

European Academic Network on Romani Studies: A balance sheet

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Summary

The Network offered an unprecedented opportunity to flag the broad and diverse body of research interest in Romani studies and to facilitate exchange among researchers. At the same time it faced two main obstacles. The first was the failure of the sponsoring bodies, the European Commission (EC) and the Council of Europe, to embed the Network into their agenda of activities on Roma. The second was an attempt by individuals to use the Network as an instrument for identity politics. Both these circumstances undermined the Network's ambition to add value to policy discussions. They even combined into a single strand around a proposal for a European Roma Institute (ERI), which was to be backed by the EC and the Council of Europe, led by activists, but lay a claim to academic authority. The fact that the Network's future was allowed to become entangled in this discussion is symptomatic of the lack of clear direction in European policy on Roma: It shows its inability to engage in a critical reflection on majority society's conceptualisation of Roma on the one hand, and its fixation with the delivery of tokenistic projects on the other. It also shows that its commitment to obtain value from research in order to draft policy that is evidence-based is extremely volatile and easily overridden by the pragmatism of power and funding alliances and of politically correct appearances.

The following notes offer a personal reflection on the European Academic Network on Romani Studies (henceforth the 'Network') and its activities during the five years since its establishment. The Network must be viewed in the overall context of European policy on Roma over the past decade. Two hindering elements accompany this policy:

- a) Unwillingness and inability to tackle head-on the way in which the majority conceptualises the Romani minority, which is at the heart of social exclusion at both grassroots and policy levels;
- b) Absence of concrete objectives and performance indicators for interventions, and reliance instead on the creation of project-delivery structures, which often become self-serving, as an end in itself.

The Network emerged at a meeting convened by the EC's DG Education and Culture, chaired by Xavier Troussard in March 2010, to which around 80 individuals had been invited. The EC had proposed a 'project on Romani culture' but had no

concrete idea as to what it wanted to achieve. From the very beginning, the 'project' was an end in itself – an opportunity for DG Education and Culture to have a share of the flow of European resources dedicated to Roma. The consensus formed at the meeting was that a Network would be created which would include bona fide academics, and that it should help to raise the visibility of Romani studies and to bring research expertise to the attention of policy-makers.

As with several other projects on Roma, the funding came from the EC but the project was contracted to the Council of Europe. However, the sponsors did not provide a set of objectives or performance indicators, nor did they outline operational procedures. Instead these were left to the Network to define. As a result, the elected Scientific Committee (SC) had to engage in a continuous negotiation process. For each and every activity including matters of procedure, it had to establish consensus firstly within its own ranks – a committee of fifteen members, of different backgrounds, many of whom had no previous experience in academic committee work or major administrative responsibility. It then had to try to gauge the interests and the potential for active contributions among the membership; this became a large and diverse body, which was inevitably characterised by unequal levels of engagement, a mixture of views, and a range of different experiences and expectations.

Since no channels had been set in advance to harness the Network's resources, the SC also found itself having to negotiate with the target beneficiaries – political bodies that included the sponsor organisations themselves – in order to draw their attention to the Network and to its potential contributions. These pro-active approaches gave the SC the appearance of a quasi lobby group and it soon found itself challenged to respond to approaches from activists both within and outside the Network.

From the very beginning of the process, the Network struggled with the precise meaning of 'academic'. On 22 March 2010, immediately after the consultation in Brussels, I wrote to Xavier Troussard and Laura Cassio (contact person for the Network at the EC) with a proposal for membership criteria. My suggestion included strict scrutiny of prospective members' track record of peer-reviewed publications and research student supervision, in addition to PhD qualification. My proposals were rejected during the subsequent one-year preparation process, which was carried out by an ad hoc committee entrusted with setting up the Network's operational framework. Instead, a less rigorous threshold was set, consisting of merely a PhD qualification and proven work in Romani studies. An even lower threshold was set for Associate Members, which in effect allowed graduates in any field to join on the basis of a declared interest in pursuing a PhD degree in a relevant area. The membership body that emerged as a result was diverse not only in respect of its discipline and methodological background, but also in its level of academic experience and arguably also in its commitment to the field.

