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To cite this article: Peter Vermeersch (2012) Reframing the Roma: EU Initiatives and the Politics of Reinterpretation, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38:8, 1195-1212, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2012.689175](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.689175)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.689175>



Published online: 06 Jun 2012.



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# Reframing the Roma: EU Initiatives and the Politics of Reinterpretation

Peter Vermeersch

*Since the accession of the A8 post-communist countries to the European Union, various EU institutions have regularly expressed deep concern about the precarious political, social and economic position of the Roma. This article examines the recent political reinterpretations that accompany the EU's framing of the Roma as a group in need of special attention. It argues that EU institutions will have to find ways to deal with the ambivalence inherent in their 'European' appeals for tackling the problems at hand. These calls may indeed—as, for example, the European Commission insists—enhance cooperation between different levels of government and persuade member-states to adopt new policies that will benefit Romani citizens. But, somewhat paradoxically, they also provide new discursive material for nationalist politicians with an anti-Romani agenda who try to minimise or evade their countries' domestic responsibility by highlighting the role and responsibility of the EU. They also latch onto the alleged 'Europeanness' of the Roma in order to exclude them symbolically from their own national space and frame them not only as 'Europeans' but also as 'outsiders' and 'cultural deviants'.*

*Keywords:* European Union; Roma; Framing; Europeanisation; Minorities

## Introduction

International policy debates about the precarious social, political and economic situation of the Roma in Europe are not new. In the early years of the 1990s, various international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) raised the alarm, outraged not only by the sheer scale of Roma socio-economic exclusion but also by the blatant negligence on the part of domestic policy-makers in the countries concerned. Some of these NGOs began to concentrate their activities exclusively on the plight of the Roma and became the core of what could perhaps be called a growing cross-border advocacy network for this group (Vermeersch 2006). International governmental

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organisations soon joined the debate. In the mid-1990s, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and the Council of Europe, for example, took several notable attempts to place the topic higher on the European agenda. These actions were prompted in part by the assumption that the Roma—in contrast to minorities who live in territorially concentrated areas—have no national lobby or external homeland to defend their interests and therefore need to rely on institutions that reside above the level of the individual member-states.

The institutions of the European Union (EU) added their own distinct voices to the discussion when they got involved in the matter at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s. To some extent, they relied on the work done by other international organisations, but they also defined their own priorities, thereby influencing policy debates about the Roma in other international institutions and national governments. The EU's involvement thus represents not only the most recent phase in a longer and unfinished political debate about the Roma in Europe; it also clearly illustrates how the debate moves back and forth between different public policy contexts and political arenas and is therefore continually invested with new narratives, discursive arguments, ideas and meanings. These shifts create new public policy frames.<sup>1</sup> Like framing attempts by governments, scholars and NGOs in the past (see, for example, Lucassen *et al.* 1998; Willems 1995), the current EU appeals for increased attention entail the creation of a political space for the formation and contestation of new understandings of who the Roma are, what they need, and how they should be helped (Simhandl 2006, 2009). In other words, the EU has now joined a complex political game of framing and reframing the Roma.

The EU 'discovered' the topic of the Roma in several stages. After the Roma had initially attracted the EU's attention, and concern, as (potential) asylum-seekers from Central and Eastern Europe, they were later, in the run-up to EU enlargement, increasingly discussed in the context of the EU's attempt to promote interethnic peace, respect for minorities and anti-discrimination regulations in the candidate member-states (Guglielmo and Waters 2005; Vermeersch 2002). Since the enlargement, EU policy towards the Roma seems to have acquired a more definite shape. Although there is still concern about the Roma as asylum-seekers from outside the EU, they are now primarily seen as the EU's largest transnational minority, and their socio-economic exclusion is now unambiguously viewed as the key problem. This problem needs to be addressed, according to the emerging consensus among EU policy-makers, by persuading member-states to adopt new policy initiatives in the fields of social inclusion and anti-discrimination, to use EU funding to back up these initiatives, and to revise legal frameworks in order to accommodate the claims of the Roma. In addition, the increase of Romani migration to Western Europe has made it more difficult for the EU to narrow the issue down to merely a problem of Eastern Europe (Sigona and Trehan 2009: 9). It has also forced the old EU members in the West to take the situation of their own native Romani citizens, which they so far had more or less ignored, more seriously. The EU's initiatives on interethnic relations, human-rights protection, diversity promotion, anti-discrimination and social

equality all now contain special references to the Roma—all Roma (that is, those who are seen as Roma, and not necessarily only those people who use this term to refer to themselves) in all EU member-states.

