

Roma

Myth Busting Leaflet

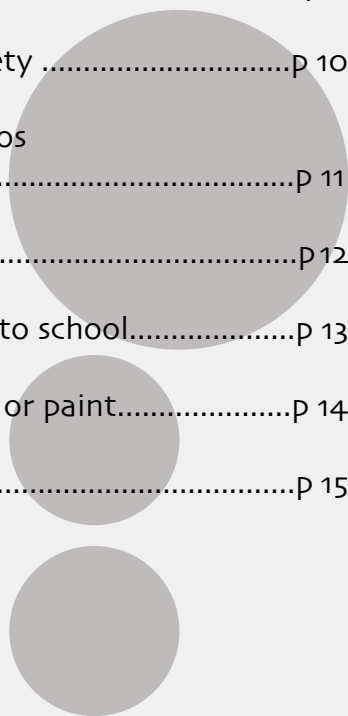


Inside you will find answers to the most popular myths about the Roma community

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Inside you will find answers to the most popular myths about Roma people:

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Who are Roma people?

Roma people are the subgroup of Romani people, who are the largest and the most excluded minority ethnic group in Europe.

Romani trace their origin to the North of India, from where they migrated in the 11th Century. Nowadays Romani are widely distributed around the world, with their largest concentrated populations in Europe.

Roma live in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Italy. Roma are not a homogenous group and recognise divisions among themselves based on territorial, cultural differences and self-designation.

In Scotland, Scottish Gypsies/Travellers are probably the best known subgroup of Romanies.



Roma never claimed their homeland; they live as ethnic minorities within other countries. Therefore we can talk about Bulgarian Roma, Lithuanian Roma or Slovak Roma.

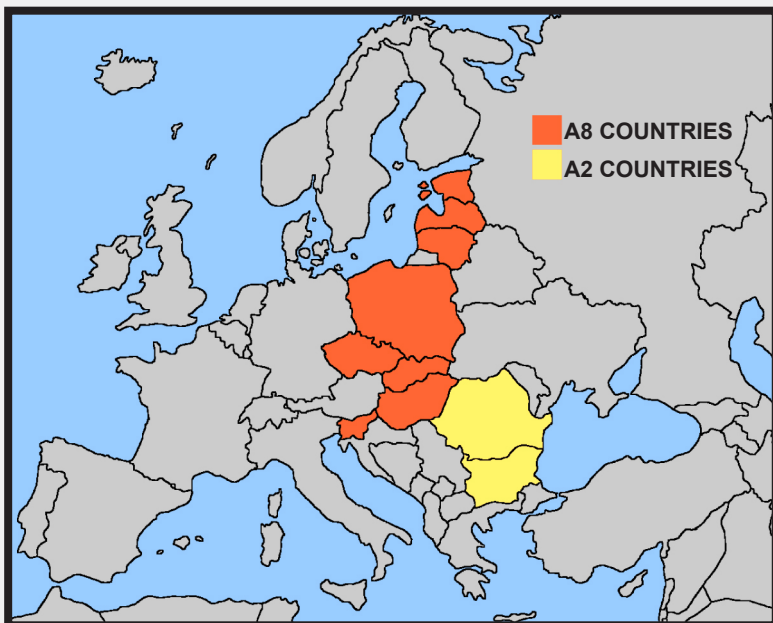
Roma have a distinctive culture, famous for its vibrant music, dance and highly valued big families. Due to hundreds years of persecution and nomadic style of life, Roma communities tend to be semi-inclusive and have lower trust in external authorities. The worst punishment for Roma is exclusion from the community. The majority of Roma people speak one of the Romani dialects, (language which is nowhere official) alongside of the language of the country they live in.

'New Migrants'

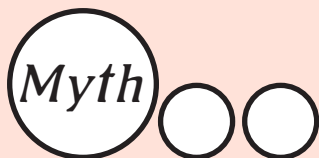
After May 2004, the UK saw arrival of new migrants from so called A8 Countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), when those countries joined European Union. In January 2007 further 2 countries (known as A2 Countries) Bulgaria, Romania joined as well.

