



1986
2011

EUROCITIES report: The Berlin mobile contact point for EU migrant workers and Roma from the perspective of the service providers

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This report was produced by Anna Schmitt and Hamze Bytyci from Amaro Drom e.V. and Wolfgang Heine from südost Europa Kultur e.V. The information contained within does not necessarily reflect the position or the opinion of EUROCIITIES.



This publication is commissioned under the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-General for Employment, social affairs & inclusion of the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the EUROPE 2020 goals in these fields.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details a meeting of the EUROCITIES task force on Roma inclusion in Berlin. It presents the work of Berlin's contact point for EU migrant workers and Roma from the perspective of the NGOs *Amaro Drom* and *südost Europa Kultur*. These associations run the service on behalf of the Berlin Senate for integration, employment and social issues.

According to estimates, around 12,000 Roma from the former Yugoslavia and some 5-7,000 Roma from new EU member states, mainly Romania and Bulgaria, live in Berlin today. The arrival of the last group in particular is a new phenomenon in the city. Because of this, Berlin is currently developing a strategy for Roma inclusion to help integrate these migrants into city life.

Set up in May 2010, the contact point for EU migrant workers and Roma represents one of the first steps by the Berlin Senate to acknowledge the new wave of Roma migrants in the city. The service was developed with the aim of building bridges between Roma migrants and social and private services through advice, information on services available, translation and awareness raising among Berlin's institutions. It is located in the district of Neukölln in south central Berlin.

Since its set up, the service has mainly relied on word-of-mouth or referral from other services. It receives around 18 clients per day, leading to an average of 400 clients per month. Around 70% of the clients are Romanians and another 20% are Bulgarians.

The main reasons why clients first contact the office relate to their financial situation, housing, access to employment, education and healthcare and to legal and residential status. In Berlin, as in cities all over Europe, very little is known about the social situation of Roma migrants. Because of this, the information gathered through the contact point project and, in particular, its advice centre, can contribute to a better understanding of the intra-EU mobility of Roma.

The success of the Berlin contact point in outreach to and support of clients affirms the city of Berlin's approach to draw on civil society and community resources in service delivery. This success is, however, also due to the unpaid work of a lot of volunteers, their energy and commitments.

The authors hope that this report provides interesting insights into the situation of Roma migrants and can inspire the development of similar services in other European cities and in general.

INTRODUCTION

Leaving aside the variety of internal differentiations, the Roma living in Berlin today can be divided into two main groups: Roma migrants from the former Yugoslavia and those from EU member states. Because ethnic background is not recorded in German population registers there is no precise record of the size of these two groups but according to estimates there are around 12,000 Roma from the former Yugoslavia and some 5-7,000 from EU member states¹.

Roma from the former Yugoslavia came in a first wave as civil war refugees in the early 1990s and in a second wave after the abolition of visa restrictions for Serbia and Montenegro in December 2009 and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania in December 2010. Many Roma from these countries also claimed their right to asylum. The Roma from EU member states come mainly from Romania and Bulgaria, but there are also smaller groups from Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the other countries of the 2004 EU accession.

The Berlin Roma population is concentrated in some districts, in particular in parts of Mitte and Neukölln on the outer limits of the centre of Berlin. These districts are among the poorest in Berlin, but they provide the informal accommodation structures for newcomers that are typical for such neighbourhoods.

Berlin is both a city and a region ('Land' in German) in federal Germany. It is governed by the Berlin Senate and is further divided into 12 districts with an average of 300,000 inhabitants. District councils have strong remits on social policy areas such as health and youth issues in particular.

The policy towards Roma migrants in Berlin has undergone significant changes recently. While German Sinti and Roma are an official protected minority in the whole of Germany, the relatively new presence of Roma migrants from other EU states has not yet been fully recognised in minority/migrant/social policies, primarily because this migration was seen as temporary. In the last few years, however, the long-term integration of this group is on the political agenda. This is in part due to growing public concern following an incident in the summer 2009, when a group of 100 Romanian Roma spent the night without a place to stay in a city park. In the wake of this, city authorities, social services and schools called for policies to tackle the multiple problems regarding Roma immigrants.

