

TRiALOGUE Books

MOBILISING FOR MOBILE ROMA

Solidarity Activism in Helsinki in the 2000s-2010s



Eds. Aino Saarinen, Airi Markkanen and Anca Enache

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Acknowledgements

This book is the result of work carried out throughout the 2010s. The overall aim of our multinational and multidisciplinary Roma/RAGE research team has been to produce a trilogy: we first observe the arrival of Eastern European Roma in Finland, which was made possible by the EU's directive of free movement and Eastern enlargement; then document the various forms of solidarity activism that have sought to address the fear and hate targeted at Roma and to combat violations of their human rights; and, lastly, turn to the task that lies ahead, listening to the voices of the Roma themselves.

The first book – *Huomio! Romaneja tiellä!* [Attention! Roma on the Road] – was published by Like on Europe Day, May 9th, in 2012. The present volume – *Mobilising for Mobile Roma* – comes out in 2020 from Co-operative Trialogue, which was founded for multicultural dialogue and collaboration during these years. As the next chapters will note, we wanted to proceed on a methodological 'on-for-by & with' line by moving from research on and about Roma to analysing research for them in order to reach that final, timely phase where we would function as facilitators to give Roma their own space, their own voices.

Our first joint publication drew on research done during other projects and on a lecture series at the Aleksanteri Institute of the University of Helsinki in 2010, which we also invited other researchers and actors from both civil society and the state to attend. The second publication is part of a multinational EU-venture titled *RAGE – Hate Speech and Populist Othering in Europe*, which was funded by the EU's DG Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme in 2013–2015. RAGE, which involved nine countries from Northern, Central and Southern Europe and the British Isles, began with analyses of populist hate speech and related acts and then continued towards solidarity activism from a perspective of diversity, respect and human

rights. *Citizens' Activism and Solidarity Movements: Contending with Populism* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) has concluded the book series, which also led to *Populism and the Web* (Routledge 2018) and *Understanding the Populist Shift* (Routledge 2017). The volume at hand is therefore intertwined with wide-ranging European collaboration. We wish to thank Birte Siim and Anna Krasteva, as well as all other RAGE participants in the EU.

We especially want to note our gratitude to the other contributors of our book: Raluca Bianca Roman from the University of St Andrews, who reflects on her fieldwork with Finnish Roma in Finland, and Cristina Raț from the Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, who writes in the epilogue about Romania, one of the countries of origin of the Roma arriving in Finland. The anonymous referees in the different publications have all offered important contributions to our work.

For the cover image of this book we are indebted to Elena Dima and the Alternative Christmas Cards of All Our Children, the Helsinki Deaconess Institute and Hirundo. For translation and revision we thank Alisa Manninen and Pirkko Hautamäki. In addition to Co-operative Trialogue and Trialogue Books, we are of course indebted to our backing organisation throughout these years, the Aleksanteri Institute of the University of Helsinki. Our gratitude also goes to the Kone Foundation, which has supported us financially in publishing both *Attention! Roma on the Road* and *Mobilising for Mobile Roma*.

We find it important to emphasise that we are involved in the process not only as researchers but as volunteers in political work as well as paid employees in human rights settings. Therefore, of course, we wish to address our sincere thanks to the Helsinki Deaconess Institute and the Hirundo drop-in centre under its wing, and – last but not least – the clients as well the movement activists who in different ways took part in the observed events, campaigns and forums, as well as individual interviewees and focus group discussants in particular. We are grateful to Elviira Davidow, Hilkka Helsti, Kyösti Roth, and Angelica Vironen,

the local activists who provided writings or key interviews for this book, for their contribution.

Most of the activities followed by our Roma/RAGE team dealt especially but not exclusively with mobile and migrant Roma – Roma, if any, challenge us to rethink our views on humanity and social, cultural and political justice. This commitment we believe to be shared by all we encountered during these years.

