

Article history: Received 13 October 2016 Accepted 22 November 2016

“Visiting” Close Kin Abroad: Migration Strategies of the Serbian Roma

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Abstract

The Roma/Gypsies are the largest, poorest and youngest ethnic group in Europe. During the past decade, the Roma from Central and Eastern Europe were of considerable public concern due to a large inflow of Roma emigrants into Western European countries. Applications for international protection submitted by the Roma from the Western Balkans became a substantial part of the asylum case-load at the EU level. More recently, however, a new wave of migrants, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, has found its way to Europe. As Serbia is classified as a safe country, Serbian nationals have limited chances of being awarded refugee status. Nevertheless undeterred, the Serbian Roma/Gypsies continue to travel to and apply for asylum in Western European countries. Using data from original fieldwork conducted among Serbian Roma women, we argue that their desire to travel and possibly reside in one of the more affluent Western European countries is connected to the fact that they have extensive kinship ties in those countries. Kinship ties, in brief, explain much of current Roma migration practices.

Keywords: *Migration; asylum seekers; Roma; kinship; Serbia; Europe.*

Introduction

Literature on Roma migrations often has an external focus, concentrating on the range of reactions to Roma as “poverty migrants” or “bogus” refugees in receiving countries (Castaneda, 2014) or on the politics of Roma ethnicity, security, integration practices, and legal perspectives (Magazzini and Piemontese, 2016; McGarry and Drake, 2013; Ram, 2014; Pantea, 2013). For the Roma, however, the decision to migrate depends on a number of factors including an individual’s gender and position within a social network (Quinlan, 2005; Curran and Saguy, 2001). In this paper, we examine the decision to migrate in light of an evolutionary psychology perspective on social capital and values (Espinosa and Massey, 1997; Kanazawa and Savage, 2009). Social capital refers to resources that characterize a relationship between individuals that, directly or indirectly, can help them survive and thrive in a given environment (Kanazawa and Savage, 2009). For a number of reasons, including the role played in reproduction and the importance of biological kin who help raise their

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children (Leonetti and Chabot-Hanowell, 2011), social capital for women can differ from social capital for men. Thus, one can predict that women will be more likely to migrate if they have more social capital in terms of having kin who are current or former migrants (Palloni et al., 2001). Further, given a female’s increased fear and feelings of vulnerability when around strangers (Young, 1992; Kelly et al., 2004), one can predict she will be likely to migrate to areas where her kin reside. This argument seems to fit the migration experience of the Roma, who often have kinship-based social structures and female-centred family lives.

In this paper, we draw on ethnographic data collected in rural Serbia among Serbian Roma women to identify the reasons underlying their migration, particularly in light of recent European migration governance. We found support for the claim that kinship plays a critical role in migratory decisions and strategies, which can be described, to paraphrase Leland (2007, 2), as “Wherever Gypsies Go There their Kinsmen are (We Know)” (Čvorović, 2013).

Background

The Serbian Roma/Gypsies

Roma/ Gypsy populations have been present in Serbia since the fifteenth century. According to estimates, around 600,000 Roma people currently live in the Republic of Serbia, comprising 8.18 percent of the total population (Council of Europe, 2010).

Historically, their integration with the mainstream Serbian society has been poor, and they remain a separate ethnic group (Čvorović, 2014). Although Serbian Roma have, for the most part, adopted the language and religion of the majority, they have preserved their traditional social organization and culture. Extended family remains the most important social unit whereas an extended kinship network and a high level of independence from the mainstream Serbian population characterize Roma social and family life. Serbian Roma populations maintain a high level of endogamy that involves an extended kinship network in their settlements (Čvorović, 2010).

Roma communities in Serbia typically share common demographic features, including young age profile, high birth rates, high unemployment, poor educational attainment, inadequate health care, and substandard housing (Radovanović and Knežević, 2014). The overall situation in Serbia, with political and economic instability, has also contributed to the present Roma/Gypsy condition. In 2009, Serbia entered the European visa-free travel zone, thus allowing people with Serbian biometric passports to enter the European Union (EU) without a visa for short-term trips. This prompted many Serbian Roma to take advantage of the opportunity to leave Serbia in search of a better life. Under EU legislation, although the reception conditions vary between the countries, all EU countries are obliged to offer asylum seekers free



accommodation, food and clothing, medical care, and schooling for the children. Some countries also provide them with cash benefits.

