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Abstract

Romania hardly enjoys a monopoly on impunity for violence against Roma (the name many Gypsies use for themselves). Throughout much of Europe, Roma are among the most hated, misunderstood, and mistreated of people. Their renown as musicians, dancers, and palm-readers is surpassed only by the near-universal belief among the Gadze - or non-Roma - that Gypsies are also liars, thieves, and cheats. In Europe today, negative myths about Gypsies penetrate childhood stories, family legends, and the fabric of everyday life. People reveal their anti-Roma prejudice unhesitatingly, in the most casual conversations. Fortunately, conditions may finally be beginning to change for Europe's most despised minority. With the fall of communism, many Roma in central and eastern Europe - where the vast majority of Roma live - have rediscovered their ethnicity and formed their own community and advocacy groups.

Full Text

EUROPE'S GYPSYPROBLEM

Several years ago, a Western law-enforcement adviser working in Romania -- a country where police abuse has been widely reported -- noticed a common explanation for the country's astronomically high conviction rate: nearly every prosecution commenced with the defendant's confession. All the more surprising, then, that one of the nation's most infamous crimes -- a 1993 case in which a raging mob in the town of Hadareni murdered three men and burned down more than a dozen homes -- was stymied in the courts. No indictment. No trial. The reason, as the local mayor made clear at the time: the victims were "Gypsies," and prosecution of their killers would not have been popular.

Today, after more than eight years of international pressure and several protracted court proceedings, the families of the Hadareni victims are still waiting for justice. And Romania hardly enjoys a monopoly on impunity for violence against Roma (the name many Gypsies use for themselves). Throughout much of Europe, Roma are among the most hated, misunderstood, and mistreated of people. Their renown as musicians, dancers, and palm-readers is surpassed only by the near-universal belief among the Gadze -- or non-Roma -- that Gypsies are also liars, thieves, and cheats. Robert Jordan, the sympathetic hero of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, could have been speaking for many contemporary Europeans when he said, "The gypsy... is truly worthless. He has no political development, nor any discipline, and you could not rely on him for anything."

In Europe today, negative myths about Gypsies penetrate childhood stories, family legends, and the fabric of everyday life. People reveal their anti-Roma prejudice unhesitatingly, in the

most casual conversations. "I don't like them," says a Budapest florist as she wraps up some daisies. "Can't trust them," warns a taxi driver. The stereotypes about Gypsies are so insidious that even some leading human rights activists share the tendency to minimize the extent of Romamistreatment, to react defensively when their national governments are criticized for their Romapolicies, or to blame the Romafor their own troubles.

Fortunately, conditions may finally be beginning to change for Europe's most despised minority. With the fall of communism, many Romain central and eastern Europe -- where the vast majority of Romalive -- have rediscovered their ethnicity and formed their own community and advocacy groups. Meanwhile, Europe's accelerating process of political integration offers the prospect of improved legal protection for the Romaand other minorities, through human rights laws and strict conditions imposed on countries eager to join the European Union. And accession may also lead the EU's older members to look inward and address their own shortcomings in this area.

Such a positive future for the Romais by no means secure, however. In recent years, the Romahave been subjected to physical attacks, discrimination, and exclusion from many aspects of mainstream life. Economic hardships have created a fertile environment for the exploitation of racial prejudices, and more than a few European politicians have eagerly taken advantage of these opportunities.

STRANGERS AMONG US

Lacking a territory or government of their own and numbering only eight million to ten million, the Romatoday are in many ways Europe's quintessential minority. Although they have lived in the region for 500 years, the Roma's history in Europe has been characterized by alienation, persecution, and flight.

Even the details of their identity are contested. The term "Gypsy" -- by which most Romaare known to the outside world -- was given to them by others, probably in the mistaken belief that the Romacame from Egypt. The word has often been used to denote itinerants rather than members of a specific ethnic group. Although some Romacontinue to live in caravans and move from place to place, most have long since settled. In recent years, as political awakening has encouraged collective expression, the umbrella term "Roma" has increasingly come to embrace not only the Romani ethnic group found mostly in the Balkans and central and eastern Europe, but also peoples with different languages, cultures, and physical appearances: the "Gitanos" of Spain, the "Travelers" of England and Ireland, and the "Sinti" of Germany and Italy. The word rom-- which means "man" in the Romani language -- has provided a fitting foundation for the universality to which many Romaincreasingly aspire. The ethnic Romani are generally believed to have arrived in Europe from India in the fourteenth century. Oppression soon followed and then lasted for centuries. They were enslaved in Romania well into the 1800s and subjected to pogroms and banishment in many parts of Europe. During the Romani genocide in World War II, more than 500,000 Romani are thought to have perished throughout Nazi-dominated Europe.

