

# “Discovering” Roma

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**I**N HIS NOVEL *The New Life*, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk says, “I read a book one day and my whole life changed”. My paraphrase of this sentence is, “I took a class one day and my whole life changed”.

When I came to Budapest to study human rights law in 2003 at the Central European University, I had experience with a number of human rights issues in Turkey such as the Kurdish question and the Armenian minority’s problems, but I was unfamiliar with the problems of Roma in Europe. It was my professor Dimitrina Petrova and her class which introduced me to this topic.

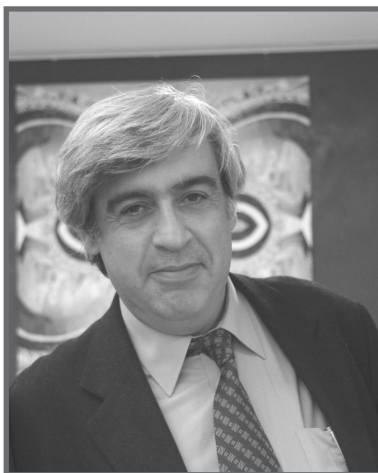
Having been a war correspondent reporting from Algeria, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh among other places, I regard myself as somewhat used to grim realities. As much as anyone can get used to grimness, that is. But, time and again, even after five years of involvement in Roma rights work, I cannot help but be shaken by the tough reality facing many Roma in Europe and beyond. The deprivation of European Roma, day in day out, *is* strikingly similar to war zone conditions at some levels.

I am originally from a country that has (or rather used to have prior to the nationalist resurgence in recent years) strong aspirations to be a European Union member Turkey. Even though I know European institutions inside out due to my professional links, and I am aware of their shortcomings, the stereotype that Europe is the beacon of human rights lingers in my mind. Thus, it is frustrating for me, for

example, to witness the racist surge against Roma in Italy and the inadequate response by EU institutions to it.

Actually, I cannot blame the general public for their lack of knowledge about Roma. When I was a journalist, I had a stereotypical approach to Roma matters myself. Ironically, my first assignment as a reporter was to do a story about the Romani community in Istanbul in 1985. The story was to depict the culture and traditions of Roma. I recall that at the time, I was so focused on portraying Roma as a group which is differs from the rest of society due to their colourful culture that I totally overlooked the underlying human rights issues facing the people I met.

This superficial approach is still widespread today. By and large, even some of the most experienced human rights activists in Turkey do not seem to be interested in Roma rights advocacy. The Roma are conceptualised as a dancing and singing merry bunch, and although they appear to be deprived they still make the best of it. It is shocking to see that a story I wrote almost a quarter of a century ago reappears every now and then in Turkey’s press. In other European media, Roma rights issues seem to have better chances, although coverage is often guided by the principle “when it bleeds, it leads”, i.e. focusing on violent abuse. In more recent times, credible and competent information sources can also attract reporters to other types of news about Roma such as for example, judicial remedies



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for injustice against Roma. With the 24 hour news cycles and increased numbers of media institutions (print sources, internet-based news sites, television channels, etc.), there is a need for a constant feed of news stories. The Romani communities' problems are, in fact, shedding light on the dynamics of Europe's inner societal sanctum. Children's rights, immigration, racism and women's rights are some of the issues that the Roma rights field intersects with; so there is much depth to Romani issues that might be of interest to the media.

It is imperative that Roma rights NGOs concentrate on bettering their relations with the media. There is a trend towards that end in the last years with newsletters being compiled and newsgroups are that very actively working.

On the whole, being a part of the work of the European Roma Rights Centre is exciting for me because I am part of a process in which I can *learn* while working, use the knowledge from my previous human rights work in Turkey and apply my skills as a journalist.