

End Europe's ugly racism toward Roma

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Decades after the Holocaust, which counted them among its victims, Roma, or Gypsies, remain at the extreme margins of European societies, despised and excluded. Roma are a people of Indian origin whose thousand-year history in Europe has been marked by oppression, slavery and raw, systematic persecution. In recent years, Roma in Europe have faced lynchings, pogroms, racist denial of access to services, and other serious violations of fundamental human rights. When Bosnian Serb forces overran eastern Bosnia in April 1992, Roma were targeted for attacks. One Romani man in a refugee camp in Debrecen, Hungary, told the European Roma Rights Center in 1996: "The whole Romani community of Zvornik was slaughtered. Our houses were destroyed. ... It was a bear hunt." In 1999, after the NATO bombing and the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo, a large number of Roma were ethnically cleansed from the province, together with Serbs and other ethnic minorities, by ethnic Albanians. Before 1999, Roma in Kosovo had achieved the greatest advances of Roma anywhere: There was Romani radio, there were Roma in the public administration and an apparently integrated class of Romani intellectuals. But as the conflict between Serbs and Albanians heated up, Roma were, as one Romani activist from Kosovo put it, "caught between two fires." Much of the Kosovo Romani population today lives in Serbia and Montenegro, often in appalling conditions, unable to return to Kosovo and denied even rudimentary compensation for their suffering. Racially motivated violence against Roma is not confined to war zones. Since the end of Communism in Eastern Europe, Roma have borne the brunt of a rise in racism and racist violence. After the fall of the Ceausescu regime, a wave of pogroms broke out in Romania, with more than 30 Romani communities subjected to expulsion, arson and killing. Similar episodes have taken place in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine and the former Yugoslavia since the end of Communism. When Roma fall victim to racist violence, European criminal justice systems often fail to provide adequate remedy. Roma are especially unlikely to receive justice when the perpetrators are police officers. Today, Roma are subjected to grinding discrimination all over Europe. Most countries in Central and Eastern Europe have effectively segregated school systems. In some countries, Roma are more likely to be found in schools for the mentally disabled than non-Roma by factors that are simply obscene. In Romania, many Romani children are simply not in school at all. Unemployment among Roma throughout Central and Eastern Europe outpaces unemployment among the population at large by five to 10 times. Total joblessness is reported in some areas. Roma also fall victim to discriminatory treatment in public administration, are often not served in pubs, restaurants and

discotheques, are likely to be denied housing on ethnic grounds and to live in substandard settlements with few or no public services. Residential segregation is also reported in a number of areas. Racism and racist violence toward the Roma is not new. Roma were the targets of medieval persecution in Western Europe and were reduced to slavery in Eastern Europe. Persecution of the Roma culminated again during World War II, when hundreds of thousands of Roma lost their lives in the Holocaust. Clumsy policies of assimilation in the modern era have destroyed Romani culture, crafts and way of life, leaving a confused and divided people in their wake. In recent years, Roma have begun fighting their oppression, often using strategies inspired by the U.S. civil rights movement. Groups such as the European Roma Rights Center have recently won victories, including an award of more than \$1 million for 74 Romani victims of a 1995 pogrom in Montenegro and a ruling by Britain's House of Lords, in a case involving Roma from the Czech Republic, declaring British border policy racist and illegal. For the time being, however, such progress has been a mere drop in the bucket compared with the scope and intensity of forces ranged against the Roma - the racism and racial discrimination, the contempt and suspicion in which European publics hold "Gypsies." This year, 60 years after the Nazi death camps were liberated, Europe remembers the Holocaust dead. The continued suffering today of the Roma victims and their descendants also deserves attention. . .