

# INTERVIEW WITH DIOGENES OUTREACH WORKER DANIELA NOVAC

FEANTSA's Simona Barbu sits down with Daniela Novac, who has been an outreach worker with DIOGENES for 17 years. Daniela talks about how the work has changed over the years, the tangible barriers for Roma trying to obtain supports, such as having a fixed address, and the disconnect between the policy work being done at EU level and the challenges that she comes up against on the ground.

## About Daniela Novac

DIOGENES is a service dedicated to outreach work with homeless people in the Brussels-Capital Region. The organisation focuses on building a bridge between the street and the rest of society and their mission is to have contact with everyone who lives on the street. Daniela Novac has been part of the Diogenes team since 2003. Daniela is from Romania and she is Roma herself. Since she joined the DIOGENES team in 2003 she has worked on the cultural mediation program and has focused on interacting with Roma living in destitution and in homelessness. With over 17 years of experience, Daniela agreed to share with us her extensive knowledge on the situation of Roma in Brussels.

### *Tell us about the beginnings of the project and how you started working at DIOGENES.*

I was hired in 2003. I really liked it because I felt very productive and I could also use my experience which was very good. At the beginning of the project we were working in a pair, so I had another colleague. We worked with everyone, but my focus was on Roma. This allowed me to learn a lot about how things work on the street and I could learn about what rights people have and do not have when living on the street. My colleague would learn about the Roma as well, and together we found the few services that could help people that still exist today. For a while now I have worked alone and in a very independent manner, reporting back to my other colleagues. I go into the field and I contact people and together we try to find out what their needs are and where we can go to ask for help. And I do it together with the people I'm trying to help, depending on what they say and in their rhythm.

### *What are the needs of people, what are their main requests?*

In the beginning, we were met with different situations and the legislation was also different in Belgium for Roma who came from countries like Romania, because we were not in the EU yet. The people that we started working with succeeded in becoming regularised with the help of lawyers that we found for them. There were pregnant women who did not know where they could receive health care, children who were not vaccinated. People told me that they were sick and did not know where to go to apply for regularisation here in order to obtain a registered status and be able to access medical services or welfare benefits.

Back then, there were few requests from people who did not have somewhere to sleep. How should I explain this... it was because we Roma function around the concept of family, not as individuals. So those who came here first would help their relatives when they would first arrive, at least to offer them accommodation until they found a place of their own. After Romania entered the EU more communities arrived in Brussels who were new. Some of them had the opportunity to obtain an independent status and they opened companies, for instance in construction. They had this opportunity and then they supported other people from their community by offering them a work contract. So, people could obtain this temporary regularised status and a big group started working in constructions, for men, and women work a lot in cleaning services. Now we also have a lot of people who do Uber, there are many jobs that people do. (...)

The last group I worked with is the group of people who are homeless. I first noticed that many new people came to Brussels from France after they were expelled in large numbers. They did not have relatives

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here. Starting from 2015 they started coming more and more and they went straight to sleeping on the street. And they did not have help from anyone, not even the Roma groups who were here already. We keep our traditions within each Roma community, but there are also differences between our groups. These people come and stay for several months after which they go to help their families back home. For them we try helping by suggesting the shelters for homeless, but some of them refuse to go there because of the codes that we the Roma have. For instance, families do not accept sleeping in a big room with many women and men all together, as we have a rule about purity and impurity<sup>1</sup>. We have some restrictions that do not allow this. So, then they find abandoned places to sleep in or they sleep in the streets and police sometimes go to evacuate these places. Then we also collaborate with the associations who work in the camps to facilitate vaccinations or consultations for pregnant women. We do all possible kinds of mediation, both on behalf of Roma and on behalf of other services if needs be.

Roma are not all the same, they have different statuses – those who were able have integrated and they have lived here for many years,

they have children who go to the university. Then we have the very destitute groups who live in the streets. The issue is that these people are the most visible. The ones who are integrated do not have an interest in being exposed and showing off their status. I also think that in Roma’s minds there still is this stamp of discrimination and a question mark about what motivations lie beneath anything that is proposed to them.