The elections in the spring of 2012 produced an SC that was criticised for having no member of Romani background. Despite the fact that the Network had been flagged as an academic body and not as one that represents Roma, pressure was immediately exerted on the SC, both internally (within its own ranks) and externally (in the form of petition letters from members and non-members alike) to amend its composition and even to change the election procedures. The SC gave in to these pressures and decided to incorporate representatives of the Associate Membership in the hope that at least one of them would be Romani. This was inevitably interpreted as an act of political, rather than professional inclusion. It contributed toward blurring the lines between a body that represented the community of researchers, and one that would be seen to be playing a potential advocacy role on behalf of Roma. This ambiguity was fully exploited by candidates standing for election as Associate Member representatives in November 2012, with the two ultimately successful candidates putting themselves forward in their candidate statements "as Roma" and "as activists" and issuing an overt challenge to the operational procedures of the SC over "transparency". Both also stated that they were standing for election "on a joint ticket" – a mimicry of a parliamentary process that sought to turn the Network into a political arena.

Utilising the new arrangement and politicised climate, a small group began to make continuous efforts to try to discredit the Network's elected leadership. Within a year this would coincide with their involvement in a bid for support from European political bodies in the shape of a proposal, led by the Open Society Foundations (OSF), for a European Roma Institute (ERI). Linking the critique of the SC with the emerging bid for ERI epitomised the use of the Network for identity politics. It put forward the proposition, in complete contradiction to the spirit in which the Network had been founded, that recognition of expertise should be based on individuals' self-proclaimed ancestry rather than on their qualifications and track record of achievement.

The SC in fact practised full transparency in all its decisions. It issued detailed calls for all applications that involved grants, it set criteria for successful awards, and it made every effort to provide unsuccessful applicants with feedback. My impression is that this was generally appreciated by the membership, as it very much followed the routine of academic committees, and indeed went far beyond that routine in making public all minutes of the committee's meetings. Very few complaints were received about our operation mode. The politically pitched petition expressing distrust in the SC, launched by those involved in the bid for ERI in the spring of 2014, received only a very small number of signatures. Some of them were from individuals who had themselves served on the SC and who had taken an active part in shaping its objectives and procedures in the first place; in the tense climate that ensued, some members of the SC preferred to side, or to be seen to side, with those who challenged the Network's working procedures rather than to face the challenges and respond to them.

Despite these problems, the Network can show a broad set of achievements. First, it created a system of virtual contacts in Romani studies on an unprecedented scale, which enabled specialists in the field who were not aware of one another's work and areas of interest to engage with one another. Moreover, it produced a resource of value to academics whose research did not include Romani studies and who wanted to become acquainted with such research and integrate it into their teaching.

Through its sponsorship of research into policy and research training workshops, including participation of entire groups at the CEU Romani studies summer school, the Network allowed many dozens of mainly early career researchers to engage face to face with one another. This opened up many new opportunities and had the added value of introducing a reporting structure through which information on all events and their content would be publicly available even if they did not result in a proper research publication. Sponsorship of early career researchers had a significant impact on the inclusion of relevant content in international conferences and contributed directly to the visibility of Romani studies.

The many approaches to policy bodies at European and national levels may not have always yielded the desired results, but they at least served to flag the availability in principle of a wide body of expertise in the area.

Finally, the Network facilitated, precisely by bringing together diverse views and interests, a number of core debates that will have a lasting impact on the intellectual agenda in the field, with direct implications for policy. These include the issue of conceptualising Romani identity and identifying the target group, the issue of compiling quantitative data on Roma, and the role of academics in providing quality assurance of policy interventions at local and national levels. All three remain controversial issues, but the Network debates have, it can be argued, shifted the parameters of the discussion on all of them.