As a first step, the Berlin Senate set up working groups on Roma inclusion together with the districts and non-governmental organisations. The aim was to develop a proposal for a city-wide strategy for Roma inclusion for the next four years. In parallel, districts have also started running decentralised inclusion projects themselves. In 2010 the district of Neukölln organised a summer school to provide special language training to help Roma pupils catch up with their class peers. In the district of Mitte, several schools cooperate with the NGO Regionale Arbeitsstellen für Bildung, Integration und Demokratie (RAA) which employs mediators working in particular with Roma children and their parents².

In its report to the European Commission within the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies the German federal government acknowledged the inflow of Roma from EU member states to Germany. The national government however did not find it necessary to develop any specific policies for this group. This was also justified by the fear of stigmatising Roma and backed

¹ There is also evidence of a dynamic growth of the Berlin Roma population. According to the district of Neukölln, in early 2011 more than 500 Romanian and Bulgarian children, many of which Roma, were attending schools in Neukölln. Within the first half of 2011, another 87 had registered.

² See EUROCITIES 2011 report on school mediators.

by the main representatives of the German Roma minority. In this situation, Berlin, together with cities like Dortmund, Duisburg and Munich, played a role in bringing the topic of Roma migrants onto the national agenda.

THE MOBILE CONTACT POINT FOR EU MIGRANT WORKERS AND ROMA

The project 'mobile contact-point for European migrant workers and Roma - conflict intervention against anti-Gypsyism' was created in early 2010 as an answer to increasing evidence on the precarious socio-economic situation of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma in Berlin. The contact point project is run by two NGOs and financed by the Berlin Senate's Department for Work, Integration and Social Affairs, including EU funding, such as the European Regional Development Fund.

The contact point advocates for the rights of Roma migrant workers from EU countries, draws attention to the risk of stereotypes and 'Gipsy' clichés in the discussion and implementation of the EU rights and raises awareness of the social and economical situation of Roma migrants.

While the concrete objectives may vary for each individual client, the overarching objective of the project is to build bridges to mainstream services for users through guidance, to make them aware of their rights, to help maintain stable living conditions for them and to allow them to become independent from social support.

The NGOs running the mobile contact point project

Two NGOs jointly run the project: Amaro Drom and südost Europa Kultur. Amaro Drom runs an advice centre dealing with clients in the district of Neukölln while südost Europa Kultur focuses on outreach work, mainly in the districts of Mitte, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Tempelhof-Schöneberg, Spandau and Lichtenberg.

Amaro Drom (which means "Our way" in Romanes) is an intercultural youth association of Roma and non-Roma that was founded in 2006. It works throughout Germany and participates in a network across Europe with different youth organisations in Hungary, Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania and others. The association is the only Roma-run organisation in Berlin which undertakes social work with Romanian and Bulgarian citizens.

Amaro Drom sees the social inclusion of migrants as a two-way process. It therefore provides support for the integration of migrants while working towards a better understanding by the receiving society for actions that foster inclusion and participation of migrants. This perspective is based on the understanding that change can only take place as a result of both sides engaging in a dialogue, in which migrant organisations play a crucial role.

One focus of Amaro Drom's work is the empowerment of young people. This happens through a youth group, which organises exchanges between Roma and non-Roma people from different backgrounds in meetings and workshops. Amaro Drom also supports young Roma from eastern Europe to get practical experience in Berlin through volunteer programmes and scholarships. The association offers an afterschool programme for children, which is run by volunteers and some parents. Romanian and Bulgarian children come on a daily basis to learn the German language and develop social skills.

The main contribution of Amaro Drom to the mobile contact point project consists of running an advice centre on social issues in the district of Neukölln. The association also accompanies

migrants when they are visiting services and offers translation services focused on Romanian and Bulgarian Roma.

Südost Europa Kultur is an organisation which unites psycho-sociological work, cultural activities and societal engagement with an overall concept. *Südost Europa Kultur* stands for integration through consultation, assistance and support, education and employment. The organisation feels closely connected to refugees and Roma who are in need of specific care or support. These aims are achieved through measures such as social counselling and therapeutic support, support for repatriation as well as financial and in-kind support. They also run German language and integration courses and promote learning opportunities at an intercultural garden and a textile shop. In addition, they offer accompaniment to and support at school and various projects for children and adolescents. Furthermore, an extensive cultural program offers movie and theatre shows, exhibitions, readings, cafés as meeting points, concerts, lectures and panel discussions.

