



Fondation Scelles

Connaître, Comprendre, Combattre
l'Exploitation Sexuelle

Roma Criminal Networks



From :

Fondation Scelles, Charpenel Y. (Under the Direction of), *Sexual Exploitation – Prostitution and Organized Crime (2nd Global Report)*, 2012.

© Fondation Scelles, 2012

Today the Roma community is the largest ethnic minority of Europe. It is comprised of approximately 12 million people. Originally from India, the Romani populations settled in the European continent during the eleventh century. The given name of Romani populations varies by European country. Popular names are: Manouches, Gypsies, Tziganes, Romanichals, Bohemians and Sinti. In 1971, the first "Tzigane World Congress" took place. This conference established a flag and a National Tzigane Day (April 8th) for the Tzigane Romani people. At this Congress, a national anthem was created: *Djelem, djelem* (I traveled). In the public's eye, the Romani are nomadic people. However, today 95% of them have settled down without moving. Those that are nomadic are motivated exclusively by economic reasons.

To understand the specific way Roma criminal networks function it is essential to be familiar with the organization of the community itself, including its strengths and its weaknesses.

Like any other criminal organization (Italian or Chinese mafia, Colombian cartels...), Roma criminal networks have their own codes and specific activities (among them trafficking). However, criminological studies regarding human trafficking are not as developed as the ones regarding thievery. Understanding how the victims are trafficked is essential to the dismantling of the trafficking

networks, the protection of the human trafficking victims, and the prevention of human trafficking.



Roma flag

Social organization of the Roma community

In the Roma tradition, families and communities are patriarchal. The second level of organization of community is the clan (Kaldaraši, Jonešti, Bumbulšti, Miheješti, Saporrioni...). The third level is the sub-ethnic group. For the Roma belonging to a sub-ethnic group is more relevant than belonging to the ethnic group in general. The sub-ethnic groups (Lovari, Sinti, Mačvaja...) share common traditions, culture, and specific professions that bring them close together. In each family the parents of the man are the ones to enforce the rules (the laws making the difference between Good and Evil; between what is fair and unfair...). The man is an integral part of the family. Outside the family he feels insecure. In the case of a dispute between two families, the elderly men of the clan decide the verdict of the dispute. These elderly men are usually the oldest and most respected members of the clan.

Indeed, within each sub-ethnic group there are wealthier families, like in all societies. In Bulgaria, for instance, the privileged "Court of wise members" is called the *méschéré*. Such Court is able to judge divorce affairs, rapes, or any other kind of infraction committed within the community. The power of such an organization is more relevant in countries where jurisdictional systems are unstable. In the past the *méschéré* used to pronounce material and body sanctions. Today the members of the Bulgarian *méschéré* state that, except for the most severe sanction (the banishment of the community), there are only financial penalties. Nonetheless, according to some police sources, several death penalties were executed in the 90's. The Bulgarian *méschéré* sits until the disclosure of the verdict, which can last for more than 12 hours. The families involved in the conflict pay the *méschéré* members. The transmission of the traditions and culture is crucial for the community. The education of children varies according to their gender. The Roma community structure leans on the family frame. Marriage is one of the most significant social ceremonies. The marriage tradition, and the rites that go along with it, vary according to the different sub-ethnic groups. Arranged marriage is a very common practice that acts as a contract between two families. Today, arranged marriages are often forced marriages.

The gap between reality, tradition, and popular imagination

The dangerous aspect of the "judiciary sub-system," specific to the Roma communities, is the privatization of justice, which can be unfair for poor families. Certain determined infractions, human trafficking for instance, are not clearly sanctioned by this archaic judiciary system. The exploitation of women may be viewed as a normality because culturally the woman has, first of all, duties with respect to the family and, in addition, an obligation of submission to the man. Within this social organization the woman's role is

predefined. Marriage is considered to be a contract, or even as a trade transaction, between two families. The bride is often purchased. In return, she must produce a yield on the investment. The woman has, among others, the task of educating the children. The man must financially support his family. Traditionally each clan was specialized in one of several crafts, such as horse breeding, or agriculture (seasonal jobs...) Nevertheless, the economic context pushed some Eastern European clans to specialize in several criminal activities. At the end of 2011, there was media coverage of an incident that occurred in the little Bulgarian village of Katunitza. The event ignited public outrage and entailed social turmoil. The media exposed the ethnic confrontations between the Romani and the Bulgarian people. The journalist of the Bulgarian TV Channel TV7 Nikolaï Barekov even compared the Kosovo conflict with the events of Katunitza. Such a suggestion was more of a sensationalist move than an objective report of the real facts. It actually was a corruption and impunity affair related to several crimes committed by the oligarch Kiril Rashkov, who has Romani origins. Extremely wealthy, Rashkov was member of the Romani aristocracy and used to have important relations with the authorities at both the local and national level. Following those incidents, the reasons behind the popular uprising were disclosed; Rashkov was the leader of a large international begging and prostitution network. The profits generated by those activities allowed him to claim himself as the Romani governor within a political system presenting feudal characteristics. In the 90's, the media referred to him as Czar Kiro, and he truly embraced this nickname. In addition to all the activities of Rashkov, we must mention the bribery implicating some other members of the community. The Roma oligarchs, among them Rashkov himself, are assumed to have sought support of local officials by selling the votes of people under their influence. This kind of clan way of functioning is well described in the movie *Time of the Gypsies* by Emir Kusturica.

During the incidents of Katunitza, members of the Roma community were also infuriated with the impunity bought by the Roma criminals. Indeed, their crimes often incite the anger of the population and play a significant role in the stigmatization of the Roma minority in general.