Less deadly but still destructive were the efforts to assimilate the Romaand end their wandering that were launched under the Hapsburgs and accelerated apace when communist

governments took power in eastern and central Europe after 1945. These governments suppressed the notion of ethnic difference in the name of class unity, forcing their Roma citizens to settle and discouraging them from expressing -- or even acknowledging -- their identity. Motivated by subtle -- and not so subtle -- racism, communist-era policies such as segregated education and the sterilization of Romawomen were premised on the assumption that a backward and degenerate people had to be either forcefully dragged into the modern age -- or prevented from making the trip.

E PLURIBUS UNUM

Over the past decade, however, the possibility of a genuine and lasting improvement in the condition of the Romahas emerged, thanks to an extraordinary piece of luck: timing. Just as the movement for Romarights began to gain ground, the European Union intensified its struggle to transform itself from a free trade zone into a more meaningful political union. Thus, as the EU has begun to incorporate ten postcommunist countries where many Roma live, these two trends -- the assertion of Romarights and European integration -- have increasingly converged. Today, the plight of the Romahas rightly come to be seen as a major test of Europe's constitutional pretensions. How can Europe's much-vaunted human rights and equality provisions be taken seriously, the thinking goes, unless they improve the lives of the union's most vulnerable citizens? Simultaneously, the prospect of being allowed to join the EU has become the single most important catalyst for changes in individual government policies toward the Roma.

The round of EU enlargement now being debated will be unlike any the organization has ever experienced. Incorporating central and eastern European states has the potential not only to ease the democratic transitions in these countries, but also to infuse the European project itself with a greater sense of purpose. As Gunter Verheugen, EU commissioner for enlargement, observed, "the next enlargement will ... give us the opportunity to unite the European continent -- on the basis of shared ideals and agreed common values." Advocates of European integration aim to do far more than just expand the union's geographic reach, and they have set their sights high: they hope to build a new model of cooperative democratic governance, one capable of abolishing internal armed conflict, securing economic prosperity, developing lasting legitimacy for public institutions, and safeguarding individual freedoms.

Of course, much of what is actually being discussed in the accession negotiations with Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and several other countries concerns technical matters, such as the regulation of fisheries, telecommunications, and agriculture. But the protection of minority rights -- and hence of the Roma-- has become a core issue as well. Why are minority rights so important to the European project? There are several reasons. First, there is Europe's past to consider. The continent's ethnic minorities have already suffered horrific atrocities. This history influenced the creation of treaties such as the U.N. Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Convention of Human Rights, which helped establish the post- World War II order and still cast a long shadow today. It is no accident that both the Universal Declaration and the European Convention

specifically prohibit discrimination on grounds of "race," "color," and "national or social origin."

Then there is Europe's present. One need only remember the role that ethnic hatred played in inspiring the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia to appreciate the dangers posed to regional stability if minority rights are ignored.

And this leads to the third reason minority rights have become so important to Europe: the future. Anti-immigrant and anti-minority political messages have grown more popular on the continent in the last few years: witness the electoral success of Jorg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria and the recent marked increases of political support for anti-immigrant parties in Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland. This xenophobic trend has rightly disturbed many European leaders. But the EU's hasty imposition of sanctions against Austria in early 2000 and their quiet retraction several months later only underlined the absence of a permanent mechanism for monitoring negative developments and enforcing adherence to European norms of equality.

Finally, sheer common sense demands that the treatment of minorities become a major issue in European integration. After all, Europe itself is, at its core, a community of minorities in the most fundamental sense. No state contains even close to half the population of the EU. Although English is increasingly becoming a universal second language, no first tongue commands a majority. The union's diffuse population is also reflected by its political structure; the EU's ruling Council of Ministers makes many decisions through a complex process known as "qualified majority voting," designed to ensure that a blocking minority of member states can veto any action by the majority that threatens their own interests.

As enlargement proceeds, the EU's heterogeneity will only increase, with the union becoming more and more an agglomeration of diverse political and linguistic groups. The union's leadership is already starting to recognize this trend. When the European Commission's president, Romano Prodi, recently proclaimed on a visit to Budapest that the "equal treatment of minorities is a cornerstone of the new united Europe," he was proclaiming a fundamental principle -- and stating the obvious.