According to the European Stability Initiative (2015), a new record was set in 2014: more than 30,000 Serbian citizens, 85-90% of them Roma, claimed asylum in the EU. During the lengthy period needed to evaluate asylum claims, many Roma applicants have been receiving benefits in the meantime. This has meant that making an asylum claim, even though it may be eventually turned down, is a fairly attractive option for many Serbian Roma. Since 2010, Serbian Roma, as well as many other asylum seekers, have shown a strong preference for submitting their claims only to certain EU countries: Germany, Sweden, and Belgium (Asylum Information Database, 2016). It is speculated that Western Balkan asylum seekers target countries where benefits are generous and where the asylum procedure takes a long time so that the benefits can be enjoyed for a considerable period (European Stability Initiative, 2015).

One thing that distinguishes Western Balkan asylum seekers, including Serbian Roma, is the rate of “repeat applications.” For instance, in 2014, 27% of the claimants had applied for asylum in the EU for at least a second time. According to the most recent UNDP data for Serbia, around 10,000 Serbian Roma are rejected and returned from Germany annually, with around 5,000 returned from other EU countries (Politika, 2016). Most of these Roma returned voluntarily, which means they can apply for asylum over and over again. According to Serbian non-governmental organization “Roma League,” Serbian Roma asylum seekers are “seasonal” immigrants who travel to the EU not only to seek asylum but also to work illegally (Liga Roma, 2016).

Roma European history, as well as the Roma identity, is to a great extent closely associated with ideas of migration, “nomadism”, diaspora and exile (Cahn and Guild, 2010). The so-called “Roma problem” is not only an internal one that is important to the former communist states with high numbers of Roma, but it has also become a global issue due to attempts made by many Roma living in Central and Eastern Europe to seek asylum in the West, as well as the illegal emigration of thousands of others to Western countries. Increased migration of Roma from “New” to “Old” European Union Member States has resulted in governmental responses which are controversial and highly politicized (Van Baar, 2015).

The EU has placed pressure on South-Eastern European governments to improve the treatment of Roma and other minorities. The “Decade of Roma Inclusion”, launched in 2005 by the EU, the World Bank, OSI, and the governments of participating countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and then Serbia and Montenegro), largely failed to provide measureable changes in the everyday lives of most Roma. Data suggest that the four target areas of employment, housing, health, and education are actually getting worse.

Today, many Roma families depend on state welfare payments to survive: in Central and South-Eastern Europe, an average of 46.8 percent of Roma

families receive social assistance, 15.7 percent receive unemployment benefits, and 56.8 percent receive child allowance payments from the government (Greenberg, 2010). The Roma see these sources of governmental support as a strategy to curb Roma migration to the West (Sardelić, 2013). Many Roma residing in the successor Yugoslav states have found themselves caught between political manipulation by some post-Yugoslav states and other EU states.

Visa liberalization ensured freedom of movement for all citizens as well as protection of minority rights. As expected, after visa liberalisation, there was an increase in the number of asylum seekers from the Western Balkans. These consist mainly of Roma from Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Albanians from Albania and Kosovo (UNHCR, 2014). The number of applications has varied over time, albeit showing a general upward trend, and is seasonal with major peaks just before winter. This is a significant issue in regard to claims from Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Eurostat, 2016). EU immigration regulations forced many newly migrated Roma to practice “seasonal work.” Some of these Roma stayed on if their passports had not been stamped and their date of entry into the EU territory was unknown. Many EU countries responded to this situation by demanding restrictions to be placed on migrations from the countries in question, a response that led to ethnic and socio-economic profiling of certain groups, especially the Roma (Kacarska, 2012; Hampshire, 2016).