By contrast, the Network can show little achievement in direct contribution to policy. The reasons for this are complex, and to some extent they lie beyond any failures of management or strategy of the Network itself. Policy is a complex field, and policy at all levels is not easily responsive in the short term to civil society initiatives of any kind, let alone those that are international, arranged in the form of a network, and lacking any substantive or targeted lobbying effort. Policy bodies are diverse and not always effective in implementing their own concepts and ideas unless acting under immediate political pressures. The very concept of input into policy is only vaguely defined, making impact on policy difficult to measure and making the drafting of a policy impact strategy anything but a straightforward task even in the context of a body that is simpler and less diverse than the Network. Finally, the Network was pitched from the very beginning as a pluralistic body and not as a uniform think tank that would provide coherent strategic advice. For all these reasons, we must adopt realistic indicators of both success and failure when it comes to assessing the Network's interaction with policy bodies.

One of the disappointing outcomes of the Network's policy initiatives was the fact that most National Contact Points failed to respond to the Network's invitation to hold meetings with Network chapters, despite the fact that the invitation was explicitly backed by the Network's EC contact person. Only in one case, that of Bulgaria, was there direct reluctance on the part of Network members (including a Bulgarian member of the SC) to engage in the procedure and there was therefore no purpose in initiating a meeting. Of the two meetings that took place – in the UK and Italy – one, with the UK National Contact Point, concluded with a very concrete action plan in the form of a proposal from the Contact Point and expressions of interest from over a dozen members to contribute to the UK report to the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion. However, the Contact Point then abandoned this action plan.

There were a number of exchanges with the EC in regard to feedback from Network members. On one occasion, the SC attempted to collate responses to National Strategies in a structured manner by setting up working parties with country-based expertise and delegating the lead to a number of designated members. The procedure turned out to be cumbersome, yet it resulted in a reasonable number of responses that were fed back to the EC and published on the Network website. Our contribution was acknowledged in a progress report by the EC to the European Parliament from June 2013, and the issue of consultation with civil society, which we had flagged centrally in our integrated response, was later taken on board and it now figures in various EC communications on the National Strategies.

On another occasion, the SC issued a call for proposals to respond to the EC's request to provide training. Several members put themselves forward, one was selected, yet the EC cancelled the invitation without consultation and without even informing the SC. When we enquired, we were told that the training was merely postponed, but in fact it never took place. We had also forwarded, but were unable to coordinate an efficient response to an information request from DG Justice that was received at extremely short notice.

On all these occasions, the SC's commitment to ensuring the transparency and openness of the procedure of soliciting expertise forced us to take a prolonged and somewhat complex route, which inevitably slowed down our response time, yet we did respond. Nonetheless, there is a striking disparity between the resources that the EC put into the Network, and the minimal effort that it put into getting any value out of it. When the EC's contact person for the Network moved to a different post in May 2014, her replacement remained elusive; for a whole year out of the four-year funding period, the SC had no contact with its sponsoring body. Here I return to my opening remarks: To the EC, the Network was yet another 'project', a budget item that was signed off and sub-contracted to the Council of Europe for delivery without any earnest attempt to formulate objectives or performance indicators. It was pretty much a project for the sake of a project, an end in itself.

This brings me to the biggest disappointment surrounding the Network: the Council of Europe's failure to embed the Network into the strategic delivery of its Roma-related agenda.

In the early 1990s, the Council of Europe spearheaded an effort to achieve a fundamental re-conceptualisation of policy on Roma. The process began with the Verspagnet report in 1992, which led to Recommendation 1203/1993 of the Parliamentary Assembly. It called for recognition of the Roma as a minority that does not fit into the conventional definitions of national or regional minorities; it made reference to historical intolerance and called for the protection of human rights and culture, for the dissemination of information, for the inclusion of the Romani language in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, for everyday activities in the fields of education and human rights, and perhaps most importantly it called for the appointment of a mediator for Roma (Gypsy) affairs and for the granting of consultative status in the Council of Europe to Romani representatives.

