

RELOCATION OF NON-EU ALBANIAN ROMA TO EU COUNTRIES: ANOMALIES AND INEQUALITIES WITHIN THE EU-SPACE AND THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how the relocation to EU countries affects Albanian Roma lives and how they understand or experience “citizenship” and “belonging”. I show the inequalities, and anomalies within the EU and how non-EU citizens after relocating to EU countries grapple with these ambiguities. The situation of Albanians compared with Albanian Roma is presented in the socio-political frame, by pointing out the challenges they face as a minority and the need to find other ways to change their situation, through migration, as well as to show how their lives changed after their relocation. For this, I rely on qualitative research data from semi-structured interviews with five Albanian Roma citizens who relocate to different EU countries.

Keywords: citizenship, (non) EU Roma citizens, migration, belonging, exclusion

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INTRODUCTION

Being Albanian and a non-EU citizen makes the case for Roma migration to EU countries quite complicated. The EU space tends to be a space full of contradictions and inequalities, as many authors present in their articles.

In the case of EU Roma, Caglar (2016) observes that EU space tends to include and exclude citizens at the same time. And Roma people are seriously caught in these contradictions. Relying on Caglar's analysis, my argument is about how the EU space is presented and perceived by non-EU Albanian Roma. How are Albanian Roma included or excluded and what does this show in terms of belonging? What are the reasons for migrating to EU countries and is the migration to EU countries, despite all the ambiguities and inequalities they face, changing their own lives and the community as such? In the first section, I present some of the points advanced by Caglar (2016) Delanty (2007), Ong (2006), and Islar and Irgil (2018) with respect to citizenship.

In the next section, I will present the case of a group of Bulgarian and Romanian Roma who relocated to Berlin in 2009 as analyzed by Caglar (2016). Then I present the Albanian Roma's relocation to EU countries. I worked with data based on semi-structured interviews with five Albanian Roma individuals and families who migrated to Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, and Malta, respectively.¹ During these interviews, I inquired about the reasons for their deci-

¹ The names of the participants in these interviews are changed based on the assurance that their identity will stay anonymous and confidential.

sion to migrate, how their situation changed, and how they experience “citizenship” and “belonging”. Furthermore, based on the interviews, I want to offer my understanding on the question of citizenship and belonging. This section is followed by the findings and conclusions.

CHAPTER 1 | THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION AMONG ALBANIANS AND THE ROMA POSITION WITHIN THIS PROCESS

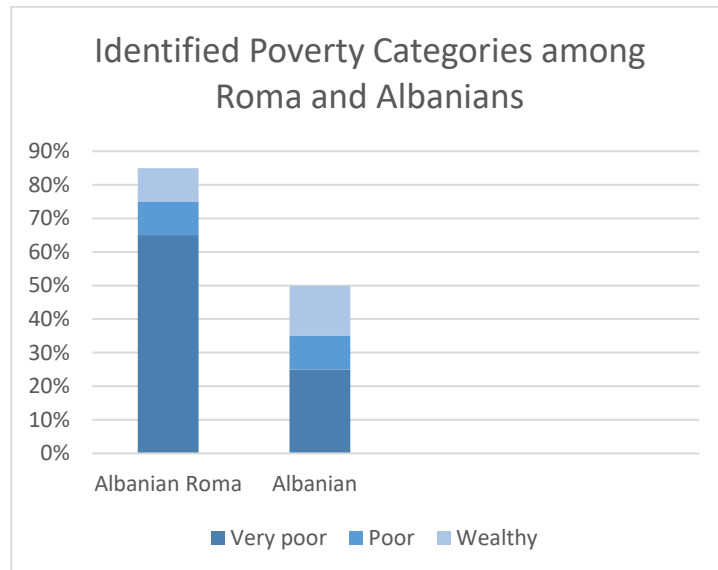


Figure 1. Map. Generated by Google

Since communism collapsed in 1991, Albanians have experienced many crises and difficulties (See Figure 1). Being an independent country with all the rights, including the “freedom of movement” led to an Albanian diaspora, mostly in Italy, Germany, Greece, and other EU countries, where they relocated. But their “free movement” right remains limited since they can stay in an EU country for no more than 90 days without providing a visa. Albania is not part of the EU member states and so it is considered part of the Third Country Nationals (TCNs). The third-country nationals are all those countries that are not part of the European Union. It refers to those individuals who are in transit or applying for visas as well. In European Union, this term is often referred to as “foreign nationals”, or “non-EU foreign nationals”.