Many people, including Roma, decided to exercise their right to work and live in UK. The European Union agency for Fundamental Rights identified a disturbingly negative Roma-specific dynamic in migration. It basically means that if you are Roma, settling in a new country it will be probably harder for you than for the others. Negative stereotypes and prejudices towards this community contributes to unfair situation as well.

The aim of this leaflet is to raise awareness about Roma people and highlight the most common misconceptions about them.



Most popular Myths about Roma

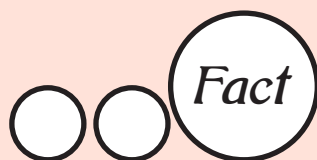


Roma arrived to the UK to make money claiming benefits.

Between the years of 2004-2011 A8 nationals could not access the same benefits as British Citizens. They had to register with the Home Office (£90 fee) and work in the UK for a year to be able to access jobseekers benefits and out-of-work benefits. This situation changed in May 2011, where A8 nationals were brought in line with the rights of nationals from other European Union countries. However, in order to access some benefits they are still required to sit the 'Right to Reside' test.

Restrictions on A2 nationals, which are still in place, require work permit or self-employment certificate, as they are allowed only certain types of jobs (eg agricultural). Access to benefits is restricted.

Data also shows that there has been insufficient use of benefits migrants were entitled to.



Roma people arrived in the UK to work and improve their living standards.

Roma people (as with any other A8 or A2 nationals) have to pass certain requirements to qualify for benefits. This, for example, includes satisfying the 'Right to Reside' test.

Myth

Roma people are criminals.

Just being born as Roma was a criminal offence in the past for which they could have ended up in slavery or deportation if lucky - mutilated or executed if not. As with any other ethnic group, some Roma people are involved in crime.



Fact

Members of the Gypsy/Roma/Travellers communities are statistically under represented in the mainstream prison population.

Furthermore there is evidence of under reporting of crime by Gypsy/Roma/Travellers, including racist crime and victimisation. One of the most accepted hate crimes is towards Roma.

There were perceptions within the police and the settled community that Gypsy/Travellers were responsible for disproportionately higher rates of crime and anti-social behaviour, yet there is no evidence that this is the case. (Criminal Justice Report 1998)

Myth

Roma are dirty people, they stink and carry diseases.

Fact

Roma culture is built upon strict codes of cleanliness learnt over centuries of life on the road.

Concepts such as mokadi or mahrime place strict guidelines, for example, on what objects can be washed in which bowls. In fact Roma view non-Roma as unclean because of the way they live. For example, Roma rarely let animals inside their homes, because they believe them to be carriers of disease.



Myth

Roma people are endowed with supernatural powers. They have the ability to curse, can levitate and see the future.



Fact

True, some Roma might have psychic powers. But no more than anyone else.

Creating myths could serve as a defence mechanism for a nation without an army, who tries to defend itself with curses and superstition. Some Roma have turned the myths about them on their head and earned a living telling fortunes. Roma fortune tellers have cultivated the mystery that has always surrounded Roma culture.

Roma life is bound up with nature, the earth and the seasons. Settled people in towns on the other hand have moved far away from nature. Roma, in their everyday lives, probably know things that others have forgotten, eg when the weather is about to change, about animals and their habits, but this is not supernatural powers - it is knowing how to read signs around us.

Myth

Roma women are loose.

An overtly negative stereotype, but perhaps with an unobvious appeal to men. Manifested femininity has been typical and highly valued in Roma culture for ages. Girls have their hair long for traditional and cultural reasons, as a mark of respect to their parents. Another cultural feature is wearing vivid jewellery and expressing femininity in dressing.

It is a fact that in some communities virginity is essential for unmarried Roma women. Therefore girls are still not allowed to date boys before engagement or marriage. Arranged marriages are supported within particular communities.

Fact

Arguably, this myth says more about the repressed nature of society than about any accurate understanding of Roma Culture.

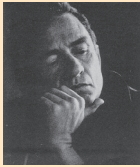
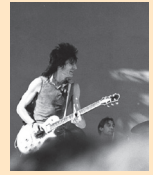


Myth

Roma never contribute anything to society.