Looking forward to the final phase of our trilogy project,
Helsinki, on International Romani Day, April 8th, 2020,

Aino Saarinen, Anca Enache, Airi Markkanen and Heini Puurunen

SECTION 1:

Introduction

Chapter 1

A Roma Trilogy in the Making

Aino Saarinen

Preface

‘Roma are ending up in slums’ [Romanit slummiutuvat] wrote Finland’s leading newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* fifty years ago (17.5.1969/2019). According to the newspaper, they lived – even in those years when the new welfare state was being built – in cellars, chicken coops and huts that had been condemned. Some had no housing at all. Many of them were ‘Gypsy evacuees’ from Eastern Karelia, which had been surrendered to the Soviet Union in 1944. These Roma did not receive rental flats from the city because they could not prove that they had lived in Helsinki for the required amount of time; their chances were no better on the private market. No wonder that thousands of Roma turned to the Nordic right to settle in Sweden, which as the Social Democratic ‘folk home’ had already begun to serve as an example of all-inclusive Nordic exceptionalism (Siim, Saarinen & Krasteva 2019). Emigration slowed in the 1970s due to the evolving of the Finnish welfare state: as a result of mobilisation from below, a special law that guaranteed Roma domicile rights opened up access to local social, educational and political services and rights. (Saarinen 2012; Friman-Korpela 2014; Nordberg 2004).

But there had been even darker periods in Roma history. Romanophobia and its development into antiziganism were already recognisably present in the late Middle Ages when Roma arrived in Finland. Begging was viewed as a means of earning a living, but ‘vagrants’ and ‘Gypsies’ were not allowed to engage in this ‘trade’. They were unwanted as a strain on the resources of parishes, which served as

the social security of the time. (Mäkinen 2009; Pulma 2009). Roma in particular were faced with life-threatening persecution. In Greater Sweden (Sweden-Finland), the ‘hanging law’ of 1637 gave the right to kill without trial any Roma man who stayed in the region. (Puumalainen 2009; Hirvonen 2012). This pattern of development is in many ways connected to systemic changes: the formation, since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, of modern nation states that protect their regional sovereignty and the creation of more or less imaginary ‘pure’ nations. (Tervonen 2012).

The newspaper article, along with studies in Roma history, told the same story as our co-writer, artist and Roma activist Kyösti Roth (2012/2020-in this volume/itv; Pulma 2012), when he recalled his childhood in *Huomio! Romaneja tiellä!* [Attention! Roma on the road], the publication put together by the Roma/RAGE team comprised of Anca Enache, Airi Markkanen, Heini Puurunen and Aino Saarinen (Markkanen, Puurunen & Saarinen 2012).¹ After the Eastern expansion of the EU in 2004 and 2007, Roth was among the first to support Roma who arrived in Finland as a result of freedom of movement (2009/50/EC). Roth brought up the contested question that recurs in academic discussions and collective mobilisation: that of a cross-border Roma identity. Many Roma, though not all, are led by this sense of identity into solidarity activism; remembering Romanophobia and antiziganism or anti-Gypsyism in the past (and even today) they hesitate to welcome ‘new Roma’ and worry: will racism, once more, strike at them too? (Roman 2020-itv; also Kopecký 2012; Kovats 2013; Georghe 2013; Ferreira 2019).

All in all, there should be a critical assessment of what kind of ‘model country’ and ethical-political yardstick Finland is in the EU Europe of the 2000s – especially now when the openly ‘immigration-critical’

1 This chapter is based on our joint work over the years of the Roma/RAGE projects.

Finns [Perussuomalaiset] party appears to have risen in polls to become the biggest party in our country. The EU project *RAGE – Hate Speech and Populist Othering in Europe* (RAGE) is urgently topical in the Finland and Europe of today. The hate speech and hate acts fed by far-right populism are not about to disappear, at least not in the near future. (Lazaridis & Campani 2017; Pajnik & Sauer 2018; Siim, Saarinen & Krasteva 2019; Krasteva, Saarinen & Siim 2019). Therefore it is necessary to turn to solidarity activism and give a voice to the migrants themselves. This is the aim of the Roma trilogy. The current publication, *Mobilisation for Mobile Roma*, is the second part that was begun by *Attention!*; the third part, under the working title of *In Our Own Voice*, will focus on new Roma as speakers and actors. In the opinion of our team, pro-action (for) should be followed by co-action (with) and, finally, the activism of mobile and migrant Roma (by) themselves, which would also be supported by Finnish, ‘old’ Roma.