However, despite the difficulties Albanians face while trying to obtain citizenship in an EU country, the number of Albanians leaving their country is still high. In most cases, Albanians come from a low educational and financial background. For this reason, looking for new ways to escape their poverty became one of the main aims that encouraged them to migrate. As a poor and undeveloped country, there was a lack of jobs for all ages, and even those citizens who were part of the labor force were not satisfied with the wages. Furthermore, those who

wanted to continue their studies had to face other issues such as the absence of universities in many cities and villages, the lack of academic literature, and the low-skilled professors.



Graph 1. ERRC "Roma and Egyptians in Albania: From social exclusion to social inclusion: summary of the world bank needs assessment study on Roma and Egyptians in Albania" (2005)

Indeed, Albanian Roma citizens were experiencing the same difficulties, but their situation was even worse than that of Albanian citizens. (See Graph 1.) Roma families have been living in extreme poverty with no housing, proper jobs, and living conditions for ages, and the government did not put much effort into improving their current situation. For this reason, many Albanian Roma relocated to EU countries, similar to other Albanian citizens. Many Roma and non-Roma citizens were entering EU countries illegally and they were not provided with the necessary documentation for their stay. In other cases, they went as asylum seekers, refugees, and tourists.

CHAPTER 2 / LITERATURE REVIEW

EU citizenship is of great importance and has a considerable impact on citizens' lives. For many categories of people, especially non-EU citizens, EU space is central because of the opportunities and benefits it offers them.

EU citizenship and the national citizenship of the member states are tightly connected with each other. In Baubock's (2000) understanding, the relationship between the EU and national citizenship is like a 'thin layer of additional rights [...] placed on top of a thicker national citizenship.' This does not mean that EU citizenship has replaced the national one, but the first one is considered complementary to the second one. (Caglar Ayse: 647) Caglar (2016) points out that EU citizenship is a "derivative citizenship" (Caglar, 2016: 647). A non-EU citizen can acquire the status of EU citizenship if they become citizens of an EU member state. Furthermore, she clearly shows that the EU space is "differentiated" and "stratified" as a space of contradictions and inequalities which means that citizens are not equally treated and, in this term, they face contradictions within the EU space.

There are three ways of obtaining EU citizenship. First is citizenship by descent through marital ties with an EU citizen, parents-children re-union, or through adoption. To obtain EU citizenship in this case takes six months up to a year. The second way is by naturalization when a citizen worked and lived in an EU country for a period of time which varies from five to ten years depending on the state. And the third way is by the increased potential of citizens to invest in an EU country, and it takes one up to five years. To show the anomalies and inequalities within the EU space Caglar (2016) brings in her article the case of a group of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma who gathered in a park in Berlin in the summer of 2009. These countries joined the EU in 2007. To prevent labor influx, Romanian and Bulgarian citizens (not only

Roma) did not have access to the employment market until January 2014. Consequently, many Roma worked in irregular and precarious jobs. Through this case, Caglar argues that EU citizenship is a “complex and uneven landscape of inclusion and exclusion...” (648) This group of Roma in Berlin wanted to apply for asylum which seemed legally impossible, yet they were living in asylum seekers’ shelters and treated as if they were tourists. Due to this, the Roma raised questions about the nature of EU space. (Caglar: 655) They enacted the contradictions and inequalities that EU citizenship embodies by drawing attention to their precarious conditions. Being an EU citizen means being free from the requirements that necessitate asylum within the EU. From the political and human rights perspective, not recognizing Roma as asylum seekers was crucial because of the ambiguities it could create in distinguishing EU space from those of non-EU. From the EU Roma case perspective, it follows that the EU space is full of unresolved issues and crises within it, which in the first moment of confrontation with non-EU citizens, reveals inequalities and creates contradictions.

Ong (2006: 499) looks at changes or so-called “mutations” in EU citizenship because of migration. She also registers “an ever-shifting landscape” shaped by the flows of markets, technologies, and populations. EU space and EU citizenship are challenged by irregular markets and migrant flows. Preventing access to the employment market raises the risk of inclusion in irregular jobs. (Ong: 499) Furthermore, being considered “guest workers” or “illegal aliens” has ignited many debates about these diverse foreign communities in integration.