There are, indeed, several reasons to assume that, by highlighting the Roma's plight as a special concern, the EU will be able to persuade member-states to take additional action in this field. The first reason is that the EU has more instruments than other international organisations in Europe, especially in terms of funding, with which to influence domestic policies. Secondly, the EU has considered the management of interethnic relations as a critical security concern. While such concern has primarily inspired EU foreign policy (Peen Rodt and Wolff 2008), the importance the EU has attached to interethnic peace abroad has nevertheless also compelled it to be increasingly engaged in promoting certain standards on ethnic-minority protection at home (Rechel 2009). Indeed, throughout the last decade the EU has increasingly linked its security interests with the promotion of rights in the field of minority protection and anti-discrimination (Sasse 2005). And thirdly, the EU's attempt to improve things for the Roma has received support from a wide range of internationally organised NGOs, who scrutinise state practice in individual member-states and add pressure 'from below' to the pressure that is already brought on these states 'from above'. As has been the case with the global diffusion of human rights norms more broadly (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse *et al.* 1999), international advocacy networks (consisting of NGOs that operate across state borders) can, in theory, reinforce the EU's particular normative agenda on Roma inclusion by moral consciousness-raising and by monitoring domestic change (Sobotka 2011).

Yet these are hardly the only implications of the EU's initiatives on the Roma. In this article I want to point out that the EU's calls for attention to the Roma need careful reflection. In particular, I argue that EU institutions will need to find ways to deal with the ambivalence inherent in their 'European' calls for tackling the problems at hand. Such calls may indeed push member-states into adopting new policies that will benefit their Romani citizens. But the new tendency to single out the Roma as a *European* priority and a special *European* concern has also, rather paradoxically, opened up new opportunities for nationalist politicians to plead *against* new national measures to help the Roma. These politicians have tried to minimise or evade their countries' domestic responsibility by stressing the role and responsibility of the EU. They have suggested that, while other citizens belong to the nation-states, the Roma belong to Europe, thus latching onto the alleged 'Europeanness' of the Roma (and their alleged lack of national belonging) in order to exclude them symbolically from their own national space and frame them not only as 'Europeans' without any attachment to any particular nation-state, but also as ethnic outsiders and cultural deviants. They have done so by reframing the problems facing the Roma as problems caused more by lifestyle and culture than by socio-economic inequality. Such symbolic exclusion may lead to territorial exclusion. By portraying them as outsiders, and not as socio-economically deprived fellow citizens, politicians have created room for policies that indeed treat the Roma collectively as a special case. In the summer of

2010 the French government, for example, relied on such discourses to authorise and extenuate a clearly problematic *ad hoc* collective expulsion of unemployed or non-legally employed Bulgarian and Romanian Romani immigrants (van Baar 2010).

In other words, contrary to its intentions, the EU's strategic highlighting of the Roma as a special case has thus provided ammunition for the view that the Roma belong more to Europe than to the individual member-states and that therefore they should be governed by special *ad hoc* laws and procedures. In the end, such a view will not do much to impede social exclusion but will, rather, foster it.

I explore the problem of political reinterpretation by presenting empirical evidence from several debates in the European Parliament about the situation of the Roma (January and December 2008, and September 2010). I end the paper by discussing a number of potential implications for future EU initiatives, local policy implementation and the relationship between Roma and their co-citizens in the EU member-states.

### **The Roma as a Special Focus of EU Policy**

Before proceeding with my analysis of these reinterpretations, I start by outlining the broader historical and institutional context. The EU's current strategy towards the Roma comes at the end of a relatively long history of EU involvement in shaping minority protection policies in Central Europe. It also builds on a range of activities specifically targeted at the Roma by other international institutions and NGOs.

#### *Before the Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe*

For a long time the issue of the Roma was as good as absent from the political discussion surrounding the Eastern enlargement of the EU. At the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, however, it gradually became more prominent. This conclusion can be drawn from the European Commission's regular reports on the accession process where, over the years, progressively more space was given to discussion of the situation of the Roma. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, as the case for enlargement was articulated in terms of common values (Guglielmo and Waters 2005: 764; Schimmelfennig 2001), the issue of minority protection became an important rhetorical tool in the dialogue between the EU and the candidate countries. The EU sharply accentuated the role of minority protection in the Copenhagen criteria for accession (1993), hoping that, in so doing, it would be able to maintain political stability throughout the future territory of the EU, especially in areas where ethnic relations were volatile. Although the EU was sometimes accused of using a double standard—it required applicant countries to conform to standards that several old member-states clearly failed to comply with, especially in the field of minority protection (Amato and Batt 1998; Liebich 1998)—it is reasonable to assume that its enlargement strategy did buttress local demands for minority rights in the candidate member-states. Such development was further