The Roma networks specialties

The organization of the Roma criminal networks is inspired by the social organization of the community itself. The networks lean on family links involving a specific clan. Several 2011 affairs confirmed the ties of paternity between members of Roma networks. The most frequent crimes committed by the Roma networks are thievery, forced begging, and forced prostitution. The victims belong to the community and are selected according to their social status and their vulnerability. The most exploited people are women, children, and disabled, belonging to the poorest families.

There are cases of parents selling their daughters for "marriage". As an example, we can mention the case of a 13 year-old Serbian girl with Roma origins, who was sold by her parents for €1,000 in order to become the wife of a 25 years old mentally disabled Swedish man.

In November 2011, 20 Romanian procurers were arrested in France. They were members of Roma networks established in La Courneuve, in the outskirts of Paris. The police forces identified 40 victims (most of whom were minors). The traffickers seduced the young girls and convinced them to immigrate by promising them a pleasant life in "wealthy" Western Europe. The organization of the network was based on three clans, and the clan leaders were the commanders of the network.

On one hand, we have the traffickers taking profit from the victims' families and mentally manipulating the loyalty of the victims. On the other hand, they take advantage of the fear that the victims feel towards the outside world. According to a research study carried out by the University of

Niš, Serbia, the members of a Roma community are assumed to chiefly trust other members of their community. This phenomenon is illustrated by the fact that apparently 50% of the Roma community of Albania would not accept to have Albanian neighbors.

The dissolution of these networks is not an easy task because the confusion between Bulgarian, Roma, and Romanian networks generates an under-estimation of the level of organization of the Roma criminal networks. The clan way of functioning is the same for all Roma networks whatever their country of origin (Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia...). The threats and the extreme violence used by the traffickers against the victims characterize their methods.

The profits generated by these criminal activities are sent to the country of origin and often used in political corruption. In 2011, the lawsuit of Ilia Iliev commenced. She is the mother of the leader of the Roma Bulgarian party. Since 2006, the Italian authorities were investigating human trafficking, child begging exploitation, and forced prostitution which assumed to be commanded by members of Ilia Iliev's family. More than 200 children were identified as victims of this network. According to Italian authorities, the parents of the Roma leader were assumed to have earned more than €10 million in three years. The money was probably used to elect Ilia Iliev as Municipal Councilor of the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. Such an election became possible when Tsvetan Tsvetanov, the then Vice-Prime Minister and Bulgarian Minister of Interior, registered the leader of the Roma party in the electoral roll of the GERB party, the ruling party at that time. The pressure of the European organizations advocating for the integration of the Roma populations may also explain this political choice. This same Roma party (DROM), whose leader is assumed to have links with the Roma criminal networks, fights for the rights of the Roma people at national and international level. The claim of

this party ensures judiciary immunity to its leader.

Endemic poverty and vulnerability of women and children

The Roma victims of sexual exploitation are often subjected to abuse and/or sold by members of their family. Many affairs confirm the implication of the family in the exploitation and human trafficking of Roma women and children. The men are often victims of forced labor.

Within the Roma society, early marriages are the norm. At 13 years old, a girl can be married and have children. Therefore the education of young girls is not a priority. Thus, they become easy prey for the traffickers. They even accept exploitation because they are convinced that it is the only way to meet the needs of their families. Even if a victim is identified and taken out of the trafficking situation, the likelihood of them returning to the hands of the traffickers is extremely high. The main reasons for this are the fear of the police, weak assistance from/by the public authorities, and the daily discrimination they endure. The stigmatization of the victims leads them to return to the very same environment where they were initially recruited. Additionally, some jurisdictions, particularly the Serbian Courts, when confronted with cases of return to sexual exploitation, would readily attribute the guilt to the victims, even if consent does not count in respect to the constituted offense, is described by the Palermo Protocol¹ and by the 2011 European directive².

In addition, there is no "ethnic" data regarding human rights. However, *European Roma Rights Centre and People in need*

recommends in a 2011 report, the implementation of standards for the collection of international comparative data on trafficking (ethnic group, gender, physical condition, and other characteristics of the victim) to allow a better coordination between the stakeholders in the fight against human trafficking. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) observed that the laws regarding the protection of data are wrongly interpreted as an insuperable obstacle to the collection of data based on the ethnic groups. UN also criticizes the lack of relevant data. It constitutes a relevant obstacle to the implementation of specific policies aimed at fighting the victimization of Roma women and children, the most vulnerable members of modern European society.

Sources

- European Roma Rights Centre and People in need, *Breaking the Silence: Trafficking in Romani Communities*, ERRC, Budapest, March 2011.
- Romaninet, *History, tradition and customs of Roma*, European Commission, Education and Culture DG, Lifelong Learning Programme, 2011.
- Todorović D., Miloevic L., Đorđević D.B., *Social distance of romas of southeastern and southwestern Serbia towards members of other nations and national minorities*, University of Nish, 2002.
- Todorović D., *Roma in the Balkans and Serbia*; ДраганТодоровић, *РоминаБалкану и у Србији*, Универзитет у Нишу, University of Nish, 2011.

¹ Additional protocol to the Convention of the United Nations against international organized criminality, aiming at repressing human trafficking affecting particularly women and children, was adopted in New York on November 15th, 2000. It is also known as the Protocol of Palermo.

² Directive 2011/36/UE of the European Parliament and of the Council on April 5th, 2011 regarding the prevention of human trafficking, the fight against that scourge, and the protection of the victims. It replaces the framework decision 2002/629/JAI of the Council.