Another perspective on citizenship, and implicitly on belonging and integration is presented by Mine Islar and Ezgi Irgil (2018) through the example of the Indignados movement in Barcelona. A movement that acted as a “call” for participation in the production of urban space. Firstly, it started in the squares and since most of the people joined this movement in their neighborhoods, it expanded more. The aim of this movement was to enact the re-politicization

of citizens in their neighborhoods and encourage their participation and visibility of political practices.

According to Isin, there are the so-called grassroots practices of citizenship at the urban scale. Struggles in cities can illustrate acts of citizenship and practices used to become “claim-making subjects in and through various sites and scales.” (Isin 2008). Purcell (2003) refers to this Lefebvrian-inspired citizenship: the *citadinship*, where he mentioned two sets of rights: participating in the production of the urban space and appropriation of the urban space in the course of everyday life. (2018: 179)

Taking into consideration these views and analyses, in the next section, I intend to reflect on the experience of five Albanian Roma who decided to move to EU countries. I focus on these individuals and families to find out what motivated them to migrate. Furthermore, I want to look at their living conditions and if this opportunity served to improve their situation, or not. Finally, I will find out how these Roma groups define or experience the sense of belonging, or exclusion in EU countries, and how this affects their participation in the urban space.

CHAPTER 3 | RELOCATION OF NON-EU ALBANIAN ROMA TO EU COUNTRIES

I conducted the first interview with Ana and her husband. They both did their MA at the Academy of Arts in Albania. The lack of employment made them decide to move to Bulgaria to search for reliable jobs related to their studies. Once they got accepted, they started Visa procedures, by providing all mandatory documents. Since they became parents of one daughter they have had to deal with additional documentation for their newborn baby. The second interview is conducted with Maria, a Roma student who decided to move to Austria to live and study. The third interview is conducted with Aleks, a young man who decided to move to Malta to work and live. An interview is conducted with Gerta, who is currently living in Hamburg with her daughter and her husband. The last interview is conducted with Erlin, who currently lives in France with his son and his second wife. The two last interviewees initially applied as asylum seekers.

3.1 REASONS FOR MIGRATING

While interviewing the Albanian Roma, I observed that their reasons for leaving Albania and relocating to EU countries did not differ that much from the reasons that Albanian citizens and the Bulgarian and Romanian Roma citizens (EU Roma citizens) had when they decided to migrate. I could clearly observe that the main reasons that lead them to the decision of migration are mostly related to their identity, education, and finances.

When I asked about the reasons why they migrated Gerta clearly said:

“...I do not have an educational background and I did not have a job either...I wanted to start a new life and I wanted to start it somewhere else, in a place where I could work and get paid as much as it is needed for me to fulfill my family’s needs.”

While Erlin said:

“I saw that in Albania neither the government nor the organizations were really helping me with my financial difficulties... I tried to work in different jobs, but I was always stopped by the police because they were accusing me of practicing and participating in the informal labor market.”

Their low educational background has affected their lives in numerous aspects. The reasons for these Roma can definitely be considered existential. Not having the proper education resulted in the lack of jobs that could have been available for them. Their desire to start a new life was much related to migration to EU countries. Their hopes to improve their situation in Albania seemed impossible since according to the interviews this country cannot offer the facilities and opportunities to overcome poverty and live a normal life. Looking at the case of Albanian Roma and other (EU and non-EU) Roma from different countries, we can observe that despite the development of the country the Roma minority is still facing difficulties and challenges in their own development within the country they are part of. Thus, besides the factors listed above, there is a third factor that is tremendously affecting Roma's life improvement both in non-EU and EU space.

Gerta said:

“I could not find a job. I was sending job applications, and I was going to be interviewed, but I never got an answer from them...I could understand that they did not prefer a Roma for that position. a hundred times I felt discriminated against, but I was used to that, and I was accepting it...even after I came to Germany, it was a bit hard to find a job because of the discrimination, but I could find it through a friend of my husband.”

Evidently, I could observe that the third factor can be considered the main one for creating numerous barriers to Roma's integration into Albanian society. That is discrimination. As a

matter of fact, the Roma community has been always predisposed to be discriminated against by most of Albanian society. This discrimination toward Roma resulted in exclusion from the labor market, exclusion from society, and the fading of the sense of belonging between Albanian Roma and non-Roma citizens. Furthermore, they were still feeling discriminated against within the EU country they relocated to because of their identity and status as asylum seekers. The interviewees mentioned that in the countries they are living in, they still feel excluded from both the labor market and the society.

