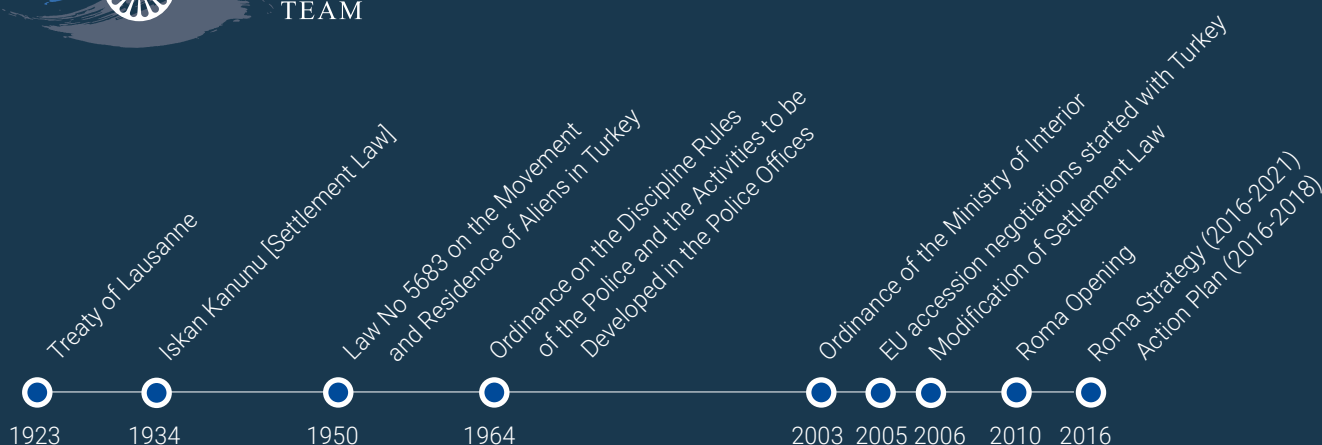




III. 1

Historical benchmarks that shaped the identity of Roma and groups related to the Roma in Turkey

1.1

A glance at the history, identity and present situation of the Roma and groups related to the Roma in Turkey

Ana Oprüşan, PhD

The various groups of Roma and groups related to the Roma in Turkey (Roma, Dom, Lom, Abdal) do not have an official minority status within the Turkish Republic and belong to the majority Muslim population of the country, as regulated by the Lausanne Peace Treaty. Their distinct historical trajectory has shaped their identity formation and makes them seem generally more integrated, with stronger ties to the Turkish state. Nevertheless, certain discriminatory provisions in official documents, as well as their further religious and linguistic sub-grouping have influenced the treatment they have received from the state, the perception society has had of them as well as their self-perception.

GROUPS DIVERSITY AND INTERRELATION

Turkey is the only country that accommodates the three main groups argued to have the same origins - the Roma [Tr. Romanlar] (also identified as “European Roma”), the Dom [Tr. Domlar] (“Middle Eastern Roma”), and the Lom [Tr. Lomlar] (“Caucasian Roma”). However, frequently, in Turkey, these groups avoid identifying themselves ethnically, mainly due to fear of discrimination. Moreover, they tend to acculturate to mainstream Turkish (in different parts of Turkey) or Kurdish (in Southeast Turkey) cultures, in an attempt to diffuse their identity into that of the majority population of the area they inhabit. Moreover, until rather recently, when policy and scholarly discourses started to address them, these groups did not

manifest any interest in joint collective action. Besides fear of being discriminated against and persecuted, this could be explained by their general lack of collective self-awareness, lack of connection with each other, geographical distance, as well as affiliation with different Muslim rites (Shafi, Hanefi, and Alevi - Bektaşî). In attempts to address the vulnerability of all these groups in a more inclusive manner, policymakers and some NGOs have started to use the generic designation “Roma and groups with a similar life-style” [Tr. *Roman ve Romanlar gibi yaşayan gruplar*] in 2010. This designation includes the Roma, the Dom, the Lom and the Abdal and is how these groups are collectively identified in the first policy documents, including the Strategic Document for the Romani Citizens [Tr. *Roman Vatandaşlara Yönelik Strateji Belgesi (2016-2021)*].

