

# Unheard Voices: Roma and the Kosovo War

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**Abstract:** The Kosovo conflict is usually seen – and remembered – as a conflict between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians. It was the escalating armed conflict between these two ethnic groups following the revoking of Kosovo's autonomy by the Milošević regime in Belgrade in 1989 which led to NATO's military intervention in the spring of 1999.

However, this focus on the Serbian-Albanian confrontation meant that the fate of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in this conflict has been largely overlooked. Both within Kosovo and outside, their experiences and memories remain widely unconnected to the wider narrative and collective memory of the conflict, even though the Roma<sup>1</sup> constituted a significant proportion of the overall population and one upon whom the conflict had an enormous impact.

**Keywords:** Kosovo, Roma, Holocaust, memory, human rights, United Nations

*Vi man sas ek bari familiya,  
Murdadas la e kali legiya  
Aven mansa sa lumniake Roma,  
Kai putaile e romane droma  
Ake vriama, usti Rom akana,  
Men khutasa misto kai kerala.  
I once had a great family,  
The Black Legions murdered them*

*Come with me Roma from all the world  
For the Romani roads have opened  
Now is the time, rise up Roma now,  
We will rise high if we act.*

Gelem Gelem, second stanza<sup>2</sup>

Roma have lived in the region since the late 1200s, having migrated there along with, or just ahead of, the Ottoman advance into the Balkans.<sup>3</sup> During the long centuries of Ottoman rule many Roma in Kosovo converted to Islam and many adopted Albanian as their language, losing their Romani language in the process. Those Roma who settled among the Serbs further north became Serbianised in language, culture and religion.

It is notoriously difficult to gauge the exact number of Roma in Kosovo before the start of the armed conflict. The official census is inaccurate and estimates vary, with many suggesting that it was probably three to four times as many as the official figures state, which would mean 100,000 to 150,000, or between 5 and 10 per cent of the overall population.<sup>4</sup> The situation is further complicated because since the late 1980s/early 1990s the authorities (first Serbian, later Kosovar) encouraged the establishment of three dis-

tinct communities, of which only one identifies itself as Roma or Romani, whereas the other two, the Ashkali (or Askhaelia, Ashkalija) and the Egyptians, reject this term.<sup>5</sup> Most Ashkali are native Albanian speakers and do not speak Romani; Egyptians also by and large are Albanianised Roma but aim to counter the process of their Albanianisation and base their claim of a different identity on their alleged Egyptian origin. The differences are more about political expediency, geographic location and self-assertion of identity rather than actual ethnic dividers. However, many Ashkali and Egyptians will have been registered in earlier censuses as Albanians.

In today's Kosovo, the three communities Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians are usually grouped together as RAE. In 2006, the Statistical Office of Kosovo estimated their number to be 23,512, or 1.1 per cent of the population – which is about half the official (already seriously deflated) 1991 number of Roma in Kosovo. This gives an indication of the huge scale of Roma displacement: up to 100,000, possibly even more, are thought to have fled their homes in Kosovo as a result of the conflict.<sup>6</sup> The 2011 census, which excluded the three northern municipalities Zvečan, Leposavič and Zubin Potok as well as Mitrovica North (all Serbian dominated and governed), gives the total number of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians as 35,784, or just over 2 per cent of the population.<sup>7</sup> The increase reflects the programme of repatriation of refugees to Kosovo following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008.

The Roma communities had largely tried to avoid involvement in Kosovo politics and stay out of the Serbian-Albanian conflict. However, this was no longer an option once Kosovo's autonomy had been revoked in 1989. The Milošević regime in Belgrade 'invited' Serbi-

anised Roma to see their interests with the Serbs: Serbian authorities allowed some Roma schools to continue operating in Kosovo; Roma children attending Serbian schools were not removed like ethnic Albanian children; Roma were not subjected to summary dismissals from their jobs in the way ethnic Albanians were. The Yugoslav delegation at the Rambouillet talks on Kosovo in February 1999 included Kosovan Roma and Egyptians, and Luan Koka, the self-styled leader of the Kosovan Roma, publicly declared that the Roma in Kosovo supported the Serbs. Some Ashkali identified with the Albanians; other Ashkali aligned themselves with the Serbian authorities re-classifying themselves as Egyptians. During the NATO military intervention, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians were involved on both sides – some voluntarily, but most coerced and under pressure.