stimulated by NGO activity. International advocacy organisations saw their opportunities for exerting pressure across state borders increase simply because European countries openly committed themselves to the same standards of democracy and willingly submitted themselves, at least on paper, to international scrutiny. Human Rights Watch was one of the first international independent actors in the 1990s to publish reports on the situation of the Roma as a vulnerable minority group in some candidate EU member-states. Others, such as Minority Rights Group and Amnesty International, followed. Some NGOs, such as, for example, the European Roma Rights Centre, began to focus their attention exclusively on the Roma.

Secondly, there was increasing political concern in the old member-states about potential future migration from the East to the West. As long as discrimination and social exclusion in the candidate countries persisted, as many feared, there would be push factors for Romani migration. In part, the EU began to pressure for change in the candidate states in order to allay fears of large-scale migration to the West (PER 1999; Vermeersch 2002: 88).

Thirdly, in its monitoring of minority protection in the candidate member-states, the EU also relied on the work that had been done by other international organisations. In 1997, for example, the European Commission's Agenda 2000 referred to both the Framework Convention (FCNM) and the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1201 (1993) on minorities. The Central European countries did indeed adopt the FCNM. Although the acceptance of this convention was in theory merely linked to the demands of the Council of Europe and not to the EU, it can be speculated that candidate member-states adopted it to strengthen their standing on minority protection issues *vis-à-vis* the European Commission. Not surprisingly, the EU's concern for the Roma followed a trend of growing international concern for the Roma in other international organisations, in particular the OSCE (thanks to the activities of the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the establishment of a Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues), and the Council of Europe—thanks mainly to its Parliamentary Recommendation 1203 declaring the Roma to be 'a true European minority' (Kovats 2001: 95–6).

The accession process inherently encouraged form over practice (Ram and Vermeersch 2009: 69), so the real impact of this process on the ground should not be overestimated. Conditionality may have been influential in bringing attention to the Roma and in getting programmes and reforms adopted by governments in the acceding countries, but implementation has seriously lagged behind. In the end, the Central European countries were admitted to the EU while substantial problems remained. Moreover, Romani activists themselves did not always consider the EU's conditionality policy useful for their actions (Vermeersch 2002). Roma sometimes became reluctant to refer to the EU's conditions and the Commission reports because they feared that society would hold them responsible for hindering EU accession. Thus, instead of inadequate minority protection being seen as an obstacle for EU membership, the Roma themselves thought they would be perceived as the obstacle.

Activists were left wondering how they could protest a situation when the situation was framed as being their own responsibility. Although this dilemma was hardly new for the Roma, EU membership standards brought this issue into sharp relief.

### *Since Enlargement*

After EU enlargement, several EU institutions got more actively involved in raising awareness about the Roma. Since 2004, several new initiatives have been taken and should in the future lead to a comprehensive EU strategy towards resolving the problems facing the Roma.

In 2004 the coordination of the matter was in the hands of the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs. Among the early steps was a conference on Roma issues (held in April 2004), which included contributions from a large number of Romani activists—mainly but not exclusively from the new EU member-states—and which resulted in a substantial report entitled *The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union* (EC Directorate 2004). The stated aim of this report was to generate broad political support for EU policy initiatives that target the Roma as a special group. Illustrative of this approach is what the report noted on the proposal for a 'Roma integration directive' that a number of activists had tabled and wanted to lobby for with EU institutions. The report's response was ambiguous. It argued that it might be problematic from a legal standpoint to introduce a legally binding directive that targets one specific ethnic minority, but it still acknowledged the fact that such a directive *could* be useful in principle and could give the necessary impetus to several EU member-states to introduce new policies. Given the fact that legal problems are likely, so the report argued, it was better to keep expectations low: 'The inclusion of Roma will depend upon a series of lesser, but important, individual initiatives that may collectively, however, have a similar effect to a Directive' (EC Directorate 2004: 44–5). The report also concluded that the EU should

clearly and explicitly identify Roma within existing and comprehensive anti-discrimination and social inclusion policies, and not simply assume that Roma will be effectively covered by such policies. There is a need for policies to be efficiently steered by a body with sufficient influence and authority to ensure that EU departments, Member State governments and other stakeholders take decisive action to target Roma integration (2004: 46).