The focus of *südost Europa Kultur* within the mobile contact point is rather on outreach work and street work. As for *Amaro Drom*, *südost Europa Kultur* sees its role in mobilising self-help and in providing bridges into mainstream services, especially in medical care, labour market and housing. Furthermore, *südost Europa Kultur* offers children and adolescents support and accompaniment in school-related matters. In practice this means mediation in matters of language, accompaniment to social services, social work and mediation in conflict situations. *Südost* has a close cooperation with administrative agencies and offices, social services, migrant organisations and cross-cutting target group oriented working groups.

Clients' needs and services

In a needs analysis conducted in October 2010 through expert and client interviews, two main goals were identified for the contact point: improving clients' access to mainstream services and raising intercultural awareness towards Roma inside these services. At the start of the project, only few mainstream services offered Romanes or Romanian language support or were aware of such a need. In addition, the knowledge and experience on the rights of EU migrants from accession states was weak.

The approach was taken to build bridges from client to mainstream services through translation, accompaniment and consultation, but also by offering information about the implementation of EU rights for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens.

The contact point tries to meet the needs of Roma migrants in Berlin as much as possible, even though clients often come in emergency situations. The most frequent requests made by clients concern their financial situation (including indebtedness and destitution) and housing situation (including housing exclusion, homelessness or the risk of expulsion), health, education and work. Questions concerning education are primarily about the enrolment of children, communication with schools, teachers and social workers at school, but also on linguistic courses for adults. With regard to working life, many clients come with the aim of applying for an EU work permit or with questions about self-employment.

Contact point staff act as guides, translators and experts in legal questions and in some cases act as a broker to lawyers. Support is often requested in crisis situations; for example, help with medical emergencies, deaths or births, but also with mental sufferings and racist assaults.

In spite of the general perception of mainstream service providers that Roma are hard-to-reach clients, the contact point receives a lot of clients, despite no direct advertising towards the target group. On average, about 18 clients visit the contact point's advice centre each day. Since it opened in January 2010, a large group of Romanian Roma have used the advice centre and spread the word about its existence. Throughout the year new clients came in continuously, at around 100 new clients a month. From March to October there was an average of 400 client-related activities

per month, including consultations, street work and accompaniment.

Other established services, for example child protection services and health care centres, also sent clients to Amaro Drom and südost Europa Kultur. At around 70%, the bulk of the clients looking for advice are Romanians, another 20% are Bulgarians. The rest of the clients are from Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Poland, plus a small number of people from Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia.

The centre receives financing for 72 consulting hours a month. Therefore meeting the demand of clients is only possible by drawing on additional volunteers, interns and staff speaking Romanian, Bulgarian and/or Romanes who are subsidised through the job centre (social security office). The volunteers also have to be qualified and coordinated. Their time spent coordinating their activities is not accounted for in the 72 hours per month for which financing is available.

Access to employment

Due to the application of transitional clauses for EU workers by the German government, Romanian and Bulgarian workers have restricted access to the German labour market until 1 January 2014. This means that for the time being, nationals of these countries can only be self-employed, which leads to many having inadequate or precarious income, depending heavily on the labour market and its seasonal variations. In reality, many self-employed workers are employees working on construction sites. Some of them lack information about the meaning of self-employment status, or are even intentionally misled by companies hiring them as self-employed although the job is de-facto a subordinate position.³ These restrictions are less important for young people who can access apprenticeships that are not subject to work permissions.

The common perception that Roma-migrants are suspected of working irregularly⁴, of working as bogus-self-employed or of wanting to live off welfare benefits ignores the fact that the drivers behind this situation are often not the Roma themselves but employers and a weak enforcement of employment legislation.

As a response to this situation, Amaro Drom built a network of companies that are able and committed to doing business with Romanian and Bulgarian self-employed subcontractors. Contact point staff also help clients apply for EU work permits, offer training for young people wanting to apply for apprenticeships and help them to get their qualifications and school degrees from their native countries recognised in Germany.

The financial situation and access to social benefits

The financial situation of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma in Berlin is a great challenge. Even if families have an income source, this is not sufficient so they often have to take loans from private persons, companies or institutions when, for example, school materials must be purchased or when members of the family need medical treatment without having a health insurance. This leads to a situation of indebtedness. The contact point helps clients communicate with the creditors and find ways to pay off debts.

Newly-arrived EU citizens find it very difficult to claim social benefits, even more so if they are self-employed. Non-German EU citizens who are registered at the job centre as searching for work

³ People working under the status of self-employed persons, but de facto working only for one company without the freedom to organise their working activities as a self-employed person would have. This illegal arrangement is often chosen by employers in order to save social security contributions.