COURTING EQUALITY

So much for Europe's aspirations. How much progress has the region actually made on sensitive issues such as minority protection?

Ten years ago, for most Europeans the word "Roma" meant nothing more than a city in Italy, whereas "Gypsy" was used as a pejorative to describe the bands of thieves who preyed on tourists from Barcelona to Budapest. Ignorance and stereotypes so deeply embedded in the popular consciousness will not be erased overnight. But the awakening of several million Europeans to their Romaroots has begun to effect profound changes, and the EU has played an important role in this process.

Since 1990, Brussels has contributed more than \$10 billion to help candidate countries prepare for membership, and some of this cash has been specifically designated to aid minorities. Supported by grants from the EU, individual governments, and private donors, scores of Romayouth are today studying law, public administration, and other professions in

the hope that they can start to overcome a historical deficit of formally educated leadership. Furthermore, a number of European governments that previously ignored racism have now begun to acknowledge its presence in their midst, creating some programs to combat discrimination and promising others. One country, Romania, even adopted provisional legislation in 2000 that, if confirmed by both houses of parliament, would prohibit racial and other forms of discrimination in most areas of public life and provide for legal remedies. Comprehensive antidiscrimination laws still do not exist in other postcommunist states, although, partly in response to pressure from Brussels, initial drafts are now circulating in several of them.

Also encouraging is the growth of Romani media participation in several eastern European countries. In the Czech Republic and Hungary, for example, Roma journalists have increasingly started to appear on mainstream television programs. Meanwhile, next door in Slovakia, five new Romani newspapers have appeared since 1999. Others have started up in Poland and Slovenia. And in early 2001, the Hungarian media board granted an FM broadcast license to the first full-time radio station run by and for Roma.

The development that has perhaps the greatest significance, however, is the growing number of Roma who, over the last five years, have started to use legal means to fight their oppression. Bolstered by a nascent public-interest law movement, dozens of Roma have gone to court seeking -- and, at times, winning -- legal redress for discrimination and violence against them. And so in 1997, a Hungarian court found for the first time that a pub owner's refusal to serve Roma clients -- an everyday event -- violated the law. The court even awarded damages to the Roma victims and ordered that the defendant pay to publish a written apology in the country's most popular daily newspaper. Since then, other courts in Hungary and the Czech Republic have followed suit, fining bar and disco owners for not admitting Roma.

Where domestic courts have not produced results, Roma have also turned to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. This tribunal hears cases brought under the European Convention of Human Rights, a treaty signed not just by all EU countries but by all 43 member states of the Council of Europe. And some of these lawsuits have started to pay off. Thus four years ago -- in its first decision in a case brought by a Romani applicant from a postcommunist country (Bulgaria) -- the court ruled that public authorities are required to conduct an "effective official" investigation whenever a complainant presents "arguable" evidence of police ill-treatment. This decision represented a major victory for Roma living in eastern Europe, where such abuse remains far too common and is rarely prosecuted. And in March 1999, a Roma advocacy group filed an application with the court contesting racial exclusion orders that explicitly barred all Roma from entering two towns in Slovakia. A month later, before the court had even ruled on the case, the Slovak government lifted the bans. Roma have also started to use courts to challenge racial segregation in education -- winning in Hungary, but losing at the domestic level in the Czech Republic. An appeal of the latter case -- brought by 18 Czech Romani primary school students -- is now pending in Strasbourg.

As lawsuits proliferate, the "Roma problem" -- once considered the result of an intractable mixture of local mores and ancient prejudices -- is increasingly seen as a question of rights and remedies that state institutions have the capacity, and the obligation, to secure. And the implications of this transformation are being felt outside the courtroom, as increasing numbers of Roma, spurred by a heightened sense of entitlement to full political citizenship, challenge official practices and push for change. Thus a Roma organization in Vidin, Bulgaria, for example, has sought to leapfrog years of litigation by providing supplemental training and transport to 400 Roma children who previously attended segregated schools, to help them move into the mainstream school system.

As such self-help measures suggest, international legal remedies for abuse, although salutary, are not a panacea. The European Court of Human Rights may be the most effective regional judicial mechanism yet established; it issues binding rulings that, slowly but surely, are giving rise to a genuinely common European law of human rights. This tribunal cannot, however, replace domestic courts -- and was never intended to. Indeed, prior to filing an application in Strasbourg, a claimant must have exhausted every domestic avenue of relief. Moreover, the court's procedures are slow, often taking more than five years from filing to judgment. Finally, the Strasbourg system is already overstretched. Court staff therefore look carefully for any reason not to consider individual cases on their merits -- and often find several.

