

**Featured article:**

**The racialization of Roma in the ‘new’ Europe and the political potential of Romani women<sup>12</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The formation of the ‘new’ Europe gave rise to many promises in what regards European Roma, including cultural recognition, human rights and social inclusion. At the same time, informed by neoliberal policies, it perpetuated and even increased the socio-economic disparities across and within Member States of the European Union (EU). In this context, Roma were racialised as an ‘inferior ethnic group’ associated with social problems or with the threat to ‘civilised’ Europe, blamed and criminalised for becoming (part of) a precarious class. This article argues that the politics of culture, rights and social inclusion undertaken in the name of Roma and at the same time defining them as ‘the Roma’ within the European Union, failed to address the systemic causes of social inequalities, exclusion and advanced marginality. It observes that the subject positions created for ‘the Roma’ by these discursive frames (i.e. non-territorial nation, transnational minority, citizens entitled to universal human rights, vulnerable group) are perverted by racism into ‘arguments’ about Roma as a different (meaning inferior) and sub-human species which does not have a nation(state) or a ‘mother country’, needs positive measures to act as ‘normal’ citizens, and cannot be integrated into the mainstream society because it ‘does not like to work’. Moreover, the paper discusses how this process of racialisation associates Roma with ‘East-European poverty’ and makes use of gendered ideologies. Finally it argues about the political potential of Romani women in the face of the racialisation of Roma as a manifestation of the racism underlying and justifying the neoliberal ‘new’ Europe.

**Keywords: racialization, Roma women, European Union**

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<sup>2</sup> This contribution draws partially on my paper ‘Cultural identity politics, social policies and racialization processes regarding Roma’ presented at the workshop ‘Race In/ Outside Post-WWII Europe: On the Politics of Governing and Knowledge Production’ (organized by the CEU Institute for Advanced Study and Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Budapest, 10 June 2014); on the article ‘Roma women’s voices and silences on unjust power regimes’ published in the 2013 special issue of the *ERRC Roma Rights Journal*, pp. 35–45; on the paper ‘Uneven development and Roma marginalization: From economic deprivation to ethno-spatial exclusion’, forthcoming in Júlia Szalai and Violetta Zentai (eds) *Faces and Causes of Roma Marginalization in Local Communities*, Budapest: CEU Centre for Policy Studies and Open Society Foundations; and on studies resulting from the research on the ‘Spatialization and racialization of Roma exclusion: The social and cultural formation of “Gypsy ghettos” in Romania in a European context’ (see funding note).

## **From politics of culture and rights, to depoliticized social inclusion policies**

In its 1993 'Recommendation on Gypsies in Europe' the Council of Europe argued: 'Europe harbours many different cultures, all of them, including the many minority cultures, enriching and contributing to the cultural diversity of Europe. A special place among the minorities is reserved for Gypsies. Living scattered all over Europe, not having a country to call their own, they are a true European minority, but one that does not fit into the definitions of national or linguistic minorities. As a non-territorial minority, Gypsies greatly contribute to the cultural diversity of Europe. In different parts of Europe they contribute in different ways, be it by language and music or by their trades and crafts.' This approach towards Roma should be viewed within the larger landscape of how, at that time, liberal European multiculturalism nurtured 'cultural diversity' as a crucial element of European identity. Meanwhile, the demand for recognition of how Roma as a non-territorial ethnic minority could contribute to European cultural diversity, started to mix the discourse of protecting them as a minority with that of 'improving their situation'. While granting them minority status these discourses created Roma as a minority of a different kind. Despite the fact that it was meant in a positive sense, this subject position was racialized by actors who picked it up as an 'argument' for stigmatizing Roma as an 'inferior race' ('unable' to create its own nation-state or to act like traditional ethnic minorities, possessing a mother country of their own). Such a politics of difference and recognition, by focusing exclusively on linguistic and cultural rights, and on the symbolic celebration of European diversity, distracted the political focus from the social inequalities which were in turn justified by the reification of cultural differences. Consequently, this politics of culture does not address the systemic economic causes of social inequalities. Nevertheless, it did have the potential to create and maintain self confidence and trust in the capacity for self-organization versus political dependence on the majority's will to include/integrate 'the Other' (howsoever its difference might be understood) into the circle of those who have access to the mainstream society's goods.

