FACT SHEET
Roma in the Military Service in Europe

This fact sheet aims to inform about today’s implication of Roma people in the European military, while at the same time shedding light on the connection the Roma have been having with the European armed forces throughout time.

Brief historical perspective of the Roma military affiliation

Historians and linguists of the late nineteenth and twentieth century issued the hypothesis according to which Roma people or Gypsies originally coming from Uttar Pradesh (modern India) had a highly military origin as prior to their arrival in Europe they were prisoners generally treated as warriors. A serological study conducted in India in 1992 concluded that the Rajputs (descendants of ruling Hindu warrior classes of North India) were the closest genetic relative to the Roma.¹

The recent discovery of the connection between the output of the Proto Gypsies and a passage from “Book of the Yamin”, written by the Arabic chronicler Abu Nasr Al-Utbi (961-1040), the personal secretary of Mahmud of Ghazni, helped to confirm what historians had already suspected: a direct relationship between the exodus of the ancestors of the Gypsies and the raids perpetrated by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni.²

In the first quarter century of the second millennium AD, northwestern India was subject to a series of attacks by troops of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (in modern Afghanistan), who aimed at spreading Islam in the Iranian lands and the northwestern Indian subcontinent mainly for economic reasons. Following the Sultan Mahmud’s invasions, entire Indian city populations were captured and deported to Ghazni and Kabul. Therefore, thousands of Indians, apart from being kept as prisoners of war, had to fight like “Ghulam” (servant in Arabic) in special units of troops, becoming in this way Ghaznavies slave warriors. The slaves were highly trained soldiers, most of them being of Indian origin.³ Afterwards, the Selkjes, a Sunni Muslim people of Turkish origin, defeated the Ghaznavies in 1038 and 1041, taking members of the pre-Romani

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
populations as prisoners of war to use as their own fighting force in the Byzantine Empire. The subsequent move of Roma up into Eastern Europe during the 1100s was recorded in historical documents where they were illustrated as skilled metal craftsmen, musicians, and soldiers.

Later on, during the 16th and 17th century, more documents testify the presence of the Roma in the wars of that time. In France, for example, the French Roma, organized in Bohemian companies, participated in all wars led by the French armed forces that were in the service of the kings and nobles, starting from Francis I to Henry IV. The Bohemian companies used to be attached to the regular French military units by means of royal licenses. Some of the names of Roma involved in the early European wars were, among others: Captain La Chesnaye, Charles Dodo, Captain la Gallere, Francis Roverle, Captain Robert, Capitain Quiros, the brothers Losada or the families Berenguer and Noguera. While it is true that the Roma were part of the military elite of the European armed forces, their minority background contributed though to a limited access of the majority of Roma to the high qualified military jobs and favoured their recruitment mainly in civil fields, such as house-building, railway construction, or infrastructure development in general. In today's Western, but also Eastern Europe, where military is volunteer, this low-profile military jobs are rather obsolete, this mainly due to the fact that the Roma tend to hide their ethnic minority background, which ultimately hampers the spread of ethnic diversity across European armed forces.

In more recent times, during the Communist era, despite the different approaches of state policy towards Roma adopted in the countries of Eastern Europe, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, or Poland, among others, there were plenty of common characteristics that indicated the presence of a rather unitary state policy towards Roma, which aimed at achieving the social integration and assimilation of these people. In Romania, for example, Roma were denied the status of ethnic minority; progress was made however in housing, places of work, revenue, or education for the Roma. In other words, the years of communism contributed to the modernization of their private life by helping them reach a higher standing in terms of modernity and integration, even though they were a social category with acute economic and social problems. It was thought that they could be "civilized" only if they denied their cultural patrimony and turned "Romanians."

In the first years of Communism, a large part of the Roma was employed in the Party apparatus, the militia, army and the security apparatus. The promotion of Roma occurred in the conditions of the Communist regime's social policy, which aimed at fostering the development of the poor classes and at destroying the old social structure that was unwilling to accept the new order.

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4 Tatiana Nikolayevna Gabrielson, Propaganda of Romani Culture in Post-Soviet Ukraine, p 259, http://books.google.be/books?id=tKcas6cUtBkC&pg=PA257&lpg=PA257&dq=military+history+of+the+roma+people&source=bl&ots=SyCWRZ6vgR&sig=k4XigUS1aO5ZgeTwa2wwMmg2H6M&hl=en&sa=X&ei=_VSEU4PpBcSR7Aa40GYAw&ved=0CFYQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=military%20history%20of%20the%20roma%20people&f=false
8 Comenius History School Project (2004), The Gypsies during the Communist Regime and Present Conditions, http://www2.stevenson.ac.uk/comenius/articles/movement/ro_db/gyp_1e.htm
9 Viorel Achim (2004), The Roma in Romanian History,
Romanian historian and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adrian Cioroianu, states that during Communism, the Roma minority was better integrated than it is at present mainly thanks to the fact that education was mandatory for all Romanian citizens, including Roma people, as was military service. According to him, “the military conscription was of vital importance as the chances of always being surrounded by Roma high school mates and army comrades were very high. This showed that we were all part of the same system.”