III. 2

Movie image from "Buçuk" [The Half]

A good source of estimations regarding the presence of different Romani groups and groups related to the Roma is represented by the data gathered during the filming of the 2007 documentary "Buçuk" [The Half] (<https://vimeo.com/123513550>) directed by the



The Romani groups live mainly in the Marmara and Thrace regions in Turkey and have to a large extent lost their mother tongues. They speak mainly Turkish and have acculturated to the Turkish culture.

Living in Southeast Turkey in an already less developed region due to the on-going Kurdish conflict, the Dom groups took a longer period of adjustment to the sedentary life compared to the Romani groups and have acculturated to the Kurdish culture. The Dom are alternatively identified with the following appellations, the etymology of some not being determined: *Cono* (from the Romani word *djene* which means "people"), *Aşık* (archaic name given to itinerant rural musicians in Southeast Turkey), *Çuki* (appellation encountered also in Iran for the "Gypsy" / nomad / marginal groups), *Gawandi* (from the Kurdish *gawand* which means cattle shepherd and also developed into the Kurdish word *gundi* for "unpolished peasant"), *Ghorbati* (word of Arabic origin used in the entire Middle Eastern area to identify nomads / those that come from elsewhere / the Gypsies; adopted in Turkish as *gurbet* which refers to estranged individuals who left the country to go abroad), *Mutrib* / *Mırtıp* (Arabic for "fiddler" / "musician"), *Kereçi* / *Qaraçi* (from the Arabic "*khārījīyy*" designating those who "left" / "got out", who chose to live outside the rules of the society) and *Gelsin* (appellation for itinerant groups in the area of Diyarbakır before the '90s, with unclear origin, although the word in Turkish can mean "may [they] come").

The Lom, who live in Northern Turkey and the Black Sea region and are also identified as *Posha* / *Bosha*, are the only group whose members generally live dispersed among the other layers of the society of their region, not necessarily clustered

Romani-Abdal activist Elmas Arus. The material gathered for the documentary contains testimonies from people from 38 provinces in Turkey.

III. 3

Postcard from 1900s illustrating Çingene [Gypsy] women



as a group in specific neighborhoods. They hide their ethnic identity and manage to blend into the mainstream society more than the other two groups. This may be the reason why they are considered the "best integrated" (although not necessarily less marginalized) and why reports show that their education level is the highest among all "Romani" groups in Turkey.

The Abdal in Turkey, otherwise called *Teber* or *Tahtaci*, are a socio-cultural group of Alevi faith which used to have a nomad lifestyle. Its members generally perform traditional jobs similar to those of the Roma, Dom and Lom groups. They may be musicians, thinsmiths, jewelers, basket and sieve makers, etc. They live in rather closed communities and are at times derogatorily identified as "Gypsies" by the rest of the society, the same way the other groups of Roma, Dom and Lom are. Although their mother tongue (Abdotili or Teberce) has not been properly researched, it has been established that their vocabulary includes words from Persian, Romani Kurdish and Turkish. According to their community leaders but also according to some historians and ethnographers who worked on minorities in Turkey, they are a Turkmen tribe with origins from the Khorasan Province of Iran.

The Roma in Turkey, as in other countries of Europe, are also identified with ethnonyms reflecting their traditional occupations: *elekçi* [sieve makers], *sepetçi* [basket makers], *kalaycı* [tinsmiths], *demirci* [blacksmiths], *arabacı* [wagoner], *çiçekçi* [flower seller], etc.

The rich archives of the Ottoman government and local administration acknowledged the Roma (mentioned in Ottoman Empire documents, for the first time, in 1430) under the names of *Kıbtı*, *Chingene*, *Chingane*, *Chigan*. They also

III. 4

Abdal woman in Gaziantep – photo by Elmas Arus, 2015

In his book "God's unruly friends: Dervish groups in the Islamic later middle period, 1200-1550" (1994), Ahmet T. Karamustafa mentions among the Qalandars, the Haydaris, the Janis, the Shams-i Tabrizis and the Bektashis, a group called the "Abdal of Rum". According to Karamustafa, the Abdals were known for their antisocial and antino-

mian behaviour. The author also argues (p.13) that they believed in "renunciation of society through outrageous social deviance".

