



We Are Here!

**Discriminatory Exclusion and Struggle
for Rights of Roma in Turkey**

**Edirne Roma Association
European Roma Rights Centre
Helsinki Citizens' Assembly**

Preface

Historically, Turkey has been an important place for Roma and for the development of Roma culture; according to some scholars in the field, Sulukule neighbourhood in today's İstanbul is considered to be the first Romani settlement in Europe. Despite the continuous presence of sizeable Romani communities over the course of centuries, Roma in Turkey are not an integral part of society today and face serious obstacles to the exercise of fundamental rights on equal footing with other citizens. While the protection of fundamental human rights and minority rights in particular, has become prominent in recent years in Turkey, especially within the process of EU accession, Roma rights issues have not yet been an integral part of this discussion.

There are various reasons explaining the invisibility of the human rights problems affecting Roma in Turkey. In the first place, as this book reveals, Roma in Turkey face high levels of prejudice, discrimination and exclusion by society at large, as well as by other minority groups, which has marginalised them in the public sphere. Secondly, at least until recently, many Roma have shied away from civic activism, especially from getting organised to pursue an agenda of claiming their rights, in reaction to nationalist pressures which perceive such activities as a betrayal to the Turkish state.

With the aim of contributing to the advancement of the Roma rights movement in Turkey, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) developed and implemented the project "Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey", in partnership with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (hCa) and the Edirne Association for Research, Development and Solidarity with Roma / Edirne Roma Association (EDROM) in the period December 2005-April 2008. The project received financial support from the European Commission, The Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation–Turkey, and ERRC core donor Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The main objectives of this project have been to:

- Collect reliable data regarding the social, linguistic, historical and geographical profile of Romani communities in Turkey;

- Empower Romani communities in Turkey to seek justice for human rights violations and build the capacity of Romani civil actors to mobilise for effective advocacy for government action to address racial discrimination against Roma in all spheres of life;
- Give prominence to the human rights problems facing Roma in Turkey and mobilise resources within civil society, including strategic litigation, to advocate respect and protection of the rights of Roma at domestic and international levels; and
- Promote government action, including the creation of adequate legislative, institutional and policy frameworks, to protect Roma and other ethnic minorities against human rights violations and ensure access to fundamental social and economic rights without discrimination.

Within this framework, the project made the first steps paving the way for mobilising Roma rights activism in Turkey. In addition to capacity building of Romani organisations, networking opportunities for Romani and non-Romani NGOs, the project “Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey” has broadened the human rights field in Turkey by introducing to it the aspect of Roma rights advocacy and strategic litigation. It should be noted that until this project was initiated, there had been no serious academically viable study profiling Romani communities in Turkey.

The book “We Are Here!” is one outcome of the project “Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey”. It draws on research and experiences during the project and reflects partners’ expertise in Roma rights advocacy, the promotion of values of democracy, social justice and peace, and the grassroots mobilisation of Romani communities. This book is an attempt to provide an overview of the situation of Romani communities throughout Turkey and present human rights issues of particular concern. It focuses on those legal norms (or the absence of such), practices and conditions which affect Roma and deny members of this community equal access to rights and opportunities. The other broad topic in this book is the emergence and the development of Romani civil society organisations in Turkey with an overview of their place in civil society, their goals, activities and needs.

As one of the first works aimed at bringing Roma rights concerns to light in Turkey, this book presents a comprehensive view of the issue, including a historical and ethnological background, human rights research documentation as well review of human rights instruments and policies. Above all, “We are Here!” seeks to portray the Roma of Turkey as citizens of the Republic, with their own history, social positions and relations, and their specific problems. In doing so, the book also describes the recent efforts of Turkey’s Romani activists to organise themselves to help their own communities.

The book is organised as follows: *Chapter 1* provides a brief presentation of the history of Roma in present Turkey. *Chapter 2* describes the various Romani groups throughout Turkey, their identities, occupations and relations to majority society. *Chapter 3* is a review of Turkey’s

obligations under international and regional human rights instruments and the compliance of domestic legislation with these instruments. This chapter concludes with specific recommendations to Turkish authorities for bringing the state's legal framework in compliance with international human rights standards. *Chapter 4* summarises the findings of field research highlighting the most serious human rights problems documented and provides specific recommendations for government action to remedy discrimination and social exclusion facing Romani communities. *Chapter 5* is an attempt to map out the process of the emergence of Romani civil society organisations in Turkey. An interview with the leader of one of the Romani federations in Turkey and partner to the project gives insight into the major challenges facing young Romani civil society groups and the prospects of their development. *Chapter 6* is an account of the historic roots and development of nationalist ideas in Turkey and their impact on the position of Roma in Turkish society. *Chapter 7* makes a critical examination of several major academic research works focusing on Roma in Turkey.

Throughout this report the terms Roma and Gypsy are used interchangeably, in accordance with the author's preference. In the ongoing debate in Turkey with regard to these terms, one position is that due to the negative stereotypes associated with the term Gypsy, it is the term Roma which should be given preference. The opposite opinion argues that the term Gypsy should be stripped of its stigmatising content and its legitimacy reclaimed as a neutral and inclusive term designating a variety of groups in Turkey – Roma, Dom, Lom and Travellers.

Savelina Danova/Roussinova
European Roma Rights Centre
Acting Director and Project Coordinator