In general, asylum is granted to those individual who claim that they are fleeing persecution and who can convince the authorities that they would face harm or even death if they were sent back. In 2014, however, Serbia, along with several other countries from the Western Balkans, was added to the list of “safe country of origin,” meaning that “applications of asylum seekers from safe countries of origin shall be considered as manifestly unfounded,” except in cases where the applicant presents facts or evidence which justify that he or she might be persecuted in spite of the general situation in the country of origin (Asylum Information Database, 2016). In fact, Western Balkan citizens face one of the highest rejection rates for their asylum claims. This rejection rate has increased over time (to 96% in 2012) whilst the numbers of applicants has also increased (European Asylum Support Office, 2013).

Currently, in many Western European countries, but particularly in Germany, the refugee crisis has stimulated debates about the distinction between asylum applicants from Syria and other conflict zones, and those who have come from the Western Balkans (the former Yugoslav countries and Albania), in terms of “bogus” and “real” and between “deserving” and “undeserving” refugees and migrants (Van Baar, 2015). Consequently, the terms “asylum seekers” and “refugees” have become highly subjective terms that are strongly influenced by politics. For some, the Roma asylum situation is seen as proof that discrimination against Roma is a reality across Europe (Kroon et al., 2016). At the same time, the concept of “poverty migration,”



which refers to the fact that individuals are running away from poverty and desperate future prospects, is now frequently circulated in both the media and policy spheres. From this perspective, the Roma are not considered “guest-workers” or even “labour migrants,” but rather individuals seeking support from the social welfare system (Kmak, 2015; Castaneda, 2015). In September 2015, the Federal State of Bavaria set up a couple of combined reception and return centres for asylum seekers without prospects to remain, specifically designed for asylum seekers from the Western Balkan region. According to the regional government, administrative units are established in order to accelerate asylum procedures and to carry out immediate returns if the asylum application is rejected (Asylum Information Database, 2016). Nevertheless, asylum seekers in Germany and other European nations are provided benefits such as housing, medical care, and modest sums of money for food and clothing during the several months it may take to process an asylum claim. Reports from Germany, however, point out that more than 80% of Roma children currently living in Germany under various forms of legal status do not attend school, and that in spite of the provisions, Roma continue to live by different hygienic standards and lifestyles, thus creating “a parallel society” in main German cities (Castaneda, 2015).

Methods and Data

The fieldwork was conducted in 2015 in five Roma settlements in central Serbia, as a part of a larger anthropological study on health and culture among Roma women (Čvorović and Coe, 2016). All surveyed settlements were relatively segregated and characterized by poverty, unemployment, poor education, and poor quality housing. Still, in all the settlements but one, self-styled Roma “palaces” could be seen sporadically. The owners of the palaces are “gastarbeiter” (guest workers in German), who benefited from the economic reforms of the 1960s that eased restrictions on Yugoslav workers (Čvorović, 2014). At that time, the open borders of former Yugoslavia led to the “Yugoslavian wave” of Roma migrants, who sought employment in the West. Many Roma talk about the “old days” of the former Yugoslavia and “Yugo-nostalgia” is a typical sentiment for Roma in Serbia (Čvorović 2010:45). The Roma frequently talk about Tito and “the glory days of Yugoslavia” because of the general enforced tolerance of all ethnic groups; among other things, they were able to travel freely. For many Roma, the flashy houses serve as reminiscence of the past and as a major life achievement of those who made it abroad.

In all settlements, the extended family is a prevalent residential unit. Kinship networks are established through cooperation and marriage among extended families from the same Roma groups. We collected demographic information (e.g., age, educational level, marital status, employment, place of residence), marital, health, and reproductive histories including risky behaviours (smoking

and alcohol consumption), and culturally prescribed behaviours for 274 Roma women.

