



Ireland grants ethnic minority recognition for Irish Travellers

ESPN Flash Report 2017/32

MARY DALY – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

MAY 2017

In a context of persistent disadvantage and segregation, Irish Travellers were officially recognised as an indigenous ethnic minority in March 2017. This has practical and symbolic significance in the Irish setting – especially opening the way for Travellers to be included in culture-related policy such as anti-discrimination and anti-racism measures.

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Description

In March 2017, the Irish state conferred official recognition on Travellers as an ethnic group by the Prime Minister (Statement by An Taoiseach). This does not create any new individual, constitutional or financial rights. It is mainly of symbolic significance in acknowledging and valuing the uniqueness and specificity of Traveller culture and identity. Yet, it means that Travellers will be named as a protected group in Irish equality legislation and that they will be included in the full range of the anti-discrimination and inter-cultural initiatives. Heretofore, Ireland had voluntarily reported on the situation of Travellers to the United Nations (UN) and Council of Europe (within the auspices of the Framework Convention on National Minorities). Recognition may also – especially in light of the statements by the Taoiseach on the occasion of granting recognition – expedite measures to address the structural and other disadvantages of the Traveller sub-population. The hope is that it will act to both confirm Travellers' own identity, helping to counter stigma and felt shame, and also to further recognition and respect for Travellers in the wider Irish community.

The developments follow a long campaign by the Traveller community and especially their representative organisations (Non-Governmental Organisations such as Pavee Point and the Irish Traveller Movement) to have their unique heritage, culture and identity formally recognised by the Irish

state. Travellers have already got official ethnic recognition in Northern Ireland and Great Britain and they have been included in the Irish Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989, the Employment Equality Act, 1998 and the Equality Status Act, 2000. But there was something missing. Internationally, a number of the UN bodies (including the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination), the Council of Europe (including the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) have also recommended such a step.

Outlook & commentary

As a type of recognition policy, there is some precedent for the measure in the Irish context. For example the 1998 Good Friday Agreement recognises that people's self-identification can be complex and the 2015 Gender Recognition Act provides that, from 16 years of age, the preferred gender of a person will be fully recognised by the state for all purposes. The fact of some trend and precedence should not undermine the significance of the move to recognise Travellers though, for ameliorate policy has been slow and troubled (as has movement in Ireland towards multi-culturalism).

Travellers are the main ethnic group in Ireland and constitute the single most disadvantaged population sub-group. In fact, one could describe Travellers in Ireland as a classic case study of a

socially-excluded group. As well as having low social status, they are educationally very disadvantaged (55% of Travellers leave school before the age of 15); on most health-related indicators they are significantly below the national average (having a lower life expectancy and a much higher suicide rate); their housing conditions are also significantly worse than the population at large (800 families live on the side of the road without water or sanitation); and their long-term unemployment rate is over 80% (all figures from www.paveepoint.ie).

There have, of course, been measures to address this disadvantage. One of the most recent and significant was the National Traveller/Roma Integration Strategy (NTRIS) introduced in 2011. Among its strengths was a commitment to improve the delivery of services to Traveller and Roma people and to mainstream catering for the needs of these communities. NTRIS was especially good in the domain of health services. However there were significant weaknesses also, including the lack of a clear strategy or set of goals; the sectoral and rather fragmented nature of responses; the virtual exclusion of Roma (in that NTRIS concentrated almost exclusively on Travellers); and a failure to produce an action plan to meet and monitor goals. Moreover, some of the NTRIS commitments to action have been watered down over the course of time and weakened by austerity policies. The latter have seen cuts in spending on Traveller education, health and accommodation especially (Pavee Point 2013).

A new strategy is currently in preparation (Department of Justice and Equality 2016). The available draft shows significant improvement on the 2011 Strategy (and aims for inclusion rather than integration, suggesting a change of policy approach). The development phase is being overseen by a

specifically convened National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Steering Group which includes representatives of Traveller and Roma organisations (another improvement on former practice). The process is also committed to a data collection strategy and an assessment of need among the Traveller and Roma communities. Among the measures one would like to see associated with the new Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy are dedicated funding, regular monitoring at a high level and the normalisation of an ethnic identifier in all data and evidence gathering (which would contribute to policy monitoring and review). Moreover the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in its latest report to Ireland (March 3 2017) expressed concern about the continued poor outcomes for Traveller women and girls in the fields of health, education, housing and employment as well as low level of participation in public and political life. The Committee recommended that the state take concrete measures to improve such outcomes, including by ensuring that the new Strategy has clear indicators and benchmarks for these sectors and that its implementation is monitored and regularly evaluated. It also recommended that the State should consider revising the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act of 1993 in order to sanction authorities when they fail to take measures to provide accommodation for Travellers.

The move in Ireland can be placed in a wider context of the politics and policies associated with multiculturalism. There is a vast scholarship on this topic as well as a range of different policy models and approaches (Bromell 2008; Kymlicka 2001; Taylor 1992). The scholarship and policy experiences underline the complexity of the field and the need especially to clarify the meanings and targets of

recognition policy and its relationship to the general policy approaches (in relation for example to rights and equality as well as social security and anti-poverty policy generally).

Further reading

Bromell, D. (2008), *Ethnicity, Identity and Public Policy*, Wellington, NZ: Institute of Policy Studies.

CEDAW Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (2017), *Concluding Observations on the Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of Ireland*.

Department of Justice and Equality (2016), *Draft National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*, available at:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National_Traveller_and_Roma_Inclusion_Strategy_Phase_3_Consultation_Document.pdf/Files/National_Traveller_and_Roma_Inclusion_Strategy_Phase_3_Consultation_Document.pdf

Kymlicka, W. (2001), *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Pavee Point (2013), *Travelling with Austerity*, Dublin: Pavee Point.

Statement by an Taoiseach, March 2 2017, available at:

http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/News/Taoiseach%27s_Speeches/Statement_by_An_Taoiseach_Enda_Kenny_TD_on_the_recognition_of_Travellers_as_an_ethnic_group_Dail_Eireann_1_March_2017.html

Taylor, C. (1992), *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Authors

[Mary Daly](#), University of Oxford