

# **Report on the Field Trip to Copenhagen to Research Roma Mobility**

**Prepared by**

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## **Introduction and Project Background**

Since my appointment as Chair of Romani Studies at the Central European University (CEU), during the meetings with the representatives of the Velux Foundations, I have been regularly informed about the problem faced by Copenhagen municipality in dealing with people living on the streets of the city. The assumption was that these people are Roma from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) but no clear indication on their original location was available.

As Chair of Romani Studies at CEU, I considered issues raised by Roma mobility as very important that need to be investigated. To my understanding, Romani Studies is a field that should not limit itself to teaching several subjects in universities, to have some articles and books published but also, must have an applied component, i.e. a practical side on how to deal with concrete issues in the field.

As a result, the Velux Foundations mediated the contact with Copenhagen municipality and created the conditions to have a field trip to investigate the issues.

Between April 2-5, 2017, together with four current students of CEU's Roma Graduate Preparation Program (RGPP), I went to Copenhagen to meet Peter Ellermann, the Head of the Homeless Unit within the municipality, and his unit. I have selected the RGPP students to ensure gender balance and to cover a spectrum of languages from CEE that could have helped us communicate with the research subjects. In addition, all of the RGPP students had previous experience in working with Roma and had experience in conducting research. Melinda Vajda (Hungary), Viola Popenko (Ukraine), Angel Kochev (Bulgaria) and Fridon Lala (Kosovo) were selected to participate in the field trip. The field trip overlapped with students' individual study week in RGPP and no disturbance of the RGPP schedule took place.

The municipality of Copenhagen covered our costs for travel, accommodation and meals. The Velux Foundations covered incidental expenses and the working lunch on April 2, 2017. No fees have been paid to any member of the research team as our research contribution was conducted pro bono. The findings and the recommendations included in this report reflect solely our experiences and understandings of the issues encountered in the field, without any interference from any actor.

## **Calendar**

On April 2, 2017, the research team had a working luncheon and leisure time with colleagues from the Velux Foundations. The discussions helped us better understand the context and the locals' understanding regarding the mobility issue.

On Monday morning, April 3, 2017, we meet Peter Ellermann and members of his team and talked about the organization of our work. We agreed on the routes and places to visit during the two days and to have a debriefing on Wednesday before leaving for the airport. The research team split into two groups: Angel, Viola and Fridon were joined by two members of the homeless unit (Group-I) and Melinda and I were joined by Peter Ellermann (for the first part of the first day) and two other members of his team (Group-II). Group-I visited 5 locations and talked to approximately 40 people. Group-II visited 5 further locations and talked to approximately 35 people. We also visited a drug rehabilitation center and found no Roma among its users.

On Tuesday, April 4, 2017 the two groups started the work at 5am and visited shelters and aimed to catch people in the places where they slept. Group-I visited 6 locations and talked to approximately 40 people. Group-II visited 4 locations and talked to approximately 25 people. Group-II also visited the Danish Institute for Human Rights for a discussion on the relation with police. In the afternoon, I had a short interview with a local TV station that was broadcasted on that evening. My conclusion was that there was no crisis yet, but the authorities have to get prepared for an influx of people in search for a better life. On Tuesday night, Angel and I went for a three-hour tour of some neighborhoods to check out the situation during the night. We have notice people sleeping on the streets, the majority of them Roma whom we already met during the day.

On Wednesday, April 5, 2017, we had a presentation in front of different units of the municipality and Danish NGOs. As agreed before, we had a debriefing with the Homeless Unit.

## **Findings**

The section below contains the findings of our field research. These findings are the result of our discussions with approximately 140 people living on the streets of Copenhagen whom we talked to during the above-mentioned two days.

- Almost all of the people the research team has spoken to (approximately 140 people) during the field trip were Roma from Romania. There were also few non-Roma living in the streets, as well as few Roma from Bulgaria. Most of the Roma from Romania were from Targu Jiu, Buzau and Mehedinti, poor regions in Romania.
- We encountered and talked to both men and women. Women were there with their husbands and families. Two women were pregnant and declared that they do not have regular access to water and no access whatsoever to medical services.

- The reason they were on the streets is because they did not have an income and no access to shelters to sleep overnight. The number of places in the shelters are very limited and priority is given to specific groups – mentally disabled, sick persons, drug users – and for the remaining places a lottery is organized. The probability to get a place for a night is very low, according to the declarations of the interviewees. In spite of the estimates of members of the homeless units, we met no Roma but one in the few shelters we visited.
- The people we interviewed were familiar with the phenomenon of mobility. They said that their relatives are in France, Germany and Italy or that they have spent periods of time before in these countries. In their evaluation, the worst living conditions they had was in Denmark.
- No children were on the streets. Unlike in other countries, we did not see any children in the streets. Those that declared they have children mentioned that they were at home in Romania.
- No persons with disability were on the streets. The research team did not see any person with disabilities on the streets. As in the case of other countries, persons with disabilities were exploited, trafficked and forced to beg. It was not the case in Copenhagen.
- We found no traces of violence, prostitution, human trafficking or organized crime. The research team could not identify any sign of domestic violence, prostitution or human trafficking from the discussions and observations of different group dynamics. There were also no signs that persons we talked to were engaged in criminal activities that are described as organized crime: drugs, smuggling of other illegal substances or products, robberies and other activities. Usually, such persons have enough resources to make a good leaving and do not leave on the streets.
- All the persons interviewed declared that they want to get a proper job to make a living. While we had no means to verify the info, we take it as such, based on their declarations.
- Language was a barrier for their integration. Some of them had vocational training and qualifications that would enable them to find jobs. However, without speaking Danish or even English, it was almost impossible to find a job.
- They went to Denmark in search of a better life. They heard from friends, neighbors, and newspapers and TV of high salaries and income in Denmark and they thought that even if they get an unskilled low-pay job they will be able to save money to send home.