What was the impact of this report? A single 'body with sufficient influence and authority' has not yet been established but, over the years, there have indeed been various attempts by EU institutions to push member-states into taking new policy initiatives on Roma.

A symbolic step, for example, was taken in 2007, when the issue was taken up by the European Council and subsequently given priority under the French presidency in 2008. This prioritisation followed a series of resolutions adopted in the European

Parliament, in 2005, 2006 and 2008 (European Parliament resolutions P6\_TA(2005)0151; P6\_TA(2006)0244 (2005/2164(INI)); P6\_TA(2008)0035). In Point 6 of the resolution of January 2008, the European Parliament urged the European Commission to take heed of the conclusions of the European Council of December 2007 and 'develop a European Framework Strategy on Roma Inclusion aimed at providing policy coherence at EU level'.

The European Council of December 2007 gave its full symbolic support to the European Commission for the organisation of a series of European Roma Summits—of which the first was held in September 2008 in Brussels and the second in April 2010 in Córdoba—gathering approximately 400 representatives of EU institutions, national governments, regional and local public authorities and civil-society organisations. The Council Conclusions also stated that follow-up summits had to be organised in cooperation with the three presidencies in office from 2010—Spain, Belgium and Hungary (Council of the EU 2008). The Council Conclusions on Advancing Roma Inclusion of June 2010 indeed confirmed the consolidation of these new institutions.

In the meantime a new special section was developed on the website of the Directorate, containing information about the Commission's actions on the Roma (under the heading 'Diversity and non-discrimination'). It also included news about upcoming European Roma Summits, meetings of the Integrated Platform for Roma Inclusion (regular meetings between member-states and Romani activists, policy-makers and experts, led by the presidency of the Council and aimed at the identification of best practices and stimulating cooperation and exchanges of experience on successful Roma inclusion policies), and EURoma (a European network made up of representatives of 12 member-states, determined to promote the use of structural funds to enhance the effectiveness of policies targeting the Roma and to promote their social inclusion).

In December 2008, European Commissioner Vladimír Špidla concluded in a speech before the European Parliament that there had been 'unprecedented progress (...) on Roma integration through the combined efforts of the EU and the Member States' (European Parliament 2008a). In terms of institutions and declarations, the progress was no doubt unprecedented and, as became clear when these institutions began to function over the period 2008 to 2010, was continual. For example, even if the Platform meetings have not led to new political decisions, they have facilitated the exchange of best practices and they have firmly set the principles of EU action in this field through a non-legally binding advisory document called the 'Common Basic Principles of Roma Inclusion' (European Commission 2010a). In April 2011 the European Commission urged member-states to draw up national Roma integration strategies which take into account the Common Basic Principles. This allows countries to compare practices and should increase the possibilities for monitoring by independent agencies and civil-society actors. Whether all of this will also lead to meaningful changes on the ground remains, of course, to be seen. The result we see now is, if not a fully fledged EU strategy on the Roma, at least a series of separate

initiatives and institutions that, each on their own, are designed to contribute to the development of such a strategy. At this point the array of initiatives seeks, in at least four ways, to:

- *enhance Romani representation.* Regular meetings with Romani activists and forums with stakeholders and Romani organisations are aimed at creating a better link between Romani citizens and EU institutions;
- *promote better domestic policies.* Pressure from EU institutions on individual member-states should lead to the implementation of new domestic policy measures specifically aimed at remedying some of the marginalisation and discrimination problems from which the Roma are suffering. These measures, however, are not aimed at changing particular domestic conceptions and traditions of minority protection or social policies towards vulnerable groups;
- *promote the use of existing EU instruments for the purpose of Roma inclusion policies.* In line with the ‘Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion’, the Commission promotes that EU funds such as the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) be used in projects that target Roma and are ‘owned’ by both local authorities and Romani communities (European Commission 2010b: 23). Research activities have been initiated that are intended to monitor progress in this field. In January 2009, the European Commission started with an assessment of the usefulness of existing instruments, especially in the field of gender mainstreaming, information campaigns about anti-discrimination laws, and policy coordination methods between the member-states;
- *effectuate societal change.* The actions are intended to help to raise awareness about the Roma and their rights and about the role of diversity in our societies. Such awareness-raising is aimed not only at politicians and policy-makers, but also at EU citizens in general (and it is hoped that problems of discrimination will diminish through such awareness campaigns).