The immediate aftermath of the war in Kosovo was a period of turmoil and chaos, with law and order collapsing, and the international community initially unable to do anything about it. With the return of the Kosovo Albanians to their homes, it was not only the remaining Serbs who became the target of a campaign of violent retaliation, but also the Roma populations. Many Albanians regarded them as willing collaborators in the repression of their community during the years of Serbian rule. Like the Serbs, Roma were subjected to physical abuse, destruction of their property, eviction from their homes, rape and murder. The NATO-led international peacekeeping force KFOR proved ineffective in protecting them from these acts of revenge.<sup>8</sup> The *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker* (Society for Threatened Peoples) calls what happened to the Roma right after the end of the war 'the worst Gypsy pogrom since 1945'.<sup>9</sup>

Before the Kosovo War, some 15,000 Roma lived in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo: almost all of them were driven out by ethnic Albanians at the end of the war. The Roma Mahalla in Mitrovica in northern Kosovo, one of the largest and oldest Roma settlements in the region which had grown and prospered over 150 years covering some 21 hectares and comprising around 700 houses, was looted and reduced to rubble by ethnic Albanians before KFOR troops were fully deployed. The 8,000 inhabitants had no option but to flee.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of Roma refugees from Kosovo found shelter in camps in Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia; some managed to join relatives or friends in Western Europe, in particular in Germany, where up to 25,000 Roma ended up in their attempt to escape the increasing ethnic strife in their home region. A large number became IDPs (internally displaced people) and were housed in makeshift camps within Kosovo.

Numerous of these makeshift Roma camps, official and unofficial ones, continue to exist, both in Kosovo and in neighbouring countries. Living conditions in these camps are sub-standard, to put it mildly, and – in a perverse way – actually play to age-old prejudices of the majority society against the ‘Gypsies’: that they are dirty, will not keep a place tidy, and love nothing better than to live in dirt and squalor.

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The right of people displaced by war and internal conflict to return to their former homes or places of residence is part of customary international humanitarian law. The UN Security Council explicitly reaffirmed this right in its Resolution 1244 on Kosovo and set out that one of the main responsibilities of the international civil presence was to assure ‘the safe and unimpeded return of all refugees and displaced per-

sons to their homes in Kosovo.’<sup>11</sup> However, implementing this resolution proved particularly difficult in the case of the Roma communities.

Hardly any uprooted Roma have actual homes to return to. Their properties were destroyed or are now used by others, mostly members of the ethnic Albanian majority, and it has proven difficult and often impossible for Roma to regain them. Many Roma settlements pre-conflict were so-called ‘informal settlements’, i.e. buildings were not registered in the cadastre (the public register which shows the details of ownership, tenure, location and value of individual parcels of land in a given area), and only a few residents possessed the documentation required to prove ownership, even though many had lived in their houses for more than a generation. Even when Roma had official documentation of their properties, it was often lost or destroyed in the turmoil of the conflict.

Moreover, in addition to allocating sufficient and adequate housing with security of tenure, any relocation from a camp to a permanent settlement needs to provide longer-term employment opportunities as well as access to education and medical care. Roma also continue to be concerned about their personal security, fearing that they will be targeted again when they return to their former homes.

