

From Prof. T.A.Acton, M.A., D.Phil. (Oxon), FRSA, OBE
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Tuesday, 10 July 2012

Dear Laszlo,

It is with sadness that, despite the urging of some friends to remain, I feel compelled to offer my resignation to the Scientific Committee of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies. At a recent meeting of the Brentwood Gypsy Support Group, of which I am secretary, our Chair, Bernadette Reilly articulated the policy to which everyone assented, "Nothing about us, without us". I cannot honourably remain secretary of the Brentwood Gypsy Support Group and at the same time be part of an all-gajo/buffer committee which purports to represent adequately scholarship in Romani Studies without any participation of Roma/Gypsies/Travellers. The proposals adopted to remedy this merely compound the original problem.

The view expressed by some members of the Committee that Roma candidates had failed to be elected because of the insufficient quality of their work is a self-congratulatory delusion, and is undermined by the fact that they have expressed equally derisory opinions of elected gajo SC members with whom they happen to disagree. I am sure that like myself, they did vote for some Roma candidates; but the system meant that none were elected. A first past the post election system with only one constituency means that all the places can be taken by a majority, and all opposition eliminated. It may deliver a consensus of a kind, but only at the expense of a conservative immobilism in which the power of patronage conspires, without even realising it is doing so, to strangle dissent and progress. I do not agree that this is an effective democratic method of election. The European traditions of plebiscitary democracy were decisively defeated in 1945 and 1989, and although "parliamentary" is being used as a derogatory term by some colleagues, parliamentary democracy remains the norm in member countries of the EU and the CoE, and I believe we, too should observe its forms.

My resignation was originally proposed with the express intention of allowing candidatures which could include someone of RGT heritage broadly supported by advocates of Roma participation. The present committee, however, has determined¹ that there will be no byelection, and my place will not be filled. Instead, two representatives of the junior associate members of the Network are to be elected by the other junior associates. They might or might not be persons of Roma /Gypsy/Traveller heritage. This is to be backed up by a strategic plan to promote academic involvement of students and early career researchers of Romani background. It is as though the dominant members of the Scientific Committee, having lost all faith in the existing Romani intelligentsia, have decided to create a new one, malleable, young, and above all, in their own image. Defenders of minorities often issue calls for the development of "organic intellectuals". This, by contrast, is an almost self-conscious attempt to fabricate inorganic intellectuals.

The original mandate of the network was for academics to consider how they could better deliver

¹ I assume that this is what the notes of the meeting will show; I had delayed this letter hoping to read the notes of the meeting first. Perhaps in a small way this may indicate the value of recording decisions in duly worded motions, rather than placing the responsibility on you to determine the sense of the meeting.

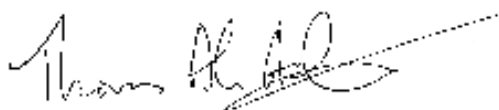
reliable and transparent expert advice to European policy makers. Those elected, however, instead of treating this as an invitation to reflect critically on their own practice as experts, and the problems of research utilisation in Romani Studies, have for the most part treated election as an uncritical, quasi-divine, endorsement of their own scientificity and pre-eminent research standing, and have devoted almost all the spare funds of the network to training and mentoring programmes which will further institutionalise their own academic dominance, and marginalise critics.

Let me make it clear, however, that I am not advocating either affirmative action to be embedded in the constitution of the Network, or that people should leave the network. Rather I urge all qualified individuals to join the network and to vote. I urge associate members of the network who agree with my reasoning to get together to select and coalesce around the candidacies of two qualified associate member candidates of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller heritage who will make clear in their election statements that they believe that the standpoint of such intellectuals enables them to challenge ethnocentric assumptions in the various national gajo scholarly traditions, and that they support adoption of either a proportional or a constituency system of election in place of the present "winner takes all" system.

I hope at the next general election for the Scientific Committee either to stand as a member of, or to support, a list of candidates which will create a majority for the implementation of such principles, and I urge those who support such principles to write to me, and if qualified, to join the network. But for me to continue now, without a fresh mandate, would either waste colleagues' time with repeated arguments, or, by silence offer an assent which in conscience I cannot offer. I call on my former colleagues on the Scientific Committee to consider their own positions, and if they feel able, to join me in resigning.

Finally, let me assure you, Laszlo, of my appreciation of the way in which you have carried out the difficult and sensitive task of Network Secretary, and that nothing I have written above reflects on your conduct. I also thank all those who have written to me offering advice.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thomas Acton', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Thomas Acton