The general idea behind all these activities is that the EU should highlight the issue of the Roma and facilitate a high-level policy discussion about it, so that domestic states can push each other to develop innovative social policies and use more of the available funding in such a way that the Roma can benefit from them. In practice, however, these EU initiatives and instruments should not amount to ‘ethnic policies’ that set the Roma apart from other European citizens. As a European Commission document on the issue argues: policy approaches should ‘not concentrate on the ethnicity of a person, but on the socio-economic reality in which this person lives’ (European Commission 2010c: 29).

The concerted activities at the level of the EU are intended to convince member-states to value that norm. The EU’s method to achieve this is ‘norm socialisation’, a concept familiar to students of international norms and domestic political change. The idea holds that, having been committed to the larger common goal of EU

membership, independent member states are likely to accept the norms about which there exists consensus within the broader institutional context that is created by the larger goal. As Schimmelfennig (2001: 48) has argued,

In an 'institutional environment' like the EU, political actors are concerned about their reputation as members and about the legitimacy of their preferences and behaviour. Actors who can justify their interests on the grounds of the community's standard of legitimacy are therefore able to shame their opponents into norm-conforming behaviour and to modify the collective outcome that would have resulted from constellations of interests and power alone.

It is not unlikely that this mechanism will indeed be at work in the case of norms and policies regarding the issue of the Roma.

Yet, as I will show in the next section, in the case of the Roma this norm-spreading mechanism will have to compete with certain counter-mechanisms. I focus in particular on the way in which some domestic elites reframe the meaning of the EU's concern for the Roma, reinterpret it as support for ethnically specific policies, and use it for the purpose of deepening the gap between the Roma and their co-citizens. Such mechanisms of reinterpretation are part of the political context surrounding the initiatives of the EU. The way in which politicians talk about the EU's initiatives on the Roma is sometimes antithetical to the principles on which these initiatives were built.

### **Strategies of Reinterpretation**

In the 1990s, the Roma from Central Europe may have been known mostly as (unwanted) migrants, but they were soon also seen as transgressors of borders in another way. They were perceived as a group which defies the boundaries of the concepts that are usually deployed to consider minority issues. Depending on how political and social actors portrayed them or on how activists represented them, the Roma could be conceived of in different ways: as migrants/nomads, as a national minority, as an ethnic group or as a social underclass. In several countries, as I have shown in earlier work (Vermeersch 2003), different ways of conceiving the Roma and the problems facing them have co-existed and competed for dominance in public policy debates. Such different identity and problem conceptions have also led to different policy outcomes.

The current European attention to the Roma—by EU institutions as well as by the Council of Europe and the OSCE—has added another layer to ongoing discussions about subject identification and problem formation. There has been a tendency among certain policy-makers and elites to frame the Roma as a 'transnational European minority', that is, a group that lives throughout Europe and constitutes a minority in every state but—in contrast to other minorities—has no clear national lobby or external homeland to defend its interests. Moreover, the idea has emerged

that these European Roma suffer from similar problems of exclusion and marginalisation wherever they are.

Some international institutions, in particular the Council of Europe, have actively promoted the 'Europeanisation' of Romani identity. As Kovats (2003: 7) has pointed out:

In Resolution 1203 of the Council of Europe, the 'Roma' are described as a 'true European minority'. They are used as a symbol whose deprivations can be said to expose the failure of the nation-state model, thereby justifying trans-European governance.

Although this recognition of the European character of the Roma seems to represent a positive response to the demands for recognition put forward by some international Romani activists, Kovats has warned of the danger inherent in such Europeanisation. By suggesting that the Roma are a European minority with a common culture, the Council of Europe characterises the Roma as a non-territorial group that has been immune from processes of nationalisation elsewhere in Europe. They are thus portrayed as a separate nation without a state. By promoting this particular identity frame, however, the Council of Europe unintentionally supports the nationalisms that have pushed the Roma out of the other national communities in Europe.

The European Commission followed the concerns (and initiatives) of other international organisations—in particular the Council of Europe—but, in contrast to the latter, the Commission has been careful to point out, at least in recent documents, that the Roma should not be set too much apart in terms of their identity or of the problems from which they suffer. In a 2008 Commission staff working document it was formulated in the following way:

There are a number of pitfalls which the Commission has done its utmost to avoid in its work on Roma inclusion, ie:  
 A purely horizontal ('ethnically neutral') approach to the problem which would risk losing sight of specific challenges that Roma face;  
 A pure ethnically defined approach which forgoes the advantages of mainstreaming Roma issues in the main policy strands;  
 A declaratory 'Europeanisation' of the problem which could symbolically transfer the responsibility to European institutions without providing them with new instruments to deal with it and without sufficient commitments from Member States (2008: 4).