III. 5

"Group of Gypsies on the fresh waters of Europe" – photo editor Max Fruchtermann, 1458, Constantinople. Postcard of 1905



participated in the Ottoman army's invasions in the Balkans, the archives (1541) mentioning the "Gypsy Sanjak" [*Çingene Sancağı*] or the *Liva-i Kibtiyan*. The Ottoman Empire allegedly applied a differential treatment to Muslim and Christian Roma, the Christians paying a higher tax than the Muslim Roma. For purposes of control and regular collection of taxes, the sedentarization of nomads was a practice used by Ottoman authorities. The Christian Roma were usually nomadic (*gezende*) and the mixture of the Muslim and non-Muslim groups was prohibited by law. The Law concerning the Gypsies in the Province of Rumelia [*Kanunname-i Kibtiyan-i vilayet-i Rumili*], issued in 1530 by Sultan Suleiman I (the Magnificent), mentions the fact that "(1) The Muslim Gypsies from Stamboul, Edirne and elsewhere in Rumelia pay 22 *akche* for each household and each unmarried person. The infidel (Christian) Gypsies pay 25 *akche*, and, as for the widows, they pay 1 *akche* tax. (...) (7) If Muslim Gypsies begin to travel with non-Muslim Gypsies, live with them and mix with them, they should be admonished; after being punished, the infidel Gypsies should pay their taxes as usual. (8) Those Gypsies who are in the possession of an authorization from the Sultan are to pay only the Sultan's tax [*harach-i padishahi*] and do not pay land tax...and the other usual taxes" (Marushiakova & Popov 2001:32).

IDENTITY-SHAPING HISTORICAL BENCHMARKS AND PROCESSES

While the various groups of Roma and groups related to the Roma in Turkey (Roma, Dom, Lom, and other similar groups like the Abdal) have a different historical path than the Roma

in Europe, at least after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire (1922) and the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic (29 October 1923), they do not have a minority status, but belong to the majority Muslim population of the country. The rule considering all Turkish Muslims of any ethnicity as majority population is part of the Lausanne Peace Treaty of July 24th, 1923, which entered into force on August 6th, 1924. The non-Muslims, such as the Jewish, Armenian and Greek communities, are considered minorities on the other hand. The Treaty mentions the rights that non-Muslim minorities (Jews, Armenians and Greeks) would enjoy, such as "the right to use their own language, run their own schools, and maintain their social and religious institutions" (Articles 37-45). Additionally, the Article 66 / Paragraph 1 of the 1982 Turkish Constitution ultimately stipulates that "everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk" (Turkish Constitution, 2001).

The Ottoman archives show that the Roma (identified under different names, e.g.: *Kipti*) were mostly nomadic and Christian during the 15th and 16th centuries but became predominantly Muslim and sedentary by the 19th century. These groups were differentiated in the tax registers and recorded separately with references to their nomadic or settled status. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, many Muslim Romani families came to Turkey from Greece, along with other Muslim groups, during the official population exchanges. This was an official process, called *Mübadele* [exchange], stipulated under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Accordingly, the Greek Orthodox citizens in the newly established Turkish Republic had to "return" to Greece, while