3.2 THE SITUATION OF ALBANIAN ROMA BEFORE AND AFTER THEIR RELOCATION

As a result of the challenges that the Albanian Roma were facing, their life was becoming harder, in terms of providing basic needs and a normal life for their families. Thus, migrating to EU countries was considered by them the only open door to escape from these difficulties. Gerta and Erlin applied as asylum seekers in two different countries, Germany, and France. The opportunity of providing non-EU Roma citizens with asylum was considered by the community a golden opportunity. Furthermore, opportunities that are given to refugees and migrants who relocate for study purposes and jobs were considered a great help as well. But this status came together with some limitations in the labor market and the society they became part of.

Aleks did not have an educational background and he was raised in a poor family in the countryside of Albania. Tired of his living conditions he wanted to do something different and decided to move to Greece. He gathered all the mandatory documents, but he was not allowed to enter through the borders. He said:

“I do not know the reason why they said you cannot enter Greece when I had all the documents they needed. The only thing I remember is that they said something in Greek,

and I could understand that they used the term, Roma. Because of that, I entered Greece illegally and worked mainly in the informal labor market during the summer.”

Same as a considerable number of Albanians, Aleks decided to illegally enter the country. Later on, he decided to move to Malta to work and live there since he said:

“In Malta, I was able to find a job similar to what I had in Greece, but at least they treated me better, I did not have any problem passing the borders and showing my documents. Now that I am here and I have a continuous job, I am not thinking to go back. I have everything I need here.”

Similarly, with him, Erlin entered the country illegally, and later, he applied for asylum. Not allowing them to enter the country for unknown reasons, was an anomaly that these non-EU Albanian Roma citizens faced, while Ana and Maria did not experience. At this point, we observe that the EU space tends to treat non-EU citizens based on their positionality and current status in society.

Comparing this finding to what Caglar says about the case of Roma from Romania and Bulgaria, we see that in both cases the Roma community has been facing inequalities and prejudices in their origin countries. As a result of it, most of them have been excluded from the working places or other rights they have as citizens. Furthermore, this resulted in the relocation of these Albanian Roma, and I can observe that even in EU countries, there is a tendency for discrimination and exclusion which is implicitly shown and felt by asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants.

3.3 BELONGING OR/AND EXCLUSION?

While I was interviewing these individuals, I was curious about their ideas and feelings about belonging. I wanted to understand if they feel that they belong to the country they relocated to because of the better living conditions that it offered or because of the urban space that surrounds them. I observed that the experience of belonging was differently understood and defined by them, based on the comparison of their lives before and after migration, without taking into consideration in what conditions they were feeling or experiencing it. The feeling of belonging for most of them is related to a place that gives them comfort, a place that gives them the opportunity to work and use their skills despite the educational gaps and employment regulations. In this way, they did not feel excluded from society or the country where they migrated, even though they often have to face prejudices or discrimination. The anomaly here stays at the fact that these individuals were mainly included in the informal labor market in the EU country they relocated. Obviously, the EU space was not offering them any job opportunities only because of their status as asylum seekers, and therefore, many of them found a place in the irregular labor market. As a result, the exclusion from the regular labor market within the EU space was considered as inclusion from the Albanian Roma citizens in the irregular jobs.

As Ong says, and as we observe in our case, EU citizenship appears to be a space-challenged by irregular markets and migrant flows. (2006: 499) In Ong's analysis, those individuals who were entering an EU country illegally and were included in the irregular labor market were considered "illegal aliens" instead of only "guest workers" with limited rights.

When they were asked if they feel they belong to the country Erlin said:

“I do feel that I belong here more than when I was living in Albania because you know, we are discriminated against a lot there...Here I am facing something that is completely different. Of course, people here are discriminating against our community a lot, but not in this way preventing them to live their life, working, and studying.”

He clearly showed that in EU countries, in this case in France, he is still facing discrimination among citizens, but this does not bother him as long as his life is not affected in any way. Since the country is giving him the freedom to enjoy the space as an asylum seeker and the benefits they have such as social insurance, a course where they can learn the French language, and housing, makes him feel that he does not only belong to that country but as if he was part of it. The strategy of EU citizenship to provide its citizens with different facilities and benefits is a good way to help asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants feel less pressure being in an unknown country, by making their lives easier.