The Commission is thus aware of the potential dangers of Europeanising the Roma. At the same time, however, it is unable to prevent other actors from reading its actions as a form of Europeanisation. Some domestic politicians have used the attention of the Commission as a new opportunity to frame the Roma as a European ethnic minority, meaning a group that is faced with a similar type of ethnically motivated exclusion and with discrimination practices across internal European borders and is thus a single subject of policy. In other words, special attention for this

particular category has served to reinforce the idea that the Roma are a category of people who suffer from a particular problem, similar across the European cultural space. This observation, however, often serves as the basis for a frame that argues that there is something in the category of 'Roma' itself which mandates special treatment. The negative potential of such a reframing becomes apparent when the problems facing the Roma are described in cultural or ethnic terms. Recognition of ethnic or cultural particularity may serve as a basis for introducing special measures to *help* those who are recognised as ethnically or culturally different. But it may just as easily become an argument in blaming them for creating their own problems. Indeed, against its own intentions, the EU's concern for the Roma has been reinterpreted by several political actors as a way to promote policy outcomes and discourses that go against the material interests of the Roma. Put somewhat more provocatively, the EU wants to stifle discrimination against the Roma but, paradoxically, has opened up a space for the reintroduction of a narrative that widens the social gap between Roma and others.

Examples of such problematic strategies of reinterpretation can be found in various political narratives and in international, national and local politics. I will limit my empirical exploration of this phenomenon here to some examples from debates on Roma in the European Parliament (in 2008 and 2010), each time on the occasion of the adoption of a resolution pertaining to them.

In these debates one can notice a shift. Talk of the need to be concerned about the Roma sometimes slips back into a narrative that highlights the distance between Roma and other groups of citizens and portrays both Roma and non-Roma as homogenous, bounded camps. What happens is not that statements that have served to stimulate the EU in its efforts to achieve change on the ground (and thus argue along the lines of the norm-distribution perspective that I have outlined above) have been contested; they are, rather, reinterpreted and adapted to become part again of a nationalist narrative. This reinterpretation is not always by politicians who are unconcerned about the Roma, but their central agenda is usually focused on the need to absolve national states and populations from the responsibility of solving the problems that face Roma. By doing so, they have a tendency to conceive the Roma as a separate nation and thus symbolically exclude them from the existing national population.

Let me begin to document this process with a quote that illustrates a genuine belief in the positive effect of Europeanisation. From Daniel Cohn-Bendit, it is representative of the norm-distribution perspective, the idea that, as a result of EU attention, the situation will change on the ground. Cohn-Bendit claimed that it is necessary to 'give the Roma the status of a European minority . . . official recognition is the first step towards combating exclusion' (European Parliament 2008a). Other politicians, such as Giusto Catania, supported this opinion. This is a political argument that goes a step further than the European Commission has been willing to go; it is in fact more akin to the Council of Europe's conception of the Roma and therefore represents the Europeanisation perspective.

It is important to note that other voices in the debate have agreed with the need for such recognition but have nevertheless given that same call a slightly different meaning. Consider this statement by Adrian Severin, a Romanian MEP from the Social Democratic Party (PSD):

The European Union enlargement was the last act of Roma liberation. Roma are today European citizens. Perhaps they are in absolute terms the truest European citizens because they are only Europeans. Their cultural, social and economic integration is a European challenge. Therefore we must communitarise the Roma policy. A strategy which only makes recommendations to the states, leaving them the ultimate choice and the ultimate responsibilities, simply does not work (European Parliament 2008b).

This quote builds on statements like that by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs at the 2008 Roma Summit that 'Roma are the biggest European minority, they are part of Europe therefore their fate is that of the whole EU' (quoted in Villarreal and Walek 2008: 11). But it adds an important twist: because the Roma are only Europeans, national states should not be left on their own to construct policies that help them. Others follow up on that same line of reasoning. Take, for example, this quote by Jiří Maštálka, a Czech MEP from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM):

I come from the Czech Republic, a country that has been frequently and in my view quite unfairly criticised in this context . . . I agree with the Commission that the problem can be resolved only by linking up regional, national and European structures to the greatest extent possible (European Parliament 2008a).