III. 6

Semi-nomad Romani woman camping in Izmit, 2004

Photo: Elmas Arus



III. 7

Romani female musicians in Bergama / Izmir, 2006

Photo: Haluk Hüseyin Arus



the Muslims (Turks, but also Roma) in Greece had to come to Turkey. Following the *Mübadele* (through the *Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations*), signed in Lausanne / Switzerland, on January 30th, 1923, the governments of Greece and Turkey exchanged more than one million people, including Muslim Roma. The criterion for the exchange was religion rather than ethnicity or mother tongue. Despite the fact that the arriving families were scattered all over Turkey and some survivors still remember unfulfilled promises made by the authorities regarding property allocation (land or houses), many Roma recall with pride their immediate origins as “coming from Selanik” (Thessaloniki), the birthplace of Atatürk (1881-1938), the founder of the Turkish Republic, and consider this event as a symbolic proof of being “wanted” and “chosen” by Atatürk, and ultimately belonging to the Turkish nation. Almost mythical stories are told about the Roma who came from Greece after 1920, during the time of the population exchange. Some claim that Atatürk personally dealt with their departure and some even say that their ancestors came to Turkey in the same boat with him. Moreover, some consider the fact that they renounced their own mother tongue (Romani), in order to be able to speak better Turkish, a sign of pride and an important indicator of them being more ‘Turkish’ than the other ethnic groups in Turkey.

For the express purposes of controlling the movement within Turkey of certain populations, some discriminatory regulations and laws referring also to the Roma were issued and kept in force until 2006. The Roma in Turkey have been mentioned explicitly in some legal regulatory documents, like the *Law No 5683 on the Movement and Residence of Aliens in Turkey* (1950), which, in Article 21, mentioned the expulsion of “Gypsies” and “nomads who are not linked to the Turkish culture”. The 2011 ECRI Report on Turkey criticized this law and expressed concerns about the fact that this “may create

particular difficulties for Roma who do not have official identity documents”. On January 5th, 2011, Bülent Arınç, State Minister and then Deputy Prime Minister, placed a motion on the agenda of the Parliament to eliminate the prejudicial terms from this law. He qualified this action as a “symbolic, psychological essay” of relieving the Roma from discrimination. A similar document is the *Ordinance on the Discipline Rules of the Police and the Activities to be Developed in the Police Offices* (1964) which vilified the poor and the Roma. Chapter 5(B), Administrative Provisions, Paragraph 9, mentions among others, the categories of suspicious people: “5) The Gypsies who have no specific job; 6) The unemployed and those who wander purposeless, not because they do not find a job, but because they do not want to work” (TC 2012). Similarly, an *Ordinance of the Ministry of Interior* of 2003 referred to measures to be taken when someone applies for citizenship. The document mentioned the necessity of special attention and research on people who might be “beggars” or “Gypsies”. However, the most debated legal document that discriminated against the Roma was the *Settlement Law* of 1934 [*İskan Kanunu*], which addressed “the nomads and itinerant Gypsies”, treating them alongside “those that are not linked to the Turkish culture”, “the anarchists” and “the spies”. The law, which was modified in 2006, stipulated that the “nomads and itinerant Gypsies are not to be settled in the country” and “shall not be accepted as immigrants in Turkey”. After modification, the new version of this law includes only the word “nomad”, without specifically naming the Roma.

All these legal documents specifically mentioning the “Gypsies” show that they have not been treated equally under the law, although this should have been their right as citizens of the country and part of the majority population. Consequently, many Roma and groups related to the Roma are aware that they are perceived as “intruders”, treated as in-

III. 8

Romani woman selling fruits during 1900s,
Postcard



III. 9

Group of Romani in front of their tent in Smyrne
(today the city of Izmir) in 1903, postcard



visible on some occasions, while other times their mere presence is used as a pretext for the police to stop them every time something bad happens in the vicinity. The EU continued to criticize Turkey for these reasons in its regular progress reports. The EU Progress Reports emphasized on numerous occasions the absence of comprehensive policies to address the situation of the Roma in Turkey who have faced social exclusion and marginalization concerning access to education, discrimination in health services, exclusion from job opportunities, difficulties in receiving personal documents and exclusion from participation in public affairs and public life.

The tone of these official documents has had a direct influence on the treatment of the Roma and other groups related to the Roma by the state as well as on society's perception of them. Consequently, this has also shaped the Romani people's self-perception. Even though officially part of the Muslim majority population of the country and formally recognized as citizens with equal rights, many Roma still note that they feel like "second class citizens". The rejection or hiding of the Romani identity can be also explained through the stigma enforced by the number of derogatory synonyms that the *Çingene* [Gypsy] word has had in Turkish dictionaries and books.