The Verspagnet report laid the foundations for the Council of Europe's agenda on Roma for more than a decade and a half. Its outcomes included the appointment of a Coordinator for Roma Affairs followed by the multilateral working group MG-S-ROM (later CAHROM), the inclusion of Romani in the Charter for Languages and the launch of the European Language Curriculum Framework for Romani (so far the most far-reaching intervention in support of Romani culture at European level), and the granting of consultative status to the European Roma and Travellers Forum, the first ever recognition at European level of a Romani representation. These were accompanied by initiatives such as the European Roma Youth Forum and the Fact Sheets on Roma, which supported networking and information, respectively.

Almost all of the Council of Europe's activities on Roma up to the Strasbourg Declaration of October 2010 can arguably be described as part of the momentum of the Verspagnet report. In fact, the Strasbourg Declaration only added four new aspects that had not been addressed in some way or other in the Verspagnet report. These, however, were crucial elements of a new trajectory, which in my view constituted a significant setback:

The first was the reference to 'trafficking' (item 29 of the Declaration). In line with the climate in several European countries at the time (e.g. Metropolitan Police 'Operation Golf', funded by the EC to combat alleged human trafficking by Roma), it singled out Roma as potential victims of their own community and thereby insinuated that Roma are engaged in organised crime.

The second was the operational call to set up the projects 'Dosta' and 'Romed' (items 32 and 46). This set the ground for a shift in the Council of Europe's engagement on Roma from policy drafting to project delivery.

The third was the suggestion that Roma inclusion depended on mediation (items 33, 34, 35, 46). This set out the practical and ideological frame for what was to become

the Council of Europe's jewel engagement activity on Roma, the Romed/Romact programme. As I have written in a number of recent comments, the mere concept of 'mediation' in this context suggests that their cultural particularities lead Roma to disengage from the mainstream, and that Roma require permanent external support in order to manage their interaction with public institutions. It is a statement that departs in a most radical way from the empowerment spirit of the Verspaget report.

The fourth and final new item was the call to "re-organise resources in a transversal manner" (item 44), which meant in practice that the coordination of the Council of Europe's activities on Roma would come under a single unit. This unit, the Roma Support Team under the Secretary General's Special Representative on Roma, assumed the operational lead on what became a service-delivery enterprise whose work was anchored in what we might call a 'neo-traditional ideological framework on Roma': It subscribed to a view of Roma as needy subjects and it committed to the continual management of open-ended interventions funded by external grants.

The Strasbourg Declaration thus transformed the Council of Europe from the spearhead of policy reform on Roma, to a contractor of service projects. It symbolised the inauguration of the current European policy on Roma, which I described in my opening remarks. At EU-level, a new policy strand was also soon to follow, borne out of the EC's incapacity to confront the blatant violation of European treaties by founding member states in their treatment of Romani migrants from the new accession countries. Rather than enforce these treaties, the EC diverted its attention to the creation of a regular consultation mechanism, the National Strategies for Roma Inclusion, accompanied by a new cash flow, which promised to support even more service-delivery projects. Its ideological manifesto was to follow in December 2013 in the form of a EU Council Recommendation that called for coordinated trans-national action to address the "mobility" of Roma and which singled out Roma as victims, and by implication as perpetrators, of human trafficking and forced marriage.

The Network was being launched at the same time as the Strasbourg Declaration. What place was there for the Network in the new Council of Europe setup on Roma? None. The Network did not subscribe to the view that Roma required mediation, and it did not offer prospects for a large-scale and open-ended intervention. Structurally it was affiliated with the Directorate of Culture, and so it remained outside the "transversal" reach of the Roma Support Team.