At first glance, this statement echoes the Commission's call to see the problem from a European perspective. In this sense it seems not much different from the slightly more neutral statement by Jean-Pierre Jouyet, who said: 'It is vital that we take a European approach to this, not least because it is very much a cross-border problem, not at all a purely national one' (European Parliament 2008a). In the Czech quote, however, something else is added: the complaint of unfair criticism towards a single country and the idea that national and European structures should be linked up *to the greatest possible extent*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, this politician seeks to align the Commission's argument that the problem is 'European' in nature with his own assumption that the problem therefore cannot be the responsibility of any single nation-state. The political argument that recognition of the Roma as a European minority is an important first step in the process of solving their problems is entirely consistent with this view. But this slight rephrasing of the matter helps him to accomplish something that puts it entirely at odds with the initial ideas behind the idea to see the Roma from a European perspective. While the intentions of the European Commission have been to instigate national states taking responsibility for 'their own' Romani minorities, this politician supports the European Commission's statements and actions in order to arrive at exactly the opposite conclusion: that the member-states

themselves should not be blamed for the current problem nor can be held responsible for solving it.

Probably Barroso had such reinterpretations in mind, and tried to counter them, when, in his speech at the 2008 Roma Summit, he stressed that the 'European institutions and Member States have a *joint* responsibility to improve the social inclusion of Roma' [emphasis added]. Yet, in the game of political reinterpretation, such joint responsibility can still be imagined as a formula for taking some allegedly undeserved blame away from the national state. The Romanian MEP Adrian Severin again observes:

We cannot turn into reality the fiction of the Roma national citizenship when Roma opt out from taking the nationality of a particular state. Roma are European citizens without a national project. Therefore the models usually applying to the national minorities at the level of the nation state do not work. Roma social and cultural integration is a transnational matter and consequently it is first and foremost the responsibility of the European Union. Of course, Member States also have their responsibility concerning Roma in terms of non-discrimination, social inclusion and affirmative local measures. But these responsibilities should be seen as having a subsidiary character (European Parliament 2008a).

Sometimes MEPs link this to issues of lifestyle and culture. They oppose any policies to support the Roma and base their argument on a conceptualisation of the Roma as a group who are themselves to blame for creating the problems with which they have to live. In the September 2010 debate, Derk Jan Eppink from the Belgian right-wing populist party 'Lijst Dedecker' and member of the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the European Parliament, stated:

When I worked as a journalist in Eastern Europe, I saw the issue of the Roma. It was a gigantic social problem, for which the socialist governments at the time didn't have a solution. Now Europe is faced with it. It is too easy to look at the situation of the Roma only through the prism of racism and xenophobia, as the left does. People who travel around Europe in caravans, without a normal income, will in the long run *cause* trouble [emphasis added] (European Parliament 2010).

The extreme right, of course, takes this reasoning even further. For these parties *all* blame should be put on the Roma and none of it on the nation-state. In the narrative of the extreme right the alleged cultural difference of the Roma becomes an argument for excluding them not only from the national population, but also from Europe. For example, in the European Parliament debate on the Roma strategy, Ataka politician Desislav Chukolov reinforced this line of division by associating national Bulgarian membership with positive characteristics and categorising the Roma as non-nationals—outsiders with negative characteristics. The Europeanisation of Romani identity gave Chukolov the necessary rhetorical space to pit 'the Roma' against 'the honest, hard-working Bulgarians'. The former he described as foreign perpetrators, the latter as innocent 'victims of gypsy crime' (European Parliament 2008c).

Here the narrative is straightforward, and it is easy to unmask the blame-the-victim rhetoric. But the point lies in its larger significance: such statements can acquire a certain status of legitimacy for a broad audience when they are communicated in a context where more-subtle endorsements of the 'Europeanness' and post-national character of the Roma are made by less-suspect institutions and actors. The crucial shift towards evading state responsibility and blaming the victim often happens in moderate statements, where the danger is not immediately visible.

In other words, Europe-wide actions to foster the social inclusion of the Roma in Europe run the risk of being reinterpreted as support for the argument that the Roma's particular form of marginality is not unique to any country and should therefore be seen as something created by the Roma themselves. From there it is a small step to see such marginality and exclusion simply as a symptom of Romani culture and identity and not as a problem of inequality and socio-economic polarisation. From deprived co-citizens the Roma are turned into cultural deviants.