Up until the period of 2004-2010 when the Romani issues began to be put on the national policy agenda because of the EU's pre-accession conditionality, the civic representation of the Roma was scarce, and the hiding of Romani identity was prevalent. Especially after the Governmental Roma Opening [Tr. *Roman Açılımı*] of 2010 – an initiative which targeted the improvement of the situation of Roma –, the number of Romani NGOs (associations, federations and confederations) has flourished, growing to more than 300 today. However, their influence is generally low, and the political context rather sensitive, rendering a real negotiation with

the power holders difficult. Nevertheless, as a continuation of the Roma Opening initiative as well as under the pressure of the EU regarding the "visa liberalization" conditionality, the first Roma Strategy (2016-2021) was adopted on April 30th, 2016, with a first Action Plan for the period 2016-2018. This first Action Plan was implemented through several actions by different ministries in the areas with a high Romani population density. The strategy addresses the Roma and groups with a similar lifestyle with respect to their vulnerability and not their ethnicity. The financial support for these actions came from the EU; no funds have been allocated for Romani issues in the state budget.

FROM STIGMATIZATION TO A SENSE OF BELONGING

The Romani groups have enjoyed a certain amount of tolerance in Turkey that was not present in other societies or political systems in Europe in the same period, such as generally not being considered a serious "threat" by the power holders, being described in a rather romanticized manner in the accounts of travelers and novelists, "benefitting" from the religious membership which included them in the "*millet-i hakime*", the "believers" or Muslims, as opposed to the "*millet-i mahkume*", the non-Muslims or minorities.

Although they express loyalty to the country as well as to the Muslim faith, the sense of belonging of the Roma to the Turkish society is challenged in practice by the treatment they receive from members of the majority and from the authorities. The Roma in Turkey lacked visibility within the category of the majority Muslim population, unrecognized by the state other than as a particular (ethnic) group and therefore unaddressed in a targeted manner up until 2010 when the Roma Opening was launched.

III. 10

Awareness action of Romani and non-Romani NGOs on the Holocaust of Roma and contemporary discrimination of the Roma in Turkey. Photo by "Dur Del" Platform, Istanbul, August 2014



III. 11

Romani displaced by urban regeneration projects in Küçükbakkalköy / Istanbul, 2012. Photo from personal archive Ana Oprışan



The implications of this official categorization can be analyzed from different perspectives: It could be argued that it conveyed a degree of “inclusiveness”, since there was no official differentiation between the Roma and the other populations of the (Muslim) “majority”; however, it was de facto disempowering and hence “silencing” for different ethnic and religious groups inside of the “majority” population, including the Roma. Additionally, the Alevi Roma or the Abdal had to subject themselves further to a double form of invisibility: both due to their ethnic origins as well as for their faith.

Nevertheless, to a certain extent, the status of the Roma in Turkey is different to that of Roma living in other countries of Europe, regardless of their similar levels of poverty. The different historical trajectory of the Roma in Turkey has shaped their identity formation and makes them seem generally more integrated, more closely connected to the state and subject to less discrimination, particularly on the basis of their race. The Roma in Turkey generally tend to distance themselves from the other ethnic groups in Turkey as well as from the concept of being a “minority”. Instead, they embrace the desire to be a well-integrated part of Turk-

III. 12

Çingene

Screen shot of the search engine of the Turkish Language Agency under the Prime Minister’s Office illustrating pejorative terms which describe the word “Çingene” (Gypsy).

Since different dictionaries, encyclopaedia and books of proverbs contained such descriptions, different official complaints were made by NGOs resulting in sanctions, including action by the Ministry of Education to remove readings from their curricula. Definitions of the word Çingene (Gypsy) in these books contained some of the following terms and expressions: “stingy”, “shameless person”, “a community composed of people with dark skin and a nomad life-style”, “they move from a place to another and are accused of stilling children and eating human flesh” etc.