1: *Attention! Roma on the Road* – arrival and reception

Descriptions of the lives of Roma, whether in the past, 1940s–1960s Helsinki or 2000s–2010s Europe, can be summed up with the concept *bare life* (Agamben/Isin & Nielsen 2008). The concept refers to out-and-out exclusion in which life is reduced to mere physical survival from one day to the next. This issue was addressed by the ethnographic texts of *Attention!*; in the parts relating to structures and the actions of the majority, we illustrated the mutual intertwining of the system and everyday life. The simultaneous analysis of these two perspectives – as well as the examination of both Roma minorities and national majorities – brings to light different forms of Romanophobia, the prejudice that arises from difference, and its development into hostile, even destructive antiziganism and the cultural blaming of Roma. Furthermore, it assesses critically the exoticisation and idealisation of Roma cultures, the image of authentic nomads who enjoy

their freedom. (Markkanen 2003; Markkanen, Puurunen & Saarinen 2012a; Nordberg 2004; Viljanen, Granqvist & Enache 2015; Berlin 2015; Gripenberg 2019).

Attention! tells of how Eastern European Roma who had appeared on the streets of Helsinki were reduced to the racialised term ‘beggar’ regardless of the fact that they sought to earn a living (Enache 2012; Markkanen 2012). Sitting on sidewalks from dawn to dusk was not perceived as work even though it was the only form of income that they could rely on, at least initially. Of course, *bare life* also included sleeping rough under bridges, in cars or in camps set up in forests or on unused land. Now more bearable options have been offered. In 2011 the Helsinki Deaconess Institute (HDI), the Federation of Parishes and the City of Helsinki founded the day centre Hirundo; since 2016 its services have been complemented by overnight accommodation in winter (Puurunen, Enache & Markkanen 2016/2020-itv). However, at all times one had to, and still must, avoid various grassroots control actors – such as private security guards or the police. (Enache 2020a; Ravnbøl 2019). In many ways EU Roma are in the same position as the varied group of the ‘paperless’ – in Helsinki and in the other Nordic Capitals. (Engebrigtsen et al. 2014; Djuve et al. 2015; Piemontese & Magazzini 2019).

What did this look like to the majority population? Finns had to adjust to the presence of new Roma. The concept *blasé* (Simmel/Nielsen 2008), which is attached to urban and cosmopolitan life in its various states of co-being, was and is topical in its duality. It means security in the sense that – unlike hate speech and acts – it refers to the toleration of difference, a live-and-let-live attitude that is necessary in a country, and a world, that is becoming more diverse. But on the other hand, in its negative sense *blasé* means indifference, not recognising the need for aid and not seeing, in the words of the church, the ‘fellowperson’ in the clearly foreign Roma sitting behind a begging cup.

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The book focuses on civil society: established institutions and forums, radical groups, NGOs, and self-organised individuals who are promoting the inclusion and welfare of Eastern European Roma in the name of shared ethnic identities, religious closeness, and universal human rights in Greater Helsinki, Finland. Special attention is directed to methodological issues regarding research for/with/by Roma.

Contributors

Anca Enache, Airi Markkanen, Heini Puurunen, Aino Saarinen (Helsinki); Cristina Raț (Cluj-Napoca); and Raluca Bianca Roman (St. Andrews). The book also contains the writings and interviews of local pro-activists: Elviira Davidow, Hilkka Helsti, Kyösti Roth, and Angelica Vironen.

Roma Trilogy in the making

The first part, Attention! Roma on the Road [Huomio! Romaneja tiellä, Like 2012], analysed the arrival of 'beggars' from Eastern Europe. This second volume, Mobilising for Mobile Roma, makes visible answerable acts of citizenship that challenge populist hate and othering and campaign for social, cultural, and political justice. The third, In Our Own Voice, will give space to the migrants themselves.

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