It took the SC two years to be able to even obtain an audience with the Roma Support Team. At that meeting, in May 2013, the SC tried to convince the Team of the benefits of drawing on the Network's expertise. It soon became clear that the Team was reluctant to engage with the Network, either for lack of explicit instruction to do so, or due to unwillingness of some of its members to submit their work to the possible scrutiny of academics. Of the twelve action points listed in the joint meeting in May 2013, only a single one had been followed up on by the first review

in the following September – and that was an action point delegated to the ERTF (which was also present at the meeting).

None of the Council of Europe's Roma projects was interested in opening its doors to the Network. In regard to the Network's participation at a CAHROM meeting, the proposal was even made that the Network – an activity initiated and run by the Council of Europe – should register as an independent NGO and then apply for consultative status. In relation to all other action points, there was mainly denial. All this came despite relentless efforts by the Network's Project Coordinator and Council of Europe contact point to help the SC to gain access and to convince the relevant actors of the potential value of collaborating with the Network and of drawing on its resources of expertise. Clearly, the Council of Europe not only failed completely to embed the Network into its structural agenda, it was also indifferent toward the reluctance of some of its own established actors on Roma affairs to engage with it.

Nothing represents this failure more clearly than the Council of Europe's handling of the discussions surrounding the proposals for a European Roma Institute (ERI). Not only was the Network excluded from the discussion process, which took place behind the scenes, but Council of Europe officers continued to deny, even after the public announcement by President Barroso and George Soros in Brussels in April 2014, that they had had any prior knowledge of ERI.

Yet at the same time ERI was chosen by the Council of Europe to put the Network to the test. While the decision whether or not to renew the Network's funding rested with the EC, the Council of Europe presented ERI to the SC in April 2014 as a unique opportunity for the Network to pitch its value by responding to the so-called 4-W position paper. A strict timetable was set and the SC was advised in its meeting on 7 April to submit a statement ahead of the CAHROM meeting scheduled for 14 May. That timetable would have been impossible to meet, however, for the official 4-W position paper was not forthcoming until the morning of 12 May. On 13 May, a day after its circulation, the CAHROM agenda was adjusted at the last minute to include a discussion of ERI on the morning of 14 May, just hours before the scheduled arrival time of the Network's delegation. The discussion thus went ahead without the SC delegation. This Kafkaesque setup saw the Network's SC being excluded from discussions that were supposedly deemed to be vital for the Network's future.

In the event, the SC had received insight into a draft copy of the 4-W paper that had been circulated informally in advance. Our public reaction to that paper was motivated by the advice that we received from EC and senior Council of Europe officers at our meeting on 7 April. The main thrust of our statement was a mere reiteration of the content of previous documents that captured the Network's ethos in regard to the principles of transparency, pluralism and scientific rigour in research. In reacting to the ERI proposal, we acted fully in line with the role that had been foreseen for the Network: to provide an informed opinion about policy ventures on

Roma, in particular those that had a bearing on culture and research. The fact that some stakeholders in the process, including a number of Council of Europe officers, regarded our statement as an unwelcome political intervention, illustrated the ambiguity that was attached to the very notion of tapping into the resource of academic expertise.

A few months later, the Council of Europe presented a radically revised concept for ERI, which appeared to take on board all the reservations that the SC had articulated. In our final meeting in November 2014, we welcomed that paper and offered our full support for the process. If our statement from April 2014 made a contribution toward a more realistic approach to ERI – removing any suggestion that research should be led or licensed by a political organisation, that academic or cultural management could be carried out by a self-appointed body, and that qualification and expertise thresholds should be lowered on the basis of self-proclaimed ancestry – then this will have been one of the Network's principal policy impact achievements, regardless of whether or not it is credited with this achievement. At the time of writing, it remains unclear, however, which concept the Council of Europe is actually committed to supporting.