Roma who fled to western Europe are now facing forced repatriation to Kosovo. The case of Germany is a poignant example. The German authorities had only ‘tolerated’ the stay of refugees from Kosovo, expecting them to leave Germany again once a safe return would be possible. From 2000 onwards, the German authorities encouraged voluntary repatriation of Kosovo refugees, although Roma were initially excluded from this. The United Nations Interim Adminis-

trative Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) normally rejected the return of Roma as well as Serbs to Kosovo because their safety could not be assured. However, following Kosovo's declaration of independence and its new constitution coming into force, Germany quickly stepped up its efforts to repatriate refugees from Kosovo, including Roma. (Forced) returns from Germany began in 2008, and are continuing.<sup>12</sup>

Roma returnees, like all Roma in Kosovo, usually live in extreme poverty on the margins of mainstream Kosovo society, often in shacks or abandoned buildings without running water, sanitation or heating; some of their make-shift settlements are next to rubbish dumps. A number of repatriated Roma even moved into lead-poisoned camps in northern Mitrovica. Roma returnees are victims of racial discrimination and attacks, and because their physical appearance sets them apart from ethnic Albanians, they are often afraid to leave their settlements, especially on their own or after dark. Chances of regular employment are minimal; and many Roma, including children, have to collect rubbish in order to survive. Because of missing papers, many Roma have problems accessing medical care and social services. Repatriation to Kosovo is particularly hard on children who have grown up outside Kosovo as many of them speak neither Serbian nor Albanian. This makes it very difficult for them to find new friends. Often they are unable to attend school because their parents cannot afford the school fees, books or proper clothing; and those children who do go to school are frequently bullied by children from the majority ethnic communities. The results are loneliness, bewilderment, depression and sometimes even suicide.

A 're-integration' of thousands of forcibly returned Roma is basically impossible. Most of those repatriated,

therefore, try to return to western Europe as quickly as they can, meaning as quickly as they find the money to pay for a (usually forged) visa or a smuggling ring to bring them back illegally, increasing the risk of further exploitation and victimisation.

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The Kosovo War had a devastating impact on the Roma communities in Kosovo. In post-World War II Yugoslavia, the situation of the Roma was better than in many other countries: Roma were recognized as an official ethnic minority with the right of their own language and culture, they enjoyed a higher living standard than elsewhere, had their own institutions, newspapers and theatres, and there was even some primary school education in Romanes. Within Yugoslavia, the situation for Roma was seen as particularly good; Donald Kenrick calls the region 'a thriving centre for Romani culture in the years after 1945',<sup>13</sup> which is echoed by Kosovar Roma activist Avdula (Dai) Mustafa: 'Until 1999, Roma had quite a good position in Kosovo.'<sup>14</sup>

This has changed drastically. In today's Kosovo, the Roma communities are severely disadvantaged. More than one third are living in extreme poverty; more than two thirds are unemployed (in some regions Roma unemployment is almost 100%), and those who do have employment are usually working in low level positions. There are private companies in Kosovo which only hire ethnic Albanians. Nearly one fifth of Roma are illiterate, and the illiteracy rate is rising. Roma suffer from economic and social segregation; families and communities are torn apart; traditional settlements are destroyed.<sup>15</sup> The future for the Roma in Kosovo looks grim. Donald Kenrick sums up 'that the conflicts in this region have extinguished what had

once been an inspirational example to Roma elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

The challenge of addressing the fundamental issues facing the Roma in Kosovo today is compounded by the fact that in the attempt to defuse the Serb-Albanian confrontation, the situation of the Roma at best constituted a side issue and at worst was overlooked. Warnings by individual human rights campaigners and international Roma organisations have so far not managed to bring about a sustainable solution for the Roma communities – indeed, these warnings did not even manage to catch the attention of the mainstream international media for more than very short moments.

However, only addressing the immediate ‘bread-and-butter’ issues that the Roma face in Kosovo – vital as this obviously is – is not nearly enough: it is just as important to listen to their memories, acknowledge them, and incorporate them in a comprehensive and inclusive historical-cultural memory or historical consciousness. This does not just mean an awareness of the age-old prejudices and discrimination suffered by Roma in eastern Europe and elsewhere but also a more specific appreciation of the history of the Roma communities in Kosovo in the past decades. At the moment, some of the immediate human rights issues are being addressed, even if hesitantly, painfully slowly, and often only following international pressure (and funding) and numerous campaigns. However, the issue of the ignored memories of the Roma persists – and both need to be addressed simultaneously in order to map out a sustainable future for the Roma communities in the region and for the region as a whole.