III. 13

Abdal women from Syria who migrated to Gaziantep, personal
archive

III. 14

Romani woman in Thrace region
Photo credits Elmas Arus

ishness. Their distancing from other recognized minority groups in the country and of this status in general could be explained by a prevalent view held by the majority population and the decision-makers according to which allowing a minority to gain certain specific rights would potentially result in less loyalty to the state and lead to demands of self-determination or separatism.

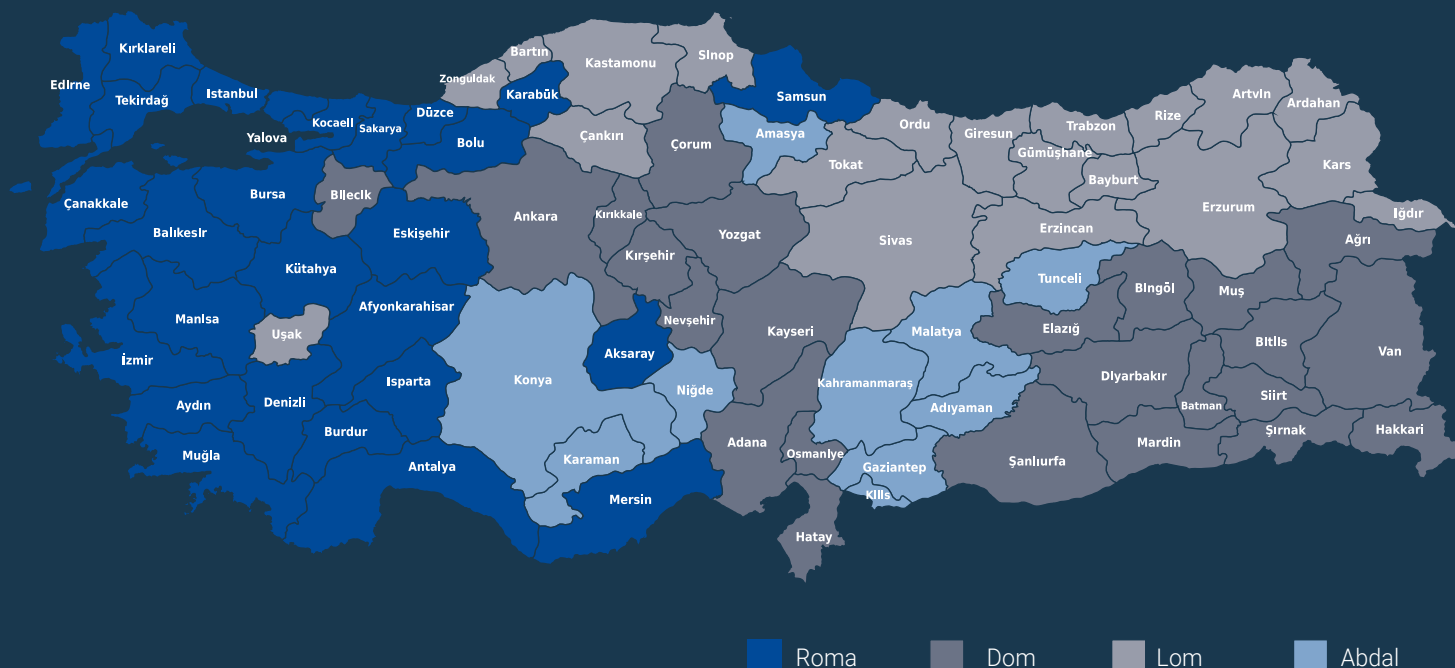
The “choice” of some Roma to de-emphasize their ethnic origin, mainly before 2002, by obscuring their identities and going even further and seeking assimilation, could be identified in what Scott described in 1985 as a “weapon of

the weak”: a method of the vulnerable to protect themselves from the same powers that rendered them invisible by not addressing them.

