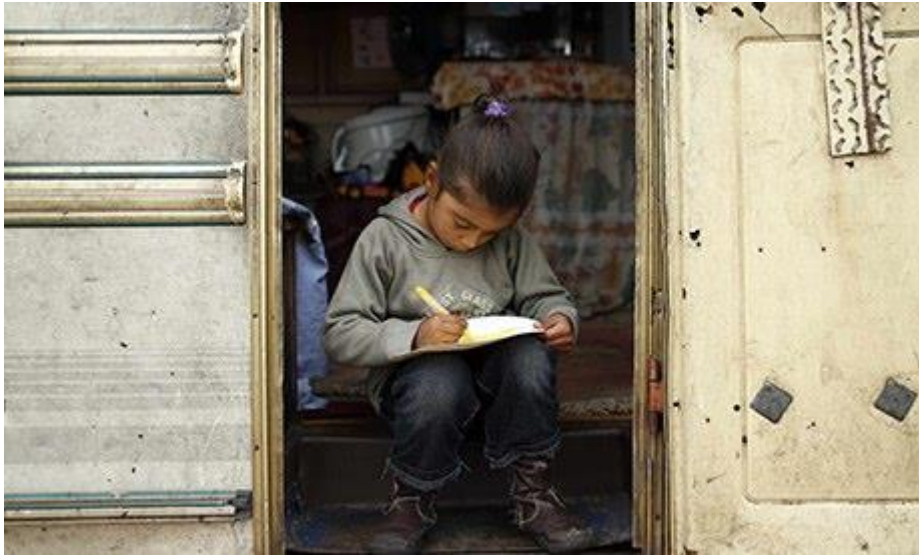


Europe needs a Roma working class

Roma represent more than 20% of new entrants into the labour force in the European Union's newest member states but their living conditions have actually deteriorated since many of them became EU citizens

George SOROS

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A girl in a Roma camp in Triel-sur-Seine, near Paris. The good news is that we know how to prepare Roma children to be productive members of society. Photograph: Benoit Tessier/REUTERS

Across Europe, millions are suffering from unemployment and the prospect of a long period of economic stagnation. But no group has been harder hit than the Roma.

There are more than 10 million Roma living in Europe, mostly concentrated in the Balkans and in the European Union's newest member states, especially Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary. What is truly shocking is that their living conditions have actually deteriorated since many of them became EU citizens. At the same time, the majority population's attitude has become more hostile almost everywhere in Europe.

The two trends are mutually reinforcing: marginalisation breeds contempt, and vice versa. The only escape from this trap is investment in education, which would pay enormous social dividends.

Consider, for example, that Roma represent more than 20% of new entrants into the labour force in the countries above.

The good news is that we know how to prepare Roma children to be productive members of society. My foundations have been active in educating Roma for more than 25 years. Over that period, we have educated a small cohort of young Roma who retain their identity and yet can break the hostile stereotypes held by those with whom they interact.

Together with the World Bank, we established the Roma Education Fund in 2005. The REF is ready to help national education authorities across the EU improve their performance in educating Roma children. Indeed, its programmes currently reach more than 100,000 students each year, including more than 1,600 university students who receive scholarships.

But these numbers are woefully inadequate relative to the magnitude of the problem. Half of the Roma are of school age, and the population is growing faster than the capacity of the REF. The fund's annual budget is only €12m (£10m), of which my foundations cover nearly half, and we find it difficult to secure additional funds. That is unacceptable. The programmes developed by the REF ought to be scaled up by governments, with the help of the EU, and made available to all Roma children in Europe.

The European commission has played a very helpful role through its structural funds, which cover up to 80% of the additional costs involved in integrating the Roma. Unfortunately, the remaining 20% is difficult to mobilise, owing to widespread anti-Roma sentiment throughout Europe.

To break the negative stereotypes, Roma children must be educated to celebrate and take pride in their Roma heritage. That is what the REF has done. As it is, educated Roma do not fit the stereotypes, so they can easily blend into the majority population, but the majority's hostility remains. If the approach developed by the REF were generally adopted, it would go a long way toward breaking the stereotypes.

But education is not enough. The Roma must also be able to find employment. A lasting solution requires Europe to build a Roma working class. Here the private sector also has a role to play.

Experts from the European Commission and from my foundations are developing a demonstration project to make private sector internships available to Roma youth enrolled in vocational schools.

Romania already has a similar programme for the majority population, and minister of education Remus Pricopie has pledged to open it up to the Roma. I urge other governments to take similar steps.

Let's be honest: there is a Roma problem in Europe, and it is getting worse. But both the problem and its worsening reflect a toxic combination of deep-seated hostility and persistent neglect.

In fact, Europe's educated Roma are proving every day that the problem is eminently solvable. But solving it will take more than a generation, and Europe cannot afford to wait for economic recovery. On the contrary, given the increase in its Roma population, Europe's long-term prosperity depends on reversing current trends – and getting started right away.

George Soros is chairman of Soros Fund Management and of the Open Society Foundations.

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