Interviews with Roma conducted immediately following the Kosovo War bear witness to their experiences of violence, lootings and expulsions.<sup>17</sup> Interviews

that I am currently conducting with Kosovan Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians both inside and outside Kosovo confirm how traumatised they still are today, almost 15 years after the war, by what they experienced.<sup>18</sup>

The suffering is often framed as the eternal fate of the Roma – which almost assumes that it is unmodifiable and cannot be changed. Centuries of discrimination and maltreatment have created a deep-rooted sense of betrayal and mistrust, and the feeling of being constantly threatened by violence and legal arbitrariness and of being essentially defenceless and at the mercy of any authority runs through all the interviews.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the wide range of experiences since the beginning of the conflict in 1989, for Roma living in Kosovo as well as those who fled Kosovo and are still living elsewhere, Kosovo is the country of nightmares, and this is what is handed down to the next generation. Children of Roma born outside Kosovo are not told much if anything about Kosovo by their parents or grandparents – and the little they are told perpetuates into the younger generation the negative views which their elders hold about the region where their families had lived for centuries. This results in a generation of children who reject everything that is associated with Kosovo – and some do not even know what Kosovo is, or where it is. The long family history is abruptly cut off, and many Roma children under 15 grow up without a clear sense of their multi-layered identity and unprepared for what the majority society might hold for them.

Many older Roma or Ashkali, almost as if driven by the desire not just to talk about their suffering, often idealise their situation before the outbreak of the Kosovo conflict, in particular under Josip Broz Tito. In the

interviews, they describe their lives before 1989 as good: they could go about their business unimpeded, had good relations with their Serbian and/or Albanian neighbours, and were more successful than many non Roma as they could offer better prices for goods and services than their non Roma competitors. Compared to their situation since the end of the Kosovo War, the prejudices and discrimination that did exist under Tito, in particular on the municipal level, seem almost negligible and are rarely mentioned.

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Memory is not a simple and straightforward recounting of past events. It is the wide field where the battle is fought over the framing of individual and collective identities and, even more importantly, over the interpretation of the past. The Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo have been the clear losers in this battle – as have the Roma elsewhere in Europe.

Because of the lack of a tradition of written transmission of their history and culture, Roma have long been regarded as a people without history, or a people who are not interested in their past and only live in the present. Their memories and experiences have not been attributed any value by the majority society in Europe and have been treated as a marginal phenomena, not worthy of being included in the overall historical memory. Their stories have remained unheard and unacknowledged. 'Cultural forgetting' by the majority society is an important reason why the Roma, the largest ethnic minority in Europe, continue to suffer extreme poverty, lack of employment opportunities and discrimination from housing to education and access to health: 'European politics and culture rest on the amnesia of Roma people's slavery in Europe be-

tween the 15th–19th centuries, and the genocide committed against them in the 20th century.'<sup>20</sup>

This applies to Kosovo as well: Kosovo politics and culture on both sides of the Albanian/Serbian divide rest on a similar kind of amnesia of the fate and experiences of the Roma in the turbulent history of this region in the twentieth century. Roma memories of the conflict are only handed down within the Roma communities. Amnesia outside the Roma communities means erasure from the collective memory and historical consciousness of the region.

It is, therefore, vital that the specific Roma/ Ashkali/Egyptian memory is unlocked and introduced into the general discourse of the recent past by collecting Roma testimony of the Kosovo conflict and including it in what Anna Reading calls 'the Global Memory Field'.<sup>21</sup> Prevailing patterns of discourse in mainstream society have long ensured that the 'otherness' of Roma and travelling communities was heightened and perpetuated, and it will require a fundamental change in these patterns to change the perception and the treatment of these groups.

