post-Yugoslav states, on 12th December, 2014.

Dr. Sardelić, a sociologist dealing with citizenship, EU integration, migration, minority policies and statelessness claims that the position of Romani minorities worsened after the collapse of the socialist system. Moreover, the beginning of the EU integration of ex-socialist states did not correspond to an improvement concerning a potential citizenship within the EU for the Romani. While the position of Romani minorities in Central East European or other South Eastern European countries has been widely studied, their situation in the post-Yugoslav states has not been subject to research, thus making Sardelić's aim that of establishing how the post-Yugoslav citizenship regimes transformation affected Romani access to citizenship.

During the communist regimes in Central and South Eastern Europe, Romani minorities were treated in an uneven manner from state to state. However, as Sardelić explained, Romas were subject to an "assimilationist policy", being considered a deviant social group, in Central Eastern Europe, while in Yugoslavia the general pattern for dealing with them was of ethnic integration. In the first case, Romani were basically pushed towards rejecting their own identity in order to assimilate with the majority of the country, while in the latter case they were given more space, even in public life. Indeed, they even had their representatives in the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. Although this was the general pattern in Yugoslavia, there were differences even within the federation. For instance, while in Macedonia the Romani language was integrated into the educational system, in Slovenia Romani children were placed in schools for children with special needs. Furthermore, while the constitutions of the Socialist Republics of Serbia and Macedonia, and of the Socialist autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina included a group of cultural rights, in the constitution of the Socialist Republics of Slovenia and Croatia there were just general anti-discrimination provisions concerning ethnic groups. What was however a reality, back in the Yugoslav times as well, is that Romani minorities were always *in-betweeners* due to a lack of clear definition of their status.

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, many Romani groups had to migrate within the country, which of course affected their status. So, the Yugoslav wars had a negative impact on them, because their movements put them in the uncomfortable positions of internally displaced people or of

refugees, and affected their right to citizenship since they had to deal with the new citizenship regimes. Sardelić talked about *epistemic violence*, which does not include physical violence, but means that the Romani had to deal with ethnic and socio-economic engineering in the context of the attribution of citizenship.

One of the most difficult situation for Romani minorities was that of Croatia, where they had to prove their proficiency in Croatian language and Latin script. This measure was taken especially to challenge the Serbian minority in Croatia, however it also had a negative impact on the Romani, since many were illiterate. Another issue was the economic one: due to not being able to pay fee and taxes for the acquiring of citizenship, they were often automatically excluded from it.

Post-Yugoslav states had different practices of recognition of Romani minorities (Ashkali and Egyptians minorities have to be taken into account when talking about Kosovo). The general pattern was that Romani found themselves being *in-between* as far as their status is concerned. Moreover, not only the collapse and the wars of Yugoslavia impacted them negatively, but to a certain extent, the presence of the European Union did not improve their condition and access to citizenship either. Indeed, as Sardelić underlined, the Schengen visa-free regime, which made it possible, for example, for citizens of Serbia and Macedonia to travel visa-free to Europe, led to an increase in number of Romani asylum-seekers in the European Union. This pushed certain European countries to ask for implementation of restrictions from the countries of origin of those flows, having a negative impact on the freedom of movement of Romani.

At present, the Romani minorities seem to be excluded from improvements in the field of citizenship in South East Europe, often living in a condition of statelessness in their own place of residence. This situation is legitimately linked by Sardelić to their status as *subaltern*: they cannot give full expression to their needs despite also having their own political elites. Sardelić, in her outstanding presentation, let us understand that the issues faced by Romani are not only linked to identity and feelings of belonging, but are, to an important extent, due to citizenship engineering. All those reflections made me really appreciate this field of enquiry, because the Romani are very often stigmatized and are victims of strong prejudices which prevent further understanding and communication with them as a group within the European Union and my country, Italy, too. Thus, hearing from an expert in the field was a chance to get to know Romani issues from a detailed and relevant point of view.

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