As far as the politics of human rights is concerned, this trend mixed appeals to cultural minority rights with claims for universal (civic) rights, and gave space for a series of debates about the relationship between culture and rights, particularism and universalism, and between national and civic understandings of citizenship. The 'Roma rights are human rights' discourse and practices warned national and European political actors and policy makers that anti-discrimination laws and positive measures are needed in order to enable Roma to act as universal citizens in spaces marked by institutional racism. But the appeal to formal equality proved to be weak in counterbalancing the effects of uneven treatment and institutional discrimination, which are embedded in the structural arrangements of an unequal social order that 'rationalizes' injustices caused by racism. However, Roma (and non-Roma) national and transnational organizations created to serve this cause were unable to become equal partners in the political decision-making processes regarding 'Big' EU policies that produced the marginalization/inferiorization of particular territories, groups and persons. Conceived in the (ethnic) minority-majority dichotomy, the politics of human rights focused predominantly on cultural minority rights, civil rights, anti-discrimination and anti-racism, and generated policies for ensuring formal equality before the law and

non-discriminatory treatment. This has not yet been articulated in terms of socioeconomic rights addressing the structural causes of exclusion. But it does have the potential to address institutional discrimination and raises awareness about the need to create material conditions that empower people to make use of their legally guaranteed rights. However, viewed in the broader frame of the European politics of the 1990s and 2000s, the human rights perspective reflected limited liberal optimism about the transformative effects of the formal assurance of rights and remedies of human rights violations through legislative measures, while failing to address structural power relations creating social inequality.

In the second part of the 2000s, the efforts towards cultural recognition or entitlements to rights were overshadowed by the so-called 'policies for Roma inclusion' that became the predominant tendency promoted through European discourses, institutions and funds. The trend to 'Europeanize' Roma culminated in the elaboration and adoption in 2011 by the European Commission and other EU institutions of 'A European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020'. Compared to European cultural diversity discourse and to that which framed Europeanness around human rights, the social inclusion policy framework shifted attention towards how Roma employment could contribute to progress in the Europe 2020 employment targets<sup>3</sup>. Designed in the context of the European Union and governed by neoliberalism, these policies depoliticize poverty and do not address it as a result of advanced marginality. Rather they suggest that the precarious conditions of Roma (whose indicators show a large discrepancy compared to the majority population)<sup>4</sup> result from individual failures to adapt to the market economy and can be improved through specific projects focused on the improvement of individual skills. These policies, although some conceive them as based on socioeconomic human rights, predominantly promote a different kind of argument for inclusion: they create a new subject position for Roma (useful labour force for a market economy) and propose a new conceptual basis for solidarity (according to which the inclusion of the excluded costs less than the costs associated with the 'socially assisted'). These policies, at best, generate sectoral projects which require affirmative action measures for Roma as a 'vulnerable group' and possibly trigger a philanthropic solidarity by the majority, but are not able to address/treat in an integrated way the structural (cultural and economic) causes of marginalization and exclusion.

### **The association of Roma with 'East European poverty'**

Even in the 1990s, regardless of the fact that the Roma politics of the day referred to Roma, Travellers and Sinti, EU integration discourse slightly transferred political attention on Roma from Eastern Europe as if 'the Roma problem' were an 'East European issue'. By this it created Roma as an object on which to negotiate the accession of former socialist countries to the EU and through which the distinction between the

<sup>3</sup> The EU 'Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020' states: 'Addressing the situation of Roma in terms of employment, poverty and education will contribute to progress towards Europe 2020 employment, social inclusion and education targets' (p. 4).

<sup>4</sup> See for example in FRA, UNDP (2012), 'The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States. Survey results at a glance' (fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\_uploads/2099-FRA-2012- Roma-at-a-glance\_EN.pdf). Data for Romania resulting from the UNDP survey conducted in 2011 are available at: [www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/ourwork/poverty-reduction/roma-in-central-and-southeast-europe/roma-data/](http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/ourwork/poverty-reduction/roma-in-central-and-southeast-europe/roma-data/)

original EU and the ‘post-communist countries’ was maintained. This is the legacy that even nowadays fuels, among other factors, racist classifications between the rich and poor countries, or between countries whose citizens should be entitled to enjoy the right to free movement and those who do not deserve this, or between the ‘authentic’ Europe and the ‘second-hand’ newcomers.