In our sample, Gypsy women were 16 to 80 years old, with a median age of 55. They had been married at least once and had given birth to at least one child. The majority of women were supported by social welfare and child allowances (68.6%), while only a few reported having occasional part-time jobs. The majority rated their family socio-economic status as “average-poor” (56.5%), approximately one third said their status was “very poor” (33.6%), and only 9.9% said their status was above average. The level of schooling of these women was low: their average years of attending elementary school was 4.94. Almost one-quarter (24.1%) never attended school, meaning they were illiterate or functionally illiterate. The majority lived in a household with extended family, with an average number of kin residents per household being 6.27. Initially, migration was not a focus of our study; however, during the interviews, the subject spontaneously came up since many women insisted that their situation, characterized by poverty and high unemployment, was a consequence of living in Serbia. Thus, we conducted additional interviews with 27 Roma women, focusing on their experiences living in Serbia and life abroad. Some of them were recent returnees from EU countries, while some were preparing to leave. While we report here on micro level data from an anthropological study involving a limited number of informants, the results nevertheless provide qualitative information about the Roma perspectives in Serbia.

For the whole sample (N=274), a shared characteristic was an extreme level of passivity and acceptance of the status quo. Several questions pertained to the women’s aspirations and needs in life: specifically, we asked Roma women if they could think of anything they might do to improve their lives. The majority said that there is nothing in their power to do, while 28% said that obtaining social help/benefits or having an additional child so they can apply for child allowance would do them good. Only 8% of the women out of 274 said that getting a job would probably improve their situation, while 10% said that moving out of Serbia to an EU country would improve their quality of life.

Data show that the 10% (n = 27) ‘active’ women who said they would move abroad have several things in common that set them apart from the rest of the sample. Their average age was 36.6, younger than the sample average, and all but one claimed to have finished 8 grades of elementary school, which is higher than the level of schooling for the whole sample. Also, they rated their socio-economic status as above average compared with their Roma villagers. All of these informants had a more opportunistic approach to life. They indicated that, although they were aware that asylum seekers or even seasonal workers from Serbia were not very welcomed in the wealthier EU countries, they nevertheless were willing to try their luck. As one young woman explained, “If you pass, you passed and if you don’t, what is there to lose?” Furthermore, these women differed from the others in that they all claimed to have close relatives living under unknown legal status in one of the EU countries, and who

were, according to the informants, earning “a decent” amount of Euros and were thus able to live well and even help their poorer relatives in Serbia financially. A youngish woman in her 30s pointed out:

Just look at this [one of the Roma palaces in her native village, decorated with sculptures, mostly lions and eagles, but also a Mercedes car symbol], in this poor village, they [the owners] didn’t earn money here but in Austria, I know them, they are my relatives, the old man died [her uncle] but even his grandkids enjoy what he had earned—as a grave digger!

Focusing on the 27 women interviewed later in this study, only nine indicated that they had never been in a foreign country. Those who had lived in other countries indicated that Western Europe seems a much better place to live than Serbia. Many women, coming from the rural parts of Serbia, were thrilled to see the lights of some bigger cities abroad: they commented on how clean the streets were, with a lot of shops, the roads were in great condition, and there is a place for everybody referring to the cosmopolitan character of Western capitals. For instance, as one young woman explained:

Vienna is a great place: rich, cultural, there are people of every colour there, I saw some Japanese or Chinese, blacks, you name it, I lived in an apartment with a shower and hot water as much as you like, and we were given clothes and food...it broke my heart when we had to come back [when the asylum claim was rejected] to this dark hole, but I said to myself, I’m coming back even if I have to go as someone else...

For many of these women, their relatives’ success stories often work as an additional stimulus. For instance, one informant, a 35-year-old woman, reported that her older sister, who is married to a Roma man, has been living in one of the main cities in Germany for some time. This sister was our informant’s role model when they were growing up and is now an even stronger role model since she has managed to succeed abroad, working in a beauty/hair styling shop. The woman wanted to join her sister as soon as possible because she had heard, “You get everything there, a place to stay, food, even some money and they take care of you in every way. My sister is a lady compared to how I have to live in this country.” This informant was saving the money sent to her by her sister to obtain biometric passports for herself and her family.