⁴ i. e. not paying taxes and social insurance.

or as not working are not entitled to social benefits from the job centre. This has further consequences, because without the status of benefit recipient, people cannot get support for school materials, access to food distribution services and food kitchens for people in need nor free-of charge use of homeless shelters.

At the advice centre, clients wanting to claim social benefits can get information about how to do this and which documents are required. The suspicion that most Romanian and Bulgarian Roma migrants would come to Germany to claim social benefits resulted in some cases in this particular practice of the contact point being criticised. Whereas in other advice centres access to social rights for clients is a core responsibility, the same task is often still perceived as illegitimate for Roma and EU migrants in the Neukölln centre. However, the stereotype of “benefit migrants” is contradicted by the fact that many customers of the advice centres spend years in Berlin with an income below the subsistence level without ever claiming benefits.

Issues related to legal status and residence permit

While Romanian and Bulgarian citizens’ access to the German labour market is restricted, they enjoy freedom of movement as EU citizens. However, EU citizens are required to obtain a specific ‘freedom of movement certificate’ (Freizügigkeitsbescheinigung) issued by the immigration office. Many clients are not aware of the need to follow this procedure upon arrival in order to register. Some are also obliged to provide additional documents in order to obtain it, e.g. proof that they have regular income. Unemployed women who are not married to their partner have even more problems to obtain the document and therefore find it difficult to claim their right to free movement.

The contact point supports clients by accompanying them to the immigration office and offering legal advice. A precarious resident status remains a central problem and a major obstacle to integration for many Roma migrants. This problem is even bigger for migrants from the former Yugoslavia who still have a subsidiary protection status⁵.

Access to housing

The Berlin rental market makes it very difficult for many Roma families to find a flat, in particular when the savings from the country of origin are not high enough to cover a rental deposit and the demand for proof of income cannot be met. Consequently, Roma migrants often live in a precarious status in substandard housing, which causes problems in many other areas. Over the last years, the particular problems of Roma on the housing market have become most visible in various cases of Romanian Roma migrants with toddlers spending the night in parks.

Roma from Romania and Bulgaria often live in an informal housing situation and are not allowed to register at the municipality by landlords or sub-letters.⁶ Without an official registration it is not possible to obtain a work permit and health insurance. Another set of problems concern substandard housing: some landlords rent dilapidated, nearly uninhabitable flats to Roma families. Overcrowding is common, causing family problems and tense relations with neighbours, which lead to a perpetuation of existing ‘Gipsy’ prejudices. Prejudices towards Roma are generally strong and expressed openly by landlords and strengthened by media reports.

⁵ This status is granted to non-EU nationals who do not qualify for refugee status but nevertheless would face persecution if they returned to their country of origin (e.g. by non-state actors) or cannot return for other reasons. This status was granted to many refugees who came to Germany from the former Yugoslavia during the civil war. In contrast to refugee status, subsidiary protection only grants limited access to social rights and employment. Residence permits are only issued for short periods of time.

⁶ A lease contract is needed for registration.

Support provided at the contact point can rarely provide direct help for the client to find an apartment. The focus is on supporting clients to get the required papers (proof of income, proof to be debtless from financial institutions and former landlords) and to learn how to find vacant apartments on the Internet and in newspapers.

For those people who have a flat, the contact point's staff mediates with housing administrations, regularising informal housing arrangements, informing renters with a precarious status, translating contracts and raising awareness among sub-letters and landlords.

Contact point staff also try to find accommodation in homeless shelters for Roma families. The problem is that most shelters are not designed for families and Roma families may consequently be denied access. The contact point supports families who were denied access to homeless shelters to make an appeal in court, which, at the time of writing, was successful in all cases. For emergency cases, an informal support network was set up that can temporarily house homeless people in private accommodation.

Access to education

According to Berlin legislation, access to education is provided to all children, independently of legal status or registration. In practice, however, children may find their access to schools denied, in particular when no official registration exists.

In 2011, some special courses were established in primary and secondary schools to meet the needs of German language support among children from the new EU accession states. Unfortunately even in primary education, many children have to change schools several times to attend these support classes⁷. Secondary school pupils sometimes have to wait several months in order to get a place at school.

Adults have access to language and orientation courses that are organised under a scheme by the Federal Government, but the clients sometimes face problems with financing the courses (which cost €1 per hour) if these are not paid for by the social benefits services (see financial situation above).