### **Conclusion: A Call For Reflection**

The conclusion should not be that EU initiatives on the Roma are thus necessarily problematic. It is clear that projects and policies funded and instigated by the EU may have a very positive impact; there are indeed examples of inspiring projects made possible by EU support (Guy 2009: 43). It is also important that the EU acts on matters where individual member-states fail. And it is equally important that European institutions keep monitoring the fundamental rights of all EU citizens, including the Roma (as is currently done at the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency), and respond forcefully should member-states introduce policies that threaten those rights. But the positive impact of new institutional initiatives at the EU level should not simply be assumed; it should be the subject of empirical verification. In the recent past some important evaluation work on EU-funded projects has been done—for example, by Guy and Fresno (2006) and Guy and Kovats (2006); more of that will certainly be needed in order to establish definitively whether, as the norm-diffusion model predicts, international scrutiny works and the effects will be felt within the communities concerned. The EU institutions, however, will always need to be mindful of the problems of political reinterpretation. There are at least four reasons why the political reframing of the Roma should be closely monitored by those European institutions which seek to bring this higher up the agenda.

First, as I have shown by examining the debates in the European Parliament, Europeanising the Roma might give domestic politicians an opportunity to evade their own country's responsibility. These politicians might support the EU's concern for the Roma merely because it can function as a legitimatisation of the problematic argument that national states are now not responsible for introducing effective policies, just as they were not responsible in the past for creating the issues that now need to be addressed.

Second, European initiatives might provide ammunition for ethnic mobilisation and reinforce the boundaries between the Roma and other population groups. If European support is not monitored well it might easily be interpreted as support uniquely for the Roma rather than for whole societies. The effects of such reinterpretation may trickle down to the local level.<sup>3</sup> It is of the utmost importance that policy initiatives that help the Roma are framed in a way that encourages other social groups to accept the Roma as equal partners and co-citizens. The narrative that should accompany these initiatives is one that highlights the advantages of these policies for the whole population, not only the Roma. If not, the Roma will continue to be portrayed as a burden on the national economy, not as a group that deserves economic support as part of the welfare state.

Third, the Europeanisation of the Romani issue might leave us with the impression that the situation of the Roma is very similar across Europe, and that formula-like solutions can be implemented. This is not the case. There is a lot of variation, and that variation should be taken into account by policy-makers. Even if problems seem similar, causes may vary a lot from place to place, and each community might possess different resources and dynamics to deal with these problems.

And finally, if the Roma are perceived as the EU's best ally, the rise of Eurosceptic political voices in Central Europe presents an additional potential danger for the Roma. The reason is that—however poor or excluded they are—the Roma might be viewed and framed as winners of the European integration process. This is problematic, as they may become the object of Eurosceptic citizens' resentment. Sociological data show that the European integration project at large 'has predominantly been about the opportunities that upper- and upper-middle-class people have had to interact with their counterparts in other societies. This has made them more "European"' (Fligstein 2008: 147). Poorer people are often less enthusiastic about European integration. This makes the problem of Europeanisation very acute for the Roma. They cannot usually benefit from the cross-border business and tourist opportunities that wealthier people in Europe enjoy. But paradoxically, the process of Europeanising Roma policy might put them symbolically in the camp of those elites.

For these four reasons, EU institutions will need to continue to respond forcefully and cleverly to attempts at political reinterpretations. They will also have to make sure that their initiatives are ultimately translated into effective policy change at home, at the domestic and, particularly, at the local level. Several authors have warned that the disconnection between the actions of local authorities on the one hand and the national and international policy frameworks on the other is a continuing cause for concern (ERRC/NÚMENA 2007: 18; Sobotka 2010). Institutional initiatives at the EU level will have failed if they do not produce perceptible change on the ground and create a better relationship between the Roma and their fellow citizens. Not only the material but also the symbolic costs of such failure would be enormous. In short, new EU initiatives on the Roma will benefit from critical

reflection on how to deal with the ambivalence inherent in their ‘European’ appeals for tackling the problems at hand. They will have to consider carefully not only the content of the policy measures that they propose, but also the narrative that accompanies these measures.

## Notes

- [1] On the importance of frames and framing in public policy formation see, for example, Benford and Snow (2000) and Steensland (2008).
- [2] The statement sounds remarkably pro-EU for a political party that has otherwise been very critical of the European integration process and in particular the Lisbon Treaty, which it has considered a threat to Czech state sovereignty (see KSČM 2009).
- [3] In Limanowa, Poland, for example, a recent discussion about the building of a Romani community house with the support of government funding (which, in turn, relies on European subsidies) has deepened divisions in an already divided village. Local politicians there have claimed that all money that goes to the building of such a community house is money that cannot be used for the building of a road in the non-Romani part of town. This might not be true, but the problem is that such interpretation is quite believable in a situation where all policies have been usually framed as beneficial either for the Roma or the non-Roma, never for the inhabitants of the community as a whole. For more about this case, see Smoleński and Kuraś (2009).

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