There are a few examples of such a new discourse. One of these is the Museum of Romani Culture (Muzeum romský kultury) which was set up in 1991 in Brno, Czech Republic. On its website, the Museum sets out how it sees its role in bringing together Roma and non Roma:

'We are a space where different cultures meet. We preserve examples of Romani cultural history as part of Europe's heritage. We educate the younger generation to be tolerant and appreciate other cultures. We are committed to fighting xenophobia and racism. We are paving the way to a new understanding of the roots of Romani

identity. All this we do in the name of mutual understanding. For a dialogue of cultures. For us.<sup>22</sup>

In 1966, the village of Sczuruowa in southern Poland dedicated an honorary grave in its cemetery to the 93 Roma shot by German policeman and Polish constabulary in July 1943, one of the very first memorials to the Nazi persecution of the Roma, or *Porrajmos*.<sup>23</sup> Since 1996, the nearby town of Tarnów has hosted an annual week-long 'International Roma Caravan of Remembrance' ('Międzynarodowy Tabor Pamięci Romów'). There are now plaques at several concentration camp memorials (including Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen) commemorating the Roma Holocaust, and in October 2012, the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Murdered Under the National Socialist Regime was inaugurated in Berlin.<sup>24</sup> There is also increasing awareness that the image of a girl peering out of a cattle train at the Nazi transit camp of Westerbork in the Netherlands on 19 May 1944 just before it leaves for Auschwitz, which has become a symbol for the Holocaust, is that of a Sintezza, Settela Steinbach.<sup>25</sup>

However, the examples of a true cultural-historical dialogue remain few and far between, and they relate predominantly to the past. There is hardly any serious dialogue with regard to the situation of the Roma in today's world, where Roma continue to be regarded by the majority society as scroungers, benefit cheats, undeserving asylum seekers and untrustworthy criminals. The recent furore in France about the deportation of the Kosovar Roma schoolgirl Leonarda Dibrani and her family to Mitrovica, after they lost their battle for asylum, demonstrated that all the old prejudices are still very much alive.<sup>26</sup> Interior Minister Manuel Valls, who vigorously defended the deportation, has become France's most popular politician. On 23 September

2013, in an interview with France Inter, one of France's major public radio channels, he set out that the Roma community's way of life was 'very different from ours' and 'clearly at odds with the way of life of their neighbours', suggesting that they should return 'home'.<sup>27</sup> Valls only voiced what the majority society in France and elsewhere in Europe is thinking, reflecting total ignorance both about Roma history and the situation that Roma face in Kosovo when they are returned 'home'.

It is crucial to remember that the Roma have been an integral part of Europe's history ever since their arrival in the late thirteenth century, and that equally they are an integral part of a common European future. The Roma, the largest transterritorial ethnic minority in Europe who live in every European country, need to be given their fair place in the pan-European space and recognized as the Europeans they are. It requires from all sides a willingness to enter 'the realm of co-existence of life-worlds'.<sup>28</sup> This co-existence will need to be based on the knowledge and understanding of each other's history, experience and memory shared through an open, honest and respectful dialogue of equals.

In the 2005-07 negotiations to determine the final status of Kosovo, the Roma were not invited to send their own delegation, even though this is what they requested. Instead, the UN Special Envoy, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, talked only with the Serbian and Albanian delegations, arguing that they also had the task to represent the interests of the Roma.<sup>29</sup> The voices of the Roma remained again unheard; they were not even asked. Stephan Müller, 2000-02 Advisor on Minority Affairs to the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, now Programmes Director at the Euro-