Information on the situation faced by the Roma in today’s Europe with particular focus on the good practice examples in encouraging them to join the army from several European countries

In Hungary, like in most European countries, Roma continue to encounter difficulties in finding employment, have an underprivileged status and limited chances to access education, let alone the persistence of the prejudices against them. Even though the Roma still face disadvantages in the Hungarian Defence Forces, the Ministry of Defence attempts to solve this issue by means of new minority strategies as the army is seen as an important place for socialization and Roma integration. The measures that the Hungarian Ministry of Defence has taken over the past years are reflected in, among others, the establishment of the Roma Task Force and the Roma Social Committee, both under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence and are re-confirmed by the official positions taken by the Hungarian Ministry of Defence and Government, in general. The most recent statement on the matter was issued in December 2013 by the Minister of Defence Csaba Hende, who affirmed that in the Hungarian Defence Forces it doesn’t matter where one comes from, whether they are rich or poor, what religion or belief they belong to, emphasizing that the only aspect that is of true importance is the will to work and, if necessary, fight for Hungary. It is only “through hard work and support of the Hungarian Defence Forces, that the Roma will manage to step out of the vicious circles of poverty that keeps them entangled”, he said. Moreover, the Minister for Social Inclusion, Peter Garai, also mentioned that he would do his best to better encourage Roma youth to join the army as it would undoubtedly contribute to their enhanced social integration.

Although there is little information on how many Roma have recently joined the army, we can make use of a survey conducted in 2004 that displays data still valid in present times, according to which the share of Roma in the Hungarian Army is 12% but that in fact is 6-8% only.

Even in Bulgaria, discussions on the issue of managing diversity in today’s military put the question of equitable representation of minority groups (including Roma) and females in the armed forces in a new context. Diversity is seen in Bulgaria as a challenge to the traditional integration and an important generator of constitutional innovation. Here again, there are no official statistics about ethnic background of the military, but data from recent representative sociological surveys illustrate the fact that among conscript soldiers, 81.8% identify themselves

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11 Veronika Karacsony (2008), The Roma in the Hungarian Army
13 Ibid.
14 Veronika Karacsony (2008), The Roma in the Hungarian Army
as Bulgarians, 12.4% as Turks, 2.7% as Roma and 3.1% as others.\textsuperscript{15} Before 1989, the largest part of the young people of Turkish and Roma communities used to do the military service in paramilitary formations such as the Construction or Transportation troops, thus not having access to the regular armed forces. Some reasons for the under-representation of Roma communities in the professional military nowadays could be the weak interest among Roma to join the army as professional members due to the lack of information about the necessary procedures, requirements, career opportunities, etc., as well as a low level of education and proficiency in Bulgarian language, requirements that some young Roma groups do not meet.\textsuperscript{16}

In April 2011, the Danish Ministry of Defense issued a policy on diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity for its employees, 61% of whom are members of the Danish Armed Forces. The share of ethnic minorities (including Roma) of the Danish population has increased from 3% in 1990 to over 12% in 2010.\textsuperscript{17} According to the Ministry of Defence reports, 1.1% of their employees, civilian and military had an ethnic minority background, as compared to 7.2% of the Danish civilian workforce.\textsuperscript{18}

Likewise, the United Kingdom has had throughout the years to address challenges in its attempts to diversify its armed forces in terms of gender, ethnic, and racial lines and developed policies meant to establish its all-volunteer force, to better integrate women and racial and ethnic minorities (Roma included), that have continued to the present.\textsuperscript{19} At the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the British military set a goal of 2.8% of the active force to be ethnic minorities by 2006 and in 2006 after reaching this objective they set a new target increasing their recruitment of black and ethnic minorities to 8% of all personnel by 2013. According to a Statistical Release issued by the British Ministry of Defence in 2013, this time the goal was partly achieved as black and minority ethnic personnel comprised 7.1% of the UK Regular Forces, continuing though a gradual increase in the proportion of minority personnel.\textsuperscript{20}

Conclusions

The army is historically a leader in opportunities for ethnically diverse people as it is a vast organization with a global presence. Leaders should emphasize that ethnic diversity, as an important element of the European culture, in the army reflects ethnic diversity in the society and when acknowledged and respected, forms the underpinnings of an inclusive environment unique to the European army in general. Involving more Roma people in the European military services is an ingredient of developing adaptive leaders and represents a key measure in favouring their enhanced social integration in Europe on the whole.

The European military forces should continue to improve their understanding of its diverse population, as well as how to attract minorities such as Roma to the army, how to include their

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. p 67
\textsuperscript{17} Gary Schaub, Jr. et al. (2012), Diversity in the Danish Armed Forces, P 6, \url{http://cms.polsci.ku.dk/publikationer/diversity1/Diversity_report.pdf}
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. p 7
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. p 15
knowledge and abilities in mission accomplishments, how to retain them, and how to inspire them to be members of military service in the armies across Europe. Therefore, the implementation of a diversity initiative, within the framework of a set of broader National Roma Integration Strategies, as well as a better implementation of policies and laws that provide equal treatment to Roma people in terms of army accession, will provide strategic direction and align the EU’s member states efforts with a single European strategy supported by the knowledge and resources necessary to be successful. The EU countries should better consider that the army will always offer Roma citizens good jobs by reducing disadvantages, giving chance for social evolution, integration as well as further chances in education as the military services of the European Union’s countries should be the leading national organizations in enhancing the strengths of ethnically diverse people in a truly inclusive working environment.