## *What made a difference between those who integrated and who did not?*

When you arrive in a foreign country without knowledge of the rules and no support you cannot manage. In big water you cannot swim on your own all the time if nobody is there to help you. Of course, if you come to a new place and you have access to accommodation, already you are out of homelessness, you are not visible in the street. You have access to information, and you know where to go, you do not wander the streets looking for help. This is a big problem that we have in Belgium for families who arrive here – there is no service to counsel people, to give them guidance in the beginning. I also

noticed that many Roma who come here already carry a stigma of themselves, because they have felt discriminated against back home for being Roma, because they are poor, because they don't have rights back home either... the list is long. So, when they come to ask for recognition of these things in another country, they actually find out that there is nobody to recognise this, nobody is receiving them and listening to their needs.

(...)

***During this spring you managed to obtain accommodation for several Roma families who were homeless in Brussels. How did you manage to do that and what did this mean for the families?***

These families were homeless, and we had known them for a while. In the spring the opportunity to house some people appeared for a short term of 6 months and we were told to think about people who could be helped by the fact that they would have an address. After being registered with this address they could access their rights. One of the families I worked with was from Slovakia and they were on the street, they did not have anything. What we did was ensure support from many sides: first we registered them at the municipality. After that, I helped them register at the job centre to be able to look for jobs. They were here for quite some time already and even if they lived outside on the streets, they managed to learn French somewhat. So now they could be registered because they had an address, which is the biggest problem that people face. Not having an address means that they cannot get access to support services. Then I also registered them at a Roma service for school mediation and there the mother also received help to get a job. This service found the mother

a job exactly towards the end of the accommodation period. After she got the job, she was able to receive the residence card and she can now get welfare benefits, as she works part time, and she can get supplementary support from the state. The children can receive allowances. So in time, slowly, she can get out of this situation and reach a good position in society. So the key was the address! As well as the support she got from the services.

***And can they continue to stay at the same address?***

Unfortunately, the day when she was starting work there was a fire at their building, so they had to move to the Red Cross. We are looking for another place to rent for them. The mother still goes to work in these conditions, which proves her huge motivation. In all these unfortunate conditions her thoughts are still on her job, because she knows that this is her only chance to have a better life.

**“Not having an address means that they cannot get access to support services.”**

*What do you think about the impact of the EU framework and the results it has on the field and what would you recommend for improving this work?*

I see that there are different possibilities of securing help for Roma, some are more useful than others. I think that people should be supported to become autonomous. They should be supported in understanding what rights and obligations they have. A good example is what we at Diogenes achieved with this family. The address meant a lot for this family, but that is not enough. People also need support to stand on their own and become independent, support themselves.

There are strategies, but in the area where people need practical help there is no news. And I regret that I'm not able to be more involved at EU level. I went to several conferences and to the European Parliament, but I felt I could have used that time better, maybe helping someone to get help at the hospital. I really want to be involved more as I have a lot of knowledge in the field collected over 17 years and I would like to raise awareness on the situation of Roma at a higher level, to show people how things are in the field and to make them understand better, but I always get the feeling they are not interested. This discourages me in the end. More practical things that

are noticeable and which make a difference should be implemented. Sending money [to Member States] is just not enough.

People should be offered at least the chance to have an address to register and access to a good service that could support them in finding a job. And then, when you offer people a solution to accessing jobs you can also have requests and sanction those who do not comply. But punishing people just because they are poor and you are bothered by their presence in the streets, when they are not being offered any support - that is not right. This is how I see things. Because people are capable and motivated, otherwise they would not come here. Generally, all those who come are motivated and willing to work. Because life in the street and making a living through begging, not having any security for the future and living from one day to another is very difficult. There is no harder thing than this life.

**ENDNOTE**

- 1 Purity laws ("marime" or "marhime") are part of the Romani traditions and are still present currently within some of the Roma communities across the EU. You can read more information on pure and impure rules [here](#).

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