In short, Europe's own regional mechanisms may be able to prod, push, and plead with national governments to improve their conduct, but they cannot substitute for the responsibility of states to enforce their own laws. Moreover, even where European integration has led to new domestic legislation, actual improvements in minority protection have been limited by the fact that relatively few domestic judges and lawyers are familiar with antidiscrimination laws or with international human rights standards. Civil rights litigation remains a rarity in most countries, and the European Court has yet to find a government guilty of discrimination on grounds of race or ethnicity.

Despite these shortcomings, there have been significant advances so far, and the prospect of EU expansion has played an important part in bringing them about. Over the past several years, Romarights -- a concept previously unheard of -- has soared to the top of the EU agenda. Hardly a month passes without the Roma being made the subject of a pan-European gathering. The European Commission's annual reports on candidate countries also underscore the importance of minority rights, as do periodic statements on the subject by senior EU officials and visits to the countries that are the worst offenders. In the autumn of 2000, at a preparatory meeting for last year's World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, 41 European governments committed themselves to "guarantee equality to all," and to "bring to justice those responsible for racist acts and the violence to which they give rise."

In June 2000, furthermore, the EU enacted a binding regional prohibition against racial discrimination. This "Race Directive" defines discrimination broadly and mandates liberal standards of proof and effective judicial redress for violation. And the law requires that its

provisions be transposed into domestic law in all EU member states by 2003. It also establishes a floor of legal protection that countries hoping to join the union will have to internalize as a condition of their accession.

WORDS INTO DEEDS

The prospect of membership in the world's richest intergovernmental club has helped change popular attitudes and official policy in candidate countries. And yet, despite some advances, most of these governments still must significantly improve their protection of minority rights. Many governments continue to deny the presence of racism, and ongoing hate speech by officials poisons public discourse. Such language is not always confined to the fringes, either: Vadim Tudor, a member of the Romanian parliament who won more than a quarter of the vote in the 2000 presidential election, reportedly stated, "We are not interested in what Gypsies want. All [Gypsies] should be put in jail. There is no other solution." And in April of last year, a deputy prime minister of Slovakia showed how little some things have changed when, in an interview with the international press meant to trumpet the country's reforms, he made no mention of racism or discrimination but simply repeated communist-era shibboleths about Roma "need[ing] to know what is good for them" and having "to change their way of life."

Perversely, the EU accession process has also led to the scapegoating of Roma by officials embarrassed by asylum applications in the West or criticism from Brussels. This was evident when, two years ago, Romania's then foreign minister expressed frustration that a "few thousand Gypsies... are preventing the country from getting off the EU visa blacklist." In another incident, in August 2000, after a group of Roma from the village of Zamoly fled Hungary to seek asylum in France, one Hungarian official accused them of "going abroad to discredit Hungary" and "making groundless allegations against the state and government." The mayor of a nearby town was more direct: "The Roma of Zamoly have no place among human beings. Just as in the animal world, parasites must be expelled." Far from condemning these statements, Prime Minister Viktor Orban exhorted Hungary's Roma to "try to study and work more." (Since then, French authorities have granted asylum to two dozen of the Zamoly Roma.) And last April, following a well-publicized request for asylum in Belgium by a number of Roma from his country, the Slovak foreign minister warned, "We would consider it very unfair if the Iron Curtain fell on Slovakia because of 90 Romani asylum applicants."

In view of these bitter official attitudes, it is no surprise that central and eastern Europe's Roma continue to suffer hostility and harassment. In recent years, skinhead attacks against Roma have been recorded in large numbers in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Police abuse of Roma is widely reported in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. And just this past July, two Romani men were killed: one in Slovak police custody, having been reportedly bound to a radiator and beaten to death; the other, having been fatally stabbed in a Czech bar following a barrage of racial insults.

All too frequently, Roma complaints receive short shrift and the perpetrators of racially motivated crimes escape justice or receive lenient punishments. International monitoring

bodies and local activists complain that the police in several candidate countries have refused to record victim statements and sometimes even pressure Roma victims to withdraw their complaints. The Czech government has conceded that "in several cases of serious violent attacks against [Roma] and foreigners ... the bodies responsible for penal proceedings tended to trivialize the matter." Yet when a prominent Romani activist filed a complaint after being physically attacked in his Czech home in July 2000, the town's deputy mayor said, "A mountain is being made out of a molehill."