Nowadays, the association of Roma with the ‘socially assisted’ across borders (a term with negative connotations in a system that pretends to be meritocratic) is a mean of blaming the poor because they are poor and it is a manifestation of the racialization of poverty. By racialization of poverty we mean here the practice of coupling ‘the Roma’ perceived as the ‘racial other’ with ‘the poor’, and explaining ‘Roma poverty’ as a ‘natural result’ of the cultural traits of an ‘inferior race’ trapped in pre-modern (‘non-civilized’) and subhuman forms of existence. This trend is even stronger in cases where a distinction is made among the poor themselves, between the ‘deserving’ and the poor who ‘do not deserve’ social protection (respectively between the majority population, and the Roma minority). Or put differently, between the poor who deserve to live in poverty (like Roma who supposedly ‘do not like to work’) and the poor who became poor through no fault of their own (the non-Roma who are ‘victims of economic restructuring or of the financial crisis’). On the other hand, the racialization of poverty means the displacement of poor Roma from the ‘respectable’ cities and countries, entrapping them into ghettoized spaces that reproduce material deprivation, dependency and humiliation, dramatically reduce the chances of belonging to and participating in the life of the larger society, and uphold relations of exploitation and surveillance.

Under these conditions, as the current political debates around the ‘free movement of people’ show us, the entire anti-Roma-immigration politics and its underlying racism is part of an effort to justify on the side of old EU member states why capital may travel freely across EU member states, while labour (especially the labour force from former Eastern and Central Europe) should not. Anti-Gypsy racism is part of this neoliberal regime promoting, on the one hand, the extension of the ‘free market’ conceived as a product of civilization (in fact, the interests of the Euro area countries) and, on the other hand, sustaining the austerity measures and the marketization processes in the areas that the European Commission names more and more explicitly as ‘peripheral countries’. This current form of anti-Gypsy racism functions to protect the former from the ‘invasion’ of the impoverished populations from the latter perceived as symbols of ‘primitivism’. Parallel with these processes we may witness how the impoverished populations (mostly from Romania and Bulgaria) are racialized, and how the political category of Roma is associated with ‘East European poverty’ by those who had a crucial role in creating and sustaining that poverty. Meanwhile, the political decision makers of the ‘peripheral countries’ (economically benefiting from the system described above) are doing their best to distance themselves from their native population (self-)identified as Roma while blaming the latter for all the failures encountered in their road towards the promised land of the EU.

### **From gender-blindness to the gendered racialization of Roma**

For quite a long time, gender awareness did not characterize Roma politics in any of its forms. In the context of an ethno-cultural paradigm Romani women were conceived of as naturally bearing the role of reproducing and nurturing the ‘nation’ both in the

biological and cultural sense, but were not recognized as political subjects. The socioeconomic paradigm was no better either in terms of addressing Roma women's status in the community or in the broader society: their particular needs, interests and experiences were overshadowed by the seemingly gender-neutral effects of poverty and social exclusion on Roma communities. Thus for a long period, Roma women's public voices were silenced under the shadow of identity politics or social inclusion policies, both of them blind towards internal divisions and towards gendered and racialized class hierarchies between and within Roma and non-Roma.

Ironically, for example in Romania, Roma women's status within their own communities was addressed first by the (otherwise patriarchal) mainstream public discourse in a false feminist tone, which was seemingly deeply concerned about their subordination to community norms regarding early marriage and childbirth. This was and remains a challenge that Roma feminists are still faced with: protecting women's and children's rights within their own communities while deconstructing the way in which such mainstream positions reproduce convictions according to which Roma are an 'inferior race' performing pre-modern/primitive practices of life.

The rights-based Roma discourse began to explore the gender dimension of racial discrimination and Romani women's situation at the end of the 1990s, when the Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies of the Council of Europe decided at its 7th meeting in Strasbourg (29–30 March 1999) to request a consultant to prepare an introductory report on *The Situation of Roma/Gypsy Women in Europe*. The report framed the problem in terms of how Romani women experience the conflicts between traditional culture and modern society, and between acting for cultural rights on behalf of their groups and for women's rights as universal human rights. More recently, the EU framework for National Roma Inclusion Strategies made explicit references to Roma women, but not surprisingly this happened within its mainstream discursive frame. Romani women are mentioned in this strategy in the context of reduced employment and increased school abandonment rates among Roma, but also in terms of problematic access to quality health care. Consequently, the promotion of gender equality is not conceptualized by this strategy in terms of women's rights or social justice, while it also fails in addressing the phenomenon of multiple discriminations.