Another informant was 50 years old and had eight adult children, two of whom have been living in Germany for the past five years. She explained:

I’ve been to see my kids several times; they are doing well, much better than anyone here. They work in “Roma” jobs, but still can make so much more and even save some money, unlike us here. We are trapped because we are Roma [in this country]. Only the lowest [jobs] are reserved for us, you cannot make a living like this. And there [abroad], even if you work as a cleaner, you can save some money and live decently.

All of the 27 women knew that in order to legally work abroad, one has to have a legal residence or temporary working permit. However, most of them were unsure of the legality of the status of their relatives living abroad. This fact did not faze them much. As one young Roma woman who was preparing to leave said, “I’m not worrying about ‘the papers’ [documents]. I have many relatives abroad, and they will help me out to find a job and settle in.” Another woman said she was leaving soon because her aunt, who has been living abroad for many years, had found her a job at a hotel: “There, I will have a decent wage, and my life will be completely different than here. We struggle here on a daily basis to provide the basics for children, and there, everything is provided for free.”

Several of the 27 women said their husbands were already abroad, working in construction or the paint business, and they were going to join them very soon. “My husband sends money every month, he works with his own brother and they are doing just fine. They paint homes and offices. He was in the painting business here too, but couldn’t get a job in years,” one young woman with three children explained. “We have good connections there,” another woman reported. “Our people stick together and we help one another - that’s what you do in a foreign country.”

In regard to the attitude of returnees, one informant, who was a recent returnee from Belgium, reported that she and her family (a husband and two children) went to Belgium last spring and applied for asylum, but had to return since their claims were rejected. “This isn’t fair,” she argued, “they take almost everybody [Middle Eastern migrants/refugees] but Roma, and we are much worse than many of them. If all those people can get an asylum and free stay, why shouldn’t we?” Despite the rejection, she and her family were prepared to try again in the near future, since “they are changing [the legislation] all the time, and there you go.”

Another young woman, who returned voluntarily six months ago said, “There is nothing wrong with applying for an asylum [abroad]. We don’t have jobs here, we don’t have basic living conditions and the social benefits here are not enough.” Another informant, whose passport was stamped with an expelled stamp meaning that she cannot enter the EU for a year, explained that as the year has gone by, she and her whole family was ready to try again even though she may only be allowed to stay a short period of time. “Before, it used to take them [the authorities] much longer to decide, I know, so people told me how it was before, but now, it may take only a couple of months, and you are out” ... at least for another year or so. But, even as little as a couple of months, according to these women, means a great deal. “When the winter comes, then we have the worst here,” explained one woman. “Children are cold, we don’t have enough for heating, or food.” They explained that the best time is to travel in the fall months; that will give them a couple of months off from cold and hunger during the Serbian winter. This constant departing and returning means that a lot of Roma children miss school. E.N., a Roma mediator for elementary



education in the town of Kragujevac, explained, “A lot of parents take their children with them to Europe. One day, they are in school, and then suddenly they are gone for several months. After they come back, it is hard to get the children back into the school system, if they were ever in it.”

Discussion

Migration to the EU is frequently discussed among the Roma living in Serbia since it is connected to the gloomy economic and social circumstances in the country. For our informants, a chance, even the slimmest one, for a new life, one without dire poverty and stigma, even if it requires they get jobs and work hard, is the main factor that drives most of them to travel and seek asylum abroad. To understand Roma women’s migration, social and family networks and strategies need to be examined. In Serbian Roma communities, social, cultural, and demographic behaviour cannot be analysed without reference to the extended family and its impact on their life choices.

The choice of migration destination for Serbian Roma women is determined primarily by the presence of close kin living in a potential destination country. The asylum application processing time is long and the benefits granted to the asylum applicants are seemingly ample. Germany is often the first choice, probably because of generous social benefits (European Asylum Support Office 2013:18), but also because many of their close kin live there, legally or illegally. Preparation and the actual process of traveling/migration are supported by family members living abroad. All women stated that relatives living abroad help to organize the travel, finances for the trip, and getting the necessary papers and documents. Relatives living abroad usually speak the language of the country of destination and are able to help. Without their support, the migration/travel would often be impossible.