NOTE: This text contains excerpts from the PhD thesis “The Roma in Turkey – From Survival Mechanisms to Development Strategies” (2017), for a degree received from the Development Studies Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CoE (2011), ECRI Report on Turkey, <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/turkey/TUR-CBC-IV-2011-005-ENG.pdf>
- Convention (1923), Lausanne Peace Treaty VI. Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations Signed at Lausanne, January 30, 1923, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty-vi_-convention-concerning-the-exchange-of-greek-and-turkish-populations-signed-at-lausanne_.en.mfa
- Marushiakova, Elena; Popov, Vesselin (2001), *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire - A contribution to the history of the Balkans*, Centre de recherches tsiganes, University of Hertfordshire Press, Bristol
- Roman Vatandaşlara Yönelik Strateji Belgesi (2016-2021) ile I. Aşama Eylem Planı (2016-2018), *Resmî Gazete, Sayı: 29699 / 30 Nisan 2016*, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/04/20160430-11.htm>
- TC (1950b), Law issued on 15/07/1950, published in the No 7564 Official Gazette on 24/07/1950, Accessed 26.03.2012, <http://www.turkiyeyabancilarburosusu.com/kanunlar.html>
- TC (2001) *The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey*, Article 66 as amended on October 17, 2001, p.21, http://www.anayasa.gov.tr/images/loaded/pdf_dosyalar/ri/THE_CONSTITUTION_OF_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_TURKEY.pdf
- TC (2006) Settlement Law [Iskan Kanunu], Law no 5543 / 1934, Amended: 19/9/2006, Turkish Parliament Web Site, Accessed 20.03.2012, <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/kanunlar/k5543.html>
- TC (2012) *Polisin Merasim ve Topululuklardaki Rolüne ve Polis Karakolları Teşkilatlanmasına Dair Talimatname* [Ordinance on the Discipline Rules of the Police and the Activities to be Developed in the Police Offices], 1964, Accessed 27.03.2012, <http://bit.ly/2hqs0ir>



III. 15

Map of Turkey showing the distribution of the main groups of Roma, Dom, Lom and Abdal, by provinces, based on their estimated preponderance. Many provinces (both in urban and rural areas) have presence of different groups; the map highlights however the most numerous / dominant group in each province. Since data on ethnicity cannot be legally collected and many groups identify themselves at different times with different names, certain estimations can only be made based on existing field research and consultations with NGOs and community leaders. Accordingly, in terms of predominant groups in each province, the following can be highlighted:

- Istanbul: Roma and Abdal, Roma are in majority
- Bursa: Roma, Lom (Posha) Abdal and Dom
- Adana: Dom and Roma
- Izmir: Roma and Abdal in the villages
- Uşak: Lom and Abdal
- Antalya: Abdal / Tahtaci and Roma
- Karaman: Abdal and Roma
- Yozgat: Abdal and Roma
- Hatay: Dom and Abdal
- Kahraman Maraş: Dom (a Dom group who calls itself "Melikli") and Abdal
- Malatya: Dom of "Melikli sülalesi" [Melikli lineage]
- Adıyaman: Dom Karaçi
- Elazığ: Dom and Abdal
- Tunceli: Alevi Dom
- Kayseri: Abdal and Roma who are called "Mandacılar" [buffalo handlers] who are said to have arrived in the region around 1960s from Bulgaria by carts dragged by buffalos
- Çankırı: Lom Elekçi [sieve makers]
- Kütahya: Roma and some Lom families
- Eskişehir: Roma and Abdal
- Ankara: Abdal (mostly in villages), Roma and Dom
- Zonguldak: Lom and Roma
- Samsun: Roma and Abdal
- Ordu: Lom and Roma
- Sivas: Lom / Posha (who do not want to be publicly called as such by saying that "biz Poşalıktan çıktık" [We got out of Posha identity])
- Düzce: Abdal Elekçi
- Erzincan: Lom and Abdal
- Erzurum: Lom and Şih Bızınlı (a group which is identified by others as Çingene [Gypsy] but seems very different than the other Romani groups)
- Bitlis: nomadic Dom
- Van: Dom / Mırtıp
- Osmaniye: Dom and Abdal
- No data has been identified for Burdur