Meanwhile, Roma women continue to be pushed to the margins by the whole socioeconomic system as members of their dispossessed class. Under conditions of severe poverty they are making tremendous efforts to fulfill the household and motherhood related duties allocated to them by a domestic patriarchal regime. The combination of these private and public gender regimes eventually exhausts their bodies and endangers their lives, so it is not surprising that their life expectancy is more than 10 years lower than the life expectancy of majority women, while the maternal mortality rate of Roma women is 0.62%, compared to 0.04% for majority women. Simultaneously, their sexuality is expropriated from two directions: on the one side they are viewed as bearing the obligation for the biological reproduction of their own ethnic group, and on the other side they become targets of racist fertility control and dehumanizing discourses according to which they give birth to children with less value than majority mothers' children (as practices of sterilization or discourses on Roma and non-Roma fertility demonstrate). Furthermore, if the multiple deprivations they are subjected to occur in socially and spatially segregated and ghettoized areas, which render access to any form of social and legal protection impossible, Roma women can also fall victim to sexual exploitation. Under these conditions, they not only suffer the effects of economic marginalization, being placed in the category of 'undeserving' citizens alongside with

Roma men, but – due to their reproductive and maternal roles – they are perceived and controlled more and more strongly as symbols of ethno-cultural boundaries and embodiments of racialized differences.

### **The potential of Romani women as intersectional political subject**

The construction of the neoliberal order shaped by marketization is enacted among other means by racism. In this process racism functions most importantly as an institutionalized arrangement producing material effects in the form of accumulation on the one side, and dispossession on the other side. While the formation of a precarious class is a consequence of how the neoliberal political economy deprives marginal groups of the instruments and capabilities for living a life defined by current standards as decent, racist ‘arguments’ claim that ‘Roma poverty’ or sub-standard living conditions are the outcomes of Roma cultural traits or lifestyle. Consequently, the current marketization processes not only dispossess the disadvantaged of social goods and livelihood opportunities, but also create the subordinated subject(s) of this new social order together with the distinction between the useful, i.e. employable, labour force, and the redundant and therefore dehumanized Roma. The interplay of capitalism and racism materially produces the dispossessed by pushing some people into structurally disadvantaged conditions, and it also racializes them discursively by asserting that they are sub-human or non-persons since they cannot fit into the ideal-type subject position prescribed by the neoliberal order.

While the socioeconomic aspects of Roma marginalization are more and more depoliticized (transformed, at best, into public policy issues without addressing the major systemic causes of mass impoverishment and exclusion), there are signs in Romanian public life of the political potential of Roma women activists. This politicization seems to be happening exactly around their experiences as women, but it has the potential to evolve towards reframing ‘Roma women’ as political subject in an intersectional way. On the other hand, matters embraced by a current radical non-Roma feminist agenda (violence against women, rape, maternity, birth, or women’s sexuality) framed by the principle of ‘the personal is political’ are becoming more and more inclusive towards Roma women’s experiences. Due to their knowledge about and sensibility towards Roma socioeconomic marginalization, Roma feminists have the potential to centre attention on social inequalities and by this to enrich the radical non-Roma feminist agenda (for example by addressing violence against women as part of structural violence). Simultaneously, they might become important actors of repoliticizing poverty, social inequality and marginalization, including the repoliticization of understanding racism and patriarchy as cultural systems justifying and maintaining the social divisions of classes, but also as structural arrangements that alongside with classism are the producers of social inequalities. By doing this, they might also fill the class gap identified in the European antidiscrimination policies by several scholars who observed that social class is the most prominent example of a social category that is strongly connected to inequalities, yet not currently included in the European equality agenda. The political intersectionality assumed by Roma feminists addressing sexism, racism, classism and homophobia should acknowledge the

realities of structural intersectionality<sup>5</sup>. Institutionalized forms of Roma women's representation have the chance to resonate with the experiential or structural forms of intersectionality if – while formulating political and policy demands – they are able to assure the participation of multiple Roma women perspectives in this process. Or, put differently, if they are capable of providing Roma (women) at the grassroots with the power to control their means of production, reproduction and representation. But obviously, this effort in itself would not be enough for generating systemic change: for this they need alliances across gender, and across different social and ethnic groups that could generate political action enforcing national and international stakeholders to really act on behalf of the socially and economically dispossessed classes of present-day European societies.

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<sup>5</sup> Besides Kimberlé Crenshaw's article 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color' published in 1994 in the Routledge volume *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, crucial points about the political aspects of intersectionality were discussed in a 2006 special issue of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (for example by Mieke Verloo), or in 2009 by Angéla Kóczé in her piece on 'Missing intersectionality: Race/ethnicity, gender, and class in current research and policies on Romani women in Europe', but as well as in the third issue of *Nevi Sara Kali. Roma Women's Journal/Revista Femeilor Rome/Romane Zuvleange Zurnalo* ([www.desire-ro.eu/wp-content/uploads/revista-NSK-3\\_20-07-11.pdf](http://www.desire-ro.eu/wp-content/uploads/revista-NSK-3_20-07-11.pdf)).