- They made a living by collecting bottles, pet and scrap paper. Few of them engaged were begging sometimes. Some petty crime was acknowledged such as stealing food.
- They did not have where to sleep and to wash themselves. Some of them suggested that authorities should set up a camp so they have access to a shelter and water.
- No protection whatsoever was found from the Romanian Embassy. The people we talked to declared that none from the Embassy of Romania came to talk to them or offered any support. They did report the support received from the NGO xxx (remember the NGO that Simona worked for) and some of them knew members of the homeless unit from the Copenhagen municipality.
- There were reports about police harassment and deportations. The harassment was related to sleeping in the parks and fining. After three fines a person could be deported. This practice was seen by human rights activists and groups (Danish Institute for Human Rights mention it in its annual report as an issue of concern) as a violation of the due process when it comes to deportations, especially in the case of EU citizens.

## **Conclusions**

Based on our findings, the conclusion was that there was no crisis at the time in handling the situation of people living on the streets of Copenhagen. Nevertheless, the authorities have to get prepared for an increase influx of people and adapt their social services to meet the challenges. The administration of Copenhagen is a highly performing institution that has access to resources to effectively tackle the situation on the ground. There is no reason to believe that 150 people living in the streets can destabilize such an institution or the government of Denmark.

There are two broad options for tackling the situation of people living on the streets of Copenhagen. Both options are highly political as it involves an increase in allocation of resources, including financial resources. Being political issues, some politicians might use the situation for capitalizing political benefits and use the media to strengthen their support.

The first option would be to tighten the rules of immigration and mobility as a way to tackle the issue of people living on the streets in Copenhagen. This option is in my view a no option in fact as those that are living on the streets are EU citizens and they enjoy the provisions of the Directive 2004/38/EC on the freedom of movement. This solution will lead to significant increase of public expenditures when it comes to policing and public safety without having any guarantees that the situation will be kept under control. Most probably, the European Commission will launch an infringement procedure against Denmark and the human rights groups will intensely criticize Denmark for its human rights records on dealing with Roma inclusion, as it was the case with France and Italy between 2007 and 2011. However, in my opinion, the highest cost of this option will be the political costs the democratic institutions of Denmark will have to pay. The securitization discourse used to tackle the problem of people

living on the streets in Copenhagen will lead to a raise in xenophobic and populist discourses of the political competitors with a long-term impact on democratic institutions and social trust within the Danish society.

The second option would consist in a set of measure to promote the inclusion of those living on the street into the Danish mainstream society. Some of the measure to tackle the situation do not require additional financial resources but rather flexibility in the approach. For example, some of the shelters run by the Salvation Army and others could adapt their daily schedule and set 2 or 3 days between certain hours as schedule for families. Some shelters could accept couples if one of them is getting a place to spent the night following a lottery. However, estimating the influx of people to leave on the streets will increase during the summer, there is a need to increase the places in shelters to address the issues faced by people living in the streets of Copenhagen. This option implies as well an increase in public expenditures. Spending money on people that are portrayed as undeserving – they are foreigners, they are a burden for social services, they are poor and lazy, they are Roma – will not make politicians more popular. However, this option has its benefits that go beyond the economic argument, according to which it is smart economics to invest in future labor force than using money for social assistance or tightening security. The benefits are related to the stability of democratic institutions, building trust in institutions and showing the human rights, democracy and solidarity as European values are respected and could serve the basis for policies towards disenfranchised groups.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations are based on two pre-conditions:

- I. That there a level of coordination among municipalities in Denmark to implement measure that will lead to the social inclusion of the people living on the streets. If only one or few municipalities will implement such policies, they will risk a sudden increase in the influx of people that will lead to a policy failure, as it was the case in Gent, Belgium.
- II. That the voice of those concerned is heard during the design, implementation and evaluation of these measures. These people are not part of the democratic processes and their interests are not represented in any decision-making body. For policies to succeed, the participation of these groups in defining their problems, negotiating priorities and expressing preferences is fundamental.

Considering that these preconditions are met, below are our recommendations:

- Design and offer an integration package for all those willing to work and integrate into the local community life. Such a package should be preceded by an evaluation of the capabilities of those living on the streets and should include language training, vocational training, and access to basic services.
- Make sure that basic human needs, especially of those most vulnerable – pregnant women, persons with disabilities, older persons in need of medical assistance, etc. – are dealt with as a matter of priority.

- Consider hiring Romani language speakers and persons that have experience in interacting with Roma and other vulnerable groups. Our experience shows that speaking Romani language was extremely helpful in communicating to people and building trust.
- Involve media in the work with people living on the streets as media is a powerful tool to build counter-narratives and to prevent the framing of certain social groups as “underserving”.
- Work together with politicians and policy-makers from other areas who could be exposed to these problems in depth and gain their support and understanding.

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Budapest, June 7, 2017