On 16 March 2015, OSF presented a concept for ERI at a meeting in Brussels, which basically replicated its original contribution to the Council of Europe 'non-paper' from April 2014. It called once again for ERI to be run by an exclusive group of people who self-ascribe as Roma and for it to provide policy advice, now downplaying any explicit mention of research but still flagging "historical documentation" and "dissemination of knowledge". It presented the group, which had previously, in November 2014, referred to itself as "the Roma elite", as an "Alliance in formation".

Two initiatives were subsequently named as the pillars of this Alliance. The first is the Documentation and Culture Centre of German Sinti and Roma, operated by the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. Established in 1989, it is without a doubt one of the most powerful Romani institutions, its funding stream guaranteed in Germany by Federal law. The Documentation Centre has so far devoted its work almost exclusively to documentation of the Nazi genocide and its effects at local level. It has always opposed any public display of Romani culture, insisting that it belonged strictly within the family domain. It even agreed to support the recognition of the Romani language in Germany under the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages on condition that no effort would be made to codify the language or to use it in public – thus contradicting the very purpose of the Charter. Its track record thus seems diametrically opposed to the proclaimed goals of ERI, which are to showcase and promote Romani culture. On the other hand, it has a disturbing track record of hunting down researchers whose opinions contradict its own ideological positions, for instance on issues such as the possible number of Roma/Sinti victims of the genocide. The second partner was named as the Roma Museum in Bucharest, an incipient initiative without any track record of achievement so far.

Just a week after the Brussels event, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, and George Soros published a short comment in which they called for the creation of ERI. The first sentence of their comment read: "For more than four decades Europe's Roma community have wanted to establish an institution that would give their music, art and unique traditions their own stage". This opening sentence could not have been more symbolic for the termination of the Verspaget legacy. The Verspaget report called for Roma participation in Council of Europe activities as political agents with consultative status, in pursuit of a human rights agenda. That concept was now being replaced through an entrepreneurial partnership to sponsor Gypsy artistic performance. This shows just how fragile the Council of Europe's commitment to its earlier vision has become, and how it is easily overridden by the temptation to have a share in funded projects.

The bruises inflicted on the Network and its academic Full Members over the four-year funding period are a symptom of the uncertainties and the internal contradictions that characterise current European policy on Roma. The term 'Roma' has become a politically correct license to reproduce the traditional notion of 'Gypsy' in the sense of a lifestyle that allegedly compels its own people to disengage from the mainstream and to neglect and exploit the vulnerable members of their own community, but which retains romantic attractiveness through musical and artistic performance. This approach grants legitimacy to the patronising attitude that Roma must be 'managed' and that their interaction with the mainstream must be 'mediated'. This in turn serves to justify an indulgence in open-ended intervention management, which has replaced the idealism of a decade or so ago and has led to the abandonment of any attempt to fundamentally re-define mainstream society's relationship with the Roma. In the process, project leaders seek to legitimise their interventions by showcasing Roma, and individuals who self-ascribe as Roma are given incentives to aspire to influential positions if they use their 'authenticity' to help provide projects with the legitimacy that they require.

The Network has no place within the establishment of current European policy on Roma, both because as a 'project' it fails to fit in with this pattern of 'marginality management' that seemingly rewards 'authenticity' but is indifferent to qualification, and because of its potential and predisposition to rock the boat and to point out the inconsistencies in this very pattern. The Network was, for this reason, an unwelcome guest in the very neighbourhood that created it.

In this light, I believe that the Network has achieved much beyond the value that its sponsors were willing and able to extract from it. Its lasting legacy will include some of the analyses of basic parameters of both academic and political engagement, such as critical reflections on the way the majority conceptualises Roma and on the way of achieving a sound balance between affirmative action and advocacy on the one hand and transparency and rigour of enquiry-led expertise on the other. This is an intellectual legacy, one that the discontinuation of funding and the suspension of privileged access to policy bodies, such as it was, are unable to erase.