When neo-Nazi groups broke windows and sprayed racist graffiti on the houses of Roma families in the Polish town of Brzeg in December 2000, the local police commander reportedly suggested that it was the Roma themselves who had painted the graffiti in order to claim asylum in western Europe. And in another incident last March, a Romani woman from Kosice, Slovakia, alleged that a group of 15 skinheads had beaten her and her ten-year-old daughter, doused her in gasoline, and tried to set her aflame while shouting, "Die, Gypsy bitch." Although the woman received hospital treatment for multiple wounds, the chief of the district police publicly questioned whether the beating had actually taken place. "In my opinion, she made it up," he told a newspaper. "I don't know why she would do it, but the Roma are probably preparing the groundwork to leave [the country]."

Of course, when there exists sufficient political will, anti-Roma violence does get prosecuted. Last spring, a chorus of international condemnation led to the conviction and seven-year jail sentence of a Slovak soldier for brutally murdering a 49-year-old Romani mother of eight. Such convictions remain the exception, however, and seem to require both intense international scrutiny and high-level political involvement.

If violence offers the most graphic demonstration of anti-Roma prejudice, racial segregation in education may have the worst long-term effects. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, Roma have for decades been shunted into "special schools" for those deemed "retarded" or "mentally deficient." Thousands of Roma students each year are thus given only second-class education and are denied basic opportunities for economic advancement. In Ostrava, the Czech Republic's third-largest city, Roma children outnumber non-Roma special schools by 27 to 1. Although Ostrava's Roma represent fewer than 5 percent of all primary school students, they constitute 50 percent of the special school population. And nationwide, approximately 75 percent of Romani children attend special schools.

In other spheres, Roma suffer similar treatment. They are routinely denied access to housing, jobs, restaurants, bars, and even health care simply because of their ethnicity. And such discrimination is an equal opportunity phenomenon; no Roma are too important to merit exemption. Thus, on the eve of the annual human rights meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Warsaw in September 2000, three Roma -- including the OSCE's highest-ranking official on Roma issues -- were forcibly removed from a downtown cafe after refusing to leave when denied service.

Studies in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary suggest that Roma charged with crimes have received disproportionately harsh treatment: they are detained prior to trial more frequently and for longer periods and sentenced more severely upon conviction. Verifying

these allegations is difficult, however, thanks to a paucity of ethnic data and the fact that most governments resist monitoring racial bias. Ironically, this resistance is shared by many Roma, who remember all too well that government registration of ethnic origin has often led to abuse.

ON THE INSIDE

The EU accession process has focused most attention on the rights of Roma and other minorities in the candidate countries. Western European leaders, determined to forestall a large influx of Roma fleeing the east, have lectured their foreign colleagues on how to do better. But this attention on eastern and central Europe has at times obscured the fact that EU member states have also struggled, with limited success, to address racism and xenophobia in their own ranks. The numbers of Roma in the EU may be smaller, and violence against them less common, but western Roma, and Roma refugees from outside the EU, also suffer serious discrimination.

The anti-Roma sentiment in the EU may reflect a broader hostility toward migrants and foreigners and the emergence of racist attitudes in countries -- such as Finland, Ireland, and Sweden -- where they had previously been less evident. Although general xenophobia may exist, however, the Roma still suffer special vilification. According to one report, Roma in Italian schools suffer worse discrimination than do foreign students. Teachers reportedly find it "impossible to blend the nomad culture with ours" -- despite the fact that, as in most places, few of Italy's 100,000 Roma are actually nomadic.

In Greece, members of the more than 150,000-strong Roma community suffer frequent ill-treatment from the police, including excessive use of force and verbal abuse. Yet police are rarely disciplined or prosecuted for such offenses. In Germany, Bavarian police records single out Roma and Sinti for preventive crime measures; in Spain, non-Roma parents protest the integration of Roma children into schools; and in Ireland, Travelers are excluded from pubs.

Nor have all EU governments proved equally determined to address racial discrimination, despite the union's equality provisions. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands boast strong antidiscrimination laws, public bodies that investigate complaints, and lawyers and minority activists capable of effective advocacy and litigation. Six EU states, however, have still not ratified the principal European convention securing the rights of national minorities, and legislation in a number of other EU countries is seriously deficient. Last February in Greece, a man was convicted of the crime of "disseminating false information" for distributing a leaflet that acknowledged the presence of minority languages

in the country. The court reasoned that the leaflet could "incite anxiety among citizens and create the impression that in Greece minorities exist."