Similarly, Aleks says:

“I think that I belong to this country. Since the first days I came here I could see how sociable people were to me despite the fact that it was visible that I am Roma. But there are other people as well, who do not even talk to me only because of that. It is hard to build friendships here...”

Later on, when they were asked if they feel a sense of belonging among citizens who surround them, they all expressed the same thing as Aleks mentioned above. Establishing new connections within the urban space, more specifically in their neighborhood and working place gave them comfort. But being ignored by other EU citizens gave them a feeling of exclusion, which did not bother them as much.

Gerta's answer was different. Since she got married in Germany and she is raising her daughter, she could not get in touch with people around her, except with some Albanian Roma migrants or asylum seekers. For that reason, her definition of the sense of belonging was related to the new German family she became part of, who are not Roma. She said:

"I feel that I belong to my family first."

But despite all, comparing the sense of belonging with the feeling of being excluded from society and the country, they both seem to go together in the same direction. They were feeling inclusion and exclusion at the same time, and the inclusion they felt was defined as a sense of belonging. That might be because of the hard conditions these people were living in Albania, where they were feeling excluded from the majority.

In the case of Roma citizens from Romania and Bulgaria (new EU member states), we observed that they did not have the right to labor mobility and they were not able to qualify for asylum as well, only because they were EU citizens.

3.4 PARTICIPATION IN THE URBAN SPACE OF THE EU

Interviewees were asked if they could participate in the cities where they lived and neighborhoods, or if they were politically involved. I asked if they are aware of their rights as well.

Ana clearly stated:

"Nobody needs us to participate in socio-political issues and in any demonstration in the urban space because even though we are working in the regular labor market and we have our residence permit, we are still treated as tourists in many cases..."

While Aleks said:

“I usually am not informed or included in any group which deals with the issue of Roma here. Even if it exists any, nobody came to me and I do not know how to get in touch with them if I will need any institution or organization to help me, or any group of Roma around me...”

Among non-EU Albanian Roma migrants, participation in any street demonstration, or gathering with other citizens in the squares, as happened in the case of EU Roma citizens in Berlin, did not happen for many reasons. First, nobody met them and told them to participate in any kind of political group. Second, most Albanian Roma are not aware of the rights or obligations they have to the state, and there is limited information gathered by them which creates a barrier that prevents them to take part in any social or political movement.

In the case of Roma in Berlin, 4 days after their settlement, they went out in public, unexpectedly and read out an open letter including the rights to residence, education, access to health services, and their children’s allowance to stay with them (Rumänen-Bettler 2009) Even though the authorities said that they had no rights to claim since they were considered tourists, they still tried to participate in the urban space in a different political manner, for their rights. (2016: 648) To do that, the group of Roma had the support of several organizations and institutions such as the Refugee Council of Berlin, Amnesty International, Office of Social Welfare, activists from New York in Kreuzberg, and bureaucrats and politicians as well.

CHAPTER 4 | FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

EU citizenship is a social and political space that is influenced by many economic, social and political factors. Moreover, EU space tends to reveal many anomalies and inequalities in the case of the non-EU Albanian Roma who relocated to different EU countries. Furthermore, as presented by Ong EU citizenship is challenged by the irregular labor market. Analyzing the case of the non-EU Albanian Roma, I found out that the reasons for their migration were mainly related to discrimination, difficult living conditions, and the lack or gap of proper education. As such, they considered the EU space as a way to escape from these difficulties, but the reality they faced showed that even within the EU they can face the same challenges, despite the benefits they offer. The concept of ‘belonging’ and ‘citizenship’ is differently understood and defined based on their living conditions before and after migration. I observed that most of the interviewees felt a sense of belonging in the countries they relocated to because of the opportunities to live in a proper house and to be supported with social assistance. However, not allowing some of the Albanian Roma citizens to enter EU countries and not giving them the opportunity to work in regular jobs is an anomaly that raised the risk for the migrants who irregularly enter the country and those migrants who take part in the informal labor market. The inclusion and exclusion these Roma citizens were experiencing at the same time, shows that the EU space tends to create ambiguities and inequalities for relocated citizens by positioning them depending on their status. Furthermore, this is affecting their participation in the urban space which seems to be completely absent related to the socio-political aspects. That is happening as a result of the information gap they have about their rights and obligations to the state, and as such, to the urban scale. However, despite these challenges, their relocation to

EU countries made it possible to affect some other aspects of their lives that are currently shaped and improved.

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