

Roma migration for begging and street work: From migration practices to policy responses in Scandinavia

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Since Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, Scandinavia has emerged as an important destination for migrants who engage in circular migration for begging and informal street work. Most come from poverty-stricken Roma communities across Romania, and while in Scandinavia they live under harsh conditions with limited access to shelter, sanitation, and basic amenities. As EU citizens with a right to free movement, their presence is not challenged, but without formal work, they lack access to regular social rights or pathways to permanent residence. With their presence, acute poverty and widespread begging have re-emerged as a highly visible phenomenon in Scandinavia, with extensive media coverage and heated public debate as a result.

This policy brief summarizes research on migration for begging conducted by Fafo and its collaborators. The brief is divided into three parts, describing 1) migration for begging as a livelihood practice among Romanian Roma, 2) the migrants' lives on the streets of Scandinavia, and 3) policy responses in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, before identifying what are the key characteristics of these new migratory patterns in the Scandinavian context.

Data and methods

This policy brief is based on research conducted between 2014 to 2023, through three different research projects, funded by the Rockwool Foundation, the Norwegian Research Council, and the EEA and Norway Grants. The data material consists of:

- Three standardized surveys among homeless Romanian migrants were conducted in Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen using Respondent Driven Sampling, a sampling technique specifically designed to access hard-to-reach populations.
- Qualitative interviews with migrants and NGOs in Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen.
- Four rounds of qualitative fieldwork in sending regions in Romania.
- Analysis of parliamentary debates on begging from 2007 to 2018 in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.
- Qualitative interviews with front-line workers in emergency public health care, municipal outreach services, social and employment services and NGOs in two Norwegian cities.)

Migration for begging as a social practice among Romanian Roma

The economic marginalization of Romanian Roma communities

Most people who engage in migration to Scandinavia for begging and street work identify as Roma and come from rural or semi-rural communities across Romania. Many of these Roma communities have become increasingly marginalized over the last decades, as the restructuring of the economy and strengthening of ethnic boundaries in post-socialist Romania has led to dwindling economic opportunities and increasing levels of ethnic discrimination. At the same time, distrust in public education among many Roma has hampered progress through mainstream institutions. Survey data showed that most migrant beggars and street workers in Scandinavia had very little formal schooling, and illiteracy was widespread. Their living conditions in Romania were characterized by unstable and precarious sources of household income, limited access to health

care and public services, and deprived housing conditions. Except for those old enough to have been employed under socialist rule, few migrants had formal work experience from Romania. Many had experience from informal agricultural work, but demand for this type of work had been decimated over the last decades due to the increasing mechanization of agriculture. Many migrants to Scandinavia have previous experience from seasonal migration to Italy and Spain working in agriculture, but here too, opportunities were shrinking due to the economic crisis and competition from undocumented boat migrants. At the same time, markets for the Roma's traditional crafts had dwindled as Romania became increasingly integrated with the global economy. When Romania joined the EU in 2007, many communities were in desperate need of additional sources of income, and migration for begging and street work in Western and Northern Europe quickly became an integral part of the economy in many places.

Clustered migration and community-based networks

For Romanian Roma, migration is usually part of more complex livelihood strategies within extended family households. Many travel as husbands and wives, or with brothers, cousins, fathers or mothers, and members of extended family households often take turns staying home taking care of children. Beyond the household, their migration practices are often embedded in dense community networks through which they can access a variety of resources, including information, credit, low-cost transportation, places to beg and places to sleep, as well as physical protection and emotional support when abroad. Migration facilitated through such networks creates highly clustered patterns of migration, connecting particular local communities in the Romanian countryside with particular towns and cities – or even particular neighbourhoods within cities – in Scandinavia. This is a key difference from migration patterns among non-Roma from the same areas,

which tend to be more individualized or based on weaker social ties. The clustered structure of Roma migration is an important explanation as to why people can engage in circular economic migration despite lacking formal and economic resources that are usually necessary to travel abroad.

Migration for begging and social development?

The income generated through migration is primarily channelled back into their home communities and used for household expenses or invested in new or upgrading existing houses. Migration for begging and street work is thus an effective means of short-run poverty alleviation. To what extent it may promote long-term social development – for example through increased investment in education – or lock people into poverty – for example by tying people to housing investments in areas with few economic prospects – remains uncertain.

Life on the streets of Scandinavia

Earning an income

With high thresholds into Scandinavian labour markets, Roma migrants without relevant language skills and with very little schooling or formal work experience have few chances of accessing regular employment in Scandinavia. Although some find informal casual work, most find an income through begging and various kinds of street work. In Norway and Sweden, having a “good” spot to beg that allowed migrants to maintain a courteous relationship with regular donors was essential for their ability to generate an income, particularly for women and elderly migrants. In Denmark, where begging is illegal, those who beg are more dependent on being able to move around to escape police and security guards. Collecting bottles is also a major source of income, and in many places, migrants sell street magazines designed as an alternative source of income for homeless people. Some collect scrap metal for recycling or collect old clothes to bring home and sell in Romania. Qualitative data suggests that there are also smaller groups within the migrant population in all three countries that specialize in criminal activities such as pick-pocketing, selling prescription drugs smuggled from Romania as well as organized prostitution.