Staff working for the contact point act as mediators by informing and accompanying parents and pupils and by organising the required papers and translations for registering for schools and German language courses.

Access to healthcare

Access to healthcare in Berlin is regulated through health insurance. Without health insurance, access to healthcare is limited. Many of the contact point's clients already lived outside the health insurance system in their countries of origin, which makes access to the German system all the more difficult, because the German public health insurance providers demand proof of previous insurance in order to get into the system. Other preconditions for accessing health insurance are being solvent and registered as living in Germany.

When joining the German health insurance system contributions need to be paid retrospectively from the day of the first registration in Germany, no matter whether services were taken up. This is not widely known, which results in people entering the insurance system with high debts, because they registered as living in Germany long before entering the insurance system. For the self-employed, insurance fees and related financial problems are significantly higher, as they have to cover the full insurance fee that an employed person shares with his/her employer.

⁷ Often the child has to transfer to the school that offers the special language support. Once the child has basic German language skills, s/he moves back to their original school, which is allocated based on catchment areas.

The contact point provides information about access to healthcare for the non-insured. It interacts with health insurance providers in Germany but also in Bulgaria and Romania. Interpretation for doctors appointments is another important issue for which the contact point created a pool of volunteer interpreters. In urgent cases, interpretation is also provided via phone. The contact point has a list of Romanian and Bulgarian speaking doctors, and cooperates with doctors giving free treatment. Moreover, there are separate women's and men's mutual help groups for health education and parenting.

The contact point spreads information about the European Health Insurance Card and the necessity of prior insurance amongst the Roma communities in Romania and Bulgaria, where most of the clients come from. It does this in cooperation with the Romanian and Bulgarian embassies and the European network 'ternype' for young Roma.

Other activities

The overall development of the contact point is guided by the idea of strengthening the community. This happens through activities such as free German language courses, monthly group meetings with updates on recent political developments relevant for Roma migrants and evening information sessions run by doctors and social workers about children's health, contraception methods, child protection against abuse and support services for women in Berlin.

New offers of service focus more strongly on education and access to information within the community to support an independent life. This sometimes requires new and unconventional measures because of the limited access to work and income of the majority of the Roma migrants. As long as Romanian and Bulgarian citizens still do not have the permission to work in Germany (due to be lifted in 2014), the contact point tries to build bridges to existing qualification programmes for migrants, like peer support programmes and parents courses (e.g. neighbourhood mothers Stadtteilmütter Neukölln run by the NGO Diaconia, 'Kiezväter' programme run by the intercultural centre for education and advice IBBC - another NGO).

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The experience so far with the contact point demonstrates the need for the supporting role it fulfils. Its two years of existence have shown that the current staff resources can only meet the demand by complimenting paid work with a lot of volunteer work, cooperation with other projects and peer support. The contact point team was able to find creative solutions for many concerns, and in some cases former clients have been employed as Roma mediators.

This approach also helped to maintain a certain level of autonomy of the organisations running the service. This autonomy is indispensable for a Roma organisation, and for a project like the contact point, which is not only about service provision but also about awareness raising amongst the public on Roma issues.

Involving Roma organisations in service provision can contribute to the sustainability of the services and to breaking 'Gipsy' clichés among the already established services and advice centres. One of the aims for the future is to have the consultation work run increasingly by Roma themselves, and to recruit and qualify more people from the Roma community as role models. Drawing on mediators inside the community can have a snowball effect, spreading information widely and improving the outreach of the work.

Many problems that became visible at the contact point are structural and cannot be tackled through an advice and advocacy structure alone, such as the housing and homeless shelter situation. Access to employment will become easier after the German transitional arrangements for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens are lifted in 2014. Apart from granting equal rights, the improvement of the situation for Roma migrants will also depend on mainstream society and the Roma themselves becoming fully aware of these rights.

Due to the fact that Roma migrants make up a significant share of Berlin's population and that prejudices towards Roma are still prevalent, a Berlin-wide campaign providing a more realistic view of the Roma migrants, their situation and rights is crucial.

Continuing the funding of the mobile contact point and several other projects, such as 'Roma Horizons' and a new project on job orientation for young Roma and social work with the families (financed through the European Social Fund with südost Europa Kultur as supporting organisation), will hopefully contribute to a continuous improvement of the situation in the future.