The majority of the women interviewed were aware that their applications would likely be refused, but they risked the trip anyway. Even the small amount of money they can earn in formal and/or informal jobs, or through social benefits, appear substantial compared to what they can make in Serbia through the welfare system or regular jobs. Given their low levels of schooling and limited skills, they rely on relatives living abroad who are willing to provide initial support and connections for finding jobs.

The role that kinship plays in migration decisions is not unexpected. It is important to note that family in the Serbian Roma setting includes both close kin -- parents and siblings -- as well as more distant kin -- uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, nephews or in many cases individuals with whom an individual is only very distantly related either through birth or marriage. Thus, Serbian Roma are born into a large circle of close and distant relatives, where personal services through kinship networks are particularly valuable resources (Vukanović, 1983; Čvorović, 2010). These extended kinship relations and family bonds play an important role in rural settlements, among the more

urbanized subgroups, and they even remain strong in destination countries after migration.

Conclusion

In a decade since the mid-2000s, migration has attracted attention globally and caused conflict and controversy among host countries worldwide. Although migration is perceived to be a subject that “cries out” for an interdisciplinary approach (Brettell and Hollifield, 2014), a limited number of studies are directed at the role of the family and kinship in determining the destination of migrants (Mangalam, 2015; Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011; Cohen, 2004). The role of the family also has institutional significance. For instance, in the US, nearly 70% of all visas for legal immigration are reserved for family members of permanent residents or American citizens. This is called family reunification—policies that seek to preserve family unity during or following migration – and is strongly supported by the authorities (Lee, 2013). Still, the role of kinship has been understudied, with few exceptions (Curran and Saguy, 2013; Pantea, 2013; Quinlan, 2005; Choldin, 1973; Ballard, 1990).

At present, the migration attempts of the Serbian Roma could be best described as “visiting relatives abroad and applying for an asylum along the way,” as one Roma woman jokingly say. Jokes aside, visiting friends and relatives constitutes a main component of mobility and temporary migrations, with considerable economic, cultural, and networking implications (Janta et al., 2015). It is during these ‘visits’ that Roma learn about the ‘better life’ and enjoy the benefits of living in wealthier countries. For the Roma, while kinship support is strong, a number of other factors contribute to the high levels of Roma poverty and the problems they face on a daily basis. In their aspirations towards migrating to wealthier European countries, they are not alone. According to a recent poll by Belgrade University of Political Science, most young people agree that the economic situation in Serbia is not improving and more than 64% of current students would like to live in one of the EU countries, preferably Austria (N1, 2016).

In Serbia, slow economic growth and low salaries cause young educated people to leave (Beta, 2016). For the Roma, whatever the underlying causes, the outcomes are unemployment, unstable income flows, and dependency on state transfers. Serbian Roma cope by combining social benefits with informal work in Serbia or abroad. Many Serbian Roma travel to the EU to take advantage of the benefits offered to asylum seekers even though they know their time in the country will be limited. Still, the decision to travel is strongly influenced by family ties and a wider circle of relatives who live abroad. We suggest that the consideration of this motivation provides a crucial way to understand the individual decision to migrate, especially for Roma women. Family and close kin affect the decision to migrate by influencing goals, motives, accessibility, and expectancy. These components of motivation may be considered intermediaries, connecting environmental, socioeconomic and family factors as



well as the actual decision-making process of an individual (Harbison, 1981). Availability of kin support is perhaps the most important factor influencing Serbian Roma women's decision to leave their natal country. For many Roma women, without the support and financial help of relatives abroad the migration route would not have been possible in the first place.

Visiting friends and relatives represents a chief component of mobility and temporary migrations, with considerable socio-cultural, economic, and networking consequences, but it has been quite overlooked by researchers (Janta et al., 2014). Among Roma, visiting relatives and, in the case of Serbian Roma women, applying for an asylum along the way, has largely been overlooked. Many other issues surrounding Roma migration behaviour remain understudied and need to be explored in future research, such as different impacts and the presence of kinship between Roma males and females. Thus, more research is needed to establish the impact and involvement of the extended family and related kin on Roma migration decision

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