Finding a place to sleep

Finding safe places to sleep is a major concern among migrants going to Scandinavia. NGOs in Norway and Sweden receive public and private funding for emergency shelters and basic sanitation for homeless migrants, but capacity is far below demand. Denmark has taken a more hostile approach, and NGOs who provide services for this group risks losing funding. In all three countries, however, most migrant beggars and street workers sleep outdoors – in tents, under tarps or under bridges or under the open sky – and many hide in forests outside the city or sleep in abandoned buildings or in cars brought from Romania. Many lack places to store their belongings, and between one-third and half of the survey respondents had experienced tents or sleeping bags or other belongings being stolen or confiscated, usually by municipal renovation workers. Migrants sleeping outdoors also reported that they were routinely chased and harassed, either by the police, security guards or others. This was particularly common in Oslo, where a municipal ban on outdoor sleeping was introduced in 2013. It should be noted, however, that although still in place, this ban has been less strictly enforced after the shift from a conservative to a social democratic city council in 2016.

Exposure to harassment

Both begging in public and sleeping outdoors makes people exposed to harassment and abuse. Experiences of harassment – such as people shouting or spitting at them in the streets or even violence – were reported by a substantial share of respondents in all three surveys. Begging after dark was considered particularly risky. Many also reported routinely being chased from public places by shop owners and security guards. In Copenhagen, some also reported experiencing violence from security guards and the police.

Networks and resources

Roma migrants' lives on the streets of Scandinavia are in large parts shaped by the same networks that are important to facilitate migration, in combination with the limited services provided by NGOs. Most migrants stay together in small groups, connected to wider community-based networks that can provide information about places to sleep and where

to access services. These same networks often regulate access to begging spots and provide social support and physical protection, as these migrants for all practical purposes remain outside the protection of the law in Scandinavia.

Vulnerability and exploitation

Policymakers have been concerned that Roma beggars may be victims of human trafficking and are being forced to beg. Although they are vulnerable to exploitation, research indicates that most migrants are well-informed and able to engage in migration for begging and street work without becoming dependent on middlemen. Since they are not dependent on access to job opportunities or housing, they are to some extent less vulnerable than other economic migrants. However, their strong dependence on dense patriarchal family networks can make young women, in particular, vulnerable to exploitative relationships within families.

Scandinavian policy responses to migration for begging and street work

Policy frames and responses

Marginalized intra-EU migrants can be characterized as having a double *insider/outsider* status in Scandinavia: *Insiders*, because they have the right to free movement within the EU/EEA and their presence is not formally challenged, but *outsiders* because they have limited access to social rights and lose their right to stay if they become a social burden to the state. Under EU law, policy options based on either border control or regular welfare services have in practice been off the table. Instead, policy responses have focused on efforts to exclude migrants by criminalizing activities such as begging and rough sleeping in public and to alleviate acute suffering by allocating public funds to basic emergency services provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These policy responses have been linked with two competing understandings of the issue – or *policy frames*. On the one hand, a *criminal frame*, which sees begging as a form of criminal activity often stereotypically attributed to Roma ethnics, with policy solutions that revolve around criminalization and punishment. On the other, a *social frame* that sees begging as a symptom of social inequality and marginalization, with policy solutions in the realm of social and health policies.

Scandinavian differences in the political context of reception

Despite similarities, the level of hostility or openness toward migrant beggars and street workers varies considerably across the Scandinavian welfare states. In Denmark, a criminal frame for understanding begging and street work has been most dominant, with punitive measures directed at foreign beggars as the main response, combined with strict limitations on NGOs' abilities to provide basic services. In Sweden, although a criminal frame has become more prominent here as well, the social frame has dominated, with a strong focus on tackling poverty at its roots, by focusing on the provision of basic services to migrants and efforts to improve living conditions in Romania through aid. In Norway, the social frame has been combined with a particular variant of the criminal frame focused on punishing exploiters of beggars, with the introduction of some punitive measures over time, combined with the allocation of public funding toward NGOs for essential services.

Selection and adaptation of migrants

The different political contexts of reception have led to differences in the selection and adaptations of migrant beggars and street workers in the three countries. The population in Stockholm primarily consist of family groups of rural and highly marginalized 'traditional' Roma who beg and collect bottles. In contrast, the population in Copenhagen is composed of a 'tougher' group of mostly young men with more formal education, language skills, and previous migration experience but also more widespread substance abuse and more diverse, and more often illegal, strategies for generating an income. The population in Oslo lies somewhere between Stockholm and Copenhagen. These differences in the migrant populations have most likely influenced how the issue has been framed in public debate and responded to by policymakers.

Conclusion

Intra-EU circular migration for begging and street work is distinct from other contemporary migration flows on two different levels. First, they differ from other migration streams in terms of these migrants' ability to mobilize resources, tolerate hardship and navigate a hostile social environment, thus facilitating mobility among people who otherwise would not be able to engage in economic migration. These characteristics also make this type of migration extremely difficult to regulate for policymakers and suggest that marginalized Roma migrants who make a living through begging and street work will continue to be a permanent feature in Scandinavia. Second, these new migratory movements differ from other migration streams by the Scandinavian political systems' inability and unwillingness to engage with this phenomenon, despite being the most acute form of poverty and social deprivation in the otherwise wealthy and egalitarian Scandinavian welfare states.

How do front-line workers in the welfare state deal with migrant beggars and street workers?

Migrant beggars and street workers do not have access to regular benefits and services, but they are entitled to various kinds of "acute" emergency assistance, and front-line workers in the Scandinavian welfare bureaucracies are routinely confronted with their social needs, for example when they become sick or injured, give birth, or find themselves without shelter in the cold. These bureaucrats have limited space to manoeuvre, but many bend the rules to provide help, sometimes by defining ongoing needs as being "acute". The extent to which front-line welfare providers are able and willing to provide even minimum services to this group is, however, dependent on a number of factors, including personal moral considerations, professional ethics, organizational structures, and institutional culture.

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