

International Roma Day

How the European Union supports the study of Roma culture, language and history

SUMMARY

International Roma Day, marked on 8 April, is devoted to Europe's largest ethnic minority, the Roma, a predominant part of whom suffer from discrimination and isolation. This day also focuses on Roma history, culture, language and aspirations, which remain largely unknown in Europe, even though they are key to mutual understanding and can contribute to closing the gap between communities.

The study and promotion of Roma culture and language fall under the remit of legislation concerning the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity on the one hand, and the protection of minority languages, on the other, as provided for by the EU Treaties and the Council of Europe Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

The EU offers support for the preservation of the Roma language, Romani, and its numerous local dialects, some of which are endangered and could disappear. The EU allocates funds to the study of Roma history, culture and language, while some EU Member States have also put in place programmes that include the teaching of Roma culture, history and language in primary schools.



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International Roma Day

April 8 was declared [International Roma Day](#) at the first [World Romani Congress](#), organised by the Comité International Rom (CIR) in London in 1971. The 1971 congress, which was the first Roma attempt at international cooperation, also established the Roma flag and [anthem](#). The latter was only officially recognised in 1990, during the fourth World Romani Congress in Warsaw, when it was accepted by [Czech and Slovak](#) Roma who already had their own anthem, composed in Auschwitz where many were exterminated. The congress participants also decided to replace some terms, such as 'gypsy', which were being widely used in Europe despite their negative connotation, with the term 'Roma'.

The Roma population in Europe

Diversity and geographical distribution in Europe

Roma is the general name given to a population that includes [other groups](#), such as the Sinti, the Manouche, the Romiche and the Kale, which are scattered all over the world. Together, the Roma number 10-12 million people. An estimated 6 million live in the EU, where they represent the [largest ethnic minority](#), varying from 9.9 % of the population in Bulgaria, 9 % in Slovakia and 8.6 % in Romania, to 0.1 % in Germany and 0.2 % in Italy. In general, the Roma are highly [discriminated](#) against and suffer from negative stereotypes; the high levels of poverty and unemployment, poor education and deprivation they face are often similar to those experienced in the world's poorest countries.

Origins and history

The study of Roma history, language and culture has been difficult due to limited contacts with the Roma as a result of the mutual distrust between them and the non-Roma populations, and the latter's poor knowledge of the Romani, the Roma language and its local dialects, which were, until recently, of a predominantly [oral tradition](#). At the end of the 18th century, a [linguistic comparison](#) traced the roots of the [Romani](#) language to the ancient Indic languages, the source of most modern European languages, and identified India as the country of origin of the Roma population. Further studies retraced the Roma's [migration path](#) from 10th century India across Persia, Greece and central Europe, to Spain in the west, Scandinavia and the British Isles in the north, and also reaching eastern Europe at the beginning of the 16th century.

The [history](#) of the Roma is one of migration waves, deportations, internments (for example in 18th century Spain and in France during WWII), forced [assimilation](#) by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also of equality and full civil rights granted by the Russian Empire and then countered by forced settlement by the Soviet regime. The Roma Holocaust – the extermination of Roma by the Nazis – is something the wider public is still largely unaware of, as former European Parliament President, [Jerzy Buzek](#), pointed out in February 2011. After WWII, the communist regimes forced the Roma to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and to settle in segregated areas where living conditions were poor, thereby perpetuating their centuries-long discriminative treatment.

Language

Romani is a diaspora language that has been spoken in Europe since the Middle Ages; as such, it is the only Indo-Aryan variety spoken outside the Indian sub-continent. It is also referred to as a 'non-territorial language', just like Yiddish, the language of the Jewish minority in central and eastern Europe. As Nazi extermination decimated the Roma and the Jewish populations in Europe, the survival of their languages was also endangered. According to the Unesco Atlas of the World's [Languages in Danger](#), Romani is 'severely endangered', for example, in Bulgaria and Croatia, and 'definitely endangered' in Greece, Italy, France, Poland and Romania.

Romani and the preservation of linguistic diversity in the EU: legal basis

Since the entry into force in 2009 of the Lisbon, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU has been legally binding on EU institutions and national governments. The Charter's [Article 21](#) prohibits discrimination on grounds of language, while its [Article 22](#) refers to respect for linguistic diversity. [Article 165\(1\) TFEU](#) places upon EU Member States the responsibility for nurturing cultural and linguistic diversity through their education systems. The obligation to respect linguistic diversity is enshrined in [Article 3\(3\) TEU](#).