Many Romanies sacrificed their lives for Great Britain in the 1st and 2nd World Wars. Music style Flamenco has Romani origin and only few Flamenco artists are not Romanies.

Do you recognise any of these people...?



First Row - Right to Left: Pablo Picasso, Mother Theresa, Rita Hayworth, Elvis Presley, Ronnie Wood

Second Row - Right to Left: Johnny Cash, Bill Clinton, Wayne Rooney, Mika

Fact

There are a great number of prominent people of Romani background in various areas.

The list includes politicians, activist, writers, scientists, Nobel Prize winners, athletes and actors.

Because of negative perception of Roma community, some successful Roma people are reluctant to disclose their ethnic origin to avoid prejudice and misconceptions linked to it.

Myth

Roma arrived in the UK from dirty ghettos and poor shacks in their home countries.

Roma people live in a range of conditions in their home countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Housing conditions vary from renting tenements or council flats, to ownership of houses. Number of Roma people live in poor shacks at the outskirts of the villages. They are usually the ones pictured in media. However there is no 'typical Roma housing'.

Fact

Roma who migrated to the UK are usually 'better off' as they could afford all the cost related to migration such as travel expenses, housing deposit, rent, Home Office fees. The poorest people stay at home as they are unable to afford to migrate.

Quote from Slovak Roma in Glasgow:

“ In the Czech Republic, where I worked the last fifteen years as a taxi driver, I lived with my family in a house next to my auntie's. We had a garden as well. Here, we rent a two bedroom flat in a poor area. I don't like it here. I would like to move away to a nicer place. ”

Myth

Roma have a genetic urge to travel.

History says that the ancestors of Roma people left India probably because they were part of defeated army and feared further raids. They weren't really welcomed anywhere they went, so they built their lives around travelling. Genes responsible for 'wanderlust' has not been confirmed anywhere.



Fact

Hard, nomadic life has more often been forced upon Roma people than being their genuine choice.

Travelling as a way of life was banned during communism in Central and Eastern European countries with people forced to live and work in one place. Even though the ban was lifted after communism fell down in the 1990's, the majority of the Roma people did not go back to a travelling life style.

Myth

Roma don't want to send their children to school.

Fact

Most Gypsies/Roma Travellers want a better future for their children and value literacy that comes with formal education.



However, many also fear that school will weaken their children's identity and values. In a UK wide survey, three quarters of Gypsies/Roma/Travellers said they have been picked on by other pupils because of their background. In a Central and Eastern Europe, Roma children are often racially segregated in special schools and classes and receive inferior education.

Quote from Slovak Roma in Glasgow:

“ In Slovakia they make difference between white and black. If you want to get good grades, you have to hang around with whites. When you are within Romas teachers won't consider you to be bright enough to achieve good grades.

”

Myth

Roma are born with a gift to sing, dance or paint.

Science is still unclear with the question if we can inherit 'talent' from our parents. Moreover success in arts is usually combination of gift and everyday hard work.

Music and arts are very much part of Roma cultural heritage. Many parents teach their children to sing traditional songs from very early age and support children to play musical instruments later on. In some communities it is common to see boys walking down the street singing just for themselves.

Fact

Like everyone else, Roma have to learn and continuously develop their artistic skill.



What can we do?



Don't believe sensational news about Roma in the media straight away, explore by yourself



Go and meet Roma people for yourself



Ensure relevant information about the Roma community and migrancy is embedded into school curriculum



Encourage the celebration of Gypsy History Month within the relevant public bodies



Challenge consistent persecution through racial discrimination and harrasment towards Roma



Challenge prejudice

Further Information

West of Scotland Regional Equality Council (WSREC) is a charitable organisation which works to eliminate discrimination, promote good community relations and to create an equality of opportunity for all residents of the West of Scotland.

Roma Youth Project funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation commenced in October 2009. The project works to enable young people from a Central and Eastern European Roma background across the West of Scotland to have an equal chance to live, learn and eventually work in an environment free from isolation, prejudice, poverty, racial discrimination and harrasment.



If you found this interesting and would like to find out more about WSREC or our work with the Roma Community, please contact us for more information:

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