pean Roma Rights Centre in Budapest, called this approach 'the cynical climax of the politics of the international community' in Kosovo.<sup>30</sup> There is little evidence that this situation is changing for the better.<sup>31</sup> Neither in Kosovo nor anywhere else are there any indications that Roma voices are being taken more seriously – if anything, European countries currently seem to be moving further away from an inclusive dialogue at eye level rather than edging closer towards it.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] In this article, the term 'Roma' is used to refer to all the Romani populations in Kosovo: Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians, except when it is important to differentiate between the three groups.
- [2] From the Patrin Web Journal, [online], available: <http://web.archive.org/web/20091027175152/http://geocities.com/~Patrin/gelem.htm>. – Gelem Gelem, also known as Opré Roma, is the Roma national anthem. The Black Legions in this stanza refers to the Nazi SS, so called because of their black uniforms.
- [3] For this and the following, see D. M. Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), chapter 6; The History of Roma in Southeastern Europe & Kosovo, [online], available: <http://www.projectbalkan.org/roma/history.shtml>.
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- [6] Statistical Office of Kosovo, *Demographic Changes of the Kosovo Population 1948–2006* (Pristine: Statistical Office of Kosovo, 2008): 7, Table 2, for the movement of the Roma population over the years see also 10, Graph 5, [online], available: [http://esk.rks-gov.net/ENG/publikimet/doc\\_download/521-demographic-changes-of-the-kosovo-population-1948-2006](http://esk.rks-gov.net/ENG/publikimet/doc_download/521-demographic-changes-of-the-kosovo-population-1948-2006).
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- [9] Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, "The planning of forced deportations is a relapse into the worst time of the persecution of the 'gypsies,'" press release, April 15, 2010, [online], available: <http://www.gfbv.de/pressemit.php?id=2248&stayInsideTree=1>.
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- [11] United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), adopted by the Security Council at its 4011th meeting on 10 June 1999, Paragraph 11 (k), [online], available: <http://www.un.org/docs/scres/1999/sc99.htm>.
- [12] Bekanntmachung des Abkommens zwischen der Regierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Regierung der Republik Kosovo über die Übernahme und Durchbeförderung von Personen (Rückübernahmeabkommen) vom 21. April 2010, *Bundesgesetzblatt*, Jahrgang 2010: Part II, No. 9, 260-4. – Kosovo also signed agreements on the return of refugees with Austria, France, Switzerland, Belgium and Norway.
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- [14] N. Sigona in conversation with A. (Dai) Mustafa and G. Salijevic, "Being Roma Activists in Post-Independence Kosovo," in *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization and the Neoliberal Order*, ed. N. Sigona and N. Trehan (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 212.
- [15] *The Position of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Communities in Kosovo: Baseline Survey* (Prishtinë, Kosovë: Kosovo Foundation for Open Society, 2009); see also Sigona, 2009 : 209-10, with further sources.
- [16] Kenrick, 2001 : 417.
- [17] Who We Were, Who We Are: Kosovo Roma Oral Histories – Roma Interviewee Transcripts, [online], available: <http://www.projectbalkan.org/roma/interviews.shtml>.
- [18] Project "Silenced Voices: Roma Memories of the Kosovo Conflict", Rainer Schulze, University of Essex, 2013.
- [19] See also K.-M. Bogdahl, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner: Eine Geschichte von Faszination und Verachtung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011): 452 and 465-6.
- [20] A. Reading, "Generative Memory: Gender, Digital Media and Roma Memory of the Holocaust," keynote address given at the International Conference 'Memories of Conflict – Conflicts of Memory', School of Advanced Study, University of London, February 12-13, 2013. For wider discussion, see A. Reading, "The European Roma: An Unsettled Right to Memory," in *Public Memory, Public Media and the Politics of Justice*, ed. P. Lee and P. N. Thomas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 121-40.
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- [28] See N. Sigona and N. Trehan. "Conclusion: A 'People's Europe' for Romani Citizens?" in *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Neoliberal Order*, ed. N. Sigona and N. Trehan (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 294.
- [29] M. Weller, *Contested Statehood: Kosovo's Struggle for Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, chapter 12; J. Ker-Lindsay, *Kosovo: The Path to Contested Statehood in the Balkans* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009); see also Auer, 2009 : 258-60; The United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Kosovo, [online], available: <http://www.unosek.org/unosek/en/docref.html>.
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- [31] See also Ö. Gezer, "Debatte über Roma: Ohnmächtiges Europa," *Spiegel Online*, November 2, 2013, [online], available: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/roma-europas-umgang-mit-seiner-groessten-minderheit-a-930841.html>.

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