[Article 14](#) of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE) in November 1950, prohibits any discrimination on the grounds of language. The adoption by the CoE of [Recommendation 928](#) on the Educational and Cultural Problems of Minority Languages and Dialects in Europe in 1981, paved the way for the [European Charter](#) for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML). Adopted in 1992 and in force since 1998, it includes provisions on teaching RML. By January 2018, 17 of the 28 Member States had signed and ratified it. Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Bulgaria have not signed it, while France, Italy, and Malta have still to ratify it.

Romani: an endangered minority language

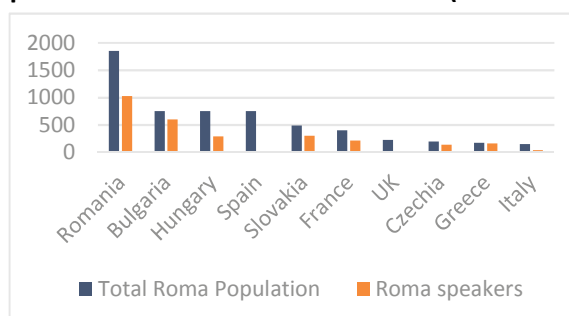
The fate of Romani and its dialects is uncertain. Its native-speaking population is estimated at about [4.6 million](#) in Europe, ranging from 1 % of the Roma in Spain to 90 % in Greece (see Figure 1). Its linguistic survival faces different odds, depending on the country and that country's historical background. It is [recognised](#) as a minority language in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. However, even though the majority of Member States recognise Romani in the list of RMLs, this fact is not sufficiently reflected in their implementation strategies. In 2015, on International Romani Language Day (5 November), the Committee of Experts of the ECRML adopted a [statement](#) calling for better protection and promotion of the language, particularly in education and cultural life, bringing attention to the vulnerability of Romani as a result of its transitional situation. Romani has undergone a major change from being solely an oral tradition for private use, to being standardised in written form and used formally in public.

EU and CoE support for the study of Roma language, culture and history

EU support

Besides its policy for the [inclusion](#) of the Roma, the EU has various tools to support both their language and its inclusion in school curricula, and the study of Roma culture and history. An EU co-funded project called 'One of Many' ([Jedni z wielu](#)), consisted of an exhibition in south-western Poland between 2014 and 2015, showing portraits of Roma people by a professional photographer, and then a photo album, with the aim of breaking the stereotypes stigmatising this population. The campaign succeeded in creating a [more positive](#) perception of the Roma in Poland, up by from 16 % to 28 % according to the area.

Figure 1 – Estimated Roma population and Roma speakers in some EU Member States (thousands)



Data source: [Council of Europe](#): average estimates for the Roma population updated in 2012, and for Roma speakers in a [publication](#) from 2000.

The European Social Fund supports the [Fundacion Secretariado Gitano](#), a Spanish foundation that actively promotes Roma [culture](#). For instance, it works on educational projects engaging Roma parents in Kindergarten education and includes Romani in its work with Roma children. The foundation has also launched a campaign to include [Roma history](#), culture and the teaching of Romani in primary school curricula in Spain. Some Member States have introduced similar initiatives in their own [educational systems](#).

Back in the 1990s, European funding supported the [Rombase](#) project, conducted by the Graz University in Austria. It resulted in the creation of teaching materials and publications on Romani history, language, literature and music. Rombase has been involved in numerous projects on Roma language and history, publicised on the web. Yet again, EU funding, channelled through the Lifelong Learning programme, co-funded [Romaninet](#), a project that focused on the production of a standard Romani multimedia course. Between 2010 and 2013, the programme also supported the [Qualirom](#) project that worked to ensure quality education in Romani across Europe, according to established standards.

Joint EU and Council of Europe support

At the initiative of the European Commission, the EU and CoE also co-funded a joint research programme – the [European Academic Network on Romani Studies](#) – with the aim of promoting Roma integration and intercultural dialogue. It resulted in publications on the Roma and intercultural education, an e-book and a series of conferences, on [the role of culture](#) in Roma inclusion.

Roma contribution to world culture and ambition to go beyond

The Roma are well known for being skilful, prolific musicians and dancers, having contributed to the emergence of musical genres beyond folklore, ranging from classical to jazz (Django Reinhardt) and other musical styles. Since 2010, Unesco's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage includes the Spanish [Flamenco](#) style of dance and music, which was chiefly developed by the Roma.

The Roma have other talents as well. As the Open Society Foundation suggests, some Roma students make [better physicians than musicians](#).

European Parliament

On 25 October 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on [fighting anti-Gypsyism](#) and stressed the fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration and the need to provide education on Roma history and cultural diversity. A year earlier, among a long series of resolutions on Roma inclusion and integration on the occasion of [International Roma Day](#), the EP adopted another resolution on anti-Gypsyism and called for EU recognition of the [Roma Holocaust](#) and its commemoration on 2 August.

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