Part of the problem is that in the EU, as in the candidate countries, governments have frequently sought to recast racial discrimination as a social and economic problem. However well intended, such thinking often focuses on the Roma -- on their insufficient skills, their purportedly inadequate emphasis on education, or their alleged "unadaptability" to hard work

-- rather than on the discriminatory treatment they receive. Such arguments displace official responsibility and hinder reform by suggesting that the majority need do little to change. Although improved opportunities for adequate jobs, health care, and housing are essential, real progress requires that governments directly confront discriminatory practices and entrenched racist attitudes among their populations.

PUTTING IDEALS INTO ACTION

Expanding the EU is commonly seen as the best way to spread democratic values and respect for human rights from the west of Europe to its east. And there is much truth to this notion, as can be seen from the way the rule of law was consolidated throughout the accession region over the past decade. Eu expansion will have even greater significance, however, if it is not a one-way street but can be made into a vehicle for broadening protection of human rights -- including minority rights -- throughout Europe. The very process of asking membership candidates to satisfy certain standards requires articulating those standards and the shared ideals and agreed common values for which Europe stands. And simple fairness demands that EU member states subject themselves to the same principles.

As the United States and other countries with legacies of racial discrimination continue to learn, centuries of prejudice are not easily overcome. The EU and national governments have already made substantial progress in this regard, but they should now use the accession process to more fully realize their progressive ideals. These governments should start this process by establishing yardsticks that are clear, unconditional, and apply to all EU members -- new and old. To this end, the union's current 15 members should set an example by bolstering their own legal measures to conform to the Race Directive, improving the enforcement of their laws against racial violence, and ensuring that all Roma and others with genuine asylum claims receive due consideration.

The European Commission should also make these political and legal issues more prominent in its annual reports on the candidate countries. It should make clear that, although the accession negotiations will involve some flexibility as prospective members struggle to harmonize their laws and economies with the EU's, no extensions will be granted on standards relating to equality and minority rights. And it should underline that, although accession is a political process, the independence of evaluations of candidate countries' performance will not be compromised. Furthermore, since monitoring has inherent value, instead of ceasing once accession takes place, it should continue and be extended to encompass EU member states as well. Expanding monitoring would accomplish two goals. By making clear that the political criteria apply equally throughout the union, it would dispel any suspicion that candidate states are judged by higher standards. And by providing for regular review, it would encourage systematic development of EU human rights policy and avoid the appearance -- fatal to the sanctions on Austria in 2000 -- that Brussels' actions are haphazard or partisan.

Finally, the commission should do a better job of involving civil society -- including Roma and other minority groups -- more directly in the accession process. The widely criticized "democratic deficit" within the EU has been replicated in EU-candidate relations: the terms of

enlargement have mostly been negotiated between governments and behind closed doors. Over the past decade, EU and other funding has supported a constellation of NGOs with a wealth of accumulated expertise on minority rights issues. The commission and individual governments should capitalize on this experience by treating such NGOs as full partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of minority policies. One immediate improvement would be to simplify application procedures and make EU funding for antidiscrimination measures more accessible.

The EU can only do so much, however; primary responsibility for protecting minority rights rests with national governments. Senior officials should therefore repeatedly and publicly acknowledge that racism is pervasive and declare it unacceptable. Governments must enact comprehensive antidiscrimination legislation and establish effective enforcement bodies to monitor compliance and remedy violations. In addition, they should increase support for Roma education and legal aid programs. Most important, however, candidate governments should use the accession process not just as a checklist for club membership but as a means to jump-start their transition to diverse and tolerant societies. Too often, newly minted national programs have seemed to be aimed at pleasing Brussels rather than truly protecting minorities. For example, when the Bulgarian government announced in 1999 a series of pledges to combat discrimination and protect the rights of the Roma, its declaration was greeted with much international fanfare. Yet a number of Bulgarian members of parliament learned of the program's existence only when European Commission President Prodi praised it in a subsequent speech. And three years later, most of the proposals lie dormant. In all likelihood, many of the present EU candidates will soon be members. This is undoubtedly for the good. But if, during this period of heightened scrutiny, candidate governments go through the motions but fail to fully invest in the implementation of minority rights, an extraordinary opportunity will have been missed. Accession offers an unprecedented chance to institutionalize reform both within the EU and in the candidate states. These changes can permanently ground the new Europe on a foundation of respect for human rights. This chance must be seized -- for who knows when Europe will get another one like it?

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