

Roma

Profile

According to the 2002 census, there were 108,193 Roma in Serbia. This is almost certainly an underestimation, as many Roma do not identify as such in censuses for fear of discrimination. Domestic and international sources estimate Serbia's Roma population to be 300,000-460,000, which would mean that Roma are the largest minority in Serbia. Roma are a diverse and dispersed group. Most speak Romani and some Serbian as their first language. There are high concentrations of Roma in Belgrade, Nis, Vojvodina and southern Serbia.

Historical context

Roma came to the Balkans in the 13th century and have lived there ever since. Roma have always been viewed by others as second class and faced discrimination and prejudice. Although they still faced discrimination and prejudice, during Tito's rule Roma were in better position than before or after, both economically and in terms of some state support for cultural activities.

Many Roma people fled to Serbia as a result of the Kosovo conflict. Poverty is particularly high among the Roma, and they face discrimination and exclusion from all spheres of life. Roma are underrepresented in local and national governments.

Current issues

Roma face discrimination and exclusion in all spheres of life. Unemployment is particularly high among the Roma, and those who are employed are usually in low paid positions. Poverty is widespread and many people do not have access to such necessities as electricity or even clean water. Conditions are particularly appalling in informal settlements; these are makeshift temporary settlements populated mainly by Roma displaced from Kosovo or forcibly returned from abroad. In 2006, the Belgrade city government abandoned plans to build housing for Roma in the city following nearby residents' demonstrations.

Roma have problems with access to basic services, such as health care and social assistance. For example, whilst routine immunization coverage in Serbia is 97 per cent, the coverage amongst the Roma is estimated by the Institute of Public Health of Belgrade to be as low as 20-30 per cent. According to the World Bank, problems with access to public services are driven by discrimination and lack of language skills and exacerbated by many Roma lacking personal documents. Many Roma children do not attend school, and those who do are often placed in special schools for the mentally disabled simply because of their ethnicity. Roma are almost unrepresented in local and national governments, and are severely underrepresented in employment in state institutions. Hidden discrimination is widespread, including by public officials, negative stereotypes from the majority and other minorities prevail, and there are many reported cases of police ill-treatment. A national strategy for integration of the Roma has been elaborated and work is underway to try to improve the situation of the Roma as part of the Decade of Roma Inclusion.