

## **Croatia: Roma Equality Struggle**

**Author:** IWPR

Human rights advocates are pressing Croatia to improve the lot of its downtrodden Roma community.

Charges of ethnic cleansing are again being aired in Croatia and this time the victims are the country's Roma.

The controversy was triggered by a proposal to shift Roma residents from a run-down city centre neighbourhood to an unfinished building development on the fringes of Zagreb.

Professor Zarko Puhovski of the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights condemned the plan as "ethnic cleansing in urban terms", invoking the infamous term coined during the Balkans conflict of the early 1990s. Puhovski accused the new reformist government of putting economic priorities ahead of human rights.

The Social Democrat-led city council drew up the plan as part of its drive to present the capital as a modern European metropolis. Councillors rejected Puhovski's charge that the objective was simply to remove an unsightly blot on the city centre landscape. They insisted their proposal would benefit the Roma.

Milena Klajmer of the Office for National Minorities said, "The city centre settlement is unhygienic and not safe to live in. We want to help them." The authorities are offering the Roma new temporary accommodation comprising small mobile living units, made out of metal containers, with only basic facilities.

Initially, most of the minority agreed and signed a contract entitling them to the housing. But the term "temporary" aroused the suspicions of most prominent member of Croatia's Roma community, Alija Mesic. "When people moved to a settlement in Zagreb in 1957, it was supposed to be temporary, but today they still live in old stables. Now the Roma feel betrayed again," said Mesic, who is president of the Union of Roma in Croatia. "I supported this (latest) plan at first, and now my own people think I'm a traitor."

Mesic's organisation claims to represent all Roma in the country, but little solidarity exists within the 35,000-strong community. Altogether, the minority has 18 separate organisations and the only one with political pretensions lies in Bjelovar, 50 miles from Zagreb.

Mesic blames activists from the right-wing opposition, the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, for stirring up hostility towards new Roma arrivals (?????) in Kozari Put, a tough suburb on the city limits.

In their 10 years of power, the HDZ frequently trampled over minority rights in the drive to establish Croatian ethnic purity. The break up of Yugoslavia left Roma with no homeland of their own. Their efforts to obtain citizenship in Croatia were repeatedly frustrated by a highly arbitrary legislative clause that stipulated familiarity with Croatian culture.

Thousands of Roma were butchered in World War Two at the Jasenovac

concentration camp run by Croat supporters of the Nazis. The Roma were not even included in the

country's first post-Independence constitution though this was rectified shortly after a landslide election ousted the HDZ. But, almost two years later, despite Croatia's improved international standing, Roma people say little has changed except for a few fine words on paper.

One of the biggest problems facing the community is illiteracy, leaving the Roma unable to articulate their case and rendering them virtually unemployable. If they want schoolbooks they have to pay at least 1,000 kuna (about 60 US dollars) which few can afford.

In the northern region of Medjmurje, home to Croatia's densest Roma population, 15 schools isolate Roma children into separate classrooms. "It's racial segregation," said Roma advocate Bojan Munjin.

County prefect Josip Levacic recently stated publicly that he didn't want his child educated alongside Roma pupils. His party, the Social Liberals, are also members of the government coalition.

"This message is clear, we lack laws against racial discrimination," said human rights activist Tijana Vukojicic. For Alessandro Fraccasetti, of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, the top priority is to improve Roma living standards if Croatia wants eventual membership of the European Union.

One politician the Roma people look up to for help is President Stipe Mesic, who has donated computers from his office to help them. Perhaps partly because of this support, Mesic was himself heckled by far right activists in Split as "a gypsy".

The Croatian government insists it will provide one million kuna (nearly 60,000 US dollars) for improving Roma conditions. But the minority needs more than money - they need understanding.

Dominic Hipkins is a freelance journalist based in Zagreb

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